

BOOK REVIEW

An Environmental History of Ancient Greece and Rome. By LUKAS THOMMEN. Translated by Philip Hill. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp xi + 186. Paper, \$29.99. ISBN 978-0521-17465-7.

Thommen's work illustrates both the strengths and shortcomings of a short handbook designed to introduce readers to the study of the environmental history of the Greek and Roman worlds. Constraints of the handbook format, especially length, make it unfair to compare it to more theoretically sophisticated works like Horden and Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea*, or more exhaustive tomes such as Sallares' magnificent 1991 volume, *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World*, and in the space of a scant 142 pages of text Thommen is able to touch upon a broad range of topics, from deforestation to changes in shore-line, with short chapters on topics as varied as Fire, Water, Animals and Food, which is not to exhaust the list. Also, the work has a very thorough summary, in the Introduction, briefly noting various modern works devoted to environmental history. Thommen is admirably lucid in laying out the key ancient and modern terms used for discussing environmental matters. The section on further reading is also very helpful and the volume will be a good jumping off point for undergraduates working on environmentally-themed term papers.

A more difficult question to answer, however, is whether such a format is really desirable for a topic as immense as the environmental history of the Ancient Mediterranean. Time and again questions are raised, or more commonly, assertions are made, that one would like to have seen more fully teased out. For example, after a half-page discussion of the Greek understanding of climatic zones and meteorology, Thommen declares, "No concrete effects of this teaching on settlement activity are apparent" (25) This is strictly not true. Lothar Haselberger has shown quite convincingly that classical urban planning took account of Aristotelian notions of the winds.¹ Rather than a closed avenue, as Thommen's comments suggest, this is a new line of inquiry that deserves much more attention. Similarly, a statement such as "During the Augustan period, the poets Vergil

¹ Lothar Haselberger, "Geometrie der Winde, windige Geometrie: Städtebau nach Vitruv und Aristophanes," in *Stadt und Umland—Diskussionen zur Archäologischen Bauforschung* 7 (Mainz, 1999) 90–100.

and Propertius praised the superior strength of the Roman Empire precisely because of its better environment" (76) borders on oversimplification. *Debellare superbos et parcere subiectis* is not an environmental manifesto!

A second reservation concerns Thommen's decision to base his work primarily on literary sources (16) and to take into account "natural-scientific investigations" (which I take to mean archaeology in its fullest sense) "only to a limited degree." Thus we get Oliver Rackham on the capacity of pine trees to regenerate and the revisionist view that widespread deforestation was not responsible for the degradation of the Greek countryside, and a passing reference to Hans Lohmann's Atene survey, but no mention of the Nemea Valley Area Project, the Pylos Regional Area Project or the nearly fifty year old Minnesota-Messenia Project. Similarly, on the Roman side, an influential 2010 Dutch landscape and archaeological project entitled *Regional Pathways to Complexity* is simply absent. Such omissions are a concern: Thommen's analysis of Roman agriculture relies far too heavily on Columella and Varro, while his treatment of Rome as an urban environment is skewed towards Horace and Martial's familiar complaints about the noise, traffic and smell of the city. Once again, archaeology is being reduced to a bowl of cherries, to be picked for the juiciest bits but not systematically digested. That's a step backwards.

Even if we follow Thommen and restrict the analysis to literary sources, there's much here to cause raised eyebrows. It is not controversial to say that "In Greece the gods took anthropomorphic form," but recent studies have explored the animal nature of Hera and Zeus, as well as the obvious cases of Athena Hippias and Poseidon Hippias in much greater depth. Accordingly, the statement that Poseidon "was primarily held responsible for earthquakes" is not wrong but only skims the surface, since the cult of the Earthshaker was central to the religious, political and ethnic identity of central Greece.² Another lost opportunity is the omission of any discussion of the Mycenaean draining of Lake Copais, despite a short section on drainage that mentions a similar, though more modest project under Alexander the Great. One might have expected the greatest engineering feat performed on the Greek mainland in three millennia to have warranted a mention.

The second half of the book is dedicated to Rome and in particular the environmental changes associated with the growth of imperial power. The section on roads is clear, if somewhat weighted towards the physical connections made be-

² See Sabine Szidat, *Poseidon als Erdschütterer* (Munich, 2001).

tween Italy and Germany without much attention to other provinces or regions. The same can be said of an interesting section on timber that makes some keen observations about Roman forestry practices in southern Germany. Here too, however, the highly selective nature of Thommen's argument, which is assembled somewhat serendipitously, leaves the reader dissatisfied. For example, Thommen cites a lugubrious passage from Pliny on the human dilemma: man is weak, threatened by the environment, aided only by his technical resources, which, ironically, leave him even more exposed to destruction. Yet what qualifies this passage as programmatic (an illustration of "the fundamental dilemma of people in antiquity with respect to nature" (p. 78)) rather than, say, Sophokles' famous ode to man from the *Antigone*, in which human ingenuity is seen as a continuous triumph over nature?

So light is Thommen's engagement that at times his pages read more as *aperçu* than argument. Page 97, for example, begins with bans on animal fights in the arena before moving to depictions on arches and sarcophagi of animal hunts, five lines on the Piazza Armerina mosaics, Vergil on bee colonies, Pliny on zoology in general, Neopythagoreans and vegetarianism, Plutarch on animal reason, Porphyry on avoiding carnivory, and finally, the New Testament, the Lamb of God and the Good Shepherd: a veritable smorgasbord!

Overall, students will find a good deal of useful information here but despite Thommen's laudable concern for the environment his volume can hardly be said to have ascertained "the interactive complexes of effects between people and their environment" (15) in the ancient Mediterranean. Such a work remains to be written. A final note: Philip Hill's translation is fine, although there are occasional missteps. "For whenever anyone was belated by a sacrifice ..." (51) is not a happy expression.

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