

1 Introduction

What is the place of the ancient *anthropos* in the Anthropocene?

Finding ways to reflect on this question will be one of the main aims of this Element. To make it clear from the outset: there are no straight answers. For one thing, this has to do with the slippery notion of the Anthropocene. There are no agreed-upon definitions of the term from a chronological, geological, or political vantage point. At the same time, the ancient *anthropos* is nothing more than a construct. It is a convenient shorthand for subsuming widely differing cultures, peoples, and epochs under a common banner. So, when I speak of the ancient world, or the ancient *anthropos*, this has to be taken with a pinch of salt.

Antiquity was neither a homogeneous nor a culturally universal epoch. Rather, it encompassed millennia, reaching all the way from the Bronze Age to the spread of Islam in the seventh century CE. This volume will mainly focus on Greco-Roman antiquity, incorporating sources from what is commonly referred to as the archaic (ca. eighth to sixth centuries BCE) and the classical Greek world (ca. fifth to fourth centuries BCE), the Hellenistic period (ca. 323–30 BCE), and the Roman Imperial period (ca. 30 BCE to 284 CE). There were, of course, other much older cultures, like the Egyptians or the cultures of the Near East, that had an immense influence on the ancient Mediterranean. And, despite the great significance that the Greco-Roman world had for modern conceptualizations of the “West,” or, indeed, conceptions of the “human,” it should be made clear from the outset that, when I speak of the classical world, my pathway differs from forms of reception that are interested in the “universalism” or normativity of tradition.

Rather, the following pages will try to perceive the Greco-Roman world against the background of its own particular place and context in human history. My Element will be concerned with establishing a dialogue with this world. Keeping the main question posed at the outset in mind, it will center around a number of related questions that will entail different theoretical problems and that will demand specific methodological approaches. The main goal will be to illustrate the role that antiquity can play in the interdisciplinary paradigm of the environmental humanities and to come up with perspectives for further dialogues. The study is aimed at practitioners in the environmental humanities who have so far predominantly focused on modernity but who are interested in gaining a deeper historical perspective on socio-ecological interrelationships in the Mediterranean as well as classical scholars who may have worked on ancient environments but who have not yet incorporated theoretical or methodological models of contemporary environmental theory into their research. In order to lay the ground for this encounter, the Introduction will give an overview

of the state of the discussion at this point in time, and it will do so by starting with the most problematic of all terms: the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene

The Anthropocene has raised much attention. In recent memory, no other word has led to a comparable degree of interdisciplinary debate. Be it the sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, or the media – it seems that everybody has had their say in discussing the term’s many connotations and implications, most of which are still unclear. The starting point of the debate can be found in earth system science and the realization that the human species is about to transcend certain limits set by the global ecosystem, including the availability of natural resources. There are a number of precursors to the word “Anthropocene” (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010), but it was only when the atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen, together with the biologist Eugene F. Stoermer, popularized the notion at the turn of the twenty-first century that it met with a reverberating echo across the sciences and the media.

According to Crutzen and Stoermer (2000), the term describes a new geological epoch in the history of planet Earth. While it denotes recent developments, its linguistic roots reach deeper: the word is a combination of the ancient Greek *anthropo-* (from *anthropos*, “human”) and *-cene* (from *kainos*, “new” or “recent”). Anthropocene, then, is born from the realization that “the human imprint on the global environment has now become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system” (Steffen et al. 2011: 842). With its focus on anthropogenic effects on the nonhuman environment and its planetary scale, the notion has stirred a lot of interest but also a wide range of interpretations, along with a fair share of controversy.

One problem consists in the word’s inherent anthropocentrism. There is a tendency toward discursively appropriating the Earth and relegating all other living beings and nonhuman matter to the margins of an otherwise human-controlled environment. The Anthropocene discourse is divided between a “bad” version and a “good” version. While the first one brings with it a baggage of apocalyptic imagery and dystopian doomsday scenarios, eventually leading to the imagined collapse of the life-supporting planetary system, the second is freighted with the fantasy of omnipotence, namely of being able to master and to finally manage adverse environmental effects, for instance with the help of climate engineering (Dalby 2016). Both versions make “humankind” the yardstick against which to measure environmental health and well-being.

Another problem is that the Anthropocene has the suggestive power of a collective singular; that is, it tends to cover up cultural, historical, political, and socioeconomic disparity and heterogeneity. Talk of the “human era” (Schwägerl 2014) is misleading in so far as it is not all humans who have turned into a global environmental factor but a certain type of human, defined by a certain degree of material prosperity and political agency. As the Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh argues, both capitalism and the history of empire, namely imperialism, are among the root causes of many environmental perils so characteristic of our times, including climate change (2016: 87).

While this crisis is usually framed in techno-scientific terms, whereby certain types of energy use or resource management are seen as the main ecological problems, history and politics are often pushed to the background. Yet, above all, human decision-making and human choices have opted for the use of certain technologies and/or resources (not vice versa). And these decision-makers and processes can be identified in historical analysis. As Rob Nixon (2014) puts it, “We may all be in the Anthropocene but we’re not all in it in the same way.” Nixon thereby points to the socioeconomic and cultural-historical asymmetry inherent in our current ecological crisis – and to the need to come up with different perspectives and narratives.

It is at this point that the new paradigm of the “environmental humanities” comes into play as an important scholarly intervention. “The environmental humanities,” writes Ursula Heise in a recent introduction into the field, “envision ecological crises fundamentally as questions of socioeconomic inequality, cultural difference, and divergent histories, values and ethical frameworks.” As she posits, “Scientific understanding and technological problem-solving, essential though they are, themselves are shaped by such frameworks and stand to gain by situating themselves in the historical and sociocultural landscape” (Heise 2017: 2).

It is therefore not so much a question of whether the humanities should grapple with the notion of the Anthropocene at all as, rather, of what stance they should take in the face of its many challenges. Without question, the word offers itself as a starting point for interdisciplinary debate and reflection that take social as well as material aspects and their interactive enmeshment into account as grounding principles of human–nature interaction. The term helps render the codependency of environment, politics, and technology, uniting many factors usually analyzed in isolation. Due to the various chronological, geological, and human “scales” involved, the Anthropocene is, in the words of Timothy Clark (2015), a “threshold concept,” prompting new ways of thinking short-term developments and deep-historical processes together.

This last aspect touches upon the third big challenge connected to the “new human era”: namely, the question of when it, in fact, begins. Early approaches, including those of Stoermer and Crutzen, preferred the beginning of the Industrial Revolution around 1800.¹ However, technically speaking, a new era needs to have lasting imprints on the Earth’s strata in order to qualify as a geological epoch. That is why a new generation of scholars prefer the first atomic tests and the use of nuclear weapons in 1945 as a critical watershed. The spread of radionuclides goes hand-in-hand with the so-called “Great Acceleration” in the aftermath of World War II, which saw a rapid increase in resource extraction and the global use of pesticides (Zalasiewicz et al. 2016).

Thus, from a geological vantage point, it is clear that antiquity clearly falls outside the chronological markers of the Anthropocene. Although we lack quantifiable statistics, we can safely say that the ancient population numbers were a long way from modern-day standards. Moreover, ancient people did not rely on the same amount of resources, and they did not know the deleterious effects of radioactivity, chemicals, or plastic waste. Antiquity saw neither an “industrialization” in the narrow sense of the term nor a technologization. So, why bother at all with whether the ancients have, or should have, a place in the Anthropocene?

I think there are good reasons why we, indeed, should think about how the Anthropocene, as a historical era, relates to other time periods. And these have to do with different types of “scale”: because if dealing with the Anthropocene means coming to terms with the convergence of different scales, be they of a chronological (natural vs. human history), a normative (the human vs. the nonhuman), or a geographical (planet vs. region) type, then antiquity belongs to the other end of the spectrum of the many dystopian scenarios connected to the “human era.” For the Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009: 197–198), the future has turned into a domain detached from historical consciousness, a realm that no longer stands in any kind of continuity with the past.

However, one could also invert this perspective and suggest that antiquity itself belongs in a realm of human experience that constantly challenges and tests the limits of the historical imagination and of historical understanding.

¹ There are also voices claiming that the Anthropocene begins with the encounter between the “old” and “new” worlds and the discovery of the American continent in 1492, because it set in motion a process of species exchange unthinkable without anthropogenic influence. The idea that the Anthropocene may be even older, and that it began in practice with the first extensive proto-urban settlements in Mesopotamia around 5,000 BCE or even with the rise of agriculture around 10,000 BCE, is also discussed (Ruddiman 2003). The question of whether Greco-Roman sources express ideologies of a human dominance over nature or bemoan negative anthropogenic effects on the environment – two aspects that would allow us to see them as prefiguring debates surrounding the term “Anthropocene” – will be dealt with in the course of this Element.

Chronologically speaking, antiquity makes up the deep perspective of historical consciousness. The period already saw phenomena like catastrophe, collapse, and regeneration – including in environmental terms. One could even say that the popular narrative of the Anthropocene, presented in countless articles and books, makes use of the generic structure of rise-and-fall narratives inspired by ancient models and elaborated in (early) modern historiography.

If we, in consequence, consider that the ancients had a vital interest in the mutability of passages of time and a sensibility to the succession of eras,² then it becomes clear that our modern debates hark back to ancient examples. One could say that, culturally speaking, an Anthropocene existed long before its geological and material effects became apparent. One of the oldest (fragmentary) texts of world literature, the Gilgamesh epic, already spoke of the divide between an urbanized “culture” and wild “nature,” reflecting on the benefits and the eventual pitfalls of making use of the Earth’s resources (Dalley 2017). That same frontier spirit can be found in Odysseus’ encounter with the fabled Cyclopes, who apparently live in harmony with the environment but are still unable to make use of its abundant riches (Homer *Odyssey* 9, 108–118). Roman writers celebrated the triumph of human culture over “nature” (Thommen 2012: 76–78). The list goes on.

These examples aside, I would argue that it is one of the most important challenges of the environmental humanities to confront the geological or natural-historical perspective of the prevalent Anthropocene discourse with the implications and challenges of a cultural deep history. This entails the need to reactivate the contents of our cultural memory in current debates (Westling & Parham 2017). In other words, we should be wary of turning the environmental humanities into Anthropocene studies, with a narrow focus on modernity and the (post)industrial age. Rather, we also have to track the Anthropocene and its ideology in the deep structures of human history and imagination. What were the channels, media, and images that saw its rise in premodernity? Again, there are no straight answers, but this is a worthwhile task, because what we will encounter are not only anthropocentric perspectives but also worldviews and metaphors that will help undermine them, that will confront us with wholly different outlooks on what it means to live in a material world and, indeed, what it means to be human in it.

Methodologically speaking, this also entails the necessity of tracing the material, social, and cultural forms of culture–nature interaction in the deep strata of the past. “Strata” is, of course, a geological term. It refers to the

² In ancient Greece, there were two popular variants of cultural theories, one that perceived culture as steadily declining (i.e. a theory of descendancy) and one that saw it as constantly evolving (i.e. a theory of ascendancy). Cf. Vögler 2000: 242–243.

different measurable effects of the Anthropocene in the so-called lithosphere, the atmosphere, the biosphere, and the sociosphere (Zalasiewicz 2016). There is, however, also a cultural sphere that acts like a seismograph and interprets tangible changes in any one of those spheres in a context-dependent way. These cultural feedback effects are integral parts of an environmental history that investigates human–nature interactions in premodernity.

However, it is also important to bear in mind the possibilities and limits of comparative history. The attempt to draw comparisons between our modern age and its ecological crises and the ancient sources can easily lead to anachronisms; and any attempt to draw conclusions from a reading of ancient texts for our current predicaments will, most likely, be doomed to fail. These cautionary notes notwithstanding, what is possible is to attempt to determine the place of both modern and ancient humankind in a natural history whose trajectories have been anything but clear or predetermined. In doing so, we are confronted with the limits of historical understanding, on the one hand, and of human agency, on the other, thereby also problematizing the ethical implications of the Anthropocene.

The Environmental Humanities and the Ancient World

It is probably no coincidence that around the same time as Stoermer and Crutzen formulated their concept of the Anthropocene in the year 2000, there was increasing talk of a new academic field, devoted to dealing with environmental questions in an interdisciplinary way that saw ecological and cultural issues as inextricably intertwined. Drawing on environmental studies programs and approaches in environmental history, philosophy, literary and cultural studies, as well as anthropology and the social sciences, that had separately developed during the second half of the twentieth century, the early years of the twenty-first century were increasingly characterized by a tendency to merge these distinct approaches. What united them in the first place was the growing awareness that the environmental challenges facing life on Earth entailed many ethical, social, and technological questions that could not be solved by the narrow outlook of a single discipline. The humanities and social sciences thereby repositioned their respective roles in academia and their stance regarding the nonhuman world. What had once served as a mere backdrop to the traditional focus on human decision- and meaning-making now came to the fore as central to human ways of being in the world; in fact, closely connected to questions of politics and justice.

Quickly, study programs and institutes emerged all around the globe that adapted the newly coined term “environmental humanities.” Although this term

is now commonly accepted and widely used, it is still hard to come up with a univocal definition. Due to the many academic disciplines involved, their respective histories and methodologies, as well as distinct national or culture-specific ways of dealing with and perceiving the nonhuman world, the environmental humanities are, indeed, characterized by a high degree of diversity and heterogeneity. As the editors of the journal *Environmental Humanities* put it in their first issue, “the environmental humanities can be understood to be a wide ranging response to the environmental challenges of our time” that “. . . engages with fundamental questions of meaning, value, responsibility and purpose in a time of rapid, and escalating, change” (Rose et al. 2012: 1). The authors of one of the first monograph introductions to the field also point to its multifaceted and wide-ranging approach, listing its historical perspective, its focus on ethics, social justice, and action, and its transdisciplinary and transnational take on environmental issues as defining features (Emmett & Nye 2017: 2–7).

In general, the humanities are thereby perceived “as an imaginative force for thinking about the ongoing evolutionary transformations of the world and its inhabitants” (Adamson 2016: 139). Nonetheless, the traditional way of starting an inquiry into (human) nature from one discipline, e.g. from philosophy or history, and largely remaining within its specialist domains is increasingly seen as insufficient (Emmett & Nye 2017: 21). This has to do with many of the cultural factors that are perceived as root causes of the environmental crisis in the first place: to overcome “the divisive epistemologies that create an illusory sense of an ontological dissociation between the human and the nonhuman realms” (Oppermann & Iovino 2017: 4) is, in this context, one of the main aims connected to the project of the environmental humanities. What were, at one time, dearly held notions of humanities research – for instance, the strict separation between “nature” and “culture,” human and animal – have, against this background, become problematized in order to undermine forms of anthropocentrism that have cared little for other life-forms or the biosphere and to create ample space for an interdisciplinary dialogue with the sciences.

The hope is that, through this blurring of traditional boundaries, core elements and key issues of humanities thinking, like ethical reasoning, questions of justice, and meaning, will enter “environmental domains” (Rose et al. 2012: 2) that have, thus far, been characterized by techno-scientific approaches. Thereby, it will, ideally, become possible “to articulate a ‘thicker’ notion of humanity, one that rejects reductionist accounts of self-contained, rational, decision making subjects” (2). In sum, “the environmental humanities positions us as participants in lively ecologies of meaning and value, entangled with rich patterns of cultural and historical diversity that shape who we are and the ways in which we are able to ‘become with’ others” (2).

Notwithstanding the weight that these quotations give to the historical perspective engrained in the humanities, it is interesting to note that the premodern world has predominantly been relegated to the sidelines of the discussion. Of the many articles and chapters gathered in the introductory anthologies that have appeared from major presses over the last couple of years, almost none include the ancient or medieval worlds.³ Why is this? I would argue that this has, on the one hand, to do with the urgency of the global ecological crisis. Although there are no quick solutions to our environmental problems, they certainly demand of everyone to be constructively involved in shaping better living conditions and possibilities for present and future generations. In the humanities, there is probably no one who would seriously question the claim that the premodern textual and artistic canon upon which our own disciplines rest should be part of this very future. Integrating this vast body of knowledge into the discussion and bringing the alternative ecological worldviews stored in ancient texts to bear on present concerns is a different story altogether. This is an aspect where more could be done. On the other hand, there are comparatively few classical philologists, ancient historians, or archaeologists involved in the debate – despite excellent work on environmental or ecological questions in all these fields.

It is one of the aims of this Element to help bridge the divide that currently exists between the environmental humanities, as they now present themselves, and approaches in classical studies (including ancient history and archaeology).⁴ Why is it important to grant them a more prominent place in our discussions? Needless to say, the ancient civilizations were themselves confronted with environmental problems on various scales – some of which were self-made and some of which were naturally caused (Hughes 2014). There was also a long tradition of thinking about the interaction and relationships between humans and their respective environments, reaching back to the earliest written sources alluded to earlier. But these points are probably too obvious to mention; they are well discussed and undisputed. There is yet another, more important reason why we should constantly be concerned with the deep past of human culture. As Greg Garrard puts it, at the core of the environmental

³ My own edited volume on antiquity and ecocriticism (Schliephake 2017a) was an attempt to bridge classical scholarship and more recent approaches in the environmental humanities. Siewers (2014) and Cohen (2012) have, in their respective works, made important contributions that include the medieval world. For a diachronic perspective on the environmental imagination and literature, see Westling & Parham (2017).

⁴ Although I include some archaeological studies and material in this work, it should be noted that another Element would be needed to accompany the present one from a decidedly specialist archaeological perspective.

humanities is the dual project of what he terms “the historicization of ecology” and “the ecologization of history” (Garrard 2014: 3–5).

Indeed, in ecological terms, the roots of our environmental crisis reach back very far in time. According to the ecologist Wolfgang Haber, the urban systems of premodern Mesopotamia present the first instance in history when humankind centralized vast natural resources, transforming them into culture (Haber 2016: 29). This transformation, namely centralization, was not unproblematic, however, especially when perceived in the *longue durée*; it brought with it numerous “ecological traps” (Haber 2007), which were integral to the rise of the great ancient cultures but had unintended long-term effects that we still experience today. The discovery, and eventual mastery, of fire was such a milestone in human development because it supplemented the sun’s energy and substantially enlarged the diet.

As the ancient Greeks well knew, however, this came at a price. When we think of the myth of Prometheus, who was largely associated with the fire element, it becomes clear that, in ecological terms, technology and knowledge are always accompanied by rebound effects. Developing knowledge and understanding of one’s environment and of oneself was a cornerstone of early Greek philosophy, and Prometheus became an exemplary case for reflecting on what this could entail. Fire enables technology and scientific development, as the mythological hero explains in one of the earliest extant tragedies (Aeschylus *Prometheus Bound* 450–471, 476–506), but the gifts and *technai* that Prometheus brings can eventually also lead to suffering – after all, he himself pays the price for transcending divine limits.

While Prometheus’ fate can be read as reflective of what happens to someone whose own thirst for knowledge can lead to hardheadedness and subsequent downfall, it also mirrors a deep-seated interest in how the understanding and mastering of natural forces has lasting effects upon the nonhuman world. As Haber notes, “For living matter . . . fire is principally destructive and even lethal, and humans also learned to make use of it in order to get rid of all what disturbed or threatened them” (2007: 359). Moreover,

Humans soon discovered that the highest energy amount was released by burning wood. Stands of woody plants, i.e. forests, thus were assigned the purpose of providing fuel, and in this way humans created their first and unconditional dependence on a specific natural resource supplying high-grade energy, expecting it to be available forever. This was our first and irreversible step into an ecological trap, because the demand for such an energy source would rise infinitely. (360)

This is an example of how human resource use, ancient mythological insights, and modern science can enter into a dialogue in present accounts, laying bare

a deep history of nature–culture interaction that still has serious ramifications for the current ecological crisis.

This only becomes possible, however, when the perspective is broadened beyond the scope of the Anthropocene or the Early Modern era. It is here that we find the roots of our present predicaments, and here we also find some of the “instruments,” to paraphrase Joni Adamson, that help us “see” through their manifold entanglements and their connections with our own age (2016: 136). In this case, these “seeing instruments” come to us via the way of an ancient mythological figure – Prometheus, for instance, is an apt mythology for our own times in the Anthropocene. As Irby-Massie notes, “Prometheus’ gifts to the human kind include knowledge of the means whereby humanity can protect itself against all blights, but Prometheus himself is the proverbial physician who lacks the remedies with which to heal himself” (2008: 143). This image is highly evocative of the role of techno-scientific knowledge and the uncontrollable nonhuman “species of trouble” (Erikson 1991), e.g. radioactivity, by which it is accompanied in our times.

In his influential essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses” (2009), Chakrabarty has reflected on these unintended consequences of human–nature interaction and their effects on our general understanding of history. He argues that the scope and impact of, for instance, climate change pose serious problems for historians (and humanists in general) because they demand a reconceptualization of many fundamental categories, like race, class, or gender, and because they embed these sociocultural traits within a context of geohistory, where different scales apply in both a chronological and a geological sense. What comes to the fore in this reconceptualization is, firstly, humans’ agency as a species and, secondly, the sense that nature has a history too; that it, in fact, “is dynamic, fluctuating, hybrid, and permeable both *in itself* and in relation to corresponding human histories” (Westling & Parham 2017: 5; emphasis in original). In consequence, Heise sees a conceptual tension at work in the environmental humanities in general, and in historical approaches to the field in particular: a “tension between humans’ agency as a species and the inequalities that shape and constrain the agencies of different kinds of humans, on the one hand, and between human and nonhuman forms of agency, on the other” (Heise 2017: 6).

There may be yet a third conceptual tension having to do with how to define terms such as “human,” “nonhuman,” and “agency” in a historical perspective. How do the *anthropoi* of the Anthropocene differ from those of the premodern times? Can cultural memory still work as a foundational category of identity questions, as a form of orientation in space and time? Chakrabarty has his doubts, and his writings have indeed formulated