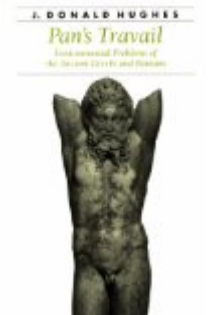


J. Donald Hughes. *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. xii + 276 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8018-5363-0.



Reviewed by Verena Winiwarter

Published on H-Environment (May, 1999)

The decline and fall of ancient Rome has been a favorite object of speculation among historians. It was one of the first major events in history that was explained by anthropogenic environmental factors, namely the poisoning of significant parts of the population by lead. Up to the time of Donald Hughes' book, not much substance has been added to the debate from an ecological and environmental point of view. Written to meet the needs of an interested lay-public, as well as to provide a study guide for classicists and students of environmental history, this very accessible short reader covers a lot of new ground.

A small (less than 300 pp.) book cannot cover everything at the same depth. Despite this limitation, Hughes provides us with an enormously rich knowledge of Ancient sources. Indeed, the list of abbreviations of Ancient sources alone covers four pages (pp. 201-205).

The book is divided into eleven chapters. The first gives the framework for the role of ecology in history in general, with specific reference to Classical Studies. Three types of sources are used: literary sources (the usual material for the classic

historian), archaeological evidence, and scientific studies about environmental change. In the second chapter, with reference to Fernand Braudel, we read about climate, sea, land and the plant and animal communities that constitute the specific Mediterranean ecosystems. The third chapter goes beyond the boundaries of Greece and Rome, into (pre-)history. Egypt is used as an example for the period preceding the civilizations Hughes is concerned with. Archaeological evidence is the main basis for a quick tour through much of human prehistory, with the Neolithic revolution given due credit for its significance in an eco-historical discussion. Chapter Four is mainly concerned with literary evidence, and gives us not only insights into the ideological but also the into main proto-scientific conceptions of the natural world. It builds especially on a detailed study Hughes has done on Theophrastus the botanist [1].

Chapters Five to Nine discuss the environmental problems encountered by Greeks and Romans. Hughes argues mainly anthropogenic causes. Deforestation with its companions overgrazing and erosion is dealt with in Chapter Five, bal-

anced by a short review of forest conservation and management techniques and concepts. The main topic of Chapter Six--wildlife depletion due to hunting, fishing and the killing of animals in the arena--is also balanced by some evidence of pets and love of animals. Industrial technology and the resulting environmental damages are dealt with in Chapter Seven. Hughes discusses extractive industries and therefore broadens the usual picture which is centered on metallurgy. More studies following the outline given here would be especially valuable.

Agricultural decline is discussed in Chapter Eight, and urban problems in Chapter Nine. There is, indeed, a lot that unites Greek and Roman history. But if the reader is not as knowledgeable as Prof. Hughes, he or she might well get confused by references to the early Greek "polis" and the late Roman "latifundiae"--given without much distinction. Hughes shows that many ancient authors described a decline in agricultural production, and suggests that this proved the problem existed in reality (p. 131). Here, the reader is overwhelmed with the author's erudition. No distinction is made between writers engaged in a larger political debate who made reference to the "mos maiorum," and those who wrote agricultural treatises well-informed about local circumstances. The notion of decline was to some part the rhetoric of the controversy between rich townspeople and the older, rural-based upper class that struggled under the new monetary economy, a line of argument that the author picks up again, if very briefly, in his discussion of rural nostalgia in the following urban chapter. Probably, giving due credit to the political implications of agricultural treatises would have made the book less convincing, less readable and much thicker. One wishes for such a book to be written, nevertheless. The chapter on urban problems contains references to city planning, to the problems of population growth, and to the subsequent circumstances of city life, which was dangerous and dirty and

which caused deterioration of larger tracts of land which supplied cities.

Before giving his concluding chapter, Prof. Hughes sets out to review evidence of nature conservation and a religious valuation of nature that could--had they been strong enough--counterbalanced the deteriorating effects of the Mediterranean civilizations. Finally, having laid out an enormous breadth of evidence, historical, archaeological and scientific, Hughes concludes, "Environmental changes as a result of human activities must be judged to be one of the causes of the decline of ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, and in producing the stark conditions of the early Medieval centuries" (p. 194). He emphasizes the cumulative effects of relatively small-scale deterioration, and accounts for regional differences in the extent of the problem. In his conclusion, Hughes argues that Christianity had a negative effect on nature appreciation. The very complex interaction between belief system and attitudes towards nature, are too complicated and not understood well enough to allow for such a short statement. At least one would have wished to read Prof. Hughes' opinion of the importance of the Mithras cult, which preceded the turn to Christian belief as a monotheist cult.

Prof. Hughes' book, written after decades of study of the subject, is a main corrective to the misconception of environmental degradation and problems being solely a modern concern. Sometimes evidence is presented as beyond doubt, where the reader of ancient sources would not agree in all cases. But a short, accessible text cannot be at the same time a balanced discussion of all open problems of ancient environmental history. Therefore I have but one basic reservation to this book, which does not diminish its value for the general reader or the student. The notion of "environmental problems" is central to the work's argument and limits the theoretical framework of analysis, which the book never goes beyond.

One can and should view ancient Mediterranean civilizations as societies that overexploited their environment and in turn got what they deserved: as Hughes puts it "how nature exacted revenge" (p. xi). But there should also be an alternative treatment: conceptualizing responses to the nature-society interactions as a form of co-evolutionary development. Only passing reference is made to the work of Robert Sallares, who laid out such a co-evolutionary perspective in his book.[2] Sallares has given a lucid explanation of the Greek colonization period, which is missing from *Pan's Travail*. It would have been especially valuable if the chapter on ancient Egypt had instead been one on the earliest Greek settlements. These minor quibbles aside, the book is very recommendable and should be widely read. Perhaps Donald Hughes would be willing to write a study with a co-evolutionary perspective as a sequel to *Pan's Travail* in the years to come.

Notes:

[1]. Donald J. Hughes, Theophrastus as ecologist. In: *Environmental Review* 9, 4 (1985) 296-307.

[2]. Robert Sallares, *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World*. London: Duckworth 1991.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the reviewer and to H-ASEH. For other permission, please contact hbooks@h-net.msu.edu or haseh@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Verena Winiwarter. Review of Hughes, J. Donald. *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. May, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3108>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.