

*Ecocritical Readings in Late Hellenistic Literature
Landscape Alteration and Hybris in Strabo and Diodorus*

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Introduction: Ecocritical Approaches to Ancient Literature

Human alteration of the landscape was an object of fascination for ancient Greek and Roman culture, as it has been also in the post-classical world. It attracts both positive and negative representations in ancient literature. Sometimes it is portrayed in celebratory terms as a sign of progress towards civilisation and order: cutting through mountains and diverting rivers are portrayed as acts of benefaction. Side by side with that celebratory attitude runs a much more negative strand, where scarring and disrupting the earth's surface is linked with *hybris*, and in some cases viewed even as an offence against the will of the gods. In much of ancient literature the second of those two strands is particularly prominent, not least because the most high-profile acts of landscape alteration were often taken as signs of the tyrannical character of the rulers who sponsored them. My hypothesis in this chapter, however, is that in late Hellenistic and Augustan Greek literature the first, celebratory strand is unusually prominent. We will see that here especially for the opening books of Diodorus Siculus' *Historical Library* and for Strabo's *Geography*. Exploring that hypothesis will involve bringing these two texts into dialogue with each other and with a range of classical, late Hellenistic and imperial equivalents in order to draw out some of the similarities and the differences between them.

I also aim to show, however, just how complex the story of those shifting patterns of representation is. If we want to do justice to ancient responses to landscape, we need to understand the ambiguities that run not only through whole centuries but also even through individual works. And that involves recognising the way in which knowledge-ordering texts like the works of Strabo and Diodorus were designed to be read from end to end, with close attention to their intratextual complexity, even when they were composed largely of material derived from other, earlier works. When we do that we start to see traces of equivocation or hesitation even in these most celebratory portrayals of human resourcefulness.

That argument, I suggest, has important implications for our understanding of the relationship between humans and the environment in the ancient world, and of its significance for modern ways of thinking about human impact on the environment. The last few decades have seen a rapid growth in the environmental humanities. One of the key driving forces for that development has been the cross-disciplinary field of ecocriticism, which focuses on literary representations of the relationship between humans and the environment, often with an interest in challenging the sense of a clear dividing line and a clear hierarchy of value between human culture and the 'more-than-human' world.¹ Those themes of course have resonances with some of the traditional concerns of scholarship on the ancient Mediterranean, but there have nevertheless been relatively few attempts within Classics to engage with the discipline of ecocriticism explicitly. That has begun to change,² but the challenge of using ecocritical perspectives to open up new questions about particular genres, regions and periods in the ancient Mediterranean is still a work in progress.³ Ancient Greek and Roman literature in turn represents a huge untapped resource for our understanding of the long history of human responses to the environment.

One enabling factor for an increase in ecocritical engagement within Classics is the way in which ecocriticism itself has evolved over the last decade or two. In its earliest manifestations ecocriticism tended to focus on non-fictional nature writing about particular places, which was often used as a springboard for quite localised environmental activism, based on an ideal of pristine nature undamaged by human interference. Within that context premodern texts were often ignored – although that is no longer the case for medieval⁴ and early modern literature –⁵ thanks in part to the widespread assumption that the societies that produced them were just not interested in any sustained engagement with or description of the natural world.⁶ More recently, however, the focus of ecocriticism has expanded dramatically to look far beyond the category of nature writing: for example

¹ See Clark 2019: 10, 13–14 and 111–36; Schliephake 2017b: 9–10; and Bosak-Schroeder 2020 for a sustained attempt to apply those interests to ancient literature, focusing especially on Herodotus and Diodorus (see further discussion below).

² See esp. Schliephake 2017a and 2020.

³ For a recent example see Burrus 2018 on late antique Christian literature.

⁴ E.g., see Rudd 2007 on medieval English literature, and Goldwyn 2018 on Byzantine literature.

⁵ See Hallock, Kamps and Raber 2008, among many other examples.

⁶ The most notorious example is in the history of human engagement with and representation of mountains: Nicolson 1959 has been very influential in encouraging the view that premodern responses to mountains were nearly universally characterised by fear, distaste and indifference, by contrast with the 'mountain glory' of modern responses from the eighteenth century onwards; for recent challenges see Koelb 2009, Hollis 2019, Hollis and König 2021.

at texts with urban as much as rural settings.⁷ It is widely recognised now that any text can be open to ecocritical questions, with their potential to reveal underlying assumptions about the relations between human culture and the environment even where those assumptions are not explicitly stated. That shift has made it easier to bring classical literature into dialogue with ecocritical themes. Greek and Latin generally do not offer extended set-piece descriptions of the natural world of the kind we are familiar with from Romantic period onwards⁸ – although with a partial exception in the *locus amoenus* traditions of describing beautiful landscapes⁹ – but if we are ready to read ancient texts from end to end, with attention to their intratextual complexity, we can begin to see that many of them do in fact project very distinctive images of the relations between human culture and the environment, through passages which often seem individually brief and insignificant on first reading, but which between them can have a powerful, cumulative effect.

The classical world also has an important part to play in turn in any attempt to understand where modern environmental attitudes have come from. Some early works of ecological scholarship made sweeping claims about either similarities or differences between past and present environmental challenges and responses;¹⁰ some of those claims are still surprisingly widely accepted. As soon as we look closely, however, it becomes clear that the relationship between past and present is enormously complex. The environmental engagements we find in ancient literature are both familiar in some ways and quite alien to modern experience in others:¹¹ we will see that ancient criticism of landscape alteration has striking resonances with a lot of modern thinking on the subject, while also being quite different in some respects, for example because it is often articulated within frameworks of religious thinking and ideas about political authority which are quite different from our standard ways of engaging with related questions today. Moreover, the classical heritage has been used in a vast range of different ways by post-classical writers and thinkers: we cannot possibly sum up that reception history within a few generalisations.¹²

⁷ See esp. Armbruster and Wallace 2002, which includes several chapters on premodern authors.

⁸ Cf. Schliephake 2017b: 5–6.

⁹ See Koelb 2006 for the influence of classical traditions of *ekphrasis* over Romantic place descriptions.

¹⁰ Cf. Schliephake 2017b: 8, with reference to related discussion of that phenomenon in Sonnabend 2005.

¹¹ See Schliephake 2020: 4–6; also Holmes 2017: xii on the play of similarity and unfamiliarity between ancient and modern in relation to the category of ‘nature’.

¹² Cf. Schliephake 2017b: 4.

To be more specific, one of the issues in ancient culture that has had most attention from an environmental perspective is the question of what degree of environmental damage there was in the ancient Mediterranean, and how such damage was viewed. Most of the initial assessments came from studies outside the discipline of Classics; they sought to summarise ancient ideas about the relationship between humans and the environment, often in just a few pages, in order to make an argument about either continuity or disjunction between ancient and modern environmental thinking. Many of these works make wide-ranging generalisations on the basis of simplistic summaries of a few key ancient texts. In some cases, Greek and Roman culture are viewed as the originators of our current willingness to alter the environment for human purposes;¹³ in other cases they are taken in exactly opposite terms as examples of environmental respect which was lost, according to one influential narrative, with the advent of early Christianity's more anthropocentric approach to the natural world.¹⁴ The last few decades have seen a series of much more careful studies of ancient environmental thinking. The work of J. Donald Hughes is one example.¹⁵ Hughes still has a tendency, like some of his predecessors, to extract brief quotations from very lengthy and complex works without any acknowledgement of their wider context. That in turn can lead us to ignore the fact that both positive and negative views on landscape change will often stand in tension with each other even within individual ancient texts: we will see examples in what follows. But despite that, he has made progress in demonstrating that both concern about exploitation of the earth's resources and celebrations of human improvement of the natural world existed side by side with each other all the way through the classical tradition.¹⁶ Peter Coates, drawing on Hughes' work, has made similar arguments in setting out the classical background to later thinking about the concept of 'nature'.¹⁷ 'We are hard pressed', he suggests, 'to find a single doctrine of man–nature relations in any era . . . A number of attitudes, notions and orientations invariably coexist in often messy contradiction.'¹⁸ As we shall see, that is the case for the late Hellenistic world just as it is for other periods of ancient Greek and Roman history.¹⁹ Drawing out that complexity, I suggest, can help us

¹³ E.g., see Sessions 1981. ¹⁴ Most influentially White 1967. ¹⁵ E.g., see Hughes 2014.

¹⁶ See also Thommen 2012 for summary statement of that view, although without much detailed analysis of particular sources.

¹⁷ Coates 1998: 23–39. ¹⁸ Coates 1998: 12.

¹⁹ Cf. Glacken 1969: 13 for brief acknowledgement along similar lines.

towards a much more careful understanding of the long history of the environmental attitudes we encounter in the present.

There are also two other respects, I suggest, in which the texts I examine here might be valuable as resources for contemporary environmental thinking. The first is as repositories of sophisticated ways of presenting the intertwining between local and global environmental concerns. Some prominent recent publications have agonised about the idea that modern literary forms, especially the novel, with its traditional focus on the local and the personal, are not well suited to imagining the way in which environmental damage today is unfolding on a global level.²⁰ In some ways ancient Greek and Latin literature are more suited to the challenge of imagining the global and the local side by side,²¹ not least in ancient historiographical and geographical writing, which as we shall see characteristically juxtapose vast numbers of different localised events and histories in a broad vision of the whole of the inhabited world and invite us to measure them up against each other.

Second, and finally, looking at ancient accounts of landscape alteration from an ecocritical perspective can shed new light on the long history of one aspect of modern environmental thinking in particular, that is the concern with environmental justice. Timothy Clark sums up eloquently the importance of that issue for the environmental humanities: 'For most ecocritics, human abuse of the natural world is best understood as the corollary of unjust or oppressive forms of government and economics, and forms of social organisation . . . that both abuse other human beings and which have no hesitation taking a similar stance towards anything else.'²² It is increasingly clear that the risks associated with climate change tend to have a disproportionately serious impact on disadvantaged populations in many contexts.²³ Environmental justice approaches, with their focus on human consequences, have often been opposed to more ecocentric ways of thinking about environmental change which focus on the balance and health of the environment as a whole, resisting anthropocentric perspectives.²⁴ Clearly some ancient Greek and Roman thinkers were interested in

²⁰ See Ghosh 2016 for the best known representative of that view; also Buell 2005: 62–96; Heise 2008, esp. 205–10; Clark 2019: 78–110, esp. 97–9.

²¹ Cf. Ben Gray's contribution to this volume.

²² Clark 2019: 3; also Bate 2000: 48: 'ecological exploitation is always coordinate with social exploitation'; Buell 2005: 112–27.

²³ See Clark 2019: 5: 'exposure to environmental risk is not evenly distributed across the world, but tends to victimise people who are already impoverished or side-lined'.

²⁴ See Buell 2001: 224–42.

images of the cosmos as a coherent system held in a careful equilibrium, which are not so far removed from modern ideas of environmental harmony.²⁵ But it is striking that ancient writing about landscape alteration tends to be relatively uninterested in that phenomenon, except in the sense that reshaping the land is sometimes viewed as an offence against divine will and divine order,²⁶ and in that sense it can look a little disappointing when we come to it from modern perspectives on environmental destruction, which tend to be shaped by a much more urgent, activist agenda. What those ancient texts do persistently give attention to, however, is the impact of massive landscape-engineering projects, most of them in imperial contexts, on the populations who lived close to them or who were co-opted to bring them into being. That theme has the potential to complicate even the most celebratory portraits of human alteration of the earth's surface.

Herodotus

Any history of ancient representations of landscape alteration must give Herodotus a prominent role, not just because of the sophistication of his exploration of that theme but also because of his influence. We find both positive and negative accounts of landscape-engineering projects in the *Histories*. The dominant impression, especially in the last three books of the work, is of the hybrid character of Persian attempts to alter the landscapes they encounter in their expeditions against Greece. However, it is important to stress that those incidents are set against a wide spectrum of different possibilities for landscape alteration, which are focalised through a range of different individuals and groups, and that many of these projects are given positive overtones.²⁷ In that sense Herodotus, like Strabo and Diodorus, offers us a remarkably wide-ranging, even global vision of human interference with the environment, inviting us to compare a series of different cases over space and time.

Some passages in the first half of the work especially portray incidents of landscape manipulation as objects of wonder, or at any rate as examples of

²⁵ E.g., see Usher 2020; also Glacken 1969: 35–79, with Schliephake 2017b: 7.

²⁶ See Prencipe 2017: 135–7, esp. 136 in relation to the actions of Xerxes discussed further below.

²⁷ See the excellent, detailed discussions by Clarke 2018: esp. 171–218 and Bosak-Schroeder 2020: 32–56; I came to both of these discussions at a relatively late stage in working on this chapter, but both have helped greatly in refining my views on Herodotus (and on Diodorus, in the case of Bosak-Schroeder: see further below); also Romm 2006: 186–90 for a briefer account along similar lines; and now Schlosser 2020 for other aspects of Herodotus' ecological thinking.

impressive technical accomplishment. At one point, for example, Herodotus praises the people of Samos for digging a passage through a mountain to bring water into their city (the so-called Tunnel of Eupalinos, which can still be visited as a tourist attraction today). It is described as one of three Samian achievements that are ‘the greatest of all things achieved by the Greeks’ (Herodotus, *Histories* 3.60). Here Herodotus seems to admire the ingenuity of the Samians, without any hint of negative judgement, in line with the declaration of interest in the ‘great and marvellous deeds (ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμάστá)’ (1.pr) of the world’s human populations in his preface.²⁸

Increasingly as the work goes on, however, more negative versions of that motif come to predominate,²⁹ although they never completely overpower the possibility of more positive representations. That development is pre-figured early on in the story of the Cnidians, who attempted to dig through the isthmus that joined their peninsula to the mainland of Asia Minor. When they noticed that the diggers were getting injured to an unusual degree (literally ‘in a rather divine way’, θεϊότερον, 1.174) they sent for advice to the Delphic oracle; the reply – ‘Do not fence in the isthmus with towers, and do not dig through it; Zeus would have made it an island had he wanted to’ (1.174) – suggests divine disapproval of their alteration of the earth’s geography. Landscape alteration also comes to be associated especially with tyranny. Later in Book 3, for example, we hear about a plateau in Asia surrounded by a ring of mountains, with five gorges running through them, each one inhabited by a different tribe. The Persian king has dammed up all five gorges, making the plateau into a sea, and opens the gates only when the desperate, water-starved tribes come to plead with him and bring tribute (3.117).³⁰ This is a good example of the way in which ancient literature is often interested in the human consequences of landscape alteration. In this case the exercise of power leads to an extreme crisis of human access to resources which has a certain amount in common with modern concerns about environmental justice within marginal communities disproportionately affected by environmental change. The *Histories* in fact dramatises the way in which Persian tyranny over nature is equivalent to and intertwined with their oppression of human populations.³¹

²⁸ Cf. Bosak-Schroeder 2020: 39 on this passage as one of several examples of positive representation of earthworks and waterworks in Herodotus; also Clarke 2018: 151–2.

²⁹ See Lateiner 1989: 126–35. ³⁰ See Clarke 2018: 192–3.

³¹ See Clarke 2018: esp. 238–46; also Bosak-Schroeder 2020: 33 for the point that Herodotus (and also Diodorus) judges the value of landscape alteration according to its ‘consequences to the human community’.

The association between landscape alteration and tyranny comes to a head in the final three books and especially in Book 7, in a series of passages describing Xerxes' attempts to tame and enslave the natural world. First come Xerxes' works on the Athos peninsula,³² which had been planned for about three years, according to Herodotus, in response to the destruction of the Persian fleet that sailed in the previous invasion just over ten years before, shipwrecked by a great storm on the coasts beneath the mountain, as described at *Histories* 6.44. That initial incident establishes Mt Athos for the Persians as a landscape of fear.³³ Taming it is an enormous task: 'men of all nations who were part of the army worked at digging, under the whip (ὄρουσον ὑπὸ μαστίγων παντοδαποὶ τῆς στρατιῆς); and the men went to work in turn; also involved in the digging were the people who lived around Athos' (7.22). There is more than a hint of tyrannical behaviour in the detail of the diggers under the lash.³⁴ Herodotus' closing observation similarly has negative overtones: 'What I find when I make an assessment of this work is that Xerxes ordered the canal to be dug out of arrogance (μεγαλοφροσύνης), and wanting to display his power and leave behind a memorial (μνημόσυνα λιπέσθαι)' (7.24). Herodotus explains that the Persians could perfectly well have dragged their ships across the isthmus, and that they made the channel twice as wide as it needed to be. On that account Xerxes is motivated primarily by a desire for self-aggrandisement, in line with widespread stereotypes of Persian tyranny.³⁵

That said, it is important to stress that one might see some positive notes even here.³⁶ At any rate Xerxes' desire to leave a memorial echoes Herodotus' stated goal in the opening paragraph of the work, already quoted above, of preventing great achievements from losing their glory over time (1.pr). The excavation requires a vast effort of human cooperation in the taming of nature, and one might argue that there is a hint of admiration in some of these details. That becomes particularly clear when he tells us about the difficulty many of the diggers had because of the way in which earth at the top of the channel tended to crumble away as they

³² See Clarke 2018: 198–200. ³³ Cf. della Dora 2011: 26.

³⁴ See Bridges 2015: 56 on Xerxes as enslaver, and on the way in which that is contrasted in Herodotus' account with the Greek commitment to freedom.

³⁵ Cf. della Dora 2011: 29 on the way in which Xerxes' canal is associated by Herodotus with Persian otherness, and Athos itself imagined as a boundary between east and west.

³⁶ See Baragwanath 2008: 254–65 for excellent discussion of the doubleness of Herodotus' account, and particularly of the possibility that there are ways of viewing Xerxes' desire for magnificence as a positive trait; cf. Bridges 2015: 56–7.

dug down, except in the case of the Phoenicians, who ‘show wisdom (σοφίην) in their works generally, as they did in this case too’ (7.23), and who started digging a trench twice as wide as the eventual channel they were aiming for. There are similar technical details later when Herodotus returns to the subject of the canal a few pages later to describe its completion: ‘When . . . the works around Mt Athos – both the mounds around the mouths of the channel, which were made because of the breaking of the sea, so that the mouths of the excavation should not be filled up, and the channel itself – were reported to be fully completed . . .’ (7.37). Here Xerxes’ preparation is described as a careful, rational process which runs smoothly and precisely as planned, and resists the natural tendency of the sea towards disruption and disintegration.

Despite those caveats, however, the association of isthmus-cutting with tyranny is hard to ignore, and there are other passages that reinforce that impression in what follows. Most famously of all, Xerxes whips the Hellespont and throws a pair of shackles into it when his first attempt at a pontoon bridge is destroyed in a storm (7.35).³⁷ This is a fascinating passage partly because Xerxes’ actions here treat the Hellespont in humanising terms. That effect contributes to Herodotus’ negative portrayal of Xerxes, for example by contributing again to a sense that environmental exploitation is related to the exploitation of human populations.³⁸ There are many similar incidents later. At one point, for example, Xerxes sets a third of his army to work (an army so vast that it drinks whole rivers dry; Herodotus numbers it above two million men – no doubt an exaggeration, but still . . .)³⁹ in cutting down woods on the Macedonian mountains into the district of Perrhaebia in northern Thessaly to give his army passage (7.131). While they are doing that, he questions his local advisors about the path of the river Peneius, and concludes that the only reason the Thessalians have surrendered to him is their fear that he would have dammed up the river and flooded the whole plain of Thessaly (7.130). Here Xerxes’ reputation for landscape alteration in itself enables his project of conquest and oppression. Herodotus’ characterisation of Xerxes as a

³⁷ See Clarke 2018: 214–16 on the predominantly negative characterisation of Xerxes’ actions here, which nevertheless need not imply a blanket disapproval of this kind of project; also Bosak-Schroeder 2020: 33–5; Romm 2006: 190; and Bridges 2015: 57 and 58–60 on a series of other passages in Herodotus’ work where other rivers are tamed and enslaved, esp. 1.189, 3.134 and 4.87.

³⁸ Cf. Clarke 2018: 240–1.

³⁹ See Herodotus 7.21.1 for the claim that all but the great rivers were drained by Xerxes’ army; also 7.108.2 for the same claim about the river Lisos and 7.109.2 for a lake drained dry by the army’s pack animals; and discussion by Bridges 2015: 52.

serial landscape manipulator is part of the wider pattern of overreaching and transgressing that eventually leads to the defeat of the Persian army.

Imperial Responses

The later history of these ideas can be told as a story of continuing ambivalence which is nevertheless dominated by negative responses. Even before Herodotus, Xerxes' encounter with the Hellespont is described in hybridic terms by Aeschylus in his *Persians*.⁴⁰ That image is then picked up by a number of fourth-century authors, most stridently by Lysias and Isocrates, who present much less nuanced and subtle accounts of Xerxes than Herodotus in order to serve their own rhetorical purposes.⁴¹ Xerxes is also a negative reference point for many writers, both Greek and Latin, in the Republic and the early empire. For example, Manilius in *Astronomica* 3.19–21 refers in passing to 'the Persian war declared upon the deep, and the sea hidden by a huge fleet, and the channel inserted into the land, and the road on the waves of the sea' as one of the subjects he has chosen not to cover.⁴² That text and others like it suggest that the rhetorical commonplaces that we find in Lysias and Isocrates were alive and well even four centuries later.⁴³ For a Greek example from the decades following one might look at Philo, in his work *On Dreams*, written in the first half of the first century CE. Philo there condemns Xerxes' *hybris* as vehemently as any other ancient author:

But some people are full of such great foolishness that they are angry if the earth itself does not follow along with their intentions. For this reason Xerxes the king of the Persians, wanting to terrify his enemies, made a display of great achievements, altering nature; for he transformed both the land and the sea, giving land to the sea and sea to the land, by yoking the Hellespont with bridges and breaking up Mt Athos into deep gulfs, which were filled with sea and became a new ocean made by human hands, transformed from its ancient nature. (*On Dreams* 2.117–19)

There is a hint of the agency of the earth itself in the detail about its failure to follow along with human intentions, but that is quickly submerged in

⁴⁰ See Bridges 2015: esp. 14–16 and 27–8, with reference to *Persians* 71 and 722–52; also Romm 2006: 186–7 on the likelihood that Herodotus knew Aeschylus' play.

⁴¹ For a survey of fourth-century responses, see Bridges 2015: 99–125. The key passages are Lysias, *Funeral Speech* 2.29 and Isocrates, *Panegyricus* 4.89; and see della Dora 2011: 29–30.

⁴² See Bridges 2015: 159.

⁴³ Cf. Bridges 2015: 164–5 on Seneca the Elder, *Suasoriae* 2.3, 5.4 and 5.7.

the rest of the passage: that quasi-human recalcitrance seems to make Xerxes all the more determined to impose his own anthropocentric desires.

Some Latin texts from the late Republic and early empire are more conflicted, reflecting both praise of Rome's conquests of nature and also disapproval.⁴⁴ Pliny's *Natural History* is perhaps the most complex example of that phenomenon. In some sections of his work he seems to view Roman engineering works as objects of wonder. Elsewhere he offers quite passionate denunciations of the damage done to the earth's surface by human labour.⁴⁵ We find a similarly complex situation when we look at descriptions of villa landscapes in Latin, and also in the visual and architectural record for ancient villa construction. That is a common subject already in Republican Latin literature. Pompey, for example, is said to have accused his rival Lucullus in the 60s BCE of being a *Xerxes togatus* ('Xerxes in a toga') because of his elaborate building programmes, which included cutting through a mountain to channel sea water into his fishponds.⁴⁶ There are also much more positive accounts, however. Luxury villas in Roman Italy were often built into the landscape in a way that seems to have celebrated the interplay between building and environment;⁴⁷ that assumption is also reflected in depictions of villa buildings and their surrounding landscapes in Roman wall-painting.⁴⁸ Statius, writing in the second half of the first century CE, offers celebratory portraits of the elaborate villas of some of his contemporaries and the kinds of landscape alteration which have created them.⁴⁹ Most remarkable of all is his depiction of the villa of Pollius Felix in Campania:

Here there used to be a mountain where now you see level ground, and wilderness where now you enter beneath a roof; where you now see tall woods, there was not even land; the occupier has tamed it, and the land

⁴⁴ See also Armstrong 2009 on the ambivalence of Augustan verse authors like Propertius and Horace and Virgil towards marvellous artistic and architectural achievements.

⁴⁵ E.g., see Pliny, *Natural History* 36.1 for a moralising denunciation of the way in which human greed for marble leads to the destruction of the earth's fabric; later in the same book, however, he praises a series of Roman tunneling and channeling projects at length, at 36.121–5.

⁴⁶ E.g., see Velleius Paterculus 2.33.4 and Plutarch, *Lucullus* 39.2–3, with Jolivet 1987; Bridges 2015: 173; Edwards 1993: 143–9 for broad discussion of the association between landscape alteration and excessive luxury in Roman elite building projects, and 145–6 on the Xerxes parallel specifically; Purcell 1987: 190–2 on the way in which these criticisms draw on the widespread link between landscape alteration and tyranny; for a more neutral representation of Lucullus' projects, see Varro *Rust.* 3.17.9; and for more general criticism of practices of landscape alteration in villa building, see Sen. *Controv.* 2.1.13; Sallust, *Catiline* 13.1–2, with Vretska 1976: 1, 238–9.

⁴⁷ See Zarmakoupi 2014. ⁴⁸ See Hinterhöller-Klein 2015: 329–498.

⁴⁹ Other relevant passages include *Silvae* 1.3 on the villa of Manilius Vopiscus at Tibur; 3.1.91–104 for more on Pollius' building projects; and 4.3 on Domitian's construction of the Via Domitiana.

rejoices as he shapes cliffs or destroys them, following his lead. Now see the rocks learning to bear the yoke, and the buildings as they enter, and the mountain which has been ordered to withdraw. (Stattius, *Silvae* 2.2.54–9)

On the face of it Statius' representation of these places is celebratory,⁵⁰ although his readers would have been well aware that there was a tradition of moralising denunciation of them lying behind his text.⁵¹ Ancient authors in their descriptions of landscape alteration are often quite ready to ascribe agency and quasi-human identity to the land, as Statius is here (we shall see more examples below), but that is rarely developed into anything like a modern ecocritical vision of respect for the value and independence of the more-than-human world. It may be that we are expected to feel uneasy about the ease with which the poet's voice endorses an anthropocentric view – just as we are likely to be uneasy about Xerxes' anthropocentric manipulation of humanising metaphors for landscape at the Hellespont – but there is no attempt to draw attention to that expectation if so, or to articulate what an alternative, more environmentally respectful response might look like.

When we look ahead to the second and third centuries CE we find a striking number of negative judgements of landscape alteration, although they are still interwoven with some positive images. For example, it is easy enough to find passages where praise of the Romans is directed at their feats of engineering and their mastery over the terrain. Aelius Aristides, in his speech *Praise of Rome*, composed in the mid-second century CE, talks about the ease of travel that Roman rule has brought with it in precisely those terms: 'You have measured the whole inhabited world, you have yoked rivers with many different kinds of bridges, you have cut through mountains to make them accessible to traffic' (Aristides 26.100–1).⁵² But the dominant approach is a more sceptical one. Xerxes is still a standard example of excessive passion: for example, Plutarch in his work *On the Control of Anger* (455e) describes an angry letter sent by Xerxes to Mt Athos in which he threatens to cut the mountain down and throw it into the sea. Xerxes is also repeatedly associated with bad emperors. One obvious example is Caligula's bridging of the bay of Naples at Baiae, which

⁵⁰ See Spencer 2010: 104–13; Newby 2012: 353–5; and for a useful collection of passages celebrating landscape alteration from Statius, and also Martial and Pliny the Younger, see Pavlovskis 1973.

⁵¹ As Newby 2012: 353, n. 18 acknowledges.

⁵² Cf. the discussion of Roman power, road building and travel in Polybius and mid-Republican texts in Wiater's chapter in this volume.

is equated with Xerxes' mastery of the Hellespont in the work of Cassius Dio, Josephus, Suetonius and Seneca.⁵³

Several Greek texts from this period also take a very negative, Herodotean view of Nero's project to cut the Isthmus of Corinth (an enterprise that was originally associated with the tyrant Periander).⁵⁴ Cassius Dio goes furthest of all in suggesting divine disapproval:

As a secondary achievement from his time in Greece, having conceived a desire to dig through the isthmus of the Peloponnese, he made a start on it, even though others shrank from the task. For blood spouted up from the ground when the first people touched it, and groans and bellowing were heard, and many phantoms became visible. And having picked up a mattock himself and having dug a little he compelled the others too to imitate him, and he sent for a great multitude of people from other nations too to carry out the work. (Cassius Dio 62.16)

Here the huge volume of workers could conceivably be given a positive spin, as an example of widespread cooperation in a project for public benefit, but in this case the information that they were 'sent for' is surely intended to hint at a more tyrannical motivation; that detail also recalls the 'men of all nations' who work for Xerxes in Herodotus' account. The details of the blood and the groaning ascribes agency to the land, but in a way which is once again quite different from anything we find in modern environmental writing: in this case they are used to point above all to divine presence in or guardianship over the landscape, rather than to any developed sense of more-than-human value in the environment itself. At the same time this passage does anticipate modern environmental concerns in reinforcing the impression that environmental and human oppression go hand in hand.

Strabo

That story of mixed responses, where negative images of environmental interference never lose their prominence, is disrupted by two remarkably positive visions of landscape alteration from late Hellenistic and Augustan Greek literature, in the works of Diodorus Siculus and Strabo. What stands out is not so much the fact that landscape alteration is open to

⁵³ See Bridges 2015: 171–3.

⁵⁴ See Pausanias 2.1.5–6 with Hutton 2005: 47; Ps.-Lucian, *Nero* 2; also by contrast Suetonius, *Nero* 19.2–3 for a more positive view of the Isthmus project as an act of benefaction; and Pettegrew 2016 for an overview.

positive assessment – it is easy enough to find parallels, as we have seen – but rather the fact that that vision is sustained so consistently and at such great length.

Do these two works have any significant connection with each other in their representation of human moulding of the natural environment? Do they between them allow us to speak of a distinctive strand of late Hellenistic and Augustan environmental thinking which stands apart from what comes before and after, connected perhaps with a positive attitude towards Rome's conquests under Pompey and Caesar and Augustus in the late first century BCE and the early first century CE, and with their self-representation as cultural heroes and benefactors moulding the world for the benefit of all in the model of Alexander the Great?⁵⁵ Later Greek authors, by contrast, tend to take a much more sceptical or else indifferent view of Rome's achievements and seek their models instead in the classical world and in Herodotus in particular, with his suspicion of tyranny. That way of telling the story is obviously in line with many of the ways in which scholars have thought about the relationship between late Hellenistic culture and the 'Second Sophistic' in recent decades. On that view, the late Hellenistic and Augustan period when Strabo was writing saw many Greek writers working in Rome and dependent on Roman patronage, and still engaged in the project, started by Polybius, of negotiating Greece's place in a new, Roman world.⁵⁶ By the second century CE, by contrast, the increased wealth and confidence of the cities of the Greek east made it easier to live without constant reference to Rome; that development went hand in hand with increasing attention to the classical Greek past. For example, a number of recent publications have tended to stress the enormous differences between Strabo and Pausanias – the former more engaged with a global view of the Mediterranean world that seems influenced by imperial ideals,⁵⁷ the latter, writing a century and a half later, with a much more local, classicising focus and more hesitant about mentioning or endorsing Roman rule.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ On Strabo's positive image of Augustus, see Dueck 2000: 96–106, esp. 104 on comparison of Augustus and other Roman generals with Alexander; also 115–22 on Strabo's approving attitude to Roman conquest. On continuities between Pompey, Caesar and Augustus in the representation of the (global) space of Roman power, see Winter in this volume.

⁵⁶ Cf. Hatzimichali below for other aspects of Strabo's closeness to Rome.

⁵⁷ E.g., see Nicolet 1991: esp. 47, who sees the *Geography* as one of many examples of the intersection between knowledge and imperial power in Rome in the reign of Augustus and the decades that followed.

⁵⁸ See Pretzler 2005; also Cohen 2001.

Alternatively, are there strands of Herodotean ambiguity even in Diodorus and Strabo, once we delve into the detailed texture of their works in more depth, which throw doubt on the validity of any simplistic narrative like the one I have sketched out here? Examining those questions is the main task of the rest of this chapter. I look first of all at Strabo, building on my own earlier work on the *Geography's* representations of mountain landscapes,⁵⁹ before turning in more detail to his predecessor Diodorus.

Strabo in particular is remarkable for the way in which a positive attitude to landscape alteration is threaded right through the work (whereas in Diodorus' case, as we shall see, it clusters above all in the opening books). Over and over again Strabo describes projects which involve the taming of the natural environment. It is at first sight hard to find examples which even hint at the ideas of *hybris* that are so prominent in the Herodotean tradition and in so much later historiographical and geographical writing. Strabo's views are linked among other things with his division of the inhabited world between civilised and uncivilised cultures. Both in different ways tend to live close to the land. Untamed peoples on the edges of empire are affected negatively by their experience of the harsh environments they inhabit. In that sense Strabo is quite typical of ancient thinking on environmental determinism, although he also shows how Augustus in particular has begun to bring these people into a state of civilisation among other things by his refashioning of the landscape.⁶⁰ By contrast, and more innovatively, civilised regions like Greece and Italy are shown to have moulded the landscape to their own purposes many centuries before. Strabo is particularly fascinated by the image of cities built into mountains or coastlines, as I have argued elsewhere: there are repeated examples in his account of the urbanised landscapes of Italy in Book 5, and then again in Books 8–9 on mainland Greece, and Books 12–14 on Asia Minor.⁶¹

The *Geography* is also packed with examples of engineering projects of various types that have brought human benefits. One area where Strabo seems to have had an unusually intricate interest was mining: it has even been suggested that he may have had some kind of specialist mining experience.⁶² He tends to avoid criticism of mining, in contrast with the much more negative image of damage to the earth's surface which we find

⁵⁹ König 2016a.

⁶⁰ E.g., see König 2016a: 55–8 on mountain landscapes and mountain peoples; also Dueck 2000: 99 on *Geography* 4.6.6, where Strabo describes Augustus' road-building in the Alps.

⁶¹ See König 2016a: 59–67. ⁶² See Roller 2014: 12–13.

just a few decades later in Pliny's *Natural History*. For example in his account of the natural resources of Spain he offers a lengthy account of mining techniques used both there and elsewhere (3.2.8–11). He quotes Posidonius as a precedent for his own positive representation of the mines of Tourdetania and for some of the technical details of his account.⁶³ At 14.6.5 he even suggests (again quoting a Hellenistic predecessor, this time Eratosthenes) that in Cyprus 'in the old days the plains were overgrown with woods, and all the land was overrun with thickets and not able to be farmed. Mining helped a little with this, since they cut down trees to burn copper and silver.' Remarkably in that case mining is represented not just as a successful example of landscape alteration on a specific site, but also as a practice that contributes more broadly towards conquest of the wilderness (he also mentions shipbuilding and a scheme which allows ownership of land as a reward for clearance).

Waterworks are another important category. In 16.1.9–11, for example, Strabo tells us about the artificial cataracts built by the Persians on the river Euphrates to prevent anyone from sailing up. Alexander dismantles many of them, and renovates the network of canals that dealt with the river's floodwater.⁶⁴ For example, one of the canals turns out to be in bad condition, so Alexander 'opened up another new mouth thirty stadia away, having chosen a rocky place, and diverted the stream there' (16.1.11). Here Alexander removes the Persians' engineering projects and undertakes his own, virtuous project of landscape surveillance and alteration, characterised by care and by motives of benefaction – although the impression of moderation is partially undermined in what immediately follows when we hear that the diversion of the stream led him to plans for the conquest of Arabia: 'the truth is that he was reaching out to be master of all' (16.1.11).

Strabo's account of Xerxes similarly strips away much of the negativity of the Herodotean tradition, but without abandoning it entirely: even for Strabo it seems to be hard to escape entirely from the tradition of negative characterisation. He describes the cutting of the Athos peninsula in a very neutral, non-judgemental fashion: 'Here a canal is also visible, in the region around Akanthos, where Xerxes is said to have dug through Athos and brought his fleet from the Strymonic Gulf across the isthmus, by bringing the sea into the canal' (7.F15a). Taken on its own that passage is unremarkable, but it is important to stress that it stands as just one of

⁶³ E.g., 3.2.9. ⁶⁴ 16.1.9–11; cf. 17.1.3 on regulation of the Nile.

many similar passages in Strabo which presents us with the human achievement of altering the earth's surface: they have a cumulative and largely positive effect. The passage that follows complicates matters a little, however:

Demetrios the Skepsian does not think that this canal was navigable, for as far as ten stadia he says that it has good soil and has been dug, but then there is a high flat rock almost one stadion in length that could not have been excavated entirely through to the sea. And even if it could have been dug that far it would not have been deep enough to make a navigable passage.

The absence of explicitly negative language here is striking: this passage is typical of the way in which Strabo cites his sources in an impersonal and matter-of-fact way where others might resort to moralising pronouncements. That in turn enhances Strabo's self-representation as an author whose judgement and appreciation of grand engineering schemes is based on careful attention to the on-the-ground realities, rather than sweeping judgements and received traditions. Nevertheless, this postscript does undermine Xerxes' achievement.⁶⁵ Is it even perhaps meant, by portraying the Athos canal as an enormous vanity project, or at least a military deception that was never carried through in full, to recall Herodotus' claim that Xerxes was motivated primarily by the appearance of magnificence? For example, we might suspect that it is intended to contrast the illusory nature of Xerxes' achievement with more solid and lasting Greek and Roman dominance over landscape, as in the detail above about Alexander's dismantling of the Persian cataracts.

Diodorus Siculus

Where does Diodorus fit in with that picture? My argument here is that the *Library of History* adds weight to the idea of a distinctively late Hellenistic attitude to landscape alteration, but also that his text, rather more so than Strabo's, has elements of equivocation and ambiguity which complicate that assumption, if we read it from beginning to end. Diodorus' history was widely denigrated during the twentieth century as a second-hand compilation drawn from other writers' histories. That characterisation led until quite recently to a situation where scholars were not prepared to explore the challenge of reading the text from cover to

⁶⁵ Cf. 9.1.13 for passing mention of Xerxes' failed attempt to construct a mole to Salamis.

cover and looking for thematic continuities and dissonances between different sections. Much has changed within the last two decades or so, and it is now a less uncommon procedure in Diodorus scholarship to draw connections between different sections of the text, as we shall see further in a moment, and to assume an overarching design in the work, shaped in part by Diodorus' own thematic interests and by his own distinctively late Hellenistic concerns.⁶⁶ I share those assumptions here.

Those developments in Diodorus scholarship have occurred side by side with a growing attention to the knowledge-ordering and encyclopaedic literature of the Roman imperial world, although the two have not often been explicitly connected.⁶⁷ The recent expansion of scholarship on that vast body of literature has made it clear even more than it was before that for ancient readers compilatory writing was highly valued. It has also shown that much of this work is open to consecutive reading, of the kind which allows us to experience developing narratives that thread their way through individual texts.⁶⁸ Encyclopaedism and miscellanism in the ancient world, in other words, were narrative modes, or at least were always open to being read as narratives (not that I mean to suggest that they were viewed exclusively in those terms; clearly the intellectual culture of the Roman empire was also feeling its way to the kinds of methodologies of consultative reading that we are familiar with today, albeit surprisingly slowly and tentatively).⁶⁹ With that context in mind, the fact that Diodorus is usually viewed as an 'encyclopaedic' historian should be an encouragement to read his work from end to end rather than the opposite.

Diodorus returns over and over again in his first five books to the image of great culture heroes whose deeds, which often include various kinds of engineering projects,⁷⁰ earn them a reputation for immortality. In some

⁶⁶ See Sacks 1990: esp. 3–5 for summary; Sulimani 2011: esp. 55, n. 92; Rathmann 2016; Hau 2016: 73–123; Muntz 2017: 1–26; Hau, Meeus and Sheridan 2018; Morton 2018, incl. 534–5, n. 4 for a fuller list of recent publications 'interested in Diodorus as an author'; Rood 2018; also Palm 1955 for the argument that Diodorus' style is consistent across the work, even between sections generally thought to have been copied from different authors. Cf. also Baumann's chapter in this volume.

⁶⁷ The obvious exception is Rubincam 1987, 1989 and 1997. Wiater 2006b argues that Diodorus' choice of a compilatory method is a positive one, and that Diodorus views it as a modern way of writing history in contrast with the outdated insistence on autopsy in earlier historiographers.

⁶⁸ E.g., see the essays in König and Whitmarsh 2007a and König and Woolf 2013; also König 2016a on Strabo, and 2016b on Pollux.

⁶⁹ See Riggsby 2007 and 2019, although he also stresses ultimately the gap between ancient compilations and modern reference works.

⁷⁰ See esp. Sulimani 2011: 246–65 on various kinds of water engineering in Books 1–5; and cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1.41.1 for another late Hellenistic discussion along similar lines: he describes the way in which Heracles turned the course of rivers and cut roads

cases these are massive projects involving the diversion of rivers or carving of mountains. Recent work on Diodorus has shown that he, like Herodotus, avoids monolithic value judgement on these projects, that he is repeatedly interested in calculating their costs and benefits, and that he tends to reserve his most positive accounts for those that ‘benefit both ruler and ruled’ –⁷¹ another example of the way in which ancient assessments of environmental alteration are often very much aware of its impact on human populations. Nevertheless it is also clear that Diodorus, like Strabo, shows relatively little sign of the kinds of strongly negative judgement which are so frequent in much of the post-Herodotean Xerxes tradition. The first examples come in Diodorus’ account of Egypt. We hear, for example, about the foundation of Memphis by the Egyptian king Uchoreus, which involved the construction of a vast mound and a lake to protect the city from the waters of the Nile.⁷² That is followed by the building of another lake twelve generations later by king Moeris. In this case the language of benefaction is quite explicit: the lake, Diodorus tells us, is ‘remarkable for its utility and incredible in the magnitude of the achievement (τῷ . . . μεγέθει τῶν ἔργων) . . . Who, in trying to calculate the greatness of the structure, would not reasonably ask how many tens of thousands of men (πύσσαι μυριάδες ἀνδρῶν) brought this to completion, over how many years?’ (1.51.5–6). He makes a similarly positive assessment later: ‘as for the usefulness of this lake and its shared benefit to all the inhabitants of Egypt, and as for the ingenuity of the king, no one is capable of praising it in a way which does justice to the truth’ (1.51.7). Moeris also builds a canal between the lake and the river, and uses the reservoir to control the water supply to the surrounding farmland, at great expense. A later ruler, Sesoösis, throws up great mounds of earth above the flood plains to build new cities, and constructs an additional network of canals for public benefit (1.57.1–3). In some cases in Books 1–5 achievements of this kind are accompanied by cruel and tyrannical behaviour, but usually that kind of detail is supplemented or even mitigated by generous or even merciful acts. Sesoösis, for example, uses captives to construct a series of temples; they revolt, ‘unable to endure the hardships’ of the work, but are eventually granted an amnesty and allowed to found their own colony (1.56.3). The idea of landscape alteration as both wonder and benefaction

through mountains for the benefit of all; and discussion by McEwen 2003: 130–1, who links this passage of Dionysius with both Diodorus and Vitruvius.

⁷¹ Bosak-Schroeder 2020: 43–7 esp. 45 for that quotation.

⁷² Cf. Hdt. 2.99 for a related account, but ascribing this to a different king, Min.

is extended in Diodorus' portrayal of Mesopotamia in Book 2. For example, he describes Semiramis' foundation of Babylon, which is carried out by a vast workforce – 'she gathered together from her entire kingdom two million men to complete the work' (2.7.2) – and involves a massive project of river diversion (2.9).⁷³ Diodorus then gives a long account of the deeds of Heracles along similar lines in Book 4.⁷⁴

There are also repeated references to similar acts of landscape alteration threaded through his later books, although less frequently so than for Strabo, and it is that later material that I turn to now. Here especially the principle of consecutive reading I outlined above becomes important. The increasing readiness to see connections between different parts of Diodorus' work has led recently to a renewed interest in Books 1–5 and in their significance for the work as a whole.⁷⁵ Several scholars have attempted recently to understand the connection between the mythical narratives of benefaction in the opening books and the historical books that follow.⁷⁶ In most cases the tendency has been to emphasise the continuities, for example the way in which those mythical benefactors prefigure historical actors who turn up in the later books, Julius Caesar in particular.⁷⁷ Some scholars have suggested that contemporary readers could have drawn comparisons with recent examples of Roman conquest of the Mediterranean landscape. Diodorus seems to have been working on the text at least up to 27 BCE. It is clear that he does not go anything like as far as he could have in addressing contemporary Roman history: from his statements on the end date of the work it seems likely that he began writing the work in 46 BCE and originally intended to take that as the finishing point of his history, but that he later changed his mind and finished instead at 60 BCE.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, there are clear contemporary

⁷³ For Semiramis' many mountain-cutting projects, see 2.11.4, 2.13.1, 2.13.5 and 2.13.7–8.

⁷⁴ See esp. 4.18, 4.19, 4.22. ⁷⁵ Cf. Baumann's chapter in this volume as well as Baumann 2020.

⁷⁶ Beagon 2013 argues that Pliny in his *Natural History* draws a parallel between his own labour as compiler and the labour of Hercules and other culture heroes; it seems likely that Diodorus intends a similar link in his own case too, not least because of his mention of the benefactions conferred by universal historians, in the opening sentence of the work (1.1.1); and cf. brief discussion along similar lines by Bosak-Schroeder 2020: 37.

⁷⁷ E.g., Sacks 1990 has drawn comparisons between Books 1–5 and what follows later (see esp. 71–82 on the benefactions of various rulers and commanders in later books of the work), but without any reference to the theme of landscape alteration especially; cf. Wiater 2006a on the way in which that effect (especially the use of the culture-bringers of Books 1–5 as models for Alexander and Julius Caesar) acts out the goals of universal history writing laid out by Diodorus in his preface to Book 1, especially the connection between peoples of different time periods.

⁷⁸ See Sacks 1990: 169–72; Sulimani 2011: 37; and Muntz 2017: 215–47 for an extended reconstruction of the likely progress of Diodorus' writing during the 40s BCE and after.

resonances. Often cited examples include the evidence for Roman irrigation works in Egypt,⁷⁹ or Agrippa's alteration of Lake Lucernus and Lake Avernus,⁸⁰ acts which are echoed within Diodorus' account of these early culture heroes of Greek civilisation, especially Heracles. Diodorus' description of Heracles' progress over the Alps echoes the interventions of successive Roman commanders in this region, which made the passage of the mountains safe by building and repairing roads and by the conquest of hostile inhabitants.⁸¹ Most importantly, Diodorus repeatedly makes reference to Julius Caesar's deification, and explicitly mentions him in Books 1–5, side by side with those other deified benefactors,⁸² although his decision to end the work in 60 BCE rather than 46 BCE means that Caesar's career is largely absent from the work, so he holds back from the opportunity to explore that link in any detail.⁸³

Those views of Diodorus' structure are broadly convincing. What I want to stress here, however, is the way in which there are also occasional disjunctions between the opening books and what follows in the rest of the work. Those are not necessarily disjunctions that paint the work's historical actors in a negative light, but they might every so often give us pause before we accept the idea of a clear-cut connection between mythical and historical past. The quasi-heroic protagonists of those earlier books tend to be represented as universal benefactors, who receive divine status as a reward for their deeds. That theme is echoed in many of the historical books: there are some examples of historical actors being rewarded for their benefactions, sometimes even with divine honours, and Iris Sulimani has argued that that motif is unique to Greek and Latin writers of the mid-first century BCE.⁸⁴ It is also clear, however, that there are plenty of exceptions. Many of the protagonists of Diodorus' later books tend to act out of much more mundane motivations and with much more mundane outcomes, often within the context of military campaigns,⁸⁵ in a way which leaves the impression that the greatness of the mythical benefactors of the early books

⁷⁹ Sulimani 2011: 246–52. ⁸⁰ Sulimani 2011: 259–60.

⁸¹ See Sulimani 2011: 216–20 and 344, stressing especially the way in which Heracles' making-safe of the Alps echoes the exploits of Julius Caesar.

⁸² Diodorus 3.38.2–3, 4.19.2, 5.21.2; and see Sacks 1990: 175–84, although he also shows that Diodorus is ambivalent about some aspects of Roman rule, despite his idealisation of Julius Caesar.

⁸³ See Sacks 1990: 172–3.

⁸⁴ See Sulimani 2011: 64–82. On the wider Hellenistic background to the discourse of benefactions and its relationship with contemporary historical writing, including Diodorus and Strabo, see Gray's chapter in this volume.

⁸⁵ Examples include 15.12, where the Spartans divert a river to flood the city of Mantinea; 16.49, where Lacrates diverts the river at Pelusium away from the city so that he can bring up siege engines; 15.42, where Nectanebus fortifies the Pelusiac mouth of the Nile and digs channels for defence.

is being echoed only in quite a distant fashion in later events.⁸⁶ As soon as we move beyond the end of Book 5, we enter (as one would expect) a different world.

One of the factors that Diodorus uses to prompt his readers to compare the different sections of his work is the repetition of repeated motifs and repeated vocabulary. Most striking for the passages I examine here is the motif of a large labour force. That recurs over and over again in the mythical books, as we have seen: there the size of the labour force is often in itself a source of wonder. It is also a distinctive preoccupation of Diodorus in the later books. One of the vehicles for that motif is the word *πολυχειρία* ('many-handedness', in the context of a large body of workers). That word occurs fifty-eight times in surviving pre-Christian Greek literature. Nineteen of those occurrences are in the work of Diodorus. In nearly all of those cases it occurs in the context of a description of some military engineering project being brought to completion, often unexpectedly speedy completion, because of the large numbers involved.⁸⁷ It is hard to believe that Diodorus has lifted all of these passages from the work of his predecessors, when they are so similar to each other and when that word is so unusual in other surviving historiographical writing, and hard to avoid the conclusion that Diodorus is here tying together his work (whether consciously or otherwise) by imprinting his own distinctive interests on to his source material.⁸⁸ That repetition prompts us to make our own comparisons. If we think back to figures like Semiramis and Sesoösis when we read about these huge armies of workers that might quite plausibly prompt us to think of the historical leaders Dionysus describes as heroic benefactor figures. But that is not a foregone conclusion: in principle we might be equally likely to sense difference.

In the rest of this chapter I want to look at two examples in detail: the first is Diodorus' account of Xerxes' Mt Athos canal; the second is Alexander's siege of Tyre. Of all the incidents Diodorus recounts, Xerxes' campaign is the one that we would expect to put most strain on

⁸⁶ Cf. Muntz 2017: 133–90, who argues that most of the Hellenistic rulers Diodorus describes, including Alexander, are depicted as falling short of the divine honours of the deified culture bringers of the early books.

⁸⁷ The relevant passages in Diodorus are 1.31.9, 1.35.10, 1.63.9, 11.2.4, 11.40.2, 13.86.1, 14.18.6, 14.51.1, 14.58.3, 15.68.3, 15.93.3, 17.40.5, 17.41.2, 17.42.7, 17.44.5, 17.85.6, 17.89.6, 18.70.7, 20.92.1.

⁸⁸ Cf. Morton 2018: esp. 536–40 for a similar argument on the words *ὑπερφηανία*, *ἐπιείκεια* and *φιλανθρωπία*, which recur repeatedly through the text, often in combination with each other; for example all three terms are used together seven times; the last two are used together in some form thirty-three times (539).

Diodorus' generally positive vision of landscape alteration. Is it possible that even Xerxes' manipulation of the landscape of Greece can be rescued? For the most part Diodorus manages that challenge well. And yet there are little hints, if we think back to the mythical sections of the work, that remind us almost inevitably of the negative side of the Xerxes tradition.

Diodorus' account, for all his debt to Herodotus,⁸⁹ strips away much of the detail of that earlier account and turns the whole episode into a very brief one:

Then, dividing his army, Xerxes sent ahead a sufficient number to bridge the Hellespont and to dig through Athos at the neck of the Cherronesus, making the passage safe and short for his forces (ταῖς δυνάμεσιν ἀσφαλῆ καὶ σύντομον τὴν διέξοδον ποιοῦμενος) and at the same time also hoping by the greatness of his deeds to terrify the Greeks in advance (τῷ μεγέθει τῶν ἔργων ἐλπίζων προκαταπλήξασθαι τοὺς Ἕλληνας). The men who had been sent to get these works ready completed them quickly, because of the multitude of people working on them (διὰ τὴν πολυχειρίαν τῶν ἐργαζομένων). (11.2.4)

And then a little later: 'when Xerxes learned that the Hellespont had been bridged and that Athos had been excavated, he set out from Sardis and made his way to the Hellespont; and when he had arrived at Abydos, he led his army over the bridge into Europe' (Diodorus 11.3.6). And then finally at 11.5.1: 'the ships passed through the place where the canal had been cut into the other sea quickly and safely' (συντόμως καὶ ἀσφαλῶς). 11.5.1 repeats the language of 11.2.4 in its reference to the combination of speed with safety, emphasising the success of Xerxes' enterprise.

Where does this account stand on the spectrum between Books 1–5, with their vision of landscape alteration and benefaction, and the tradition stemming from Herodotus which views Xerxes' alterations of the landscape as acts of *hybris*? One way of addressing that question is with reference to Diodorus' representation of the 'many-handedness' (πολυχειρίαν) of those who were doing the work. That word once again presents this as part of a long series of other landscape-alteration scenes in Diodorus. Whether we should emphasise their continuity or disjunction is not clear, however. One might feel that in the case of Xerxes large numbers can hardly help suggesting *hybris*, especially given that Diodorus stresses the size of Xerxes' expedition repeatedly in the pages that come before and

⁸⁹ On the importance of Herodotus for Diodorus' conception of universal history, see Sulimani 2011: 52; on the similarities between Herodotus and Diodorus in their portrayals of Xerxes, see Bridges 2015: 136.

after the Athos description, in a way which surely for some readers would reactivate stereotypes of Persian military excess and tyranny: that is one feature of Herodotus' account that Diodorus does not dilute. And yet as we have seen, some of the culture heroes of Books 1–5 are also described even more explicitly as tyrannical: that need not automatically be incompatible with their status as benefactors.

Alternatively one might look for ways in which Diodorus resists some of the most distinctive emphases of the Herodotean tradition. For example, his point about the desire to strike terror into the Greeks parallels Herodotus' suggestion that the project was undertaken for show, but reshapes that point so that the canal comes to have a clear military purpose, rather than appearing as a piece of self-indulgent posturing. And even more than Herodotus, Diodorus emphasises the smoothness of the process: the task is completed 'with dispatch'; there is no mention of the problems of crumbling canal walls or the challenge of building embankments to stop the entrances from silting up. Arguably that omission lessens the sense of monumental achievement that we get from Herodotus' account, but it also cuts out any impression of uncertainty about the success of Xerxes' undertaking.⁹⁰

At the same time, however, it is striking that Xerxes' deeds are also different in some respects from what we see in Books 1–5. Diodorus' emphasis on the greatness of Xerxes' deeds ties it very closely to that mythical prehistory. For example, the phrase τῶ μὲγέθει τῶν ἔργων exactly repeats 1.51.5 (quoted above), where Diodorus is describing Moeris' construction of the lake at Memphis. What is missing (as for many of the descriptions of landscape engineering in the historical sections of the work) is any mention of benefaction, let alone divine status arising from benefaction. Xerxes' making-safe of a mountain route has several parallels in Books 1–5.⁹¹ There is no sense, however, of universal benefaction, or even benefaction towards Xerxes' own people. Instead the 'making safe' is aimed much more narrowly at Xerxes' own forces: 'in this way not only making the passage safe and short for his forces'. Attentive readers will notice, if they think back to the early books of the work, that Xerxes' canal is certainly not being presented here as a universal good. And yet even in

⁹⁰ Diodorus' relatively positive account of Xerxes' actions here may be linked with his broader tendency to downplay the importance of Athenian victory in the Persian wars, which Schmitz 2011a: 242–3 and 245–6 takes as a sign of the difference between Diodorus' late Hellenistic attitude to the Greek past and the more developed classicism of the later imperial period.

⁹¹ See also Sulimani 2011 on the way in which Xerxes is just one of several figures in the work associated with crossing of the Hellespont (cf. 1.20.1 on Osiris and 3.65.4–6 on Dionysus).

that respect it is hard to see a completely clear dividing line between Xerxes and his mythical predecessors. When Semiramis cuts a road through Mt Zarcaeus we are told that it is for her own benefit – ‘she was ambitious both to leave an immortal memorial of herself and at the same time to make her way short (σύντομον)’ (2.13.5) – in contrast with Heracles’ road over the Alps, which has a more universal impact: ‘with the result that it is passable for armies and baggage-trains (ὥστε δύνασθαι στρατοπέδοις καὶ ταῖς τῶν ὑποζυγίων ἀποσκευαῖς βάσιμον εἶναι)’ (4.19.3).⁹² Even within Books 1–5, in other words, Diodorus is far from consistent in his portrayal of the motivations underlying great achievements.

The siege of Tyre incident in Book 17, my second test case, is one of a series of military engineering and more specifically causeway-building projects in the central books of Diodorus’ history. In 13.47, for example, we hear about the Euboean project to connect their island with the mainland, with Boeotian help, as a means of self-defence, prompted by fear of Athens. The building work proceeds quickly: ‘for they gave orders not only to the citizens to come out en masse but also to the foreigners who were living there, so that thanks to the large number who came forward to do the work the proposed project was quickly brought to completion’ (13.47.4). Here yet again we have the standard motif of a large work force bringing the task to quick completion. This, like the equivalent incidents in Books 1–5, is a much more positive version of the motif of international collaboration that we have seen already as a sign of tyranny in Herodotus and Strabo. But even if it is hard to see any negative intent in this passage it is striking, if we read this with images of Semiramis and Sesōsis still lingering in our minds, that the collaborative nature of the undertaking seems relatively democratic, with no single named benefactor. We find here precisely the kind of shared benefit and contact between different communities that Sesōsis brings about in 1.57, but in this case it arises from civic consensus, or at least from anonymous orders (προσέταξαν) rather than the authority and mastery of an individual. This is a different, more democratic world. Then in 14.48, Diodorus recounts the siege of the island of Motye by Dionysius of Syracuse in 397 BCE. The Motyans breach the artificial causeway that joined their city to the Sicilian mainland, and Dionysius sets out to rebuild it, committing more and more resources (14.49.3). He succeeds finally, and the city falls: ‘After Dionysius had completed the causeway by employing a large force of labourers

⁹² Cf. Muntz 2017: 166 for the point that even Sesōsis and Semiramis do not qualify for the divine status that is earned by acts of universal benefaction.

(τῆ πολυχειρίᾳ τῶν ἐργαζομένων), he brought up war engines of every kind against the walls' (14.51.1). Here we do have a single individual driving the engineering project forwards and directing the vast number of helpers. But once again there are obvious ways in which this differs from the projects of the early books, above all because it would be very hard to view this as an act of benefaction when the inhabitants are sold into slavery, unless Dionysius' generosity to his own soldiers can be viewed in those terms.

The final and most complex example in this series of causeway-building episodes is at 17.40–3, where Diodorus gives a lengthy account of Alexander's famous siege of the city of Tyre in 332 BCE, which similarly involved building a causeway across the water to reach the island. When the Tyrians ban Alexander from entering the city, he takes action immediately:

εὐθύς οὖν καθαιρῶν τὴν παλαιὰν λεγομένην Τύρον καὶ πολλῶν μυριάδων κομιζουσῶν τοὺς λίθους χῶμα κατεσκεύαζε δίπλεθρον τῷ πλάτει. πανδημεί δὲ προσλαβόμενος τοὺς κατοικοῦντας τὰς πλησίον πόλεις ταχὺ διὰ τὰς πολυχειρίας ἠνύετο τὰ τῶν ἔργων.

Immediately he demolished what was known as Old Tyre and with many tens of thousands of men carrying stones he constructed a mole two plethra in width. He drafted in the entire population of the nearby cities and the building made rapid progress because of the large numbers. (17.40.5)

Once again we see the characteristic emphasis on volume of workers and on rapidity which ties together so many of these different incidents within Diodorus' text. And a little later we hear similarly that the Tyrians were 'outstripped by the large size of Alexander's labour force' (καταταχοῦμενοι δ' ὑπὸ τῆς πολυχειρίας) (17.41.2). Neither of these mentions of the volume of workers has any equivalent within the parallel account by Quintus Curtius in his *History of Alexander* Book 4, which makes it more likely that they are Diodorus' own addition.

In what follows the question of divine approval is raised repeatedly. The Tyrians sail up to the causeway and ask whether Alexander expects to 'get the better of Poseidon' (17.41.1). Later a sea monster appears⁹³ and 'both sides interpreted the portent as a sign that Poseidon would help them, inclining in their opinions towards the interpretation most in their own interests' (17.41.5–6). Those details raise the possibility of divine disapproval and *hybris*. They also make it clear that we are in a world where the

⁹³ That detail is also in Curtius, at 4.4.3–5.

value of large-scale projects like these is far from clear-cut; in Books 1–5, by contrast, that is never in doubt. The possibility of *hybris* is then raised again when a gale damages a large part of the causeway, in a way which depicts Alexander's building project as a struggle against nature.⁹⁴ In response, Alexander brings huge trees down from the mountains and 'blocked the force of the waves' (ἐνέφραξε τὴν βίαν τοῦ κλύδωνος) (17.42.6).⁹⁵ Much of this account recalls Herodotus' description of Xerxes crossing the Hellespont: there too a storm destroys the bridge, which then needs to be strengthened with the addition of wood.⁹⁶ Those echoes are not necessarily Diodorus' additions: Alexander was regularly contrasted with Xerxes by later historians, but often in a way that did not rule out the possibility of associations and similarities between them too.⁹⁷ Diodorus too, for all his overwhelmingly positive portrayal of Alexander, has not suppressed those associations entirely.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored the possibility that late Hellenistic and early imperial culture were particularly open to positive views of landscape alteration, partly in response to the imperial conquests of Alexander and of his Roman successors. The works of Diodorus and Strabo certainly point in that direction: that connection between the two, and the degree to which they stand out from most other ancient treatments of the same subject, have not to my knowledge been discussed at length before. Their work also offers at least partial confirmation of the stereotype of late Hellenistic writers expressing sympathy with the Roman imperial project, by contrast with their later imperial successors who tend to take a more stand-offish view of Roman rule in their writings.⁹⁸

It is also clear, however, that we have to be very careful about any generalising account of late Hellenistic attitudes, or even of the attitudes of either of these authors individually. Even Strabo and Diodorus maintain traces of the deep-rooted negativity about environmental alteration that is so prominent in earlier and later sources. Moreover, when we look more closely, there are significant differences between them as well as

⁹⁴ In Curtius 4.3.2–7 the main cause of destruction is a fire started by the Tyrians (not mentioned by Diodorus); the gale is just an additional hazard; however, see Curtius 4.3.16–18 for another storm which nearly sinks Alexander's fleet

⁹⁵ No equivalent phrase in Curtius. ⁹⁶ Herodotus 7.34–6.

⁹⁷ See Bridges 2015: 119–25; cf. Harrison 2005: esp. 32.

⁹⁸ See Swain 1996: 2–3, and further discussion in the introduction to this volume.

similarities. Strabo in particular is remarkable for the way in which his positive views about landscape alteration are spread quite evenly throughout the work, with only very muted qualifications and hesitations. He is also often explicit in his approval for the civilising mission of Rome and of Augustus in particular. For Diodorus, by contrast, Rome is a much more shadowy presence (although partly because of what is missing from his published work). His views of landscape alteration too are less straightforward than Strabo's. Occasionally he allows Herodotean overtones of *hybris* to work their way into his account. There are also elements of disjunction between his opening, mythical books and what follows. When we see acts of landscape alteration in the later books it is surely hard not to be aware that they are different from what comes before, less able to be counted straightforwardly as acts of benefaction aimed at universal human benefit than the mythical works of Semiramis and Sesoösis and others. That is all the more striking given that those later passages often recall the language of Books 1–5, especially in their emphasis on the size of the labour forces involved.

At the same time, even if these two authors are ultimately slightly different from each other in their representation of landscape alteration, they do share a common approach to knowledge-ordering as an intratextually challenging exercise, where environmental (and other) themes are threaded through their works in ways which invite us to read actively and to draw comparisons for ourselves between successive passages. The complex relationship between Books 1–5 of Diodorus and the rest of the work is just one of many signs that Diodorus was crafting his sources carefully into a narrative designed to be read consecutively, as Strabo was too, rather than just reproducing them passively. Those shared assumptions also bring them closer to their later imperial successors, as well as to each other. In other words, they may differ from those later authors in some aspects of their presentation of human–environment relations, but in that vision of encyclopaedism as a narrative enterprise, where knowledge-ordering texts are intended to be read from end to end with attention to their intratextual complexity and their cumulative force, they are firmly in line with what we find for later imperial Greek culture too.

What implications does all of that have, finally, for ecocritical approaches to the literature and cultures of the ancient Mediterranean? Many of the texts we have looked at do have striking resonances with present-day environmental concerns, although that impression of familiarity is also complicated by features that are quite alien to present-day discourse. Perhaps most importantly, ancient writing on landscape

alteration often takes an interest in the way in which it affects human communities, especially marginal or disempowered communities. Not only that, but authors like Strabo and Diodorus are able, through the geographical scope and the cumulative, compilatory structures of their works, to project a global vision of the range of ways in which the phenomenon of landscape alteration can manifest itself. They present us with a series of examples, some of which are presented as more problematic and some less. That kind of global perspective, which on some accounts can be frustratingly difficult to achieve in modern literary genres like the novel, comes naturally to ancient geographical and historiographical writing. At the same time, despite those resonances with present-day ecocritical concerns, some features of these texts offer quite defamiliarising versions of present-day environmental preoccupations. It is striking, for example, that ancient exploration of the impact of environmental alteration on human populations is usually contextualised in relation to distinctively Greek and Roman worries about the tyrannical behaviour of individual rulers who often coerce whole populations directly, rather than in relation to a vision of global structural inequalities which bring indirect environmental consequences, as it increasingly is in environmental scholarship today. The texts we have looked at also often ascribe agency to the land, and as in modern ecocritical work that insight can be used to project a negative view of human alteration of the natural world. At the same time, however, it is often tied up with a distinctively ancient religious framework, whereby the violation of the land is represented as an act of impiety,⁹⁹ and it is rarely if ever developed into a sustained argument for the inextricable intertwining of humans and their environment, or for the respectful co-existence of human populations with the more-than-human world.

We have also seen something of the complexity of ancient engagements with issues of environmental damage. Diodorus and Strabo do both represent a relatively anthropocentric strand in ancient thinking, in their predominantly positive representations of landscape alteration. Those kinds of anthropocentric views from ancient literature have clearly influenced post-classical thinking about the environment in some respects. We have also seen, however, that their engagement with those issues is enormously complex and conflicted even within their works individually, and that it needs to be set against the backdrop of a wide spectrum of different views in ancient literature generally. In that context, generalising about the

⁹⁹ Cf. Walter 2017 on the way in which religious responses to natural disaster in the ancient world may have parallels with and lessons for modern ecological discourse.

idea that ancient culture anticipates or stands in contrast with modern anthropocentrism – or indeed modern ecological rejection of anthropocentrism and environmental damage – in the service of convenient narratives about the long history of environmental thinking is always likely to lead one to very misleading conclusions. Apart from anything else, there is something about the topic of landscape alteration in ancient culture that seems to bring an almost inevitable doubleness: the traces of centuries-old traditions of both positive and negative representation are almost impossible to erase entirely; they tend to resurface in even the most one-sided of assessments. Ancient ideas about the relationship between humans and the environment were often far more multivocal than we give them credit for.