REACHING FOR A ‘NATURAL AUTHORITY’:
THE RHÔNE IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LYON

Pierre Claude Reynard

Historians have long probed the relationship between man and nature, and for several generations now, most have steered away from the shoals of physical or cultural determinism. Many, particularly in France, have been carried along by the current of “possibilism,” recognising the primacy of social issues but acknowledging the weight of natural parameters through an extended chronological perspective. At the post-modern end of the twentieth century, new environmental movements challenged such certainties and generated more reciprocal formulations that emphasize the density of exchanges between a society and its environment. This paper probes an enlightened series of urban projects to illustrate this interdependency and, more precisely, to demonstrate the heuristic character of a great natural feature – the river Rhône in eighteenth-century Lyon, France’s second largest city.

Cities are social phenomena par excellence where the relations between natural conditions and human choices are often less apparent than in rural settings. They have only slowly claimed a place within the still growing field of environmental history. Not surprisingly, early advances in this direction focussed on issues of pollution, often of urban origin even if felt further afield, or on the emergence of crucial infrastructure networks originally mapped by historians of technology, public health, or communications. In turn, such themes explain the

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