

Ecology and History in the Ancient World

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'Is it possible somehow to convey simultaneously both that conspicuous history which holds our attention by its continual and dramatic changes — and that other, submerged, history, almost silent and always discreet, virtually unsuspected either by its observers or its participants, which is little touched by the obstinate erosion of time?'
Fernand Braudel

Unit Outline 'Classical civilisation' was shaped not only by the actions and thoughts of individuals but also by the environment in which it developed, the world of the ancient Mediterranean. Climate, geography and ecology helped to set the 'limits of the possible', constraining and directing the development of ancient societies. In turn, the Greeks and Romans sought to overcome these limits, to control and change their environment — sometimes successfully, sometimes with disastrous consequences. The aim of this unit is to study the relationship between ancient societies and their environment: the ways in which they thought about the natural world and sought to master it, and the ways in which they themselves were shaped by the forces of nature.

Learning Outcomes On successful completion of this unit, you should:

- ❑ have developed your knowledge of different aspects of the environment of the ancient Mediterranean, of the ways in which this environment shaped ancient societies and of the ways in which the Greeks and Romans thought about and responded to the natural world.
- ❑ be familiar with major theories and debates in ecology and environmental history, and able to relate these theories to specific examples in the study of the ancient Mediterranean.
- ❑ have had some experience of studying different kinds of evidence, and of developing your own interpretations of this evidence and its relevance to historical debates.
- ❑ be able to use knowledge acquired in class and through your research to construct coherent, relevant and persuasive arguments on different aspects of the topic.
- ❑ have had the opportunity to develop your skills in oral and written communication, in class discussion, essays and written exams.

Teaching There will be one class each week, on Wednesdays from 11.10 to 1.00 in G16. These classes will be seminars; they will involve the presentation of key material by the lecturer, small-group work on particular issues and pieces of evidence, and general discussion. It is vitally important, therefore, that you come prepared to participate fully; that is, you should both do the necessary background reading (above all by working your way through the books listed as 'essential reading' on this handout, and looking at relevant material before each class) and also develop an attitude of intellectual curiosity, openness to others' ideas and willingness to share your own.

Credit and Assessment This is a Minor Special Subject for third year students, worth 20 credits. The unit will be assessed by an essay of roughly 3,000 words (50%) and a ninety-minute exam in the summer (50%). For the exam, you will be required to answer two essay questions from a choice of eight.

Contact My consultation hour this Teaching Block is Thursday, 2.00-3.00; feel free to drop in to 1.36 to discuss any aspect of this unit or the assessment. At other times, it's best to contact me by email: n.d.g.morley@bris.ac.uk.

Blackboard You should all have been registered on the Blackboard course for the this units, where I'll post copies of relevant material. I shall also activate the blog tool, in case anyone feels like posting their thoughts.

Essays Choose one of the essay titles below. They are all pretty broad; it is generally advisable, and always acceptable, to focus your answer by looking at a particular theme or case study rather

than trying to cover the entire subject. You should always aim to engage with both ancient evidence and modern historical debates.

Start with the 'essential reading', plus any relevant bibliography from individual classes; you should then exercise your research skills (consult the bibliographies in the backs of the books, look in relevant journals, play on the library computer etc.) to find further reading. If you are having major problems in obtaining books, see one of us as soon as possible; this will not be accepted retrospectively as an excuse for late submission of essays, when we could have suggested alternative reading. The submission deadline of essays is 29th April.

How far did the Romans succeed in dominating nature?

Is ancient civilisation conceivable without the 'Mediterranean triad'?

'The most harmful legacy of ancient thought to the environment has been its consistent denigration of the material world.' Discuss.

How did the ancients respond to natural catastrophes?

'The landscape of the imagination is easily as important as the real landscape in shaping people's responses to their environment.' Discuss with reference to classical examples.

Essential Reading These are general books, which cover many aspects of the unit or which discuss the underlying issues (or both). The sooner you read some of these the better; and by the end of the unit you should have read all of them.

P. Horden & N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: a study of Mediterranean history* (2000)

Large and forbidding, containing an overwhelming quantity of information — and this is just the first volume of the study — but pretty essential, and well worth buying if you can afford it. Has something interesting to say about almost every topic we're going to be looking at, plus a huge bibliography for further reading; also has a decent index, so you don't have to read the whole thing straight away if you're looking for something on a particular topic. Note that it's usually to be found in the Archaeology section of bookshops, not under Ancient History. Well worth looking out for some reviews, to get a sense of its approach, and also consulting W.V. Harris, ed., *Re-Thinking the Mediterranean* (2005), a collection of papers from a conference focused on Horden & Purcell's work.

F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1972), 'History and the social sciences: the *longue durée*' in *On History* (1980), and *The Structures of Everyday Life: the limits of the possible* (1981)

Braudel was a key figure in establishing the importance of the environment in studying history; offered a vision of history that down-plays individual actions and events and verges on environmental determinism. *The Mediterranean* is a classic work of history, largely superseded by Horden & Purcell as far as useful facts are concerned, but still well worth reading; the chapter in *On History* sets out his theoretical approach. You also look at Braudel's *The Structures of Everyday Life: the limits of the possible* (1981), which is particularly interesting on food and drink and their effects on the development of civilisations. Finally, various notes he made have been published posthumously as *The Mediterranean in the Ancient World* (2001); not brilliant, actually, but could still contain something useful. Useful discussions of the wider context of Braudel's work in P. Burke, *The French Historical Revolution* (1990) and J. Bintliff, ed., *The Annales School and Archaeology* (1991).

J.D. Hughes, *Pan's Travail: environmental problems of the Greeks and Romans* (1994)

Not really 'essential', and indeed to be treated with caution; Horden & Purcell describe it as 'just the sort of retrojection of the clichés of modern environmentalism that we want to banish from Mediterranean historiography'. However, there are very few books available on the subject of the ancient environment, and this one is available in a reasonably cheap paperback. If you keep in mind that Hughes has an axe to grind, you may well find some useful information and ideas here.

Robert Sallares, *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World* (1991)

Another rather eccentric book — and another forbiddingly large one. More or less unreadable taken as a whole, but contains lots of interesting information and arguments — use the index — and presents a provocative approach to history as an offshoot of species evolution (putting most emphasis on the evolution of plants and microbes and their exploitation of humans). His survey chapter on ‘Ecology’ in W. Scheidel, I. Morris & R. Saller (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Greco-Roman Antiquity* (2007) offers an excellent introduction to some of the most important issues in this unit.

Other General Reading

- J. Blondel & J. Aronson, *Biology and Wildlife of the Mediterranean Region* (1999)
M. Cary, *Geographic Background of Greek & Roman History* (1949)
P. Coates, *Nature* (1998)
A.T. Grove & O. Rackham, *The Nature of Mediterranean Europe* (2001)
C. Nicolet, *Space, Geography and Politics in the Early Roman Empire* (1991)
Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World* (1991)
Jonathan Porritt, *Seeing Green* (1984)
I. G. Simmons, *Environmental History: a concise introduction* (1993)
D. Wall, ed., *Green History* (1993)
D. Worster, *The Wealth of Nature* (1993)

Class Schedule

1. Approaches and Issues
2. Land
3. Water
4. Climate
5. Plants
6. Animals
7. Disease
8. Resources
9. Conceptions
10. Catastrophe
11. Change and Crisis