

THE CULT OF WATER IN ANCIENT RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

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Abstract: This article analyzes the formative factors, symbolic-semantic layers, and social functions of the cult of water in ancient religious beliefs in accordance with IMRAD requirements. In the study, water is interpreted not as an ordinary natural resource, but as a universal cultural sign that initiates life, ensures fertility, purifies the body and society, sacralizes authority, and regulates ideas about death and rebirth. Materials from Mesopotamia, Egypt, ancient Iran, the Indo-Vedic milieu, the Greco-Roman world, and Central Asia, particularly Khorezm and the Oxus-Amu Darya basin, were examined through comparative-historical, functional, and semiotic approaches. In the author’s content analysis, 54 mythological and ritual units related to water were coded according to seven functional criteria. The results show that fertility, purification, cosmogonic origin, and the preservation of social order were dominant functions within the cult of water. The scientific significance of the article lies in its interpretation of the cult of water as a complex historical-cultural model formed at the intersection of ecological experience, economic necessity, religious thought, and political legitimation.

Keywords: cult of water, ancient beliefs, fertility, purification, cosmogony, Anahita, Enki, Hapi, Varuna, Oxus, Khorezm, sacred landscape, anthropology of ritual, Chicago style

Introduction

Water is one of the oldest and most enduring symbols in human history. For ancient people, it was not merely a substance to drink or to irrigate crops, but also an earthly sign of invisible powers. Rivers, springs, rain, wells, seas, or sacred pools were named differently in various regions, yet a single idea can be perceived in their religious essence: water united ideas about the emergence of life, the transformation of disorder into order, and the liberation of the human being from external and internal impurity. For ancient farmers, water was connected with the germination of grain; for pastoralists, with the renewal of pasture; and for urban populations, with food supply, defense, trade, and sanitation. For this reason, water-related rituals did not exist separately from economic needs; on the contrary, they served as a bridge between material necessity and sacred imagination.

Modern statistical data also clearly demonstrate the strategic importance of water. The 2024 UNESCO World Water Development Report notes that approximately 70 percent of global freshwater withdrawals are used for agriculture, nearly 20 percent for industry, and 12 percent for domestic needs; groundwater provides about one quarter of the water used for irrigation and nearly half of the freshwater withdrawn for drinking and domestic purposes.¹ These figures are also important for understanding ancient beliefs: in societies with limited technology and dependence on irrigation and rainfall regimes, the sacralization of water was not accidental. Under conditions in which control over water was weak, ritual, myth, and deification enabled people to explain ecological uncertainty through meaning. The relevance of the topic lies in the fact that the cult of water is often studied within the framework of a separate myth, a particular deity, or a specific folk ritual. However, materials from the ancient world show that this phenomenon was a broader system. In Mesopotamia, Enki/Ea was associated with the subterranean fresh waters known as abzu; in Egypt, the flooding of the Nile was understood through Hapi and the motifs of Osiris’s resurrection; in ancient Iran and Zoroastrian traditions, water was embodied in notions of purity, life, and the image of Anahita; in the Indo-Vedic world, Varuna was associated with cosmic-moral order, while

the Ganges was connected with purification and salvation; in the Greco-Roman milieu, Poseidon and Neptune expressed the danger of the sea, political power, and urban protection; in Central Asia, ideas surrounding the Amu Darya-Oxus, the canals of Khorezm, springs, and wells turned water into a symbol of territorial memory and sacred landscape. The purpose of the article is to identify the main functions of the cult of water in ancient religious beliefs and to demonstrate, on a scholarly and analytical basis, how ecological conditions, economic experience, mythological thought, social control, and political legitimation intersected in its formation. To this end, a theoretical definition of the cult of water is offered, materials from major ancient civilizations are comparatively analyzed, the functional distribution of mythological and ritual units is presented through content analysis, and the Central Asian context is linked to the general model of the ancient world. The author's approach is that the cult of water is viewed not as a marginal topic of religious history, but as a fundamental symbolic system that united nature, economy, power, and memory in ancient societies. Such an approach makes it possible to analyze the topic not merely as a list of mythological images, but as a historical process, social institution, and form of ecological consciousness. Beliefs related to water simultaneously expressed the fear, hope, and labor discipline of ancient people. In this article, the cult of water is understood not as a mechanical worship of water itself, but as a set of practices that regard water sources as sacred, connect them with deities, spirits, or ancestors, and use water for purification, oath-taking, healing, the invocation of fertility, crossing boundaries, and the confirmation of authority. Mary Douglas interpreted ideas of purity and impurity as a way of defining social order; water was a means of symbolically restoring that order.² Mircea Eliade, in turn, explains water as a symbol of origin, formlessness, hidden life, and rebirth.³ Thus, the cult of water is not merely a religious motif, but a way in which ancient societies understood existence. In the scholarly study of the cult of water, two dangers must be avoided. The first is to interpret every water-related custom as a religious cult; the second is to explain the sacred imagination of ancient people solely through economic need. In reality, the religious attitude toward water is a multilayered phenomenon in which practical necessity, emotional experience, collective fear, observation of nature, and symbolic thinking are inseparable. Ancient society may have known ways to measure, distribute, or store water, yet the arrival, decline, or destructive manifestation of water in the form of flood always generated additional meaning in human perception. Therefore, the cult of water is not only a utilitarian relationship between human beings and nature, but also a cultural form of responsibility, gratitude, and fear before it.

Methods

The study relied on comparative-historical, functional, semiotic, and content analysis methods. The comparative-historical approach served to identify common and distinctive features of the cult of water in the traditions of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Iran, the Indo-Vedic world, the Greco-Roman world, and Central Asia. The functional approach helped distinguish the roles that water beliefs played in social life: guaranteeing harvests, purification, protection from disease, sacralizing the city and the state, marking points of transition in liminal rituals, and imagining the path after death. The semiotic approach revealed the place of water within a system of signs; that is, it showed how meanings were produced through the forms of current, depth, flood, spring, rain, sea, well, and pool. For content analysis, 54 historical-mythological and ritual units were selected through a conditional coding procedure. These consisted of a water-related deity, myth, sacred site, ritual, iconographic image, or textual fragment. Each unit was evaluated according to seven criteria: fertility and vitality; purification; cosmogonic origin; socio-political legitimation; healing and protection; death-boundary semantics; and punishment or warning against forces that violated order. Since a single unit could correspond to several criteria, the percentages exceed 100 percent in total.

These figures should not be viewed as absolute historical statistics, but as an authorial matrix constructed for comparative analysis. Three criteria were applied in selecting sources. First, the evidence had to be connected with an ancient written source, archaeological object, iconographic image, or ritual tradition with an ancient layer. Second, particular attention was paid to river valleys, regions of irrigated agriculture, and civilizations based on maritime trade. Third, ancient beliefs were not conflated with contemporary religious practice; later rituals were mentioned only cautiously where it was necessary to explain historical continuity or transformation. During the coding process, each material was assessed within its specific historical context. For example, the Nile flood in Egypt expressed not only fertility, but also political stability and the idea of resurrection; the image of Anahita united water, female fertility, protection, and royal favor. Therefore, the figures in the table do not contradict one another; rather, they reveal the multifunctional nature of the cult of water. Methodologically, statistical indicators in the article were used not as a mechanical count of evidence, but as a means of identifying semantic priorities within ancient religious imagination.

Results

The analysis showed that the cult of water appeared in ancient societies through seven principal functions. Among them, the semantics of fertility and vitality occupied the highest position: 42 of the 54 units, or 77.8 percent, were associated with this function. Purification was recorded in 37 units, cosmogonic origin in 29 units, restoration of order or punishment semantics in 27 units, socio-political legitimation in 24 units, healing and protection in 21 units, and death-boundary meaning in 18 units. These proportions show that the cult of water initially arose from a vital necessity, but after becoming a religious symbol, it came to encompass a very wide field of meaning.

Regional distribution also provides an important observation. The densest manifestations of the cult of water appeared in river valleys and oasis cultures, because in such regions the connection between the presence of water and social order was directly felt. Ancient cities dependent on the sea, however, imagined water more through trade, travel, war, and danger. This difference demonstrates the adaptability of the water symbol to the natural environment: in river valleys, water was blessing and rhythm; in maritime civilizations, it was opportunity and threat; and in desert-oasis zones, it was understood as the delicate boundary between life and death.

The typology of water rituals can be divided into three main groups. The first group consists of economic rituals: calling for rain, welcoming river floods, opening canals, and asking for water before the harvest. The second group consists of purification rituals: bathing, washing the hands and face, sprinkling sacred water, and strengthening an oath with water. The third group consists of boundary rituals: the use of water in birth, marriage, departure for a journey, burial, and the farewell of the deceased. These three groups are not separate from one another; in many cases, a single ritual combines meanings of fertility, purification, and social transition. The movement of water itself is also an important semantic sign within the cult of water. A flowing river signified time and destiny; a spring, renewal and beginning; a well, hidden depth and ancestral memory; and rain, heavenly grace. Stagnant or polluted water was often connected with danger, disease, or the disruption of order. Thus, in ancient beliefs, the sacredness of water derived not only from its existence, but also from its condition, movement, and relationship with the human being.

Mesopotamia: abzu, Enki, and the cosmic semantics of freshwater

In Mesopotamian materials, water is associated above all with the beginning of civilization. The cities between the Tigris and Euphrates could not exist without canals, dams, and irrigational labor. For this reason, the image of Enki/Ea combined freshwater, wisdom, craftsmanship, and

urban order.⁴ Abzu was imagined as the realm of divine waters beneath the earth and was regarded as the hidden source of earthly life. In the text “Enki and the World Order,” Enki appears as a force that determines the order of the world, blesses the lands, and opens the way for human activity.⁵ Here, water is not simply a natural current, but a cosmic principle that connects the division of labor, urban economy, and divine order. In the Mesopotamian experience, the two-sided nature of water is clearly visible. On the one hand, water revives the canal and the field; on the other, an uncontrolled flood can destroy the city. Therefore, wisdom and danger stand side by side in myths related to water. Enki was valued as the deity who regulated water because, in the eyes of ancient society, true power was manifested not in increasing water without limit, but in governing it according to measure. This case also served as a common historical model for later irrigational states.

Egypt: the Nile flood, Hapi, and the idea of resurrection

In ancient Egypt, the Nile stood at the center of the cult of water. In a region surrounded by desert, the annual flood renewed the soil and guaranteed fertility; for this reason, the Nile became the visible form of life, the state, and cosmic order.⁶ The image of Hapi expressed the river’s power to bring abundance, while resurrection motifs associated with Osiris united the ideas of water, vegetation, and renewed life. In Egyptian thought, flood was not merely a natural event, but the renewal of time: with the arrival of water, the land revived, seeds germinated, and the state administration planned the harvest. Thus, beliefs related to the Nile transformed ecological rhythm into religious rhythm.

The sacralization of the Nile was also connected with political centralization in Egypt. The river’s annual movement determined the agricultural calendar, the tax system, and the organization of labor. For this reason, pharaonic authority was often explained through the idea of preserving cosmic order: if water arrived on time, both the land and the state appeared stable. Here, the cult of water merged with state ideology and turned a natural process into the language of social obedience and hope.

Ancient Iran and Zoroastrianism: water, purity, and Anahita

In ancient Iranian traditions, water was interpreted as one of the sacred creations and as a means of preserving purity and sustaining life. In Zoroastrianism, polluting water was regarded as an act against moral and ritual order.⁷ Aredvi Sura Anahita, in turn, is a complex divine image associated with water, fertility, lineage, victory, and protection.⁸ The power of this image lies in the fact that it transforms water not merely into a material blessing, but into a symbol of society’s standard of purity, female fertility, and political grace. In the Iranian world, a careful attitude toward water was part of religious ethics, and the idea of protecting nature appeared within the ancient ritual order.

For the Iranian world, the purity of water was not a theoretical matter, but a responsibility of everyday ritual life. To defile water with a corpse, blood, or an impure substance was understood not merely as hygienic harm, but as an act against cosmic order. This idea represents a religious form of ancient ecological ethics: protecting water was equated not only with protecting nature, but also with protecting society itself. The widespread image of Anahita also shows that water, lineage, and political protection were not separated from one another.

The Indo-Vedic milieu: Varuna, the Ganges, and moral order

In Indo-Vedic traditions, water was connected with cosmic and moral order. Varuna is depicted as a deity who oversees the sky, water, and rita - that is, the general order.⁹ In this interpretation, water intersects with human sin, oath, moral responsibility, and cosmic surveillance. In later Hindu religious thought, the Ganges became a sacred river and a symbol of purification and

liberation.⁹ Bathing in the waters of the Ganges or using them in ritual has a broader meaning than washing the body: it reconnects the human being with society, ancestors, and divine order. In this respect, in the Indo-Vedic milieu, the cult of water became a symbolic language of morality and spiritual salvation.

The moral content of water in this tradition deserves particular attention. The association of oaths with water, the transformation of bathing in the river into a symbol of liberation from sin, and the practice of entrusting the ashes of the deceased to water share one common logic: water changes the condition of the human being. It separates a person from an old guilt, an old status, or an old body and transfers them into a new state. Therefore, the Ganges is not merely a river, but a religious space that unites memory, ancestors, purification, and eternity.

The Greco-Roman world: the sea, springs, and the symbol of political danger

In the Greco-Roman world, the cult of water is manifested more through the sea, springs, and urban infrastructure. Poseidon and Neptune were associated with the sea, horses, earthquakes, and military-political power.¹⁰ For ancient people, the sea was a route of trade and colonization, but it was also a symbol of danger and an uncontrollable force. Springs, meanwhile, were often connected with nymphs, healing, and prophecy. In the Roman experience, aqueducts turned water into a sign of urban order, sanitation, and imperial power. Thus, in the ancient world, water was interpreted simultaneously as economic opportunity, political prestige, and cosmic danger.

A distinctive aspect of attitudes toward water in the ancient world is that the sea leads the human being into the wider world, yet it can swallow him at any moment. For this reason, sea deities are usually represented not as benevolent patrons, but as powers that must be appeased. Springs and healing waters, in contrast to this dangerous maritime semantics, created a local, close, and protective space. Roman aqueducts, in turn, made water a visible proof of imperial order.

Central Asia and Khorezm: oasis, Oxus, and sacred landscape

Central Asia, especially the Khorezm oasis, has particular importance for understanding the cult of water. In desert and semi-desert conditions, rivers, canals, channels, springs, and wells were the direct condition of life. In ancient imagination, the Oxus-Amu Darya basin appeared not merely as a geographical object, but as the axis of territorial memory, trade routes, and sacred landscape.¹¹ In Khorezm materials, it is noted that water-related beliefs were closely connected with irrigation culture, rituals around springs and wells, and the everyday life of the oasis population.¹² In this region, the cult of water was a religious expression of local ecological experience and manifested a historically rooted form of consciousness that protected, distributed, and valued water.

In the example of the Khorezm oasis, the sacredness of water is visible not only in mythological images, but also in practical order. Activities such as opening a canal, waiting for one's turn for water, cleaning canals, and making vows around springs and wells shaped water as an object of collective responsibility. This experience reveals the most important aspect of the ancient cult of water: worship of water was not fear of nature, but a symbolic and institutional way of living in agreement with nature.

Discussion

The results show that the cult of water did not exist in a single identical form in the ancient world, although the experience underlying it was almost universal. All civilizations needed water, but this need created a distinct symbolic language in each region. In Mesopotamia, water was associated with the city and wisdom; in Egypt, with the annual flood and state stability; in Iran, with purity and moral order; in the Indian milieu, with salvation and oath; in the ancient world, with maritime danger and political power; and in Central Asia, with oasis life and sacred landscape. Thus, the universality of the cult of water does not mean that it was exactly the same everywhere,

but that dependence on water produced similar religious responses in different regions. This conclusion indicates that it is insufficient to explain the cult of water only through intercultural diffusion. Certainly, trade routes, migrations, empires, and religious contacts caused water-related images to move from one region to another. Yet the deep root of the cult of water is broader than this: in any society, water is directly connected with the human body, food, land, children, disease, death, and memory. Therefore, different peoples could independently turn water into a sacred sign. This situation demonstrates the anthropological universality of the cult of water. The high share of the fertility and vitality function in the statistical distribution confirms that ancient beliefs were not detached from material life. Water first preserved life and only afterward became a mythological image. The fact that the purification function occupies second place shows that in religious systems water operated as a means of restoring order. Through water, the human being moved out of a state of disease, sin, impurity, or danger and re-entered the sphere of social norm. This situation is consistent with Durkheim’s view that ritual reassembles society in sacred form.¹³ Although the fertility function is high, it would be incorrect to limit it only to crops. In ancient thought, fertility embraced a broad range of meanings: the greening of the earth, a woman’s childbirth, the increase of livestock, the fullness of the city market, and the arrival of abundance during the ruler’s reign. For this reason, water often appears together with images of femininity, mother, milk, spring, and seed. Such imagination makes it possible to interpret the cult of water as a symbolic field that unites biological, economic, and political productivity. The presence of cosmogonic origin and death-boundary semantics within one system reveals the deeply contradictory nature of the water symbol. On the one hand, water is connected with the beginning of the world, the rebirth of life, and the germination of seed; on the other, it also assumes the image of flood, maritime danger, passage to the other world, or farewell to the deceased. Turner’s definition of the liminal state is important here: water functions as a boundary that transfers a person from one status to another.¹⁴ When a child is born, when a person is freed from illness, when an oath is taken, or when the deceased is washed, water in each case closes the old state and opens a new one. The contradictory meanings of water derive precisely from its natural qualities. It is soft, yet it erodes stone; it gives life, yet it drowns; it is formless, yet it assumes the shape of any vessel; it flows, yet it leaves a permanent trace in memory. Ancient thought expressed these qualities not as abstract philosophical concepts, but through ritual images. Therefore, the cult of water shows both the ancient person’s capacity to observe nature and the level of symbolic thinking. The political dimension of the cult of water must also not be overlooked. In irrigational societies, governing water was equivalent to governing power. Digging canals, controlling floods, building aqueducts, or determining turns for water became visible forms of the social contract between ruler and community. For this reason, the ancient ruler was often portrayed as the person who brought water, preserved the order of water, or possessed the favor of water deities. Such an interpretation presents the cult of water not as a false religious mask, but as a logical expression of ancient society in which resource, responsibility, and authority were inseparable. The occurrence of the healing and protection function in 38.9 percent of the units also carries special meaning. If great rivers and state ideology express the monumental side of the cult of water, healing springs and vow waters reveal its everyday and family layer. In the face of illness, infertility, child health, or the dangers of travel, people sought to regain a sense of control through water. Drinking water, applying it to the face, bringing it home, or using it in ritual were simple actions, yet they connected a person with collective belief and ancestral experience. Another important aspect of the cult of water is its organization of collectivity. Sacrifice on the riverbank, cleaning a spring, digging a channel, holding a ritual before a flood, or praying for rain were often performed not by an individual alone, but with the participation of the entire community.

In this respect, the water ritual united people around common anxiety and common hope. When water arrived or was lacking, society tested its internal solidarity; ritual gave this test an orderly and meaningful form. The relatively lower indicator for death-boundary semantics does not mean that this function was secondary. On the contrary, it appeared in specific and profound situations. Washing the deceased with water, entrusting ashes to a river, or imagining the other world through a river demonstrates water's role as a boundary. Water carries the deceased away and leaves the living behind; it transforms separation into a painful but meaningful ritual. In this sense, the cult of water was also a means of giving cultural form to the fear of death. In the Central Asian context, connecting the cult of water with sacred landscape and cultural memory is especially important. River names, spring pilgrimages, legends around wells, and systems of canals and channels created not only the economic map of the territory, but also its symbolic map. Assmann interprets cultural memory as a symbolic system through which society preserves its past and transmits it to future generations.¹⁵ From this point of view, the Oxus-Amu Darya and the Khorezm oasis can be understood as central fields of water memory. Here, water was not only a means of living, but also strengthened a historical consciousness expressed in the idea: “we live here because water created life here.” This aspect also connects the article with contemporary ecological problems. The ancient cult of water cannot scientifically replace modern ecology, yet it shows the historical roots of an ethical attitude toward water. Not polluting water, not wasting it, regarding it as a collective blessing, and linking its source with memory and responsibility were expressed in ancient rituals in religious language. Under today's conditions of water scarcity, this historical experience reminds us of the need to understand water not only as a technical resource, but also as a cultural value.

Conclusion

In ancient religious beliefs, the cult of water is one of the oldest cultural systems that expressed the human relationship with nature in religious, symbolic, and social forms. The analysis showed that in the consciousness of ancient societies, water functioned as a source of life, a guarantee of fertility, a means of purification, a cosmogonic origin, a sign of political legitimation, a source of healing, and a symbol indicating the boundary after death. These functions did not appear separately, but were often manifested in an intertwined manner. In Egypt, the Nile expressed the ideas of harvest, state, and resurrection; in Mesopotamia, Enki represented water, wisdom, and urban order; in the ancient Iranian milieu, Anahita embodied purity, lineage, and fertility; in Indian thought, Varuna and the Ganges represented moral order and purification; in the ancient world, Poseidon and Neptune expressed maritime danger and political power; and the Oxus-Amu Darya and Khorezm represented the sacred basis of oasis culture. The results of content analysis showed that among 54 units, fertility and vitality occurred 42 times, purification 37 times, cosmogonic origin 29 times, restoration of order or punishment semantics 27 times, political legitimation 24 times, healing and protection 21 times, and death-boundary meaning 18 times. These figures prove that the root of the cult of water lies primarily in vital necessity, but that after becoming a religious symbol, it acquired broad social and moral content. At the same time, the results of the study show that the cult of water should be understood not as an isolated, frozen religious remnant, but as a constantly moving cultural mechanism. Throughout history, water-related symbols were enriched with new meanings as religious systems changed, political centers shifted, and economic forms were renewed. Yet its basic semantic core - life, purity, danger, memory, and responsibility - has been preserved from ancient times to the present. The main scientific conclusion of the article is that the cult of water can be explained through a three-dimensional model. The first dimension is ecological-economic: water was necessary for agriculture, pastoralism, urban life, and trade. The second dimension is ritual-semantic: water was used in acts of purification, birth, death, oath,

pilgrimage, and healing. The third dimension is political-memorial: water sources shaped the city, the state, sacred landscape, ancestral memory, and territorial identity. When these three dimensions unite, the cult of water appears not only as a religious foundation of ancient civilizations, but also as one of their social-institutional foundations. Under present conditions of water scarcity and ecological crisis, this topic is not merely scholarly knowledge about the past, but also a historical lesson that serves to rethink humanity’s responsible attitude toward water. As a result, the cult of water is not limited to the phenomenon of ancient societies “deifying nature.” It is an attempt to incorporate water, as the condition of human existence, into moral, legal, ritual, and aesthetic order. Therefore, ancient beliefs about water have a twofold significance for the contemporary researcher: on the one hand, they illuminate the history of religious thought; on the other, they reveal the long-lasting cultural roots of attitudes toward water resources. For future research, it is important to study separately the ancient ritual layers connected with springs, wells, canals, and rivers in the Khorezm, Zarafshan, Fergana, and Surkhan oases. In the Central Asian experience, the cult of water reflects not only ancient religious imagination, but also the economic discipline, local memory, and ecological ethics of oasis culture. Ancient ideas about valuing water acquire new scholarly and social significance against the background of today’s problems of water scarcity.

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