

BOOK REVIEW

Environmental Problems of the Greeks and Romans: Ecology in the Ancient Mediterranean, 2nd edition. By J. DONALD HUGHES. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. Pp. x + 306. Paperback, \$27.95. ISBN 978-1-4214-1211-5.

Why didn't the Greeks and Romans go green? Hughes explores this question of contemporary interest in a welcome update to his 1994 book *Pan's Travail*. The new title, a promotion of first edition's subtitle, makes the book's emphasis clear. Hughes intends "not to prove that environment determined the events of history, but to examine the ways in which human activities and the environment interacted in positive and negative ways" (7). Hughes emphasizes the negative interactions—from deforestation and erosion to pollution of air and water—and underlines the detrimental effects these had on Greek and especially Roman civilization.

Much is relatively unaltered from the first edition. The book has 14 short chapters, three of which are new. The first four are introductory. Hughes defines environmental history and explains its interdisciplinary nature (chapter 1); surveys the biogeography of the Mediterranean basin (chapter 2); describes the environmental problems of Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations (chapter 3); and discusses various "concepts of the natural world" held by Greeks and Romans, including religious, philosophical, and aesthetic attitudes (chapter 4). The remaining chapters each cover a kind of negative interaction with nature: deforestation and erosion (chapter 5), loss of wildlife (chapter 6), agriculture (chapter 7), industry (chapter 8), war (chapter 9, new), the city (chapter 10), sacred groves and gardens (chapter 11), natural disasters (chapter 12, new), and climate change (chapter 13, new). The final chapter, significantly expanded from the first edition, assesses the importance of environmental problems for the decline of civilizations. Further additions are black-and-white photographs by Hughes, which helpfully illustrate the landscapes and technologies he investigates.

The book's pace is often hurried, but as a result much ground is covered including such far-flung topics as river siltation (81-2) and malaria (199-200). The quality of individual chapters is somewhat uneven, and occasionally they seem not to know that they are part of the same book. For example, Hughes mentions or

cites Plato's anecdote about deforestation (*Critias* 111b-d) multiple times with little cross-referencing (ix-x, 1, 2, 64, 68, 81, 140-141). Chapters 8, 10, and 7 (excluding the section on Laurion) show only superficial revision from the first edition and do not cite recent scholarship. Chapter 9 on warfare, the only entirely new chapter, contains much information that is treated elsewhere in the book.

Nevertheless, Hughes succeeds in several new sections when he analyzes a historical phenomenon in depth, for example, the damage to humans and the natural environment from the Athenian silver mines at Laurion (136–142). Similarly in chapter 12, instead of surveying numerous plagues, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions, he provides detailed case studies of the Athenian plague (200–206) and the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE (206–13). Hughes writes grippingly and informatively in these sections, making them ideal for a non-specialist or undergraduate reader.

Hughes is less successful in determining the precise causes of Greek and Roman “disregard” for the natural world. In his final chapter, he includes among its possible causes women's place in society, Roman pragmatism, lack of scientific progress, and economic factors including slavery (229–234). He leaves the reader with a depressing feeling that all of ancient *nomos* was set up in order to do the most harm to *physis*. Hughes is not so cavalier, but reaches the conclusion that as a result of poor stewardship, “the lands where Western civilization received its formative impulse were gradually drained, losing much of their living and nonliving heritage” (235). Thus the book has a fundamentally negative outlook and Hughes takes a dim view of even potentially positive interactions with the environment: advice on land management from Varro and Columella is applicable only to small farms (122), and his discussion of sacred groves concludes with the many ways they were exploited (195).

Per the aims of the series “Ancient Society and History,” of which this book is a part, Hughes writes for a generalist audience. Little background is assumed, and historical figures are given good introductions. Occasionally dates might confuse: in one paragraph, Hughes mentions the 396 BCE siege of Syracuse, a Roman plague of 461, the Antonine plague of 164, and the Justinian plague of 540-65 without adding “BCE” or “CE” to the last three dates (198–9). References to scholarship are primarily in English and often to popular rather than scholarly works—frequently to Hughes's other publications. Some relevant books are omitted from the bibliography, including Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's *Corrupting Sea* (2000) and Jeremy McInerney's *Cattle of the Sun* (2010). It is difficult to determine

an appropriate audience for the book as a whole. Stand-alone chapters would enrich undergraduate courses on Greek or Roman civilization or history, while references to classical authors offer scholars opportunities for further research.

Especially in the new sections Hughes attempts to demonstrate the contemporary significance of environmental history, comparing ancient plagues to Ebola and bird flu (214) and ancient climate change to modern (223). Conversely, Hughes does at times engage in environmentalist faddism, including quoting Anne and Paul Erlich's remark that the agricultural revolution was "the greatest mistake that ever occurred in the biosphere" (29)—a view reminiscent of those behind gluten-free and "paleo" diets—and portraying Roman *latifundia* as unsustainable in comparison to small farms (128). But all in all, Hughes's efforts in assessing Greeks' and Romans' environmental impact make this a useful and thought-provoking book, and his message is one that is truly applicable to the modern world.

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