

# Rivers and Oceans, or the Place Where the Blue Humanities Meet Lisbon

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**Abstract** At NOVA University of Lisbon – School of Social Sciences and Humanities new avenues of research in marine environmental history, archaeology and ocean's heritage, ancient history and religion, and literary studies, are paving the way to more inclusive and interdisciplinary approaches, tackling area studies through transcultural and trans-chronological analytical strategies. Steaming from teaching, scientific projects, field work and public activities, this paper presents case-studies in teaching-learning practices. It also discusses a common framework for developing conceptual and practical approaches to the Blue Humanities.

**Keywords** Higher-education. Ancient history. Environmental history and archaeology. Literary Studies. Environmental Humanities. Water Humanities.

**Summary** 1 Introduction: Water as Shared Ground. – 2 Water as a Subject-Matter on Arts and Humanities Courses. – 2.1 Ancient Mesopotamia. – 2.2 Archaeology. – 2.3 Marine Environmental History. – 2.4 Literary Studies. – 3 Our Very Own Take on the Blue Humanities. – 3.1 The Symbolic and Material Water. – 3.2 Water Animals as Agents. – 3.3 The Historical Water. – 3.4 Water in the Pages of Books. – 4 Discussion: Placing a Blue Thinking in the Humanities..



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## 1 Introduction: Water as Shared Ground

In Lisbon, a two-millennia-old city that developed at the banks of the Tagus estuary, research in the Environmental Humanities focusing on water bodies has been emerging. By focusing on the water cycle and the cycles of human history, we can simultaneously tell the parts and the whole and make it understandable to and conceptualized by students and researchers of history, art history, archaeology, philosophy, literary and art studies. Different human contexts and temporalities can be considered and used, making it possible to perform a journey, in the classroom and out in the open, from the water drop to the water cycle.

The hydrological cycle that constitutes life on the planet as we know it makes possible the movement of water in its various forms between states, physical spaces and bodies, and cultural constructs. In addition to the areas of scientific knowledge that study the water cycle (Karterakis et al. 2007), an entire body of knowledge in the humanities adds layers of understanding about the system and its relationship with all living beings on the planet (e.g. DeLoughrey 2017; 2019; Gumbs 2020; Simpson 2025). Home to different ecosystems and plentiful resources, the waters of the world are places where sources of food were found and exploited, cities and ports were established and developed, different ways of communicating as well as transferring people, products and knowledge were devised and tested. Watery and wet spaces have always been a realm for valuable trading and misfortunes, encounters and confrontation, practices of sharing and of violent appropriation, as well as spaces for the construction of stories and legends and for the creation of myths as well as imaginary geographies and/or metaphysical domains.

Grasping, localising or even ‘domesticating’ water – physical and conceptual – at a given moment in time and space, associating it with protagonists and events, requires the use of varied teaching-learning strategies and tools which will concur for the development of water studies. That is, to zoom in on a shore that is reached, a beach where people stand looking at the sea and at those viewed as outsiders, a river that connects distant geographies and times, a spring on top of a mountain or a well of drinkable water, or on raining water (from the sky) or running water (from the hoses) that irrigates a crop, on water that is boiled to melt fat and that evaporates from melting pots, on water within the body of an animal, or a being that lives in the water.

Rivers, as well other elements of the natural landscape – islands, waterfalls (e.g. Almeida, Kater 2017), shorelines, mountains, forests (e.g. Vadjunec et al. 2012) –, typically constitute spatial crossroads where contact nodes for (hi)stories can emerge. They are the connectors of small springs and creeks and the vast open ocean while painting on the surface of the Earth a “visual mapping

of a watery network” (Simpson 2025, 154). But it is precisely their vastness and connectivity, partnered with its fluidity and liminality, that make water an ideal yet challenging subject for teaching. Which dimensions to consider, which water bodies should be picked to work as a case-study? A small creek that feeds main water courses and crosses temperate forests, the mighty Amazonia, or the full water cycle? How should they be used as elements for the teaching-learning discussions about more-than-biological systems? Could the nearby Tagus River, home to vast and rich natural habitats as well as a millenary *urbs* be such a case? In fact, riverine waters that are home to multiple species have been appropriate in numerous cultural formats, have encompassed multiple meanings, and are present in countless narratives, poems, plays, and song lyrics, as we will see ahead.

In Portugal, there were no teaching programmes that explicitly use the terminology of Environmental Humanities, let alone Blue Humanities (hereafter EH and BH, respectively), until the current academic year (2025/2026). We are contributing to it by developing collaborative and integrative approaches that deeply intertwine the up-to-date research in these areas with our teaching-learning practices, much inspired by previous groundbreaking projects and recent networks.<sup>1</sup> Our goal is to showcase, in the following pages, our separate experiences as faculty members teaching in different departments, and our efforts to include current scholarship of the EH and BH in the Portuguese higher-education curricula.

## 2 Water as a Subject-Matter on Arts and Humanities Courses

NOVA FCSH (NOVA University of Lisbon – School of Social Sciences and Humanities) is a hub of national and international reference much driven by traditional strands, departments and courses, such as history, archaeology, literature, philosophy, sociology, anthropology. Based at CHAM (Centre for the Humanities), we have been slowly but steadily developing research lines and teaching-learning processes that, emerging from different backgrounds, revolve around water and aquatic environments and animals. We are literally sitting beside the water [fig. 1]. Nearby NOVA FCSH campus, stands the Águas Livres Aqueduct, a historic site that has served to carry drinking water to

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<sup>1</sup> Such as the Oceans Past Initiative (<https://oceanspast.org/>) and the EUTOPIA Connected Community on Environmental Humanities (<https://eutopia-university.eu/english-version/integrated-connected-communities/environmental-humanities-1>).

Lisbon since the eighteenth century. As a work of art, a human-made structure, it is a link between the spring, the city, and the Tagus estuary. Today, as a national monument open to visitors, it allows us to explore in the field the interconnections between elements of a more-than-human reality. The Tagus is not just the recognizable backdrop of Lisbon but an eco-cultural system where countless events have taken place, and from which multiple narratives can be told and discussed.



**Figure 1** Lisbon is a city of water. 2025. This is a postcard view of the NOVA FCSH campus in the Campolide neighbourhood, with the Aqueduct in the background (centre and right side) and Lisbon by the Tagus estuary (left side). Photos by the Authors

Recent advances in marine environmental history and ocean's natural and cultural heritage studies have fostered more inclusive, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural approaches that link different regions and historical periods. At NOVA FCSH we have been focused not only in assessing extractions of aquatic mammals – mainly megafauna, such as whales, sea cows, pinnipeds, sea turtles, tuna and sharks – but also in including them as historical actors, co-constructors of social, political, cultural and ecological processes. These activities of extracting and transforming animal bodies into valuable commodities have led to the construction of toxic ecologies and a set of narratives and relationships of waste, in line with the concept of the “Wasteocene” coined by Armiero (2021). In this context, waste is based on social relationships that reproduce power inequalities, “entering the bodies and ecologies of humans and non-humans” (Armiero 2021, 12) – as is the case with European

domination over enslaved Africans and human domination over marine animals. Coming from a more traditional maritime scholarship, we are opening to critical water studies and investing in cross-fertilization among subjects and methods. Concepts associated with water bodies as running waters and interface spaces, biogeophysical and ecological structures are being used, but also water as a metaphysical concept and an element of symbolic-ritualistic discourses, as well as a protagonist and agent of histories.

BA and MA programmes are under restructuring at NOVA FCSH, which creates an excellent opportunity to consolidate research synergies by applying them to teaching-learning strategies. The five scholars and authors of this paper started outlining a framework of possible approaches and case studies to work together on several BA and MA courses by taking advantage of a common ground in the Humanities and their shared interest in water bodies. As such, it has been possible to start laying the foundations for the EH and more specifically the BH or the Water Humanities [tab. 1] For us, EH is an interdisciplinary field that applies analytical approaches from the humanities to address contemporary environmental challenges from cultural, philosophical, social, and biological perspectives. The field of EH brings the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences together to address questions of meaning, value and ethics, and acknowledging that the traditional separation between nature and culture has led to fragmented responses to environmental dilemmas (Oppermann, Iovino 2017; O’Gorman et al. 2019). From our own research and the recent literature on the field, we know that “human preferences, practices and actions are the main drivers of planetary change in the twenty-first century. The academic disciplines of the humanities are largely concerned with how humans perceive, articulate and behave as a species” (Holm, Brennan 2018, 10). It is possible, however, combining efforts from the human, social and natural sciences, to develop a humanities paradigm for the aquatic environment<sup>2</sup> and by doing so to address ways in which humanistic disciplines may help us understand and engage with global environmental problems.

The BH is grounded on the concepts and ideas proposed by John R. Gillis (2011),<sup>3</sup> Steve Mentz (2022)<sup>4</sup> and Serpil Oppermann (2023), among others. Water is constructed as a fluid and embodied place

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**2** A brief review of environmental history can be found in Holm, Winiwarter 2017. According to the authors, the ‘humanities paradigm’ refers to the “collaboration between the natural and human historical disciplines to address questions of the interaction of humans and nature over the long term” (Holm, Winiwarter 2017, 116).

**3** See also <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2013/mayjune/feature/the-blue-humanities>.

**4** See also <https://steveментz.com/blue-humanities/>.

of (historical) narratives with multiple agents – aquatic life forms and human life – thus revealing that its study by the humanities is not only possible but vital. Some say we live in the Age of Water, and a cultural turn towards water is central (Bailey-Charteris 2024). This approach addresses water, the water cycle and water-related practices as embodied in the cultural and historical dimensions of human life on the planet (Karterakis et al. 2007).

Following Mentz (2022, 2024) and Gillis (2013), we deal with the human engagement with water, using literary, cultural, historical, and theoretical connections and ecologies aiming to introduce students to the history and theories of water-centric thinking. Together or separately, we reflect about environmental history and archaeology, history of religions and worldviews, art and literary narratives and animal studies (e.g. Panagiotakopulu, Garcia 2023; Pires et al. 2024; Satiro et al. 2024; Robin et al. 2025). Water is thus the motivation for practices about the historical and current relationships between peoples and natural elements that are discussed here.

Dissolving lines between land and water and focusing on the interconnections and interactions between humans and non-humans is one of our main objectives. This will also allow us – (environmental) historians, (maritime) archaeologists, ecofeminists and water-critics – to have a say in current issues that concern different societies around the world in different ways or a say in issues that represent common problems for humans on this planet. Immersing ourselves in the liquid, fluid, aquatic environments, through a panoply of methodologies and theoretical approaches, will make room for new perspectives and to critically learn about and address current societal and environmental issues.

**Table 1** An overview of the areas of research-based teaching at NOVA FCSH to which the authors are dedicated to in connection with Blue Humanities approaches

<b>Areas</b> (Graduation Degrees NOVA FCSH)	<b>Ancient History</b> (BA and MA History; BA Archaeology)	<b>Early Modern History &amp; Archaeology</b> (BA and MA History and Archaeology)	<b>Marine Environmental History</b> (BA History and BA Ocean Studies)	<b>Literary Studies</b> (BA Languages, Literatures, Cultures; MA Literature, Arts and Cultures)
<b>Main topics</b>	Mesopotamian history (fourth–first millennia BCE).	History and archaeology of European Expansion, Discoveries and Globalisation.	Oceans History, Environmental History, Communities and Environment, and Oceans & Arts.	Portuguese, Spanish, Hispano-American Literature, Comparative Studies, Women Literature, Ecofeminist literary theory.
<b>BH approaches</b>	Multiple daily impacts of water bodies, metaphysical water use, actor-network theory.	Material culture, port cities, seventeenth and eighteenth-century urban development, urban and harbour waste.	Oceans and environmental history, colonialism, (aquatic) animal history, biodiversity.	Water and landscape in literature, feminist and decolonial narratives.
<b>Research &amp; Networks</b>	WATERS exploratory project.	DUST exploratory project, UNESCO Chair The Ocean's Cultural Heritage.	MSCA CONCHA, ERC Synergy Grant 4-OCEANS, FCT project ANIMALx, UNESCO Chair The Ocean's Cultural Heritage.	MSCA SE EDGES – Indigenous knowledge and academic integration.
<b>Engagement with students</b>	Interdisciplinary analysis of data, integrated approaches to the multiple uses of aquatic environments.	Fieldwork and lab analysis of organic materials, speculative questions, experimental archaeology.	Interdisciplinary classes, fieldwork in coastal areas and museum visits, marine megafauna focus.	Interdisciplinary seminars, Portuguese and Spanish and Hispanic American authors.
<b>Engagement beyond the academia</b>	Environmental-cultural changes, political and religious discourses.	Pollution and waste in the long chronology, historical changes in the shoreline, erosion.	Extinction, biodiversity loss, water and food security, energy transition, wasting relationships.	Environmental-cultural changes, gender-related issues, ethnic minorities, political issues.

## 2.1 Ancient Mesopotamia

A first year mandatory course of each of the above-mentioned BA's aims at covering the main historical processes of the contexts traditionally designated as Ancient Near East (ANE),<sup>5</sup> covering a wide time frame that spans roughly between the fourth and the first millennia BCE. This is a highly demanding task since it requires a great deal of synthesis for what turns out to be a course of 27/28 sessions (of less than two hours each), while also having to overcome two major interrelated challenges: a) most first-year undergraduate students are in the process of adapting to the teaching-learning methodologies associated with enrolling in university - which often includes moving away from their families and homes and living alone for the first time; and b) the lack of previous knowledge about these ancient contexts.

In the following semesters, students can then enrol in other optional BA courses, more specifically focused on ancient Mesopotamian cultural framework and religious system. It is in these courses that we can go deep in the analysis of the impact of different bodies of water on political-religious discourses as well as cultural-artistic expressions. Nevertheless, within the mandatory courses, our initial approach is already EH-oriented, by conducting discussions that aim at highlighting how the geographical particularities of this context impacted not only the development of the historical processes within the above-mentioned time frame, but also their impact on the academic analyses, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

These EH-oriented teaching-learning goals were solidified in recent years, as the work between the authors of present paper became stronger, namely with the development of the interdisciplinary research project WATERS: *Amidst 'Ever-flowing Water' - Tracing Aquatic Symbols and Metaphors in Lower Mesopotamia Religion (c. 3300-1800 BCE)*. From a History of Religions perspective, Latour's seminal proposal of actor-network theory seemed extremely fitted to be applied to the study of the ancient Mesopotamian religion system. As such, WATERS's foundations intertwine the postulates of Religions Studies (namely the historical-archaeological ones) with the ones of EH (e.g. Latour 1991; Simmons 1993; Oestigaard 2005). In its training component, WATERS already integrated BA and MA students in the project *Humanities for the Environment and Heritage* developed

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**5** ANE is a designation that stems from a nineteenth-century Eurocentric and deeply Orientalist historical and archaeological 'discovery' of the ancient contexts roughly within the Eastern Mediterranean to the wide region of present-day Iran. Decolonial reflections have led academics, in recent years, to prefer the use of geographical-oriented designations, such as West Asia and North Africa (see for instance the change of the University of Chicago-based Institute that promotes research on these past contexts <https://isac.uchicago.edu/about/name-change-information>).

by CHAM within the programme Summer with Science funded by FCT, the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, in 2022. Additionally, a BA course based on the preliminary results of WATERS, entitled Religion and Environment in Ancient Lower Mesopotamia (fourth-third millennium BC) has been proposed and approved by the Scientific Council of NOVA FCSH to be part of a curriculum which allows students to participate in research projects, for the 2025/26 academic year.

## 2.2 Archaeology

During the intervention that occurred in Lisbon between 2016 and 2017, in an area known as *Campo das Cebolas*, human interactions with and on the riverbanks of the Tagus were revealed in all observed realities and data was recorded and collected, serving as memories for the future. In this exercise of thinking on the teaching of BH in Portugal, one can address the case study resulting from this intervention: the study of leather and cork remnants collected during the excavation at *Campo das Cebolas*, which we are conducting at NOVA FCSH as part of the training of archaeology BA and MA students.

Within this experience, the project DUST – *Discards and Debris in the Port Cities of Early Modern Era: Contributions to Marine Environmental History* was proposed to be integrated into NOVA FCSH Archaeology training curricula.<sup>6</sup> In those lab sessions we practise different approaches to the materiality under study, giving students the opportunity to engage with soaked artifacts that are usually inaccessible, such as organic materials – that is, objects and remains found in humid environments. Beyond the archaeological practice of recording, inventorying, observing, and identifying shapes and functions, eventually animal skin used to make shoes, archaeology students and their teacher pose daily hypotheses about everyday riverine life in Lisbon during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

These organic elements, deposited over centuries in this area of the city as waste from urban life in seventeenth-century Lisbon, helped to compact landfills that allowed the city to gain new space, a wider margin for its riverside activities. Or simply fashionable footwear from the early modern period that was lost because it was no longer useful or because it got stuck in the mud on the Lisbon riverfront on a rainy day.

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<sup>6</sup> Also leveraged by the individual research project of one of the authors TRASH – *Human Waste and Marine Debris During the First Globalization: Past and Future Perspectives on Ocean* funded by FCT.

## 2.3 Marine Environmental History

Environmental History and History of the Oceans are two new disciplines in the course of History offered by NOVA FCSH. In addition, Oceans, Heritage, and Art in the BA in Ocean Studies, and Communities, Spaces and Environment in the MA in History are also new offers. This novelty represents an important milestone at a national level in curricula renovation, one that results from research and mentoring work conducted in marine environmental history in the last years. These include specific seminars on early modern ecological globalisations, on sociocultural and ecological interactions, and on history of aquatic animals and maritime societies (MA History; e-learning MA History of the Portuguese Empire). Additionally, a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) dedicated to whaling history has been designed for students in higher education, researchers and professionals of the cultural and creatives.<sup>7</sup>

MSCA-RISE CONCHA<sup>8</sup> and the ERC Synergy Grant 4-OCEANS<sup>9</sup> have set the ground to an array of themes in MA and PhD levels, related to the exploitation of aquatic environments and animals, the construction of littoral spaces, biodiversity loss and waste, changing perspectives towards marine fauna, or the construction of knowledge about aquatic species. We have been proposing entangled approaches on colonial history with that of aquatic animals, exploring how imperial contexts of extractivism were shaped by more-than-human agents.<sup>10</sup> Using what we consider to be paradigmatic taxonomic groups allows to discuss economic and social impacts of such interactions over time, but also the symbolic and cultural values of animals that are more-than-ecological. Whales and manatees are kaleidoscopic and all-encompassing entities; they speak as much about themselves as about us, humans (Brito 2023; Brito, Vieira 2022; Morais et al. 2024).

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**7** This MOOC was developed in 2022 in a collaboration between the ROSSIO Platform and the UNESCO Chair *The Ocean's Cultural Heritage* <https://www.nau.edu.pt/pt/curso/a-caca-da-baleia-e-os-portugueses/>.

**8** CONCHA - *The Construction of Early Modern Global Cities and Oceanic Networks in the Atlantic: An approach via Ocean's Cultural Heritage* (EU H2020-MSCA-RISE-2017; <https://cham.fcsh.unl.pt/CONCHA/index.html>).

**9** 4-OCEANS - *Human History of Marine Life: Extraction, Knowledge, Drivers & Consumption of Marine Resources, c.100 BCE to c.1860 CE* (H2020-EU - Excellent Science - European Research Council; <https://www.tcd.ie/tceh/4-oceans/>).

**10** An example of our approach to the topic is the Masterclass Ripple Effect. Historical and Eco-cultural Narratives about Whales given at the ANIMALIA Summer School Studying animals in the Social Sciences and Humanities in Portugal. This masterclass is available at <https://youtu.be/l3TNFmPuxng?si=UWr6Q0LSE30aw7V2>. The ANIMALIA Summer School was attended by 30 participants, including master's and doctoral students.

In their biological bodies, several species, times and geographies coexist. They are worlds.

We try to “get out of doors altogether” as Donald Worster (1988, 289) urged. We offer one class in the campus courtyard, often at the end of the day and feeling the autumn wind on our faces and running out of daylight while discussing the use of energy in premodern times. We organise study visits to museums and collections, but also to natural areas and seascapes. Learning about the environment from the viewpoint of the humanities is made by exploring the archives as much as in boat and field work. The past and current habitats of historicised aquatic animals are ideal laboratories for students interested in ecocultural entanglements.

## 2.4 Literary Studies

The approach from comparative literary studies is ideal to address water and related topics, allowing to deconstruct thought and worldviews, to position people in their relation to their surroundings, both cultural and natural, and to write (and read) alternative narratives. Fiction, poetry and other literary forms redirect action and to foster possibilities – past, present and future. Studying it presents students multiple possibilities and we use Portuguese and Spanish and Hispanic American authors to give meaning to a shared world that is told through multiple voices. We teach Literary Translation (Spanish Portuguese), Hispanic American Literature: From the Colonial Period to the Independence Processes, Hispanic American Literature: From Modernism to the Present Day, and Contemporary Spanish Literature (BA in Literature Studies), Feminist Theory and Literary Experience and ‘Landscapes and Borders’ (MA seminars).

Another approach consists of participating in research projects and networks that take our topics of interest and joint research beyond the academic sphere, involving and engaging multiple stakeholders and knowledge holders. The MSCA Staff Exchanges EDGES – *Entangling Indigenous Knowledge at Universities*, coordinated by CHAM at NOVA FCSH, is a networking project that aims to contribute to a pluralist and multi-scale approach to knowledge production, research and dissemination,<sup>11</sup> where different voices using different languages – oral and written – offer their understanding of natural and watery worlds, among many other aspects.

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**11** <https://edges.fcsh.unl.pt/>.

### 3 Our Very Own Take on the Blue Humanities

Scholars can have multiple approaches to the scientific challenges and, in our fluid field of research, deal with topics ranging from contemporary maritime cultures, colonial maritime power, migrations, cross-cultural encounters and exchanges, iconography and representations of the aquatic realm and oceanic phenomena, perceptions and myths (across different chronologies). All the way to animals, environments and resource exploitation, and to underwater archaeology, shipwrecks, seaports, maritime culture and heritage, studies of literature, poetry and other cultural products, to the production of art itself. Working within the framework of the BH, or the water humanities, or the fluid humanities (Bailey-Charteris 2024), help us to explore aspects of contact and liminality, and represents a step forward, in the sense of dissolving the lines between land and sea, humans and other animals, nature and culture.

#### 3.1 The Symbolic and Material Water

Multiple water bodies (natural and artificial) had a crucial impact on ancient Mesopotamian human populations. After all, as ancient Greeks noted, this was the “land between the rivers”<sup>12</sup> (Pollock 2001, 1). But which rivers? Only the traditional and paradise biblical-related Tigris and Euphrates? Deconstructing this *stricto sensu* meaning calls for a change in the critical inquiry related to all the subsidiary rivers, highlighting the impact of the whole hydrographic basin on historical processes. Also, the crucial diachronic importance of the southern marshes, nowadays menaced by the climate changes,<sup>13</sup> as well as the fundamental role of the artificial channels and dams’ network had a role in transforming the landscape of the territory (e.g. Wilkinson et al. 2015; Altaweel et al. 2019). Thus, this is one of the first discussions that we conduct in the above-mentioned mandatory BA courses on ancient Mesopotamia.

Though famously known from biblical references (as the mighty and ‘all too proud’ city and tower of Babylon), and other often simplified and/or misleading headlines about first inventions (like

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<sup>12</sup> From the etymological origin of “mesopotamia”.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, “Iraq’s Marshes Are Dying, and so Is a Civilization Climate Crisis”. *Al Jazeera*, 11 November 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2023/12/11/photos-iraqs-marshes-are-dying-and-so-is-a-civilization>; Al-Ruabie, Azhar. “We’re Just like Fish: No Water, No Life’: Drought and Dams Push Iraq’s Marshes to the Edge of Extinction”. *The Telegraph*, 3 January 2025. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/iraqs-marshes-drought-climate-change-water-wars-middle-east/>.

the 'history that begun in Sumer' or the supposedly first 'legal code' of Hammurabi), not much more is known by 1st year students about ancient Mesopotamia, as it is not a context fully addressed during the compulsory education (apart for the importance of the rivers and the invention of the cuneiform writing).

The study of material and iconographic data has proven to be very useful to overcome this challenge. As we have been paying particular attention to the Uruk Vase in our research,<sup>14</sup> we decided to transport it to the classrooms of both mandatory and optional BA courses. In fact, the Uruk Vase, a cultic artifact dated to 3200-3000 BCE and its symbolic-metaphorical uses of the aquatic and watery elements depicted and evoked allows us to explore the diachronic Mesopotamian metaphysical conceptions intrinsically related to water. The wavy lines depicted at the bottom of the Vase, which are traditionally seen as the fertile aquatic natural environment, can also be interpreted as evoking the cosmic domain of subterranean sweet waters (Sumerian: *abzu*; Akkadian: *apsû*) from which all rivers, lagoons and marshes were believed to have come from. From here, the joint analysis can move on to 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE literary compositions that tells us how the *abzu/apsû* was controlled by aquatic deities,<sup>15</sup> such as *Namma*, the primordial ocean, mother of all other deities; and *Enki/Ea*, a god traditionally depicted with streams sprouting from his shoulders, with fishes swimming on it.

On another level, and besides the practical function as a cultic container, we can also envision a profoundly symbolic significance embedded in this artifact – a vase which alludes to the possibility of restraining cosmic waters. This allows us to go deep on the Mesopotamian diluvian accounts, analysing this cosmic aquatic destruction as an event that signifies destruction/chaos while also marking a recreation and the beginning of a new order. Hence, the joint analysis of all these topics that stem from a single object allows to achieve deeper understandings of ancient Mesopotamian cultural, religious, and mythic uses of water, as well as stimulates within students historical-archaeological 'readings' of artifacts from several standpoints.

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**14** On the following interpretations about the watery elements on this artifact, see Gomes, Rosa 2023.

**15** On the Mesopotamian conceptions about the divine primordial oceans, see Gomes de Almeida 2021.

### 3.2 Water Animals as Agents

EH offer a wide range of topics for study, assembling knowledge from different fields of research and thereby stimulating the reconfiguration of concepts of nature, agency and materiality, and enabling the formulation of new theoretical models that bring together human and non-human ecologies (Robin et al. 2025). Both environmental and animal history share the interest of decentring humans as the driving force of history, and scholarship on both fields has been feeding the other to understand the complexity of long term, radical shifts of the biosphere (Wöbse 2021). Throughout time and geographies, by exploring the hydrological systems, humans have produced new technical competencies, new political and social strategies, new systems of exchange and circulation, new cultures and ways of living, and new worldviews. In doing so, aquatic animals have been consumed, traded, and energetically transformed for food, clothing, energy, health, and adornment in very different ways.

In recent decades, we have witnessed new developments in the so-called ‘animal turn’ (Roscher et al. 2021). The ubiquity of animals in human living experience means that human history has largely depended, and in diverse ways, both materially and culturally, on the existence and contribution of various species, namely aquatic ones. We have been directly addressing pressing questions on the Human Oceans Past research agenda about how marine fauna played an important yet underestimated role in societal development (Holm et al. 2022). As biological beings and as commodities, freshwater, estuarine and marine animals have been socially metabolised by different societies to become marine wealth and have been pivotal for human trajectories and culture. When addressing European expansions and colonisation of extra-European territories, peoples and ecologies, it has been possible to use practical examples, as well as water metaphors, to teach the so-called first globalisation, or wet globalisation (Mentz 2020) supported by the water that connects history, spaces and agents. The study of aquatic animals’ history reveals ecological teleconnections and long-distance transfer of energy, since several by-products (such as whale oil) became one of many ‘cheap nature’ products of European imperialism, reshaping food, energy and labour relations (Moore 2016, 89-90; Demuth 2019, 34; Vieira 2023, 40). In this attempt to give voice to silent (or silenced) historical players, it is necessary to pay attention to indigenous and colonial societies in modern America, as well as to enslaved Africans whose forced labour, for instance, on sugar plantations and whaling stations, was central (e.g. Brito 2023, 150-3; Vieira 2024, 14-16). Also, the construction of toxic ecologies based on appropriation, domination and dehumanisation need to be considered. This panoply of historical, cultural and natural models allows us to grasp and

analyse more-than-ecological interactions in varied perspectives, ranging from westernized and indigenous worldviews to multispecies studies. Within this multilayered approach, the water within and the water outside are becoming places of history as well.

### **3.3 The Historical Water**

For maritime archaeologists, their professional life is connected to the issues that link human history with water. Whether through human experiences and interactions with aquatic environments or through the memories left in contexts that have been positioned near water. Many times, their perspective on the historical and archaeological interpretation of abandoned artifacts tends to combine, as coherently as possible, the ecological space in which these experiences occurred (e.g. Garcia 2017). By reading between the lines of materiality it is possible to understand how the aquatic space attracted, repelled, sustained, was cared for, watched over, or even discarded over time (Garcia 2020). Within the framework of BH, through underwater archaeology and maritime history studies we problematise how aquatic elements have influenced or shaped particular and major political and economic decisions, (re)actions that impacted the historical processes.

The influence of aquatic spaces is evident in port cities, as it is the case of the port of Angra do Heroísmo, Azores, an extremely important region in the history of Portuguese expansion and in the history of the Atlantic itself. This port city was known at the time simply as Angra, meaning a protected bay, functioned for almost two centuries as a sign of 'salvation' for many lives – Angra represented the last port where assistance could be obtained after the long transatlantic voyages of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The sea was the beneficial element which, in its oceanographic dynamics combining wind and currents, led ships into the bay. However, it was also the ocean conditions that caused numerous accidents and shipwrecks. It was because of the sea, which caused misfortune for many, that from the mid-seventeenth century the port of Angra ceased to be the favourite port of the Portuguese rulers, who changed course to other Azorean shelters, such as the port of Horta on the island of Faial (Silva 2020).

Through this approach, we acknowledge and discuss the value of aquatic elements as hubs and connectors for daily lives (either on the Azores Island or by the Tagus River in Lisbon) while preserving the material memories that allows us to better understand the past. As such, the transformative nature of the aquatic state that defines the oceans (or other aquatic environments) may in fact be an agent of many (hi)stories and events that we often tend to underestimate and simplify. Water allows us to address complexity and, at the same time, to deconstruct it.

### 3.4 Water in the Pages of Books

On the banks of the Tagus the ‘Velho do Restelo’ – a mythical figure in Luís de Camões’ *Os Lusíadas* (1572) – warns of the dangers of maritime expansion and the fever of ambition. It is from these shores that Fernão Mendes Pinto sets off on his *Peregrinação* (1614), an adventure told in the first person in the manner of the picaresque and taking place mainly in the Far East. Examples multiply over the centuries, and the choices of the texts to be studied reflect the approach in each class. For this discussion, and to get Literary Studies students involved in the BH, we opt to go with José Saramago’s *As Pequenas Memórias* (2006), mainly due to two factors. On the one hand, Saramago is one of the contemporary writers with the most national and international recognition, having received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1998, and being studied in Portuguese in the 12th grade. On the other, several of our students live in areas of Ribatejo or Estremadura bathed by the Tagus and its tributaries, which provides a more immediate involvement with the text.

It is an autobiography by Saramago, which begins with a reference to Azinhaga, the village where he was born, a year before he moved with his family to Lisbon. We read in the first lines that, of the original village (which had existed since the beginning of the nation), only the river survives. The river is therefore presented from the beginning as the essence that resists the passage of time, the river that has always existed (Saramago 2006, 11) before the village was founded. It is therefore an unchanging, perennial river, the constancy of that territory. Thus, the river is the essence of space, a human territory, although its permanent essence is water, nature. However, the immutable is simultaneously mutable. It infinitely overflows its banks (Saramago 2006, 11), it metamorphoses in floods and, as if it had a life of its own, it goes beyond its apparent limits and advances towards land, like a living being that transforms itself, that doesn’t depend on humans to develop its changing existence.

The name of the river only appears after all this information, on line 10, because the name is secondary. The important thing is not that it’s called Almonda, but its aquatic and essential character. Almonda “met Tagus to which (or to whom, if I may say so), gave help” (Saramago 2006, 11): the narrator opts for clear personifications of the rivers, in a gesture of appreciation, closeness, and familiarity. In a rhetorical gesture, the narrator corrects himself and opts for a relative pronoun typical of humans. The two rivers that shaped the character of the village and with whom the population has learned to deal (Saramago 2006, 12) are living entities that listen, evaluate, and respond to humans. It is assumed that these characteristics are typical of humans, so there is a rapprochement between nature and

humans.<sup>16</sup> What's more, there is a dynamic that belies a vision that goes beyond a dichotomization between environment and people. The rivers define the village's character, shaping both its physical landscape and its symbolic identity; the town's essence is directly influenced by the water courses. They symbolize relationships and coexistence that are not idyllic, embodying asymmetry, harm, and destruction, particularly during floods, which constitute violent disruptions to both the physical environment and the lives of inhabitants that profoundly shape individual and collective existence and imaginary. Memory and kinships are central; interconnectedness is the main key of the discussion with our students.

In Saramago's fiction, water symbolizes the fluidity of humanity, historical continuity, and the instability of truth, a symbolism mirrored in his flowing, unpunctuated prose whose shifting perspectives and recursive rhythms can evoke the continuous, undulating movement of water itself. Inherent to human existence and even dependent on it, is a negotiable harmonization of those who coexist and interdepend on one another (Branco 2021). Humans are also water. Humans are also rivers.

#### **4 Discussion: Placing a Blue Thinking in the Humanities**

Water, Aquatic or Blue Humanities invite a plurality of artistic, theoretical and narrative strategies to represent contemporary emergencies in regards the relationships between humans and water environments (and living beings) and the complexities of an Anthropocene affecting waterscapes both conceptually and in their material reality.

We follow the swimming strokes and the wet words of scholars and thinkers such as Elizabeth DeLourghey, Steve Mentz, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, among many others, while conducting place- and context-based theoretical and empirical research, that embodies tangible ecological and cultural networks. We acknowledge that human practices *in* and *with* riverine, coastal and oceanic spaces have been shaped by specific ecological characteristics set in complex material and symbolic backgrounds. They *are* the relationships between people and the environment in an interconnected terrestrial and maritime space (Gillis 2012; Richter 2015). Even if conducting our teaching based on traditional departments focused on disciplinary

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**16** This is also visible outside of the literary text, namely in initiatives organized by the José Saramago Foundation, such as the project *Rivers in the Almonda*, in which, along 500 meters of the Almonda River, various data are collected with the aim of implementing the experimental scientific method, improving the site and raising awareness in society about the problems of protecting and valuing riverside ecosystems.

methods (History; Archaeology; Literary Studies), we add a layer of discussion when we use water as support and structure as much as an entity. We understand water as a living body and a fluid and liminal reality. Confluences of land and sea, the tangible and the intangible, of human and non-human animals, can be thought of and taught as waterscapes that intertwine physical, biological, cultural and emotional aspects (Bentley et al. 2007; Vieira et al. 2020).

This is where we stand, as researchers and teachers, both physically and intellectually. We live on and in between the two banks of the Tagus River, historicising and critically analysing cultural productions of water in the light of current westernised discourses such as globalisation, postcolonialism, ecofeminism, or environmentalism. Whether a creek or the ocean, the physical waters or the metaphysical, their remains, history, heritage or memories, water is a key element for part of our science-based pedagogical strategies. Steaming from conceptual frameworks, shared projects, field work and public activities, we are jointly working towards a common framework for developing strategies to introduce and anchor the Humanities for the Environment at NOVA FCSH and in the Portuguese higher-education system. We need all the collaboration we can get from within and from the outside.

Each new academic year, two fundamental questions guide us: what is fundamental for the students' future academic path to know about this distant past? What can further enrich their critical thinking as well as foster their skills to work in multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary perspectives? Interestingly, in a very organic and natural way, 'water' became one of the main elements that have contributed to (re)shape strategies to answer these questions. The teaching-learning processes that use water as a subject and as an agent, and the intricacies of its history and of human appropriation, are as fluid and permeable as the very element at the core of such practices of lecturing and storytelling. We also teach our students to have an active voice and a participatory attitude, and we set an example through direct actions to demonstrate the importance and role of blue humanities to policy- and decision-makers. At the United Nations Ocean Conference in 2020, the *Manifesto: Humanities 4 the Ocean*<sup>17</sup> was presented. This manifesto highlights the fact that scientific research into the past of the oceans reveals intense and continuous exploitation of marine ecosystems, with profound societal and environmental impacts. It argues that the Humanities should be recognised for their central role in advancing science and promoting

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**17** [https://www.fcsh.unl.pt/static/documentos/media\\_e\\_eventos/Comunicados/Imprensa/Manifesto\\_Humanities\\_4\\_the\\_Ocean.pdf](https://www.fcsh.unl.pt/static/documentos/media_e_eventos/Comunicados/Imprensa/Manifesto_Humanities_4_the_Ocean.pdf).

a global, inclusive and equitable understanding of integrated nature-culture oceanic systems.

Water is the element of connection and circularity par excellence, both in its hydrogeological reality and, in our own understanding of it, in the cultural and interpretative dimensions that people attribute to it. Shapeless, while assuming the shape of each container; tasteless, while taking the flavours of salt and tears; neutral, while eroding and shaping all its surrounds; the fluid and flexible water is truly central. To teach a new generation of scholars and thinkers in the Environmental Humanities, we must immerse ourselves in the aquatic-cultural dynamics that sustain us, abandoning our fear of the dark-blue waters and the strangeness of being out of one's depth in our ancestral element.

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**18** <https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/04666/2025>.

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