Mark and the Landscape

Mark was no armchair scholar and did not deal in pure abstractions. While his teaching and research interests were global, the Maeander valley in southwestern Anatolia holds a special place as the destination of a number of his research trips and archaeological surveys. For my part, I would like to revisit Mark's work on the Maeander region to look at the place of landscape in his understanding of historical change. I intend this as a way to bring the theoretical dimension to his work closer to the surface and to pay tribute to Mark as a philosopher of history – a role he might not have too easily recognised himself in. I hope he would excuse this attempt to co-opt him into the realm of abstractions even if he would have had none of it.

The Maeander region, together with the adjacent valleys, is the richest agricultural region of Asia Minor, but in the Byzantine period – as Mark puts it – it 'underwent an absolute economic decline'. In his doctoral thesis, Mark examined the reasons for this dramatic change in fortunes, which involved the Turkish conquests. He threw out the idea that any profound shifts occurred in the environment and could therefore have been responsible. Taken quite literally, this might sound like a denial of the possibility of climate disasters, but the point, of course, is that while the landscape remains an influence on human life, it is not in itself the origin of anything new. Instead, Mark emphasised social causes for the collapse, in particular the weakness of the local elites that kept abandoning the provinces in order to achieve recognition in Constantinople. The distant and largely indifferent state apparatus failed to defend its territories against the Turks.

The surveys of Anatolian castles Mark led from 1992 to 1996 revealed several of the sites – such as Yılanlı Kalesi – to have been built by the provincial communities. The new twist, then, was that the local elites existed but – just like the castles themselves – remained invisible within the classical optic of Constantinople. The provincials were capable of defending themselves, too – and that was against imperial armies more than the incoming Turks. As part of this striking reversal, the landscape itself changed through the activities of the archaeologist – Mark in this capacity. The castles had largely been ignored in the classicising scholarship – as Mark writes, "Many readers of this report will have passed Çardak following the main road from Denizli to Ankara via Dinar, although probably without noticing the small castle perched on a peak to the north of the road".

This change of perspective came to affect the verdict on what happened: was it disaster, or was it progress? Working within the paradigm of intensification and abatement, Mark contrasted the outlook of the state with that of an ordinary Anatolian: "For the individual – and this is perhaps the key to the model – it is worth remembering that the shift towards pastoralism involved in a phase of abatement is taken as a decision of perceived advantage. Indeed for the individual it is not clear that

sitting on the grass in spring tending your goats and watching your family make *leban* (a sort of sour milk akin to yogurt) is not more pleasant than the hard work of ploughing before returning to your house surrounded by stinking middens and fractious neighbours. But for the state, of course, this process is a disaster". Not all the local inhabitants would be successful: Mark notes in the spirit of Horden and Purcell's *Corrupting Sea* that the regional fragmentation and diversity of Anatolian landscapes corresponds to the range of outcomes possible. The individual is left as the sole master of her fate – even as, in Mark's own words, "man's activities are very plainly moulded by the environment". From this one could form the impression that Mark's work as a Byzantine historian, and perhaps also his concept of the feudal revolution, describes the emancipation of the modern individual from the ideological sway of the state on the one hand and of nature on the other. The process is not without its risks, if we recall provincial communities raiding each other during the late twelfth-century turmoil – but the key seems to lie not in the rejection of the state as such (the state too changes in the last centuries of Byzantium), rather in the change of attitude from the purely objective and detached to one that involves subjectivisation and involvement. As Mark insisted with regard to the environment, it is not the concrete situation that undergoes a shift – "the fundamental structures remain the same". Intensification and abatement describe human experience of the landscape, but the only thing that moves is the description itself. Thus when Mark dismisses the late antique reports of climatic disasters as effects of genre, he is not saying that there could be events more real than those, but warning us against making precisely that kind of assumption.

A reader who tries to follow or reconstruct the thinking that underpins Mark's work on the Maeander valley will find that it provides a challenge to commonsense thinking on many issues. Firstly, the landscape may change profoundly without any event taking place, or conversely not change at all despite the passing of time. Secondly, while historical outcomes lie beyond the control of human agents, free choice is still exercised. And thirdly, we begin with a notion of decline if not catastrophe (the Turkish invasions, the Byzantine failure to realise the economic potential of the Maeander valley) yet along the way this negative occurrence turns into a historic advancement and leads to further growth. What role is left for the landscape in all this? Mark denied any independent causality to the physical environment and instead read its forms – for instance, the plan of communal fortifications – as a reflection of human decisions taken beforehand. This consistent and radical approach is challenging to follow from the proverbial armchair, let alone to apply "in the field", but seems to be a core part of Mark's legacy and a testimony to the intellectual calibre of his work that will doubtlessly continue to provoke and inspire.