

### More Than Modern Environmental History

Humans have been living in and modifying environments for as long as they have existed as a species. The last 250 years have seen a remarkable quickening and deepening of humanity's ability to alter the planet, and thus this timeframe has garnered most of the attention of environmental historians. Modern society's relationship to the environment is, however, more than modern. It is built on thousands of years of interaction between civilisations, the land and the Earth's creatures. While there are many challenges with doing research in the pre-modern era – including a limited number of written sources, destruction over time of artistic and technological artefacts and requirements to master languages which are not spoken today – environmental historians need to be encouraged to explore our long and deep human–nature relationship.

As a scholar whose own research has included the medieval period in Europe, I was delighted to see an interest in exploring pre-modern environmental history through the workshop 'Geographies of Man: Environmental Influence from Antiquity to the Enlightenment', which is featured in this edition of the Notepad. I was also pleased to see that the workshop was organised by three Ph.D. students. The European environmental history community should be proud of such enthusiastic young scholars and work to support them in their endeavours to push our field further into the new and exciting direction of more-than-modern environmental history.

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### Geographies of Man: Environmental Influence from Antiquity to the Enlightenment

In recent decades, fears of climate change, resource consumption and irreversible environmental damage have made us more aware of how profoundly embedded we are in the natural world. There is growing concern not only with how we impact upon weather, climate and landscape, but also with how these impact on us in return, affecting our daily activities, shaping our individual and collective behaviour and contributing to the constitution of our identity in many complex ways.

On 16 May 2014, the Humanities Research Centre, in conjunction with the Departments of Classics, History, Italian and Renaissance Studies at

the University of Warwick hosted the one-day interdisciplinary conference 'Geographies of Man: Environmental Influence from Antiquity to the Enlightenment'. The goal of this conference was to historicise contemporary ecological discourse by exploring how the dynamic interactions between human beings and their lived environments were conceived of from Antiquity to the Enlightenment. Presenters considered how human beings related to weather, climate and landscape in a variety of historical circumstances; what interplay there was between environmental theoretical discourse and practical attitudes to environmental management; and how social and historical circumstances contributed to changes in environmental thought. While scholarly attention has traditionally focused on the development of environmental ideas from the eighteenth century to the present, there is still great scope for further investigation of ancient, medieval and early modern attitudes to the environment. Papers addressed these themes in time periods from the fifth century BCE up until the nineteenth century, coming together to demonstrate the long resonance of classical ideas across our period, as well as the important interventions in the theories of environmental influence made by medieval and early modern thought and practise.

Twenty-five postgraduate, early career and established scholars came together to hear twelve papers delivered by presenters from England, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United States. The proceedings were opened by Vladimir Jankovic, whose keynote paper 'On Climate Fetishism' shed light on the ideological assumptions and social implications of modern climatic discourse. Jankovic examined how stereotypical characterisations of the British 'national climate' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries went hand in hand with equally stereotypical depictions of the 'national character' of the British people. Following literary theorist David Simpson, Jankovic labelled such stereotyping processes as 'fetishistic'. 'Climate fetishism' occurs when we, as observers, experiencers and relators of climate, fail to recognise that the very phenomenon of climate that we come to define, observe and experience is one that we have constructed. According to Jankovic, the way in which we conceptualise climate is never objective or 'pure': it is the result of social pressures emerging from non-climatological contexts. Jankovic demonstrated this point by showing how nineteenth-century climatic discourse tended to obscure the social reality of which it was itself a product, yet all the while acting as a powerful 'signifier' with a social reality of its own. Jankovic's paper led to stimulating debate on the role of metaphor in climatological discourses, and laid the intellectual foundations for a day during which representations of climate and environment were at the centre of discussions.

The conference then proceeded chronologically. The first session on ancient environments provided three examples of the classical preoccupation with peoples and their relationships to places, climates and 'native species'. Anthony Ellis considered divine providence and ecological balance in the

thought of Herodotus and the pre-Socratics. Foreshadowing early modern providentialism, pre-Socratic philosophy deduced divine sanction for human action in contemporary interspecies relations, as man's dominion over animals was considered natural and mutually sustainable between species and thus part of a divine scheme. Anton Bonnier and Joanna Kemp then considered the relationship between peoples, climates and landscapes in Greek and Roman histories and geographies. Both of these papers emphasised the classical proclivity towards place-based theories of environmental determinism, with the economic, social and political characters of defined peoples being directly related to their environmental conditions.

Taking up this classical focus on the influence of environment on human society, the next session considered how late medieval and early modern Europeans conceptualised populations *in place*. Papers addressed conceptions of environmental health in the Low Countries, jurisdiction on changing coastal landscapes and the uneasy environmental legacy of English radical sect, the Diggers. Presenters examined how past societies have negotiated concurrent landscape change and political change, either proactively or reactively. Claire Weeda considered the medical theory behind the attempts by urban governments in the Low Countries to engineer healthier environments. Tom Johnson demonstrated the fluid, local and contested conceptualisations of jurisdictional spaces on mobile landmasses in medieval English law. Ashley Dodsworth problematised environmentalists' appropriations of the Digger Gerrard Winstanley's legacy, seeing unsustainable, highly extractive principles behind the radical redistributive urge to 'make the wastegrounds grow'.

The penultimate session moved our focus beyond the confines of Europe, demonstrating how theories of environmental influence contributed to framing Western representations of extra-European cultures in the early modern period. Andrea Cadelo-Buitrago argued that the environmentalistic construction of a 'despotic East' in Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws* should be seen as part of a larger effort to racialise the cultural and political discourse of the Enlightenment by introducing concepts of hierarchy, universality and (ab)normality. Shery Chanis investigated the map-making activities of Jesuit missionaries in China between 1578 and 1655, shedding light on the fruitful exchanges between European and Chinese cartographers and showing how competing views of the same environment were the result of different pastoral, cultural and political agendas. The panel was rounded off by Cecilia Muratori's paper on Renaissance representations of India and the myth of the long-lived Brahman, whose exceptional healthiness was often ascribed to environmental as well as dietary causes.

A final session returned us back to the theme of the character of place as Philippa Hellawell and David Beck illustrated natural-philosophical and theological understandings of seventeenth-century British environments. Hellawell showed how the London-based natural philosophers of the later seventeenth

century used river environments as ‘test spaces’ for the global ocean, thus highlighting the problem of how space conditions the formation of knowledge and how locally acquired knowledge can in turn be applied to both local and global spaces. Shifting focus from natural philosophy to natural history, Beck illustrated how seventeenth-century English natural historians such as Plot and Aubrey contributed to shaping a sense of locality defined by a tight alliance between nature and culture, and inspired by a religious sense of God’s providential design.

Together these papers demonstrated the continuing vitality of cultural approaches to pre-modern environments. They specifically illuminated the need for a long history of theories of environmental influence that takes account of classical texts beyond the Hippocratic-Aristotelian canon and traces their reception throughout the medieval and early modern period. Most broadly the conference challenged participants to think about the ways in which we conceptualise the impact climate has on people and places, the discourses such conceptualisations mobilise and the power relations (both between and beyond human beings) that they can often obscure. What clearly emerged is the extreme productivity and ‘hybridity’ of environmental discourse, which by its multiple disciplinary interconnections is so frequently found implicated in medical, scientific, philosophical and political debates.

Further investigations of the historical evolution of environmental reflexivity (the ensemble of cultural perceptions of the environment at a given time and place) will make it possible to establish clearer links between the development of environmental ideas and of actual environmental practices over time. With this goal in mind, ‘Ruling Climate’, on the theory and practice of early modern environmental governmentality, will be held in May 2015 at the University of Warwick as a follow-up event (see <http://warwick.ac.uk/rulingclimate> for more details). The organisers would like to sincerely thank the Humanities Research Centre; the Departments of Classics, History, and Italian; and the Centre for Renaissance Studies at the University of Warwick; and the Royal Historical Society for their generous financial support which enabled several postgraduates to attend.

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