

URBAN WATER II Conference 7-9 December 2022 Kiel, Germany

Engineering the Tiber: water cultures, uses and political conflicts in late nineteenth-century Rome

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After Italian troops had conquered Rome in December 1870, signalling the end of Papal temporal power, the river Tiber flooded, causing severe damages to the city. A divine punishment for the outrage against the pope by the Catholics, the event was seen by the Italian liberals as a demonstration of Papacy inefficiency. Thus, the Italian government undertook an ambitious project to build protection walls alongside the river to discipline it. The construction of this infrastructure altered the cityscape, closed-off ties between Romans and their river, and eliminated historical docks and leisure areas. In contrast to the image of filthiness and decay associated with the waterscape of the city under the rule of the popes, the protection walls along the Tiber epitomized the ideal of order, discipline, and cleanliness that the new Italian ruling classes sought to impose over a central space of the Italian capital. The construction of border lines between Rome and its river symbolised the conflicts between the Catholic Church and the Italian liberals, and Rome was culturally, spatially, visually, and materially separated from its recent past to mark the beginning of a new era shaped by science and technology.