

Learning from Gaia: Bringing Environmental History into the Classics Classroom

“*Gaia, the earth goddess, teaches justice to those who can learn; for the better she is served, the more good things she gives in return,*” (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 5.12). In this passage, Xenophon reports Sokrates’ exhortation to Kritoboulos about the benefits of γεωργία, farming or husbandry. The passage broadcasts the obvious concept that humans have never existed aloof from the environment but have an awareness of and live intertwined with the complex biotic communities that surround them. This is as true for the ancient societies in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and the Roman Empire, as it is for our contemporary world. What these ancient communities knew and thought about nature can be found in ideas expressed in their mythology, philosophy, literature, theology, and art. How they interacted with and altered their surroundings can be traced in the remains of their farmsteads, urban centers, and religious sanctuaries. The particular geology, climate, flora, and fauna of the Mediterranean landscape shaped many aspects of ancient culture, technology, and history. These topics form the backbone of environmental history which charts the influence of the environment on human history, the environmental changes caused by human behavior and their consequences, and the development of human thought about and the expression of attitudes towards the environment in the visual and literary arts.

This environmental history of the ancient Mediterranean can be profitably embedded in the Classics curriculum either a discrete unit in popularly taught courses such as ancient art, ancient philosophy, or mythology, or as a stand-alone interdisciplinary course that incorporates the many and varied ancient sources that can lead students to discover the destructive and successful ways humans have lived in the natural world. It has been 40 years since J. Donald Hughes published *Ecology in Ancient Civilizations*, which preceded his more well-known work, *Pan’s Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans*. These books pioneered the application of the methodology of environmental history

to the study of the ancient Mediterranean and gathered the primary ancient sources into useful categories. This work can now be amended with the results of geomorphological, paleobotanical, and paleozoology studies conducted in conjunction with archaeological investigations (Walsh 2014). Recent scholarship has employed the concepts of cultural geography to think about place in ancient Greek literature (Gilhuly and Worman 2014). Topical studies on cattle (McInerney 2010), rivers (Campbell 2012), mountains (McNeill 1992), and the Mediterranean as a whole (Horden and Purcell 2000, Broodbank 2013) have spurred new ways of conceiving the relationship of ancient populations with the land they inhabited and the seas they traversed.

This paper will present the outline of an introductory level course in the environmental history of the ancient Mediterranean, with an emphasis on the ancient Greek world, and suggest smaller curricular units that might be embedded in other Classics survey courses. Resources useful in preparing such a course or as readings for students will also be discussed.

Bibliography

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