Introduction

Medieval Waters

This book explores the cultural meanings of rivers over a broad span of time (c. 300–1100). The regional focus is on Northwestern Continental Europe (France, Germany, and Benelux), on the territories that were the core of Roman Gaul and of Merovingian and Carolingian Francia. During these centuries, several fundamental redefinitions of culture, community, and economy took place: the transformation of the Roman Empire and the rise of the earliest Germanic kingdoms; the centralizing push of the Carolingian imperial government, especially under the aegis of Charlemagne; invasion and retrenchment during the Viking Age; and the emergence of new cultural, religious, and political communities around the year 1000, with a corresponding intensification of river use. Throughout these transformations, writers and religious leaders wrestled with their own cultural identities, with the legacy of the past in shaping the present, and with understanding the role of God and the saints in the everyday workings of the world.

Rivers large and small coursed through medieval Europe. For that reason, they also flowed through the written sources of the era and the stories that people told. This book is about the medieval environmental imagination and the cultural history of rivers. An examination of hundreds of years of hagiography, poetry, and narrative accounts raises questions about what kinds of stories medieval people told about rivers and riverscapes and how authors assigned meaning and cultural value to the everyday landscapes in which they lived and worked.

This book is about an area bounded by water. It is impossible to introduce here all the rivers included in this book, or to convey the scope of the medieval connection to the hundreds of small tributaries that shaped local experiences.

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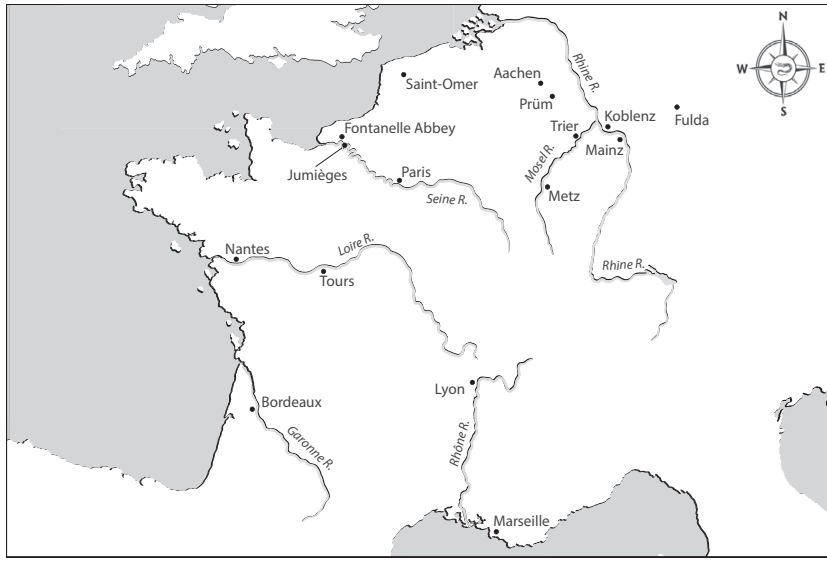

MAP 0.1. Rivers and sites central to this study

The territory that between 300–1100 can varyingly be termed Gaul, Francia, and Carolingian Europe (among others), is framed to the south by the Mediterranean and the Rhône delta. To the west, the Garonne and Atlantic hold guard, and the north is hemmed in by the North Sea. The eastern frontier is harder to define. There, the Danube, the Rhine, and the Elbe were all seen at various points as the river on the edge of the known world.

Across the centuries, rivers like the Mosel, the Loire, and the Rhine remained touchstones for explorations of power, identity, risk, and redemption. Rivers were ubiquitous and enduring, but our sources of information, though voluminous, are scattered and slippery. The stories found in these sources, even when couched in a framework of the miraculous, were derived from direct experiences with rivers. The broader social, cultural, and economic roles of rivers as sites of lived experience are visible in the stories. But beyond the practical, I am interested in questions about the nature and role of the stories themselves. What stories became important enough that they were retold across the centuries, and how did their changing nature reflect changing cultural contexts? How do river stories flow through time and space? How did medieval writers interpret rivers through the lens of broader questions about religion, cultural identity, and the workings of the saints? How do river stories reflect the

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anxieties of changing times, and where do they offer currents of hope in continuity?

Some of the ways we live within and alongside nature are radically different from those of the premodern past. We use and regulate resources and rivers on massively different scales – diverting, controlling, consuming, and even paving over rivers. Though the scale of our interactions with nature might have changed, we share more common environmental concerns with the past than we might expect. Like us, medieval people recognized environmental risk and responded to floods, torrential storms, and droughts. Yet, they also, like us, believed that people could alter their environments in ways that made them more "useful" or "safe" for human communities. They irrigated crops, created systems for diverting water resources to run plumbing, kept fish in artificial ponds to ensure steady food supplies, and regulated urban pollution to protect the health of both rivers and people. They understood that there were ethics to interactions with nature and believed that these were governed by God and the saints, and they found in rivers resources, ideas, stories, and meaning.

There is a medieval concept of books as *mirrors* – treatises to be held up to those in power so that in discussions about others, they could better see themselves and assess their roles and duties. Rivers can be mirrors, too. Reflection is a theme that runs throughout this book. In late antique and medieval imaginations, river travel was a chance for rumination and transformation, and gazing into rivers could (often miraculously) reveal the true self. Water's reflections could hide and protect and confuse, and rivers mirrored back to people an altered view of themselves and their society. I hope that this book contains moments of reflection where we see ourselves in the past; where we see that while many aspects of medieval Europe are gone, modern Europeans still live in the same spaces, and along the same rivers. Many of the stories, images, and attitudes created during the Middle Ages still resonate and ripple across time, incorporated into modern understandings of riverscapes and their meaning.

SLIPPERY SUBJECTS

There's a pernicious untruth that historians working on early medieval topics face a gaping absence of sources. Far from a Dark Ages from which a few lone voices emerge, the period from c. 300–1100 is brimming over with sources and stories. Moreover, these sources echoed across centuries, as they were read and rewritten, retold and reimagined. The effect of medieval storytelling, particularly when those stories were about

the saints, was cumulative. The voices of 350 still mattered in 1100. The story of medieval rivers includes hundreds of streams, people, and sources.

These sources encompass many voices, identities, and intentions. In this book, I draw on many, though by no means all, of them. Although on occasion I use law codes, charters, and other normative sources, I have focused on narrative and literary sources – historical, religious, epistolary, and lyrical. The primary set of evidence that I draw upon is works of hagiography. Hagiography, or "writing about the holy" refers in a medieval context to a broad category of narrative sources, both prose and poetry, produced to describe the lives, deeds, deaths, miracles, and legacies of Christian saints. For the early medieval continental West, these sources were almost exclusively written in Latin.

I identified and read over 250 individual works of Latin hagiography written in Germany, France, and the Low Countries between c. 350 and 1150 including metrical and prose lives, passions, translations, and inventios. I also included 45 annals or chronicles written before 1150, 20 other narrative sources like regional histories and collective biographies, and countless letters and poems. Over 100 of these made it into the book, including some famous stories that shine out like the bright pebbles in the Mosel that attracted the gaze of the poet Ausonius. But this book is also about the volume of smaller stories that add up to the current that carried the power of the saints from place to place and from time to time.

Another issue is recognizing that these voices are not those of passive, inert reporters. The poets, hagiographers, and historians of the early Middle Ages engaged in their changing and confusing world. They were actors within environmental and social regimes, and they experienced the riverscapes of Gaul first hand. They were also authors with agendas, and they used those riverscapes as vehicles for literary, religious, and political messages. Rivers, real and imagined, loomed large in their writing, and the stories composed about and alongside their waters show a vibrant, connected, and dynamic medieval world.

Finally, the history of medieval rivers is one that was written at the local level, by people writing about their homes. We see, of course, the big players – the rivers like the Rhône and the Mosel that were prominent enough to make it into the broader imaginative mapping of space. Some of the sources take on broad goals: histories of the world; histories of the Frankish people; collective biographies of scores of saints; and, in a source tackled in my final chapter, attempts at encompassing all the world's knowledge. But most of these stories are about smaller rivers – the rivers

that were close to hand, and to mind. They are found in narratives about local saints, histories of bishoprics, poems sent to close friends, and charters detailing local conflicts and relationships. Balancing these scales can be hard, but this variability of stories is almost like that of the rivers in a watershed; the tiny tributaries are crucial to the life of the main arteries – without the tiny stories, the cultural power of the larger narratives would dry up.

Water in all its forms was a dominating force in medieval lives. But there is little direct scientific or theoretical discussion of the nature of water and waterworks that survives from c. 300–1000. In the first century Frontinus wrote a treatise *de Aquis*, which surveyed the water system of the city of Rome, explaining the uses of water and the structures built to deliver and control it. After this, there are no later surviving treatises (up to 1000) that directly address hydraulic engineering in practice. Others do explore water and rivers: the poet Ausonius wrote a long poem about the Mosel river in the fourth century and Isidore of Seville's early seventh-century encyclopedic *Etymologies* discussed the nature of water in Book 13, on "The World and Its Parts." Bede's eighth-century *On the Nature of Things* contains several chapters (38–42) on the nature of fresh and salt waters. In seventh-century Ravenna, an anonymous author wrote a cosmography that included many rivers and bodies of water.[1] And that is about it. Despite such limited direct medieval studies of the nature of water, "wetness permeates the evidence as it must often have the lives of early medieval Europeans."[2]

The fluidity of the subject itself has meant that the scholars, past and present, who have tried to understand the role of water in the world have faced some unique challenges. It has also led to a wide range of practitioners who work with the history of water and water use – historians, hydrologists, literary scholars, geographers, biologists, and archaeologists. One of the trickiest aspects of understanding the changing role of water between 300–1100 is that the nature of the written evidence changes so dramatically that it is hard to tell if the changes we see are due to real change or a change in reporting and survival of evidence.

That said, there is written evidence for this entire span of time, including religious, administrative, and cultural texts. As Hoffmann notes,

[1] Kendall and Wallis, *Bede: On the Nature of Things and On Times*; Pinder and Parthey, *Ravennatis Anonymi Cosmographia*; Isidore and Barney, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*. Schuler, "Les rives médiévales."

[2] Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe*, 68.

because of the Carolingian Renaissance and the jump in surviving administrative documents, Carolingian Europe "has special importance for environmental history because suddenly [environmental] activity becomes visible and sometimes plainly also intentional in path-breaking new syntheses for organizing human use of European nature, notably the land."[3] That is why archaeological work has played such an important role in interpreting the active engagement of people with riverine and coastal landscapes, and in determining the degree of hydraulic engineering and resource consumption.

Such interdisciplinarity has been necessary because, as Paul Benoit and Joséphine Rouillard explain, "from the 500's to the 1500's, hydraulic techniques experienced a long development that written sources only reveal imperfectly."[4] "An 'aqueous history'" writes Paolo Squatriti, "requires ransacking texts and using them in ways their authors did not envision for them."[5] Hoffmann echoes this claim, adding more about the role of scientific knowledge: "scraps of historical information are patterned by known ecological relationships and processes."[6]

As I have pointed out elsewhere, abbot Caesarius of Prüm's notes in the Urbar of Prüm show just how much local knowledge has disappeared over time.[7] Though he recorded fiscal and taxation evidence for monastic estate management, he did not provide much discussion of agricultural know-how. This is because, he wrote, "the manner in which the holders of *mansi* plow, sow, gather, and deliver the harvest on time to the barns, and of how they must make fences and thresh the grain is known by almost everyone. For that reason, we have not recorded that which is already generally known or is able to be known."[8]

EXPERTISE AND AUTHORITY

> I judge of things about which I know.[9]

In the quote above, Venantius Fortunatus claimed to be writing from a position of knowledge or authority. One of the aspects of medieval rivers that is most elusive is the question of how knowledge about waterways

[3] Ibid., 79. [4] Benoit and Rouillard, "Medieval Hydraulics in France," 163.
[5] Squatriti, *Water and Society*, 8. [6] Hoffmann, "Economic Development."
[7] Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape*, 80. [8] Schwab, *Das Prümer Urbar*, 22.
[9] Fortunatus 1.15. Roberts, *Poems*, 45. I have chosen to rely primarily on Roberts' most recent, full translation and edition of Fortunatus' poems. At times, I will favor either my own translations or those of Judith George, and this will be indicated.

and water systems was acquired, accumulated, and shared. How much did decision makers understand about their local and regional landscapes, river basins, and hydrologies when deciding where to build mills and fisheries, how to drain wetlands, whether to reroute streams, and where to build new communities or relocate older ones? Did they rely on personal experience, local knowledge, written accounts, or the accumulated treatises of antiquity?

Who, in the medieval world, were the decision makers about water resources? Who held knowledge, and how did that knowledge reach the people who decided what to do about rivers, river resources, river transport, and even river disasters? Such questions are frequently asked in modern histories, when documentation lets us more clearly see the individuals within the larger state networks. With close reading and some imaginative reconstructions, we can do the same for the premodern world. Looking past the elite rulers, there were local land managers, boatmen, fishers, merchants – people with the real lived experience of the rivers and waterways whose knowledge directly and indirectly influenced the ways that people in power interacted with the fluvial world and the ways that authors chose to write about it.

We can find these people in the medieval sources – in hagiographies, poetry, law codes, and, of course, government documents. The eighth-century law code *Lex Alamannorum* includes a special punishment for anyone who kills craftsmen and shepherds. These skilled workers are included alongside governmental officials, demonstrating the recognition given to the special role and practical expertise of swineherds, shepherds, cooks, and fishers.[10] Charlemagne's oft-cited ninth-century document the *Capitulare de Villis* is a model of elite recognition of the value and expertise of craftsmen and expert knowledge. The emperor ordered that "every steward shall have in his district good workmen – that is, blacksmiths, gold- and silver-smiths, shoemakers, turners, carpenters, shield-makers, fishermen, falconers, soap-makers, brewers (that is, people who know how to make beer, cider, perry or any other suitable beverage), bakers to make bread for our use, net-makers who can make good nets for hunting or fishing or fowling, and all the other workmen too numerous to mention."[11] The Capitulary of Aachen also set fishermen under the

[10] *Lex Alamannorum*, §79.

[11] *Capitulare de Villis*, §45, trans. Loyn and Percival, *The Reign of Charlemagne*, 70. See, www.le.ac.uk/hi/polyptyques/capitulare/trans.html.
Perry is a pear-based alcoholic drink.

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same category as foresters and "guardians of animals," and granted sweeping administrative powers to villa managers, providing that they were "good, wise, and prudent" in their work. These powers included many traditional pastoral and agricultural duties like building and managing ponds for live fish, fisheries, and mills.[12]

Royal recognition of the importance of trades appears in a more comic setting as well. Fortunatus wrote a whole poem about his anger that he had been displaced from a royal ship because it had been requisitioned for use by one of the cooks. With clear indignation at the injustice of the perceived snub, he complained that: "a cook's broth carried more weight than my rights; a book is not as grand as a bowl, so that I had no place in my own boat."[13] When push came to shove, the royal entourage recognized the pragmatic importance of the cook's expertise over the relative indulgence of having a poet on hand.

In the late tenth century, the monk Aelfric of Eynsham wrote *The Colloquy on the Occupations*. Written in Latin with Old-English annotations that were likely later additions, the work is a series of dialogues that explore the life and daily occupations of craftsmen, including "a ploughman, a shepherd, an oxherd, a huntsman, a fisherman, a fowler, a merchant, a shoemaker, a salter, a baker, and a cook." The remarkable dialogues may "also have served as a sort of social primer designed to teach young boys something about the occupations of the different types of men with whom they will eventually have to deal."[14] They offer modern historians a striking testament to the monastic knowledge of the laborers whose work supported them, and evidence about the concerns of those participating in both the productive and extractive economies of the early Middle Ages.

This was not to say that these men's expertise was always recognized and respected. Tension between the layers of the riverine hierarchy of control and knowledge is found in a story told by Gregory of Tours. Nicetius, the bishop of Trier, ordered fish to be caught, but his servants told him that the fish traps had been damaged and were unusable. Nicetius ignored this report, telling a servant to "'Go and tell the head-cook to take fish from the river.' He did what he was told and the cook made fun of him." The bishop, perhaps frustrated, ordered the servant to go back and repeat the order, "And after they had unwillingly received

[12] *Capitulare Aquisgranense*, §18–19.
[13] Fortunatus 6.8, trans. George, *Personal and Political Poems*, 53.
[14] Amodio, *Blackwell Guides to Literature, Volume 15*, 160.

the order two or three times, they eventually went, angrily, to the fish-trap, and looking in it they found it so full of fish that ten men would hardly have been able to carry away what was there."[15] Here we see the bishop's authority reinforced by miracle, but it is an authority wielded in the face of expertise, in direct opposition to the advice and admonitions of local knowledge holders.

The processes and people that shaped medieval rivers deployed manual labor, extractive processes, small- and large-scale engineering, and water manipulation. But rivers were also parts of cultural networks. Examining how rivers are represented in medieval storytelling can show us medieval worldviews and give us glimpses of the way the people of the past imagined the rivers that are still part of our world today. There are many ways to value nature, and to explore and understand the links between people and place – looking to the medieval, pre-modern past affords us ways of seeing the rivers of Europe free from the lens of modernization, large-scale regulation, and the modern state.

RIVERSCAPES AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

It is tricky to talk about rivers. There are so many names for running waters: brooks, streams, rivulets, torrents, canals ... Water is omnipresent in landscapes; but what does it mean to focus on the river not as one part of a landscape, but instead as the key feature and focus? Throughout this book, I use the term "riverscape." Riverscapes are the complex, sociocultural networks of use, appreciation, fear, respect, and value that people build up around rivers. Water is elemental; rivers are water in motion along with accompanying sediments and living creatures; river systems are connected rivers and the products of natural forces over long timeframes. Riverscapes involve human perceptions, insight, and cultural interpretation. In other words, rivers exist without people; riverscapes cannot.

As with rivers, riverscapes are not static. They change over time through the processes of human culture. T. S. McMillin explains this for Mark Twain's Mississippi: "Knowing the shape [of the river] is much like crafting a text out of multifarious materials: the physical traits of the moving water, the undulating and oscillating riverbed, alternations of light and shadow, the crumbling and reappearing banks, events of the

[15] James, *Life of the Fathers*, 111.

recent and remote past, personal experiences and public communications."[16] Culture creates riverscapes.

Riverscape, alongside waterscape,[17] is a term not yet as integrated into environmental conversations as is landscape. But it shares similar opportunities and poses similar interpretive problems. Many works on riverscapes focus on geospatial and ecosystem concerns, but the concept can also be used to address the human cultural ideas imposed on or inspired by these systems. As the editors of *Thinking with Water* argue, "water does not exist in the abstract. It must take up a body or place (a hedgehog, a weather front, a turn of phrase) somewhere, sometime, somehow. All water is situated." "However," they add, "for humans, place is often strongly associated with landed locations; situating waters may thus be quite tricky."[18]

Why, then, a specific focus on riverscapes instead of an attempt to look more broadly at early medieval concepts of landscape? I believe that a focus on rivers and the cultural ideas that emerge alongside them and about them highlights some specific elements of the connections between people and place. Rivers, for a start, move. They are in motion in ways that other features of the natural world are not – they are never static. This movement draws the eye, shapes human interactions, and encourages contemplation of change, motion, and transit(oriness). As I argue in the first chapter, the movement of rivers became bound up in medieval questions of human migration, mobility, and identity.

As Cecilia Chen points out, the motion of waterscapes calls attention to their power: "water is much more than a resource. It is a socio-natural *force* – an active agent of overflow, creation, and destruction."[19] Disrupted river systems caught the attention of many medieval authors – and premodern rivers moved much more unpredictably than modern ones. Rivers and streams of all scales were affected by disastrous flooding, which could be extreme and sudden. "It happened, once," Wandalbert of Prüm writes, "that on account of a large amount of rain, suddenly the little river the Vuocara overflowed, surging up in such a great mass that it tore up its course not without risk and damage to many things."[20]

[16] McMillin, *The Meaning of Rivers*, 17.
[17] For watery transformations of "landscape" see Lowell Duckert's essay "When It Rains," which employs both "waterscape" and "rainscape."
[18] Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis, "Introduction," in *Thinking with Water*, 8.
[19] Chen, "Mapping Waters: Thinking with Watery Places," 277.
[20] Wandalbert of Prüm, *Vita et Miracula S. Goaris*, §2.1.

Wandalbert then offers a nature-centric sense of the flood, asking us to imagine the perspective of the rushing river. "This river," he writes, "when it first began to overflow, uncertain what obstacles would delay it from its course, with its waters descending from out of a hollow in the mountain, grew so much, so that at the end, breaking down barriers, ripping even large and most stable houses from their foundations, it hurled its force out into the Rhine." Wandalbert puts his reader in the position of the river, wondering where its headlong course will fling it, afraid of obstacles, eager to return to its riverbed. The river becomes subject, actor, and reactor, tangled up in natural forces that it is both part of and controlled by.

Rivers, as Richard White framed with the Columbia, are energy as much as they are water.[21] McMillin explains how rivers allow for a special kind of ecocriticism: "treating meaning as having both matter and energy sets things in motion. River writers often connect to and make use of that energy to convey other meanings; the energy of rivers makes their writings particularly meaningful."[22]

Rivers are also tied to the passing of time on human and geological scales. The movement of a river, unlike the tides, can be seen as unidirectional. Rivers are aeons old, shaping and wearing down rock. The inexorable, endless flow of water leads to human meditation on the passing of time. Instinct and observation suggest that, as one never steps in the same river twice, any single moment in a river is fleeting, yet the flow of moments is unending. I argue in Chapter 6, however, that for some medieval writers, the flow of rivers through time and space and history could be reversed. In the final chapter, I push this idea further, suggesting that medieval riverscapes were neither past nor present – they were, to borrow from Matt Edgeworth, entanglements of both.

Edgeworth argues that rivers and the societies along them are co-creations. He writes, "The proposition is this. *Most rivers are neither natural nor cultural, but rather entanglements of both*. It will be argued moreover that this entanglement, far from being a modern phenomenon, actually goes back much further back into the past than we might think, contradicting common-sense notions of rivers as 'natural'."[23] New Materialism argues for an even more extreme form of entanglement or "ecological enmeshment." This approach, exemplified by Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* and highlighted in a premodern context in Jeffrey Jerome

[21] White, *The Organic Machine*. [22] McMillin, *The Meaning of Rivers*, xv.
[23] Edgeworth, *Fluid Pasts*, 15.

Cohen's *Inhuman Nature*, argues that "always supported by objects, substances, and ecologies, the human is never uncompanioned."[24] "All matter, in other words, is a 'storied matter.' It is a material 'mesh' of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces."[25]

Medieval rivers were central to the lives of many: boatmen, bargedrivers, fishers, farmers, vintners, millers, women who gathered water and washed clothes along the shores, and children who played alongside the banks – the people whose knowledge and familiarity with rivers could be overlooked by even the most mundane medieval sources, and who must often be intuited. These were the people who knew the rivers. It is hard to recapture all this knowledge. We can glimpse its depth – but maybe not its edges.

This introduces the final reason that I believe riverscapes deserve separate treatment – their edges and boundaries invite discussions of change, blending, and hybridity. As Edward S. Casey argues in "The Edge(s) of Landscape: A Study in Liminology," there is a compelling quality to the boundaries and edges of things, and landscapes and seascapes often present observers with challenges of interpretation and experience. Do what he calls land/sea/scapes have edges? And if there is an edge "something we cannot take for granted – is it a limit, a perimeter, a periphery? What is it, and how are we to think of it?" A distinction that he makes (within four broader typologies: rim, edge, border, and boundary) is that of the "subtle edge" vs. the "salient edge." While the salient edge "is perceptually obvious; it stands out, is unambiguous. . .and is often marked as such," the subtle edge is ambiguous and "so integral to a given phenomenon as to be barely, if at all, distinguishable from the phenomenon itself."[26] Subtle edges include parts of a sky, the point where one wave ends, or the place where you cannot see the water disappearing downstream or around the bend.

Such subtle edges can confuse viewers, adding tensions to encounters with place. Even the human infrastructure of riverbanks adds confusion. Weirs, harbors, jetties, dams, and mills project the energies and ecosystems of the land into the water and vice versa. This mutability and boundlessness of rivers that in turn serve as boundaries is another way in which riverscapes are distinct from landscapes.

[24] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Cohen, *Inhuman Nature*, iii.
[25] Iovino and Oppermann, "Introduction: Stories Come to Matter," 1–2.
[26] Casey, "The Edge(s) of Landscape: A Study in Liminology," 92.

Rivers are compelling in part because they present to the viewer so many subtle edges. The river's edge and the surface of the waters are permeable barriers; though riverbanks may seem like a salient edge, in experience they are inconsistently located and defined. The river in flood has a different bank than a river that is running low; furthermore, is the riverbank the point where land ends or the point where water begins? Or is it the point where land above water changes into land under water even if the edge of the water is the river? Puddles, mud, floods, and storms project the river's water beyond the bank, and there are animal, plant, and insect species that are at home on both sides of the river/land boundary, suggesting that it is, for some, not an edge at all. In a poem discussed further in Chapter 2, Venantius Fortunatus pushes us to see how experience defines what is and is not a river. In his poem "On the Gers," the impermanence and unboundedness of the riverbank is at issue. The Gers river, in drought and flood, changes and shifts edges and boundaries, and "as pools become mud the river dries up, and barren earth replaces the whirling waters."[27]

Water can, of course, be a simple way of defining what is and is not of the river; yet the surface of the river at times resists that ease of definition. The Late Antique poet Ausonius wrote about this phenomenon in the *Mosella*: "though fixed upon the depths, the eyes grow weary with straying after fishes who in slippery shoals sport midway between"[28] the surface and the riverbed. When water is clear, one can almost look through it, bringing the surface and the riverbed into close contact; yet in other lights, the rivers mirror the land, so that rather than seeing the water, one sees only a continuity of sky or shore. Michael Roberts also emphasizes the blurriness of the boundaries of river and non-river in this passage: "this final sentence unites man and nature, land and water, farmer and sailor, peaks and valleys, in a joyful hubbub of inarticulate sound. The delight in blurred divisions is a key theme of Ausonius' poem, and one that finds expression in the images of reflection and echo."[29]

Water can be transparent, allowing a viewer to see past the surface, into the depths. Clarity, connected to honesty, transparency, and truth, was a lauded feature of many monastic riverscapes. Water, like a book, could be a mirror, reflecting back on the observer a true or transformed sense of self. Revelations awaited those who watched rivers. As a young

[27] Fortunatus 1.21, trans. Roberts, *Poems*, 61.
[28] Evelyn-White, *Ausonius Volume 1*, 231.
[29] Roberts, "The Mosella of Ausonius: An Interpretation," 18–19.

girl, St. Austreberta saw her future: "One day, as children do, she was contemplating the shape of her face in the water." The water recognized and signified her holiness by revealing a monastic veil over her image in the pool.[30] Water can also transport; Chapter 1 argues that it brings people to different places and creates in them new identities. It poses great risks, which are explored in Chapters 2 and 4, but offers up paths to salvation and the transformation of souls, an idea explored in Chapters 1 and 6. Water can obscure; Chapter 6 discusses several instances in which waters hid the bodies of martyrs from the searching eyes of their enemies.

But, in the end, as argued in Chapter 7, water does all of these, recursively. Water can reveal the future or convey the shape of the past. Stories that people told about medieval rivers show us much about what they lived through, how they viewed the natural world, and how they understood the connections between past and present. Their stories about saints also remind us of the depth of the ways that early medieval Christians understood the thinness of the veil that separated this world from the next. Rivers, as the ultimate semi-permeable barriers of the natural world, became vehicles for medieval authors to show the complexity, depth, and frequency with which saints used nature to act from beyond the grave to shape the world.

[30] McNamara, Halborg, and Whatley, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 309.