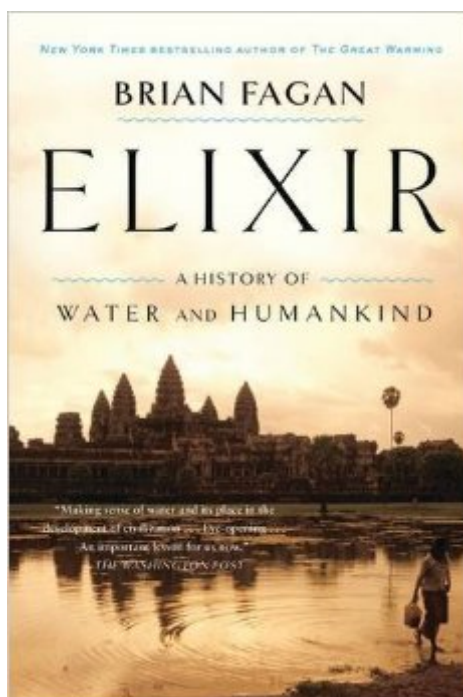


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# Elixir: A History Of Water And Humankind



## Synopsis

In *Elixir*, New York Times bestselling author Brian Fagan tells the story of our most vital resource and how it has shaped our history, from ancient Mesopotamia to the parched present of the Sunbelt. Fagan relates how every human society has been shaped by its relationship to our most essential resource. This sweeping narrative moves across the world, from ancient Greece and Rome, whose mighty aqueducts still supply modern cities, to China, where emperors marshaled armies of laborers in a centuries-long struggle to tame powerful rivers. As the earth's population approaches nine billion and ancient aquifers run dry, we once again remember the importance of this vital resource. To solve the water crises of the future, we may need to adapt the water ethos of our ancestors, captured here in rich detail by Brian Fagan.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Brian Fagan has triumphed once again with his tracking of water use and practices over a long period of mankind. In *Elixir*, he has used his storytelling genius to tie the development of civilizations and empires far and wide to their water-use management, all in an enjoyable, interesting, and intellectual manner. For me, it will also serve as a reliable reference book for my paleohydrologic research on ancient peoples. It is a presentation of important aspects of world history using water as a common thread. Fagan weaves together the three broad themes of gravity flow, the relationship of ritual use of water and water management, and the role of technology versus sustainability. Fagan's message about living within one's hydrological means is an important one. Fagan's success as a

great storyteller has been proven with more than two dozen books that combine his detailed knowledge of anthropology with analysis of how and why things happened. He begins Chapter 2 by taking us back some 12,000 years to the Euphrates Valley, with his story of a young girl and her mother discovering the marvel of gravity flow of water, and then goes on to a delicate story of water use near Petra, at Wadi Faynan in southern Jordan. I learned a lot from Fagan on the ancient Salt River water use in the Phoenix, Arizona area by the Hohokam people and how most of the remnants of their considerable irrigation works there have been lost to a sprawling metropolis. Reading about the Nile and the Egyptian civilization that relied on this great river was enjoyable. Fagan also describes in detail how groundwater was captured and developed by the use of qanats.

Brian Fagan is a storyteller and showman, in person. His book, *Elixir: A History of Water and Humankind*, does not deliver the same wonder, mystique and humor.\* That's perhaps an impossible thing to ask (perhaps the same can be said of my book), but it does give you an idea of the gap that may exist between what we want to read and what we are given to read. This 350 pp book tells many stories of how people from long-forgotten civilizations managed their water. Nearly all of it takes place before the Industrial Revolution brought powered pumps to the movement of water. What we get, then, are descriptions of how water was managed in "the age of gravity," when water sustainability was a given but human sustainability was not. Let me drop in this observation at the start: *Elixir* tells a different story from Solomon's *Water: The Epic Struggle for Wealth, Power, and Civilization*. Solomon narrates the development of water, politics and economics across many cultures. Fagan describes how different civilizations managed their water, without spending too much time tracing impacts and trends. In my notes, I wrote that "Solomon traces grandiose projects across large areas" while "Fagan observes the details of small and (usually) sustainable solutions to local problems." At least, that's my feeling after reading through it, but that feeling may be affected by the "too many notes" problem: I cannot keep track of so many kings, canal dimensions, and geographies without seeing some patterns. Maybe they were there, but they didn't grab me.

XXXXX "This book is about changing human relationships with [fresh] water over thousands of years. Our story is a complex meld of climate change, gravity, human modifications of the natural environment, and technological innovation, kept in balance by intricate ritual observance and religious belief." The above comes from this informative book by Brian Fagan. He has authored many books and is especially noted for his works on the interplay of human culture and the natural

world. Fagan now is emeritus professor of anthropology at the University of California (Santa Barbara). Fagan has written a superb book on the history of humans and water. The history that's presented can be generally thought of in terms of three stages, which overlap with one another:

Stage #1: Goes back to the remote past and even endures in places today. At this time, water was unreliable and often a scarce resource that was so valuable that it was considered sacred in almost every human society.

Stage #2: Begins about 2000 years ago reaching prominence during the Industrial Revolution, when water became a "mere commodity." At this time, water was seen as an infinite resource.

Stage #3: Begins in the early 21<sup>ST</sup> century. The realization is that water is actually a finite resource and something to be conserved. (This stage is discussed quite well in this book's final chapter.)

As well, this book revolves around three broad themes: (1) Gravity (or the fact that water flows down slope, from a high to a low point). (2) The relationship between ritual and water. (3) Technology versus sustainability. This book is divided into parts.

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