Few people think of Brandenburg or Prussia as watery worlds. Frederick the Great’s famous description of his territory as a “sandbox” tends to dominate our thinking—inaccurately. In fact, the territory was, and remains, one of the “water-richest” states in Germany. Spread across the modern state of Brandenburg lie some 3000 natural and artificial lakes. Interlocking waterways characterize—and characterized—the physical topography of virtually every district, while the structures built on and around them—mills, dams, dikes, causeways, canals, and channels—anchored social and cultural life. Water's presence was all but inescapable. Thus, in offering an “alternative history” of Brandenburg-Prussia, I do not mean to reject political narratives or socio-cultural analyses but rather to draw our attention to things that deeply concerned virtually all the territory's inhabitants and that also bore critical political implications. I am asking: how does the history of Brandenburg-Prussia change if we recenter it around water?

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