

COPING WITH CHANGING CLIMATES IN EARLY ANTIQUITY: COMPARATIVE APPROACHES BETWEEN EMPIRICISM AND THEORY

HERVÉ RECULEAU

Coping with Changing Climates in Early Antiquity (3CEA): Comparative Approaches between Empiricism and Theory is a collaborative project sponsored by the Humanities Without Walls consortium (<http://www.humanitieswithoutwalls.illinois.edu/>) through its competitive research initiative “The Work of the Humanities in a Changing Climate,” which is funded by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and based at the University of Illinois Humanities Research Institute (<https://hri.illinois.edu>). In January 2018, 3CEA was awarded approximately \$136,000 over the course of three years (2018–20) through the Franke Institute for the Humanities (<http://franke.uchicago.edu/>), the consortium’s partner institution at the University of Chicago. The award was extended to July 2022 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Projects members include ten faculty and graduate students from three institutions: Hervé Reculeau (associate professor of Assyriology, University of Chicago, principal investigator), Michele Buzon (professor of anthropology, Purdue University, project coordinator), Jay Crisostomo (associate professor, George G. Cameron Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Civilization and Languages, University of Michigan, project coordinator), Gary Beckman (George G. Cameron Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Civilization and Languages, University of Michigan), Catherine Kearns (assistant professor of classics, University of Chicago), Timothy Leonard (PhD candidate, University of Michigan), Thalia Lysen (PhD 2022, University of Chicago), and Émilie Sarrazin (PhD candidate, University of Chicago). Katie Whitmore (PhD 2019, Purdue University) was replaced in 2019 by Jenail Marshall (PhD candidate, Purdue University). A founding member of the project, Nadine Moeller (formerly University of Chicago), became in the course of our grant professor of Near Eastern languages and civilizations at Yale University.

3CEA investigates, in a comparative perspective, the social and cultural perceptions of and experiences with climate change in the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age (third to first millennia BCE) through a multidisciplinary approach that convenes archaeologists, bioarchaeologists, and text specialists to foster interdisciplinary collaboration among the three partner institutions in the Midwest and between faculty and graduate students. The project uses ancient texts, archaeological and paleoenvironmental data (including ancient skeletal remains), and geospatial analysis to address the ways in which societies in the Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia were affected by ancient episodes of climate change (see the 2017–18 annual report for a detailed presentation of the working groups and research questions). Focusing on social perceptions of and reactions to changes in local, regional, and global climates, the project members addressed the well-documented (and abundantly discussed) episodes of rapid climate change (RCC) that marked the transitions from the Early Bronze Age to the Middle Bronze Age (the so-called “4.2ka event” from ca. 2200 to 1900 BCE) and from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age (the “3.2ka event”

from ca. 1200 to 950 BCE), framing these transitions in the longer-term perspective of the periods that preceded and followed them. One important aspect of our collaboration was to integrate the archaeological data with the emic perspectives gained from ancient texts, our primary source of information on how the ancient peoples of the region may have perceived changes in their climate and environment—a precondition for developing adaptive strategies, successful or not.

Hervé Reculeau and Catherine Kearns organized the final conference of the project, held on December 4–5, 2021, at the University of Chicago’s OI and Franke Institute for the Humanities. The conference provided an opportunity to present the project’s results to the campus community and beyond and to invite guest speakers from various research universities to frame, complement, and discuss the work. The invited speakers were Joseph G. Manning (Yale University), Sturt W. Manning (Cornell University), John M. Marston (Boston University), Antonio Simonetti (University of Notre Dame), and Lynn Welton (University of Toronto). The talks presented relevant textual, archaeological, and environmental data from a region that ranges from Nubia in the south to Anatolia in the north, and from Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean in the west to Mesopotamia in the east, during the third to early first millennia BCE. The conference thus attracted a cross-departmental audience of colleagues and students and highlighted the work of our graduate students, who offered joint presentations of their work. Additionally, a poster session showcased research by students from the three partner universities who had attended a joint graduate seminar during the winter and spring quarters of 2019.

The conference was also an opportunity to address, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the theoretical and methodological issues surrounding the integration of datasets of highly divergent natures, temporal and spatial scales, and methodologies and to discuss best practices for efficiently articulating research at the intersection of the natural, social, and humanistic sciences. A specifically humanistic aspect of the discussions concerned the use of emic categories of weather and climate, found in the textual records of the respective places and times under study, as a way to address the repertoire of actions that any given society—and, more crucially, various stakeholders in that society—had at their disposal to address changes in their environment, provided that they perceived them in the first place. Finally, the conference was an opportunity to reassess a number of paradigmatic case studies that are ubiquitously cited as examples of social devolution caused by episodes of RCC and to show that careful analysis of the extant material with proper consideration of its heuristic limits does not warrant such broad-brush conclusions—that new, more nuanced narratives are needed. Beyond the ongoing collaborations among some of the participants, the conference will result in an edited volume of proceedings, currently in progress.
