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"'Cool and Tasty Waters': Managing Naples's Water Supply, c. 1500–c. 1750"

Gentilcore, David

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Although Naples was one of Europe's largest cities (after London and Paris), studies of the management of its water supply during the early modern period are sorely lacking, despite growing interest in the subject at both an Italian and European level. Naples was perhaps unique in relying on a vast and tortuous underground network of reservoirs, cisterns, channels and conduits, accessed by well shafts, all fed by an ancient aqueduct. The present study outlines and evaluates the Neapolitan water supply as it existed in the period, analysing the archival records of the municipal tribunal responsible for the city's infrastructure, the 'Tribunale della Fortificazione, Acqua e Mattonata', and its various 'Appuntamenti' (proposals), 'Conclusioni' (decisions) and edicts. This is interwoven with reference to pertinent printed accounts, from contemporary guide books to medical regimens and health manuals. We examine both water quantity, in terms of availability and accessibility (by looking at the structure and its management, and the technicians responsible for its maintenance) and water quality (by looking at contemporary attitudes and perceptions). In the process we are able to question the widespread view of early modern Naples as chaotic and uncontrolled, governed by a weak public authority, as well as widely held assumptions about the "inertia" of the pre-modern hydro-social system more generally. (Abstract)

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