

# IMPACT WORKSHOP

## CENTRE FOR ANCIENT ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

Monday May 27, 2024  
Funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh

### **Past Perspectives: How can premodern environmental research be made useful in the climate emergency?**

*This report on the workshop was composed by Florence Rogers and MAx Dyer (St Andrews Classics).*

The [Centre for Ancient Environmental Studies](#) (CAES) Impact Workshop initiated the inaugural climate week at the University of St Andrews, addressing the application of premodern environmental research in the climate emergency, as well as the ever-present challenge of wider engagement.

#### **Presentation 1: Andrea Brock (St Andrews Classics)**

##### ***Flood Risk and Response in the City of Rome***

The talk revolved around Andrea's geoarchaeological coring survey of Rome's Central Riverbank District in the ancient Forum Boarium. This was a geographically narrow [case study](#) with a deep time perspective and investigated the threat of flooding as it played out over several centuries. The evidence illustrated that Rome's landscape changed over antiquity, with urban expansion from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE resulting in heightened flood effects. Rome's inhabitants adapted to this rapidly and progressively, enacting multivariate and multiscalar flood mitigation measures over time to respond to a novel threat. It is notable however that those who were at risk of floods, the poor and disenfranchised on the lower levels of the city, were those who were least capable of enacting change. While the talk ended considering the relationship between Rome's ability to completely mitigate flooding and elite apathy, the closing remarks and ensuing discussion emphasised that stories from history can provide narratives of hope and considered how this can be useful in sustainability thinking.

#### **Presentation 2: Liz Macwhirter (Glasgow)**

##### ***Theopoetics: Giving voice to Julian of Norwich and trauma spirituality in the climate crisis***

This talk focused on drawing wisdom of the past, specifically that of Julian of Norwich, to support a nuanced position to effect social change and address issues such as the climate crisis. The talk argued for a cognitive reframing through a sense of alterity using a different lens. By examining the medieval contemplative theology of Julian's writings, one can discover intersections with contemporary trauma spirituality. Julian's writing portrays wounds as bearing witness to other wounds in a way that supports people to heal. This is transferrable to the ecological crisis. Seeing harm and bearing witness to wounds can encourage change. The paper discussed how ecological grief has a paralysing effect on society, where ecoanxiety is a moral

emotion, rarely clinical, and is a normal response to an existential threat. Ecoanxiety faced by social silence creates apathy, with the talk positing that there needs to be a shift from ecological grief to action. Liz's verse narrative, *Blue; a lament for the sea*, is a poetic response to Julian's writing and is a poem of loss as a lens for ecological grief. Amplifying knowledge through poetic forms achieves public impact with the talk's questions focused on Liz Machwhirter's experience of public engagement.

### **Presentation 3: Justine Firnhaber-Baker (St Andrews History)**

#### ***Into the Woods: Negotiating Landscape and Power in Post-Plague France***

Justine examined the peoples' experience of power in relation to the landscape from 1250-1450, a period defined by both human and natural disasters. The focus was on forests as a site for observing dynamics of power and demography as they served as resource pools, objects of state power, and sites of contestation. It provided insight into communities negotiating not only environmental change but also power relations. The scope ranged from large-scale factors such as global warming and cooling to more localised factors such as the Hundred Years War, the Black Death, and France's forestation laws, with the town of Revel in the 14<sup>th</sup> century serving as a case study. While the talk referenced how famine, plague and war could result in severe demographic contraction and consequently the regrowth of the natural landscape, it emphasised an historical example of communities negotiating both environmental change and power relations.

### **Presentation 4: Althea Davies (St Andrews Geography & Sustainable Development)**

#### ***Where's the climate story? Scottish woodlands past and future***

This paper explored the data we have of the United Kingdom's woodland cover over the *longue durée* and its current status as possessing the lowest forest cover in Europe. It explored climactic events from millennia ago and climate change's legacy on woodland reduction. The talk then focused on how we can use this data now. The talk acknowledged that there are no neat climate analogues in the past for what we are facing now. However, it proffered the solution that unexpected counternarratives, particularly positive anomalies, can be useful to a modern audience. For example, there was a major contraction in the area 4000 years ago, but since then there have been periods of woodland expansion at various intervals. In this complex picture, Althea discussed the untidy meeting of romantic Scottish histories and modern climate pledges with the reality that Scotland has arguably not been densely forested for 4000 years. As such, the talk discussed the necessity of using both a quantitative approach with ecological analysis and a narrative approach looking at community involvement, scenario planning and past learning. From this, one can package them in a way that sheds light on positive stories by which people can draw hope for positive change and creatively engage with the past.

### **Presentation 5: Rowan Jackson (Edinburgh)**

#### ***Information, Perception and Learning: Intergenerational adaptation to environmental change in Medieval Greenland***

This talk looked at comparisons between Norse and Inuit toys and miniatures of adult material culture to examine what they tell us about continuity and a community's relationship to the environment over time. Natural experiments of history allow a comparison between different societies experiencing a similar or different climate. The talk considered how environmental modification played a role in adaptation of the landscape. Inuit toy evidence demonstrated the ability to move within a changing and dynamic land and seascape. Norse toy evidence demonstrated environmental modification. Norse culture disappeared in the

15<sup>th</sup> century, whereas Inuit culture adapted well to environmental change. As such, adaptive strategies provide a beneficial response to climate change.

### **Presentation 6: Lilah Grace Canevaro (Edinburgh)**

#### ***The Environment and the Subaltern: focusing on the margins in Greek literature***

This paper promoted reading Theocritus' *Idylls* from below. It highlighted the question of in what way a society's socioeconomic inequalities intersect with environmental vulnerabilities. The talk explored new materialism as a body of posthumanist cultural theory which radically rethinks entrenched dualisms: nature and culture, matter and mind, human and nonhuman. It dislodges entrenched anthropocentric views decentring the human, shifts attention to the margins, and provides a reassessment of ontological divides while refocusing on underrepresented agents. This allows for a reading from below with urgent importance on agency. This sort of focus helps us to live more sustainably with less violence towards things. Material ecocriticism provides a way for answering human narcissism. The talk expressed the importance of reading ancient texts from a perspective re-evaluating the presence of the nonhuman as an actant in its own right. Giving voice to the marginal, including the non-human, enriches our reading of the ancient world and provides new perspectives from below. While the talk focussed more upon inanimate objects, such as tools, and landscapes, the questions highlighted the possible applicability of this to a consideration of animals within Theocritus' text.

### **Presentation 7: Rhyne King (St Andrews Classics)**

#### ***Sustainable Water Management: Qanats in the Ancient Persian Empire***

The paper examined Qanats, near eastern underground water channels that served a similar function to aqueducts, as a sustainable environmental practice which prevented disruptive climate change from happening in the first place. As Qanats allow minimal exposure to air, there is minimal loss of water to evaporation, making them efficient conduits in the primarily arid climes of the Achaemenid empire. They relied upon a complex interplay of environmentalism, imperialism, and local initiative. Inscriptions link the imperial court to the natural world, detailing Persian imperialism and the limits of Persian rule by water and its absence. However, while the spread of Qanat infrastructure was linked with the growth of the Persian empire and imperial rule, Rhyne also explored the significance of local initiative in such places as Egypt. Although Qanats themselves were products of interregional power, their implementation and maintenance, as raised in the Q&A, were dependant on local knowledge of the water system, technology, and as some demotic texts may indicate, vested business interests. As with Justine Firnhaber-Baker's talk, Rhyne provided a historical case to consider a fundamental feature of contemporary climate discourse: the complex relationship and management of the environmental, local and superregional spheres.

### **Keynote 1: Christopher Schliephake (Augsburg)**

#### ***'Ecological wisdom', cultural sustainability and the reception of ancient texts (the example of Homer's Odyssey)***

It looked at central patterns in ancient texts which have played a role in the demand for sustainable action. The paper considered how mythological narratives can be understood as an expression of ecological wisdom. The talk argued that the topic of sustainability is predominantly studied by natural scientists and economists, but the humanities should join the debate. The myths a society tells itself are decidedly shaped by the ecological contexts. There is a dynamic element: they communicate abstract knowledge about ecological

contexts. Mythological narratives are a thought experiment to reassure a culture of its own values. They represent living together and with the environment. The talk explored the engagement of scholarship with epic and critiqued an anthropocentric approach, such as John Head's idealisation of Odysseus as exhibiting the virtues in dealing with modern ecological issues. It also explored ancient authors such as Dion Chrysostom and Plutarch of Chaironeia. The former explored techniques such as subsistence farming and hunting as sustainable management from 'poor people.' Such practice of the commons would teach valuable lessons on living sustainably with limited resources. Against this background, Dion's text presents us with a reading of the Odyssey which addresses the question of people's relationships with the land and questions of sustainability. Dion places awareness of nature as subject to fluctuations to which one must react with expertise and embrace to live in a truly sustainable way. Humans are a small part of a much larger whole. Plutarch's works are characterised by works on animal philosophy, arguing that humans owe animals justice as sentient beings who can feel pain. Plutarch develops a holistic view of sustainability: moderation and restriction to the barest essentials is the maxim. There is an interdependence of all living beings. This ties in to rules of reciprocity and interdependence. Humans should refrain from eating meat as it is in excess to survival. The greed for pleasure leads man to oversaturation.

From this, the talk turned to the question of what particular kind of ecological wisdom is required when we look at our ecological crises? We must take a pragmatic view of the relationship between humans and environment. Plutarch goes a step further than Dion by making non-human living beings the reference point of human behaviour. It expands beyond the anthropocentric. There is a development discourse mainly concerned with resources. However, ancient texts open up new perspectives. It is not an anachronistic discourse or placing a sustainability slant, but is more about viewing sustainability as a concept open to debate. It is about recognising where and how literature has always explored the question of what it might mean to live sustainably.

A recording of this keynote lecture is available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uyx2xBB7R9s>

**Discussion Panel 1: Sian Lewis (St Andrews Classics), James Palmer (St Andrews History), and Richard Oram (Stirling)**

***On the humanities and social sciences and their potential***

The panellists opened the session with their main impressions of the morning session and possible lines of discussion. James queried what the narratives are that we want to say. Are they positive or negative tales from the past, aimed at select sections of academia or framed for a more general public? Sian highlighted the different power dynamic between humans and nature in the past, the difficulty of talking about the history of environment while still talking about the history of particular cultures and finally the modern power and responsibility imbalance between individuals and corporations. Richard pointed out how difficult it is for academia's nuance and careful arguments to pierce a larger audience, as well as the need to consider data anew. These ideas initiated a flurry of responses that focused upon the themes of narrative and the place of universities and engagement. While history and the humanities were suggested as possessing the potential to challenge societal banality, especially amongst younger generations, it was questioned whether universities are from where that change is coming. This turned to the potential of universities as institutions, with the main success argued to be in working with local communities for local initiatives. The discussion then focused on the need to engage with audiences outside of academia, with contrasting opinions as to how much arguments can be simplified and how restricted the narratives should be to those already familiar with the public consciousness.

## **Discussion Panel 2: James Rae, Robert Wilson, and Andrea Burke (St Andrews Earth & Environmental Science)**

### ***On the reception of climate change science***

James Rae opened the proceedings by giving a brief timeline of carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, the necessity of simplifying this data and making it relevant for policymakers, such as at COP26 in Glasgow. He addressed how although the science has elements of simplicity, the impacts are serious. However, the problem is solvable, as illustrated by the massive change in the UK national energy production grid over the last 10 years. Andrea then reflected that there are many parallels between humanities and climate science in communicating to the general public, with the uncertainty and rigor of academic arguments being difficult to communicate to a non-specialist. Finally, Rob commented how far public understanding of climate change has come over the last 20 years, with the main difficulties surrounding focus. He pointed out how climate is never treated as a priority in governmental planning, how the energy transition has to be profitable in a capitalist society, and that eco-anxiety should not exist, as the solutions both exist and are known. These comments initiated a discussion of the uptake and resistance to technologies and how such stories can be communicated or represented in the past. This transferred to a focus on individual versus state versus corporate responsibility, with the notion of local interaction as well as action continuing from the previous panel. Echoes between the two panels furthered comments about the ability to communicate data, the difficulties of timescale and the disproportionate power imbalance, with a discussion on the theme of cultural myopia in the uptake of technology.

### **Keynote 2: Rebecca Hardin (Michigan)**

#### ***Open with Care: Creating, Curating and Comparing Case Studies of the Premodern to Inform the Present***

The talk focussed upon Gala Project, which Rebecca directs. Gala ([www.learn gala.com](http://www.learn gala.com)) is an openly accessible and community-run library of academic papers and case studies concerned with the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Rebecca framed the necessity of such teaching and learning tools through recounting her own anthropological research experience. She addressed how the wealth of local knowledge, complexity of practice and nuance of understanding were often hampered by unevenly distributed access to educational infrastructure or fora to communicate further afield. In implementing a distributive learning technology, Rebecca discussed Gala's aim as being responsively designed: built around case studies, responsible with data, and separate from the monopoly of academic publishing. The Q&A posed comments on Gala's possibility for wider engagement in terms of case studies for public engagement or education in secondary schools, scaling up case studies of environmental history (beyond a narrowly European or Classics focus) and aspects of peer review on the platform. Discussion considered the potential and challenges of developing an entire Library of Environmental History Case Studies, including examples from this workshop.

A recording of this keynote lecture is available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpVUL7N4tMg>

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