

# From storied to porous landscapes: antiquity, the environmental humanities, and the case for long-term histories

*This essay makes a case for long-term history and its importance to the field of environmental humanities. Examining why the ancient world has only played a marginal role in this new paradigm so far, a new perspective on ancient environments is encouraged – one that does not see these environments as static containers of cultural memory, but rather as dynamic sites of human-nature interaction. With the help of one central text from the ancient world, Pausanias' Description of Greece, this essay seeks to introduce a reconceptualization of the ancient Mediterranean region – especially ancient Greece – as a landscape of porosity.*

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## From storied to porous landscapes: antiquity, the environmental humanities, and the case for long-term histories

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In his multivolume *Kosmos*, one of the urtexts of the environmental humanities, Alexander von Humboldt observed that ancient writers did not pay a lot of attention to the beauties of the natural world. “In the landscapes of Greece,” he mused, one is naturally confronted with “a more intimate conflation of the fixed and the fluid”<sup>1</sup> that, however, failed to leave a lasting imprint on how the ancients wrote about their environment (Humboldt 1847, p. 10, own translation). Studying the archaic and classical texts the ancient tradition had to offer, von Humboldt looked in vain for the kind of “nature writing” that he found in later epochs of literary history.

With this observation and the way he wrote about ancient Greece, von Humboldt can be seen as an heir of Romanticism. Schiller had famously argued that whereas ancient authors were still very much part of the natural world (and were therefore less observant of its beauties), later writers made the world of pastoral, plants, and stones an integral component of their creations – quite in proportion to the loss of naturalness or nature in human life (Schiller 1985, p. 191, on this Rigby 2015, p. 358). In the field of ecocriticism<sup>2</sup>, there is still a consensus that von Humboldt's and Schiller's views largely hold true.

There is also a lasting consensus that the ancient cultures were characterized by a high degree of anthropocentrism. Writing about the ancient Greeks' outlook on the world, the eminent ancient historian Kurt Raaflaub holds that, “The Greeks [...] realized ear-

ly on that man is ultimately responsible for his own and his community's well-being” and that their general worldview can best be analyzed and described as “placing man in the center of concentric circles that define his relation to household, community, the divine, and the larger outside world” (Raaflaub 2016, p. 128).

Both views – the apparent lack of environmental awareness and the predominance of anthropocentrism in Greco-Roman antiquity – have had lasting consequences for the way ancient environments are treated in the environmental humanities: usually, they are sidelined in the discussion, despite the fact that a historical perspective features prominently in general textbook accounts of the field (on this Schliephake 2020). Yet, as I want to show in the course of this essay, the views outlined above are in need of serious re-consideration. Drawing on von Humboldt's view of “the fixed” and “the fluid”, I will discuss two approaches to ancient environments: one that looks at the ancient Mediterranean landscapes as an archive of cultural memory that inspires grand narratives of classical civilization; and one that treats these environments as dynamic entities in their own right, with more and highly diverse stories to tell. As I want to show, these approaches are not to be thought of as mutually exclusive, but rather as complementary. Focusing on an exemplary reading of one of the central texts on ancient Greece, Pausanias' *Periegesis Hellados* (*Description of Greece*, figure 1), I want to illustrate the ways in which our understanding of ancient texts can benefit from an ecological perspective and in how far a re-reading of their contents (supplemented by new types of sources) can add valuable historical perspectives to the vibrant field of the environmental humanities (for an introduction see Schmidt et al. 2020, in this issue).

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1 In German “einer innigeren Verschmelzung des Starren und Flüssigen”.  
2 A scholarly paradigm concerned with the study of the interrelationships between literary world-making and natural environments.

### The storied landscapes of Pausanias' *Description of Greece*

Before we begin this discussion, it should be made clear that my perspective is limited in so far as I choose to focus on one singular text from the second century CE and that my remarks hardly do justice to the entire epoch we refer to Greco-Roman antiquity (not to speak of the much older Mesopotamian and Near Eastern cultures). Yet, choosing Pausanias' *Periegesis* as a starting point of the discussion makes sense in so far as the author, like von Hum-

boldt and Schiller many centuries later, was obsessed with the landscapes of Greece that were in his own time – the heyday of the Roman Empire – seen as “classical” in themselves.

Pausanias wrote ten books about Greece that were most likely published in their extant order between 155 and 180 CE. Although we do not know much about the author himself, we can safely say that he was well-travelled and belonged to the wealthy and well-educated elite of his time (Habicht 1985). His *Description of Greece* has often been mined for archaeological and mythological information, but the reason why this text lends itself to an ecological reading is because Pausanias is increasingly seen as an author who attached great meaning to the sites he encountered on his tours through Greece (Alcock 1996, Hutton 2005, Pretzler 2007).

FIGURE 1: The beginning of the manuscript of Pausanias' *Description of Greece*, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana – the ancient text opens up new perspectives for the environmental humanities.



logical reading is because Pausanias is increasingly seen as an author who attached great meaning to the sites he encountered on his tours through Greece (Alcock 1996, Hutton 2005, Pretzler 2007).

This alone is not enough, however. In general, Pausanias is regarded as a writer who was a deeply religious person, and writing about myth, cult or ritual was, for him, the primary way of making sense of the natural world around him. The *Description of Greece* puts a special focus on sacred sites and was mainly concerned with places that were historically or culturally important. As has often been noted (Pretzler 2007, pp. 58–65), impressive sceneries were hardly mentioned at all, and whenever Pausanias writes about landscape features such as trees or rocks he did so because they were connected to cults or temples. Since this fragmentary approach to the Greek landscape was intricately bound up with stories of communities, they naturally had an anthropocentric, highly localized outlook, and they were told because they were, in one way or another, important to the humans who lived in a specific region of Greece.

Referring to the literary techniques and the high degree of selectivity that Pausanias brings to his subject, Jás Elsner has argued that Pausanias turned the landscape of Greece into a rhetorical discourse, and at the same time, a fantasy: “It consisted of an enchanted past, of living myths and rituals whose apparent antiquity guaranteed their modern meanings [...]. Its nostalgia [...] makes the *Description of Greece* one of the first truly monumental Romantic texts, and it is not surprising that the



*Periegesis* has particularly appealed to Victorian neo-Romantics (especially archaeologists and seekers of lost religions)” (Elsner 2001, p. 18)

This is an important observation for our topic at hand, because it makes clear that our modern views of the ancient Greek landscape have, to a large degree, been prefigured by a text like Pausanias’ *Description of Greece*. The *Periegesis* is not just an objective description of Greece, however, so much as it is, as Hawes puts it, also a “conceptual map of its traditions” (Hawes 2014, p. 214). It was a way of establishing a set of connections between landscapes and Greek traditions of storytelling, which in themselves “illustrate an intricate, integral relationship with (their) physical surroundings” (Hawes 2017, p. 1). In recent years, scholars of Greek myth in general have paid more attention “to the contextual dynamics which animate the mythic tradition, having come to see storytelling as an activity which is both precisely situated in, and contingent on, its environment” (Hawes 2017, p. 1). The *Description of Greece* exemplifies this perfectly.

But this alone does not qualify it as a text that invites ecological readings. At this point, an explanation of my understanding of ecology is in order: when using the term I follow Ernst Haeckel’s original coinage in so far as I take ecology to be the ultimate expression of an endeavor to understand the multiple interrelationships between living entities in the whole household of the earth in its varied regions in a manner that does not centralise the human (Rigby 2015, p. 363). However, I use the term mainly in the sense of a “literary ecology” that looks at the way texts are situated at the intersecting lines between human communities and their natural environments (Schliephake 2016). Thereby, I take this storied landscape that Pausanias presents not so much as a symbolical realm, loaded with archetypal figures, but rather as the concrete, narrative manifestation of a highly dynamic, material environment.

In this approach to the text, I diverge from the usual perception of Pausanias. So far, he has primarily been viewed a prime example of the kind of opinions I quoted at the outset: firstly, in that he does not care so much about natural landscapes, and secondly, in that he is rather interested in human works of art or stories attached to certain (cultural) sites. Since the rediscovery of the *Description of Greece* in the Renaissance, Pausanias has not only been read as offering a kind of topographical representation of the country, but as, in a sense, presenting a timeless account of it: As Alcock has noted, the various events Pausanias “chooses for commemoration are often far distant from each other in terms of their reality and temporality, but they are nonetheless combined by him” within a textual framework that she terms “ritual” time; in the *Periegesis* landscapes, events and stories “interact with each other beyond the bounds of any linear, historical chronology” (Alcock 1996, p. 259).

This focus on the way personal experience of travel, itineraries, histories, and storytelling interact has added in lending the text a somewhat static appearance, as an archive of cultural fantasies that, during the imperial era, turned into the expression of an antiquarian nostalgia for the past greatness of Greek and its tra-

dition – in other words, of the romantic sentiment that Elsner sees at work in the *Description of Greece* and its reception history alluded to above. And it is a view of the ancient Mediterranean that has had a strong and lasting persistence in the cultural memory. It is no wonder that Pausanias is primarily read as an author who was greatly interested in (the past greatness and subsequent fall of) Greek civilization. While I do not think that such readings miss the mark, I do think that alternative readings are possible that can supplement our existing interpretation and that will help in re-situating the ancient world and its cultures in contemporary environmental debates.

### Landscapes of porosity: antiquity and the environmental humanities

So far, my account has been concerned with the conceptual significance of the Greek landscape as a container for stories and memories. But there is another side to the *Description of Greece* that has to do with the experiential dimension. Usually, this has been discussed, again, with taking recourse to Pausanias’ personal reflections on the mythic traditions that he encountered on his tours and that he negotiated, for instance, with the help of allegorical readings that included the environments he found in a given place (Veyne 1987, Hawes 2014, pp. 178–185). But there is another side to this story: what has often been missed in historical readings of Pausanias (Bingen 1996) is that he was very much interested in the natural history of a region. What caught his attention, time and again, were the specific hydrological conditions of the regions of Greece with their rivers, springs, and sources of fresh water.

As with other natural landmarks, stories attached to these natural sites were important: across the Mediterranean world, sources of fresh water were seen as life-giving (and sacred) sites. The presence of water was of utmost importance in a relatively dry climate. Diverse traditions explained “the appearance of springs, the courses of rivers, and the connections between such water features, real and imagined” (Robinson 2017, p. 178). Moreover, water courses and springs were inextricably connected to regional identities (Bremmer 2019). Pausanias’ *Description of Greece* as a whole offers a good testimony to all of these features of how the Greeks related to the hydrological conditions of the mainland.

But for Pausanias, it seems, rivers had – beyond and above such cultural traditions of storytelling – a very material dimension. As befits a work that came from personal travel, rivers, springs, sources of fresh water abound in the *Description of Greece*. Yet, no description of them is the same or follows the same rules: “Rivers have always been different from each other,” Pausanias writes, adding, “and are so to this day in the trees and grasses they naturally produce: the Maiander breeds huge tamarisks in great numbers, the Boiotian Asopos has the deepest reed-beds, and the persea-tree likes no other waters except the Nile” (Pausanias 5.14.3, translated Levi 1971). What is characteristic of descriptions such as these, is that Pausanias often spent a lot of time in describing the specific material characteristics of a river: he describes the

water, the way a river flows, its own presence in a landscape, but also the animals and plants that live there.

It is in these passages where Pausanias reflects on corporeality – he describes the way waters taste, smell, what their colors are, what their temperature is. Thus, he relates the real, bodily effects that these waters have: they can either “warm” a human’s body like the “hottest drug” (4.35.10) and cure diseases (8.19.3), or they can be “like acid”, dissolving lead pipes (4.35.11) or other mate-

humans and nonhumans. Secondly, it leads to a re-conceptualization of the apparent anthropocentrism of Greco-Roman culture – in its response to the more-than-human world of material relations, a text like Pausanias’ *Description of Greece* constantly grapples with what it means to be human among a vast assemblage of agencies and bodily presences, giving way to a transcorporeal, even posthuman outlook that finds increasing scholarly attention amongst ancient scholars (Bianchi et al. 2019).

*Combining the scientific analysis of new source types like ice core proxy records with a re-reading of cultural texts is integral to the environmental humanities, because this will confront us with new understandings of ancient environments, moving beyond romanticized notions of Mediterranean landscapes and the civilizing discourses inherent in the classical tradition.*

rials like stones or glass (8.18.5, all Levi 1971). The reader gets the impression as if the author were truly immersed in a landscape, in its material realities rather than storied abstractions, inviting, in effect, what Stacy Alaimo refers to as a “trans-corporeal” imagination where humans and nonhumans are connected through material networks (Alaimo 2010).

Water confronts us with not so much storied landscapes, but rather landscapes of porosity (Tuana 2008, Iovino 2016, pp. 13–22), where every being is dependent on the life-giving or devastating forces of this element. In passages like this, Pausanias presents his readers with a complex material web composed of water, soil, animals, humans and land. As Raymond Williams once noted, such writing can be seen as offering the vision of “a world of properly materialist history” where “there is no room for the separate abstract categories of ‘nature’ and ‘man’” (Williams 2005, p. 111). And it is, finally, in passages such as these that the *Description of Greece* becomes a narrative of matter (for examples, cf. Pausanias on the Pamisos in comparison to other rivers and the colour of water 4.34.1-2 and 35.8-11, on the horrible smell of the Anigros 5.5.7-10, on the abandonment of Myous 7.2.7, on the Kynaithaian water-spring 8.9.13, on “waters of cold” 8.28.3).

If we re-read the *Description of Greece* (and, indeed, any other ancient text) as a narrative of material relationships, we can develop a reading practice that opens itself up to the many non- or more-than-human voices to which writing bids us turn. Then, it will also become possible to re-integrate the ancient textual tradition in contemporary debates in the environmental humanities, where posthuman and material approaches feature so prominently (Iovino and Oppermann 2014). This is important for the two reasons I referred to at the outset: firstly, it leads to a more inclusive definition of what ancient environments constitute – they are not merely repositories of cultural memories and landscapes that have been overwritten by countless (colonializing) stories and histories, but dynamic testaments to material encounters between

### Culture and nature are inextricably intertwined

That my notion of the landscapes of porosity that Pausanias presents is not just a mere metaphor in this regard becomes clear when we turn our attention back at the text itself: in his description of lake Stymphalos in Arcadia, Pausanias provides a prolonged discussion of the material conditions that determine the specific geomorphological environment of the region (8.22). It is characterized by limestone and karst, and one specificity of the immediate surroundings of the lake was that water drained off through holes, fissures, and chasms in the ground. Thus, the “river Stymphalus issues from the lake” and “descends into a chasm in the earth, and reappearing once more in Argolis it changes its name, and is called Erasinus instead of Stymphalus” (8.22.3). As has recently been argued, such accounts emerged from the observation of the very common natural phenomenon of subterranean rivers in Greece. This certainly contributed to the elaboration of imaginations of the underworld as a “wet place” (Baleriaux 2016, p. 103).

But apart from the stories it inspired, this attests to environmental knowledge that was only scientifically verified in 1986 (Unkel 2018, p. 314). Although we cannot say with certainty how ancient people in the region drew the connection between the two rivers, this episode is a powerful reminder of the way in which keen observation of natural surroundings, cultural storytelling, and proto-scientific exploration went hand in hand in antiquity. This is hardly an account of a static cultural archive, telling of great civilizations of the past, however, but rather the expression of a highly dynamic, fluid environment in which culture and nature were inextricably intertwined in material networks. What we are confronted with in Pausanias’ account of this particular region of Greece is a porous landscape in the true sense of the word – it allows us to see the fabrics of human-nature interaction that were at the heart of the mythic stories that Pausanias tells at oth-

er instances, for example, when he talks about Herakles' fight against the Stymphalian birds (Neff 2019).

Nonetheless, lake Stymphalos is an archaeological archive after all: over the last decades, sediment cores were retrieved from the lake and geochemically analyzed, turning the lake and its surroundings into an archaeological site (Unkel 2018, Weiberg et al. 2016). These sediment records allow us to trace a different story from the one stored in ancient written accounts of Stymphalos. They provide us with an archaeohydrological and palaeoenvironmental history of change that encompasses the last 5,000 years. With the help of these records, it now becomes possible to analyze changes in climate, temperature, and availability of water in the area that may have contributed to sociocultural transitions from the Late Bronze to the Iron Age (1200 to 900 BCE) or from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages (with a significant cold event visible between the sixth and seventh centuries CE).

These new source types like ice core proxy records and scientific methods like paleoarchaeology are currently re-shaping many traditional views of how the ancients interacted with and adapted to their environments. They illustrate how far the ancient world had already been caught up in environmental conditions that lastingly influenced patterns of cultural processes of meaning-making, social organization, and resilience. And these environmental conditions and their cultural responses show that there are, indeed, connecting links that can be drawn between our own times and antiquity, especially when we take into account the many nonhuman agents embedded in environmental feedback systems.

Combining the scientific analysis of these new source types with a re-reading of cultural texts like Pausanias' *Description of Greece* is integral to long-term histories in general and to the environmental humanities in particular, because this will confront us with new understandings of ancient environments, moving beyond romanticized notions of Mediterranean landscapes and the civilizing discourses inherent in the classical tradition. They turn a static and monumental archive of cultural memory into a dynamic and open imaginative space that allows us to analyze how ancient environments and their (textual and material) narratives have shaped, time and again, our understanding of humanity's place in the world. They deserve a central place in the evolving paradigm of the environmental humanities.

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