
The importance and influence of the environment and geography on the ancient world cannot be emphasized enough. However, as students and historians consider the more glamorous and intellectual aspects of ancient history, we tend to neglect the surroundings which made up 'the dominant force' as Jeskins (hereafter J) rightly calls it (1) in shaping the lives of the people of antiquity. Some excellent studies of the subject have been written but, as she points out in her preface, those works are all either impractical to students unused to research, or they are too specific to provide a user-friendly introduction to the subject of the environment in antiquity. This is what J has attempted.

The limitations of the brevity necessitated by such an introduction are immediately apparent, a factor J readily admits. Thus she defines 'the classical lands' (1) as the Greek and Italian mainlands, Asia Minor, and (where necessary) includes the Roman world from Spain to the Black Sea. She cautiously makes the generalisation (2) that the Mediterranean climate was reasonably uniform. The book begins with a general description of the geography, climate, and resources of the Mediterranean basin punctuated by quotations from Horace, Ovid, Virgil, Catullus and references to other classical authors. This is a strong facet of the work and the many references to primary sources clarify and strengthen the text. The only inevitable drawback of using primary sources in such a brief introduction is that J draws from literature as diverse as Homer and Tacitus to illustrate generalised principles. J supplements her text with many useful photographs and illustrations which serve as a corroborative visual aid. The charts (fig. 4, p.20, and fig. 12, p.44) are also useful and could provide the basis for tutorials or discussion. J also provides the usual BCP suggestions for further study (86-87).

J’s survey of the natural resources of the Mediterranean reminds us of the abundance of stone and rock for building, especially limestone, of clay for pottery, and of copper—all things which made classical civilisation what it was and things which we tend to take for granted. However, it is good to remember that tin (essential for bronze production) was not common in the Mediterranean and had to be imported (14) and that the
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Phoenicians controlled nearly all tin trade (58).

Chapters 3-7 examine the influence of the environment upon various facets of life in antiquity: political, community and social, and economic life, travel and communications, and warfare. J makes observations which may have been overlooked by those occupied with other areas, but also treats some topics necessarily briefly such as the trade routes of the Mediterranean (59-60). Unavoidably, she includes generalisations that reveal nothing new, such as the unavailability of cotton to antiquity (57). The large majority of her insights, however, are helpful and it will be good to list a few. The use of quaysides and harbours was continuous in the Mediterranean since it is a virtually tideless sea (10). J points out that one of the most important concerns of Greek cities and colonies (Sparta famously apart) was access to the sea. Italy by contrast had many inland settlements and only 500 years after her foundation did Rome build a navy (19-22).

Of the effects of the environment on the Greek city states (22-27, especially 24-25) the most important to consider is that the usually fine Mediterranean days provided the template for the performance of Athenian democracy, there being no need for closed buildings (25). Thus large numbers could congregate for long periods of time. Hence the 'passion for politics to a greater degree, and on a larger scale, than probably ever before or since'. In the Roman Republic such weather enabled the large-scale outdoor meetings like those of Marius and the Gracchi. The usually reliable Mediterranean weather influenced a great deal of the life of antiquity, a fact pointed out throughout the rest of the work. Continuous outdoor activity was important for community and social life, religion, and of course economic life. In Australia and New Zealand we can appreciate the benefits of long days—although possibly not so reliable weather patterns—but certainly Mediterranean life was (and is) very different from that of people in northern Europe.

The opportunity for continuous open-air activity also influenced social and community life, trade and warfare. Religious activity benefited greatly from such conditions, reflected in the association of most deities with some environmental factor or other. The great dramatic festivals of the Lenaia and the City, or Great, Dionysia also benefitted from predictable weather, even though the former was held in late January. The four major games (Olympic, Pythian, Nemean, and Isthmian) also reaped the rewards. Daily
life was structured by nature (41): up at first light for business before it got too hot, lunch, and then siesta. A visit to the baths in the afternoon for the Romans (the *palaestra* for the Greeks), then the last main meal in the late afternoon to catch the sun. Of course for those not of the upper classes the daylight would be used for work not leisure.

J points out the entrenched connection between land ownership and citizenship, status and power in the ancient world. Climate and terrain exercised an overwhelming influence on agriculture and agriculture was the primary principle of life in antiquity (45). Wheat was the most important crop and required the best soil, a valuable resource all over the ancient world but especially in Greece where coastal lowlands were relatively rare. The best land was also necessary to raise cows and horses. The importance of wheat became vital in politics when cities outgrew their ability to rely on local crops and had to import grain. Soil quality deteriorated in lands higher up and so advantage had to be taken of browsing animals (sheep and goats) and olive and fig trees which had deep roots to seek out moisture.

The complexity of Greek and Roman agriculture and farming is striking, even when treated briefly and especially considering the basic technology available. The ancients understood various soil types and the mixing of crops to remedy their defects. They also knew about manure, fallowing, and burning off scrub to create nutrient-rich ashes. They knew about the importance of irrigation. They knew the art of pruning and grafting and cross-pollination (for instance, planting wild and domestic figs together). Pork was the most important meat and pigs were raised in abundance all over the ancient world because they could survive anywhere and were omnivorous. Cows did not provide dairy produce since they were a luxury item, so that was left to sheep and goats. Ducks, chickens, and geese were raised for eggs and poultry. Nearly all farms kept bees, vital for honey and wax.

J observes the lack of roads in Greece as opposed to Italy. Greek states did not cooperate for interstate travel (66) and although roads in and around cities were of high quality many ‘highways’ were little more than tracks. The lack of cavalry in Greek warfare was probably the result of their unsuitability to the terrain (70) as well as the cost involved in their rearing. Cavalry only became important in Greek warfare with the rise of Macedonia which had the land available to raise large numbers of cavalry which the rest of Greece did not. Terrain also restricted the numbers of
infantry deployable. Thus only on the plain of Mantinea in 418 and 362 BC were large numbers useful. Elsewhere, most famously at Thermopylae and Plataea, the large numbers of the Persians were useless since only a small front was possible. Italy had much better terrain for large numbers, such as at Cannae. However, not until Iphicrates’ invention of peltasts was a specialist force created that was capable of operating effectively in mountainous terrain.

J points out the summer and winter campaigning formula and the decisive effect of breaking such a norm, for instance at Decelea in the Peloponnesian war. Also for sea trade winter sailing was generally avoided and the period from March to September provided the best sailing with trade winds. In the winter of AD 45 Claudius stood surety for the grain supply for a famished Rome, otherwise a winter journey was not worth a trader risking his cargo.

Although not its intended audience, the general nature of the book is useful to students in the southern hemisphere especially since many of the seasonal timings and climactic conditions, and even geographical features, are unfamiliar territory. J reminds even her Northern European readers to consider the differences of their own conditions from those of the Mediterranean (13). The bibliography (suggestions for further reading 88-91) is by no means exhaustive although this must be attributed to the audience intended. Inclusion is made of important scholarly works as well as books on the modern Mediterranean to capture the imagination. Each entry is accompanied by a brief but useful description of contents. Understandably J makes cross reference to other BCP titles where appropriate in the text and bibliography.

The subject to which J has directed this user-friendly introduction is almost too vast, yet she manages, in the few pages allotted her, to awaken in the reader a (new) appreciation for the influence of the environment on various aspects of the ancient world. These influences are not at the forefront of many students’ minds, a situation this readable and accessible introduction should go some way to rectify.

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