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The Seine for Paris: A Centuries-Old Link

Raphaël Morera

Abstract
The image of Paris is closely linked to that of the Seine, the river that flows through it and around which the city developed. The opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympic Games clearly highlighted this association. This article traces the history of this relationship over the centuries. It first describes the role of the Seine and its watershed in the growth of the city, then unravels the history of the river in the city itself before showing how, ultimately, Paris shaped the history of the Seine.

Policy Recommendations
- Engage diverse communities, including schoolchildren, in the region's cultural and environmental history.
- Raise awareness of the river's former uses through displays in public spaces.
- Develop deliberative practices in water management at all institutional levels.
- Promote easy access to the Seine and provide historical information along its banks.

KEYWORDS

Seine River
water governance
inland navigation
urban history
water management

WATER ICONS



< Fig. 1 Women's 10 km open water swimming event at the 2024 Summer Olympics on the Seine, Paris (Source: Chabe01, 2024. CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons).

Introduction

Paris is the daughter of the Seine: It was built thanks to the river, both materially and politically. Its islands and the marshes of its floodplain provided shelter and food for prehistoric populations. By making Lutetia the first urban center of northern Gaul, the Romans took advantage of the Seine's benefits. Thanks to the river, goods and foodstuffs from the Paris basin could be gathered there to be consumed, processed and traded. This intrinsic link between Paris and its river was only undermined by the development of industrial modes of transport: first the train, then the road. Navigation, still present on the city's coat of arms, has undergone a process of invisibilization since flood protection became a priority for developers.

The current ecological crisis and the new needs expressed by city dwellers are significantly changing the stakes: Renewing the connection between Paris and the Seine is now a key political objective. In that perspective, this article aims to explain how this connection was established. How, in concrete terms, did the Seine create Paris?

The Seine, a Basin for Paris

Since Gallo-Roman times, the Seine has been the city's main artery (In the Seine 2024). Only the Vikings used it as an invasion route, launching attacks in the eighth and ninth centuries. In the twelfth century, Paris's expansion drew resources from across the Seine basin, particularly building materials. The cut stones used to build Notre-Dame came from the Oise and were transported by boat to Paris (Gély 2014). Similarly, river navigation made possible the city's supply of food and wine.

The river's role as a transport artery continued to grow over the centuries. In the mid-sixteenth century, Paris experienced a major crisis in its supply of firewood, as the forests closest to the city had been heavily exploited and hunting in the forests was very important to the king. To overcome this crisis, a merchant named Gilles Deffroissiz proposed to the municipality that wood cut in the forests of the Morvan massif, located 200 km east of the capital, be floated down the river (Lyon-Caen 2020). From 1549 until the end of the nineteenth century, this practice ensured that Parisians could bake bread and heat their homes, thereby maintaining the political stability of the city.

Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the Seine's importance was reinforced by the development of navigation canals connecting the Seine basin to that of the Loire, then the Rhône. The idea of extending the French capital's sphere of influence through waterways took hold at the end of the sixteenth century and became a reality during the reign of Henry IV with the launch of the construction of the Briare Canal, connecting the Loire and Seine basins (Pinsseau 1943). Completed in 1642, the Briare Canal was rapidly rivaled by the Canal d'Orléans, which opened in 1691, before being supplemented in the nineteenth century by the Canal de Bourgogne, connecting the Seine to the Rhône via the Loire and the Saône. Before the advent of railways and road transport, the Seine served as the primary means of supplying Paris, allowing its hinterland to extend beyond its own catchment area.

The Seine in Paris

The ground in medieval and modern cities is not impermeable: City dwellers live to the rhythm of the water table of their nourishing

river (Lyon-Caen 2020). The streets are muddy during the wettest periods and, conversely, very dusty, even unbreathable, when the water recedes. This close link between the Seine and Paris poses specific challenges in terms of urban policy. The streets must be cleaned and scrubbed regularly to remove the mud that forms. When the Seine swells too much and during periods of flooding, cellars fill with water and expel feces stored in pits. Conversely, during dry periods, it is necessary to spray the streets to keep the dust on the ground and then collect it. Since the end of the Middle Ages, Parisians have developed specific practices to organize life with the Seine.

The shape of the city also bears the mark of the central role played by navigation in Parisian life. From east to west, the banks of the Seine are equipped to receive and handle goods arriving in the city (Benoit 2000). The Place de Grève, now the forecourt of the Hôtel de Ville, is the heart of this economy. Located in the immediate vicinity of Les Halles, it is situated on the right bank of the river, along the widest and most easily navigable branch. The areas for unloading, storing and handling imported goods and foodstuffs were gradually moved elsewhere as the city grew and a process of socio-spatial specialization took place.

Eastern Paris specialized in receiving the heaviest and most voluminous materials (Backouche 2000). Wine and timber from Burgundy were stored on arrival on the right bank of the river, near the Quai de la Rapée and Bercy domain. The ports in the center of Paris were more likely to receive food products. To facilitate navigation and to control river flooding, the city regularly financed port development and the construction of quays, especially those that could be used to facilitate the mooring of boats. The monomialization of the city through the enlargement of the royal palaces, especially from the seventeenth century onward, accompanied this process of constraining the river within the city.

Access to the water of the Seine played a fundamental role in the city's economy (Font-Réaulx 2019). Thanks to concessions granted by the municipality, washerwomen were able to set up barrels to wash laundry entrusted to them (Le Roux 2018). Similarly, river water was regularly drunk by the poorest Parisians and by draught horses. In this sense, the discharge of pollutants was regulated by controlling the times of emissions, on the one hand, and the location of polluting activities on the other. Dumping toxic substances at night gave the river current time to carry them away, while locating tanners and slaughterhouses downstream from the city protected the watercourse.

Paris is the Seine

In medieval France, the nobility owned the land and the rights to it, as well as the men and women who worked it. The urban bourgeoisie relied on their expertise, commercial networks and control of the river. Beginning in the eleventh century, supervision of the Seine was entrusted to the Hanse League of Water Merchants (Le Maresquier-Kesteloot 2000). Their position as the main users of the river enhanced their importance, as the monarchy did not have enough agents or officers. Beginning in 1214, the League of Water Merchants collected duties on goods and foodstuffs entering the capital. The division of responsibilities changed in the thirteenth century, during the reign of Saint Louis. The centralization and strengthening of the monarchy was manifested in Paris in two developments: the creation of the Provostship of Paris to represent the king in the city, and by

the transformation of the Hanse League of Water Merchants into the Provostship of the Merchants, which was responsible for administering the city and its urban space. The practices devised and implemented by the bourgeoisie for managing the river thus formed the basis of the Parisian municipal government.

From this point on, the link between the municipal government and the river never weakened. The king's institutional creations always preserved the powers of the aldermen. In the fifteenth century, the creation of the civil and criminal lieutenancies did not encroach on these powers.

Similarly, in 1665, the creation of the general police lieutenancy preserved the aldermen's authority. Since the end of the Middle Ages, the king had nevertheless continually sought to encroach on the river jurisdiction of the Provost of Merchants by promoting urban projects and new actors, efforts which had repeatedly met with resolute and organized resistance. Engineering projects aimed at diverting the Marne or the Seine to prevent flooding or help clean up the city were continually blocked by the city authorities, who were keen to preserve their power and income (Lyon-Caen 2020).

Over the years, the city extended its authority over almost the entire course of the Seine, from Burgundy to the border of then Normandy. Limited to a few leagues around Paris in the Middle Ages, the aldermen strengthened their positions from the sixteenth century onward. The development of timber floating prompted them to intervene as far as Burgundy. The maintenance of infrastructure also led them to monitor structures far upstream on the Seine and its tributaries, including the Marne. This power was asserted in the eighteenth century with the launch of an exceptional cartographic campaign. In the 1730s, Abbé Delagrive was commissioned to draw up an atlas of the course of the Seine, focusing not only on the river itself but also, and above all, on the facilities that enabled navigation and land trade, such as ports and bridges (Delagrive 1736). Delagrive's work covered an area stretching from Mantes to the borders of Burgundy and Champagne, signifying the extent of the city's authority. The aldermen worked constantly to extend this authority without ever relinquishing their prerogatives within Paris. The supervision of the riverbanks was certainly shared for a time with the officers of the Water and Forestry Department, but by the eighteenth century, the city's monopoly was well established. The same was true for the management of wastewater and the main Parisian sewers, which remained firmly in the hands of the aldermen, who developed expertise and knowledge in this area that at the time was unrivaled.

Conclusion

The link between Paris and the Seine is not simply the product of nature or a chance encounter. The natural course and force of the river certainly made it possible to supply and grow one of the two largest European cities, but the Seine has nevertheless been continually transformed, developed and managed in order to make it useful and give it a fundamental social role. The river is thus akin to a product of the city, enabling it to extend its hinterland to its entire catchment area.

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Raphaël Morera is Senior Researcher at the CNRS (Centre de recherches historiques, EHESS-CNRS). He has been working on water governance for more that twenty years. In 2024, he published *Une histoire au fil de l'eau. Paris et son environnement, XVIe-XVIIIe siècles* with Éditions de l'EHESS.

Contact: raphael.morera@ehess.fr