

J. Donald Hughes. *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994. 277pp. ISBN: 080185363X.

Reviewed by Dongwoo Kim

I briefly imagined a toga-wearing Roman citizen picketing for wildlife preservation when I first read the abstract of J. Donald Hughes' *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans* (1994). The idea of writing an environmental history of the ancient Greeks and Romans seemed a little bit anachronistic to me (more so than of any other period of history). Contrary to my prejudice, however, Hughes presented a very convincing and relevant environmental history of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Furthermore, he clearly conveys the message that humanity and nature are timeless partners, and that they must interact sustainably or perish together. Despite its strengths, however, *Pan's Travail* is occasionally reductive, even for an introductory book—a flaw that will be addressed in this review.

As in his later work, *What is Environmental History* (2006), Hughes provides an excellent introduction to the field of environmental history of the Ancient Greeks and Romans in *Pan's Travail*. Although *Pan's Travail* is rather short (about 200 pages excluding the appendices), it has a relatively abundant bibliography of approximately 500 works, which is great for novices to the field interested in doing further research. Hughes draws information from ancient literature that includes “[ancient] Greek and Latin history, philosophy, drama, epic and lyric poetry, scientific and technical treatises, correspondence, and legal documents,” as well as results of archaeological and scientific researches.¹ For instance, in chapter five, Hughes uses both the history written by Livy, as well as results of palynological researches to demonstrate the process of deforestation in Rome during fourth-century B.C.² Hughes generally makes good use of a diverse variety of sources throughout the book to support his points.

Hughes, however, fails to engage his sources in depth and thus provides a very reductive picture of the interaction of the Greeks and Romans with nature. Hughes presents various fascinating discourses of the Greeks and Romans towards nature (which ranges from earlier forms of ecology to advocacy of animal rights), but he does not go any further than that; he does not demonstrate the impact of such discourses upon the actions of the people and simply reduces their actions as driven by “greed.” For instance, Hughes identifies religion as a motive for the Greeks and Romans to treat nature “with awe and care,” as they “regarded the world as a sacred place where the gods of nature [...] were present.”³ However, he suggests that human greed simply took over the religious at some point. This view is evident when he claims that the preservation of certain sacred places (which Hughes regards as a kind of proto-preservationism), which was part of the religious component, was difficult due to “human greed.”⁴ Furthermore, Hughes does not describe how or when this discursive shift took place. Such reductive approach undermines his urge for change in our interaction with nature. Hughes writes history as if humans were simply driven by self-interest, foregoing any consideration about cultural motivations, and thus he ultimately regards the Greco-Roman environmental history as tragedy.

¹ J. Donald Hughes, *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 6-7

² *Ibid.*, 80-81

³ *Ibid.*, 45

⁴ *Ibid.*, 179

In fact, such perception of the Greco-Roman environmental history is present throughout the book and is essential in putting forth Hughes' main message. He holds the view that humans are definitely a part of the greater ecosystem, and that nature is their indispensable and timeless partner. Thus, he deems a sustainable and positive interaction with nature essential for both humans and nature. Hughes believes that the mistreatment of nature eventually resulted in nature exacting "revenge" upon humans.⁵ The revenge that Hughes refers to is the decline of the Greek and Roman civilizations. At the end of the book, Hughes argues that the "[environmental] changes as a result of human activities must be judged to be one of the causes in the decline of ancient Greek and Roman civilization."⁶ Hence, he regards the environmental history of both the Greeks and Romans as tragic. Hughes hints that the Greeks and Romans were aware of the damages that they inflicted upon nature, but that they did not put up an effort to change their ways—which are "possibilities of reconciliation," a characteristic of the tragic mode of emplotment in historiography. In the conclusion of the book, he writes that the ecological damages were "the result of the unwise actions of the Greeks and Romans themselves, unwitting as they may have been," which certainly conveys a tragic tone.⁷

Hughes also attempts to instill a sense of urgency, a motive for change, by demonstrating that the environmental problems that the Greeks and Romans suffered were the ones that we experience today and can relate to, such as damages on soil (chapter five), wildlife depletion (chapter six), damages inflicted by technology (chapter seven), or urban problems (chapter nine). Therefore the operating ideological implication of *Pan's Travail* is liberal, in that Hughes urges for a conscious change in our ways of interaction with nature to avoid the same mistakes that the Greeks and Romans made.

As for the style, Hughes generally uses simple language and organizes the book in a very convenient manner in accordance with his stated goal—that is, "to provide the necessary groundwork for an understanding of the environmental history of classical Greece and Rome" for general reader.⁸ The book is divided into eleven chapters, which are then divided again into various sub-sections. The first four chapters serve as an introduction to the ecology of the classical worlds and the concept of the environmental science; Hughes explores various discourses of the Greeks and the Romans regarding nature, as well as a brief environmental history of other ancient societies. From chapter six to ten, Hughes covers six particular environmental issues of ancient Greece and Rome: damage to soils, wildlife depletion, industrial damages, agricultural decline, urban problems, and what may be considered as proto-conservationism. Lastly, Hughes ends the book with a chapter that sums up the aforesaid issues and attributes them to the decline of Greek and Roman civilizations. As can be seen from the organization of the book, the mode of argument in *Pan's Travail* is contextualist; Hughes links together the environmental background and other various environmental problems in context of the decline of the civilizations.

Pan's Travail is definitely a must-read for the novices into the field of environmental history of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Hughes is one of the first environmental historians (he had "no mentor who was an environmental historian because the field had not yet emerged"⁹), and his earlier work, *Ecology in Ancient Civilizations* (1975), is considered to be the seminal work in the area of environmental history of classical periods. *Pan's Travail*, according to Hughes, is a book that is based

⁵ Ibid., xi

⁶ Ibid., 194

⁷ Ibid., 199

⁸ Ibid., ii.

⁹ Mark Cioc and Char Miller, "J. Donald Hughes," *Environmental History* (2010): 1-14.

on *Ecology*, but with more recent studies and focus on Rome and Greece. Certainly, this book, with a rich bibliography of about five hundred sources, is indispensable for those interested in the environmental history of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Although Hughes does not discuss each topic deeply, he does cover the basics, which should be a good starting point for the novices. Hughes approaches certain topics in a rather reductive manner, but it does not undermine the value of the book too much. In short, it is a great introduction to the environmental history of the Greeks and Romans.