

# Introduction

Life was created in water. All human beings depend on water throughout their life, from birth to death. It is, therefore, one of the most precious and indispensable substances on Earth. It is most appreciated in its liquid stage, as this is how we prefer to consume it.

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In many parts of the world, access to fresh water is a challenge due to harsh climatic and geological conditions. Scarcity as well as abundance of water may cause major challenges to human life. This book deals with a region of the world which mostly consists of semi-arid or arid environments with little annual precipitation, which also includes some of the largest deserts in the world: the Middle East. Rain, in many areas, is unpredictable and may occur within a very limited time of the year. In addition, water is available from large rivers, most famously the Nile, the Euphrates and the Tigris, but is not immediately accessible for use. This double challenge resulted in the innovation of technologies to control the water in order to use it for consumption and subsistence. Following the development of farming, the discovery of irrigation technologies gave rise to

urban settlements and empires. In the Middle East, the understanding of technologies to optimize the use of this valuable resource became an important trigger of early civilization.

The importance of water is obvious from the earliest written sources and archaeological finds. The oldest Sumerian mythology deals with water, and it became an integral component of the Book of Genesis and other myths of creation. Both Sumerian mythology and the Bible also introduce the extinction of life by a flood that would drown the entire earth. Thusly associated with both the beginning and the end of life, the role of water also became evident in the beautiful image of a paradise, a place where water generates harmony in life.

Water was, therefore, an obvious topic for a symposium held on 27<sup>th</sup>–28<sup>th</sup> November 2014 at the University of Copenhagen titled “Water of Life”. Scholars from the natural sciences and the humanities met to discuss the many aspects of the meaning and use of water in the Middle East from the first human settlements until today. Of the many fasci-

nating presentations, fifteen have been chosen for this book intended for a broad audience; there is also no shortage of high level academic publications dealing with the issue. The symposium was held and sponsored by the Danish Institute in Damascus as an initiative to disseminate knowledge on the Middle East. The studies presented in this book are, of course, only a very tiny part of an enormous topic, but offer relevant examples throughout human existence in the region.

With the symposium, the Danish Institute in Damascus also wanted to celebrate the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of its founding father Peder Mortensen, who acted as its first director and succeeded in establishing an extraordinary framework for the meeting of Danish and Middle Eastern culture within the environment of a restored Damascene house, Bayt al-'Aqqad. This house became a small paradise on earth to many Syrians and visitors for studies, contemplation, artistic creation and, most importantly, cultural understanding. The allegory of the book is this: as water may turn the arid environment into a green pasture, Peder Mortensen, through his vision of a

Danish Institute in Damascus, fertilized the ground for cultural understanding between Denmark and the Arab world.

The production of the book would not have been possible without a significant contribution by The C. L. David Foundation and Collection. The editors would also like to thank the authors and also Kirsten B. Hastrup for chairing sessions. Further thanks go to Sandra Rosendahl, Mette Elisabeth B. Thuesen and Hanne Nymann for their editorial assistance when the production of the book was challenged by deadlines, and of course the publishers, Orbis Publishing House, for investing time and resources in the realization of the book.

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