IF YOU WANT to see how mountains mattered in ancient Greece, there is nowhere better than Mount Lykaion in Arkadia. I went there with my family one morning late in May in 2014. We drove most of the way up, past the village of Ano Karyes, to the stadium and hippodrome a couple of hundred metres below the southern peak, slightly the lower of the mountain’s two summits. I went up from there on foot while the others stayed down below; they were on the lookout for snakes, having tripped over one in the fort at Acrocorinth the day before. A track curves upwards around the west side of the mountain. The slopes were green and covered with late-spring flowers. Just below the summit you come to a wide plateau; then you go up a steep conical mound to the top. It’s hard not to be distracted by the view. You get an amazing sense of height. The southern peak is at 1,382 metres—not much by Greek standards, but it stands high up above the industrialised plain of Megalopolis with its giant smoking chimneys. And then beyond that you can see the ripples of other mountains on all sides far into the distance, with the snow-covered summit of Mount Taygetos through the haze away to the south, and Mount Ithome, and the temple of Apollo at Bassai covered in its protective tent to the west.

But it was the summit itself that I had come to see. The top section of it (about the top metre and a half above the bedrock) is the remains of the ash altar of Zeus Lykaios. It was one of many altars on mountain summits across the Mediterranean world. But this one is special, in part because it has been excavated more extensively than any equivalent site. There was not a vast amount to see when I went there, outside the excavation season: some shallow trenches, covered over with plastic sheeting, and overgrown with grass. And yet the contents of those trenches can help us to draw a remarkably rich portrait of the way in which the summit was used by the area’s inhabitants. Initial excavations over 100 years ago uncovered in the fabric of the altar (among other things) lots of burnt animal bones, hundreds of fragments of fifth- and fourth-century BCE pottery, and also various metal objects used as
dedications, including two coins, a knife, and two miniature bronze tripod cauldrons dating from the eighth or seventh century BCE. The most recent excavations (since 2004) have turned up more animal bones, in enormous numbers (nearly all of them burnt; mainly femurs, patellas, and tails from sheep and goats, with small numbers of pig bones in addition). It is clear now that the fill of the altar site is largely made up of bone fragments. These burnt remains date from as early as 1600 BCE. Also found were thirty-three more coins, dating from the sixth to fourth century BCE, from right across mainland Greece; more tripods (roughly forty in total); and other dedications too, including a small bronze hand, holding a silver lightning bolt, broken from a statuette (the hand of Zeus, presumably), eleven lead wreaths from the seventh century BCE, and a glass-like substance called fulgurite which is formed when lightning strikes sand or soil. It is not clear whether this was brought to the altar as a dedication, the product of Zeus’s lightning returned to its source in his honour, or whether it was formed by a lightning strike on the mountain itself, a reminder of the presence of the god at his sanctuary. The excavations also found some human and animal figurines in terracotta, and the remains of hundreds of Mycenean drinking vessels (ca 1600–1100 BCE), which suggest that the site was a place of feasting, and even, unexpectedly, a considerable number of pottery fragments dating from the final Neolithic period (ca 4500–3200 BC). Most astonishing of all is the recent find of a human body buried within the altar: the remains of a teenage boy with the upper part of his skull missing, dating from the eleventh century BCE. Whether that gives us evidence to back up the rumours of human sacrifice at the site that we find in a number of ancient texts is at the time of writing not yet clear, and even if it did, there would probably be no reason to think that that was a widespread practice, given that no other human remains have been uncovered. But this certainly was a place where countless animals met their deaths: sacrificial victims were slaughtered on the summit of the mountain by the people of Arkadia in honour of the god Zeus for many centuries, even millennia. And when you look more closely at the ground, you can see that it is covered with a scattering of bone pieces under the grass—charred grey splinters and scraps, the remains of animals who were killed and burned up there thousands of years ago.

The Mediterranean is a place of mountains, but you could read a lot of books and articles about classical antiquity without realising that. There are some exceptions. Fernand Braudel famously claimed that the mountainous character of the region was one of the shaping factors in ancient Mediterranean history. And yet the mountains of ancient Greek and Roman culture are
often hidden in plain sight. We can get glimpses of their economic, religious, and social importance from some inspiring studies of individual sites and regions, many of them based on remarkable archaeological initiatives, but for many classicists, with our predominant focus on urban, elite history, these are still marginal territories. That is all the more so for tourists. One of the things that amazed me most about Mount Lykaion on that May morning was just how empty it was: there was no one else there all day. Mountains are everywhere in ancient literature too—the mythical landscapes of ancient poetry, from Homer’s Olympus onwards, the hostile mountain terrain that forms the backdrop to so many accounts of military campaigning in ancient historiography, or the harsh mountains of the desert, the spiritual battleground for the Christian ascetics in the early Christian saints’ lives—but publications on the mountains of ancient literature are even more sparse. Richard Buxton has done more than anyone to expand our view in a series of pioneering works on the mountains of ancient Greek myth. He has shown among other things how ancient mythical narrative reflected but also transformed its audiences’ real-life experience of mountains. However, his work focuses above all on classical Greek tragedy; it leaves huge swathes of material from other genres and other periods still open to analysis. Very few people have so far taken up the invitation to explore further.

One of the challenges is that ancient literature, with a few important exceptions, tends to avoid the kind of extended, often aesthetically inflected set-piece representations of landscape that we are so familiar with from the Romantic period onwards. Ancient images of mountains tend to be individually briefer than their modern equivalents. That does not mean that they are any less consequential. Typically they are threaded into the background of the works they are a part of, showing themselves over and over again with a cumulative ‘intratextual’ sophistication—‘intratextuality’ being the phenomenon of internal interrelationship between different parts of a single text—which is easy to miss if we are used to more explicit, modern ways of reflecting on landscape. One of my aims in this book is to contribute to the history of ancient mountains, by bringing together a vast amount of material on ancient mountain life that has not generally been viewed as a coherent whole, and drawing out the importance of a series of key themes for our understanding of it, which I hope will help even specialist readers to see some of this material freshly. But that historical and archaeological material is intended above all to give context to my main objective, which is to understand the role played by representations of mountains in ancient Greek and Roman literature, and in the process to
generate a series of original readings of the texts and authors I discuss. With such a vast subject it is simply not possible to cover in the depth they deserve all of the ancient works where mountains play an important role, or all of the mountains of the Mediterranean, so my procedure here has been to focus on a series of case studies, exposing some key texts to questions that I hope will stimulate engagement with other material too. I look at four different themes in turn: the relationship between mountains and the divine; the role of mountains as objects of vision in ancient culture; the role of mountains in ethnographic and geographical writing and in military history, as places both subjected to and resistant to conquest and civilisation; and last the status of mountains as places of work and habitation, on the edges of urban culture. What kinds of pleasure and fascination do ancient writings about mountains offer to their ancient audiences (and indeed also to us)? How do they engage with their audiences’ understanding of mountains as real places in projecting their own distinctive images of landscape? What do these texts tell us about ancient understandings of the relationship between human culture and the natural world? If we want to have any hope of answering those questions, we need to read these texts from end to end, staying alert to the way in which successive passages project distinctive, cumulative images of the mountains of the Mediterranean and of their relationship with human culture.

In the process one of my goals is to bring the study of ancient mountains more into dialogue with its modern equivalents. There is now a huge volume of work on mountains in the modern world, ranging from scientific and geographical studies on issues as diverse as geology, environment, climate, heritage, and human geography to cultural-historical studies of the development of modern mountaineering and landscape depiction, most of it focused on the past 250 years or so. Mountain studies has emerged as a vibrant and diverse cross-disciplinary field over the past few decades. But there has been almost no interest among classicists in engaging with that material, and very little inclination in turn among modern mountain historians to think seriously about the premodern history of the places and questions they study.

One of the factors in that lack of communication is the widespread belief that human responses to mountains in Western culture underwent an abrupt change from the late eighteenth century onwards, with the development of mountaineering as a leisure pursuit and the development of the concepts of the picturesque and the sublime. The conventional story is that mountains had been viewed in premodern culture as places of fear and ugliness, to be avoided at all costs; now they came to be appreciated as places of beauty and sublimity.
That narrative has its origin in the Alpine writing of the nineteenth century, for example in the work of Leslie Stephen, who was the father of Virginia Woolf and one of the leading figures in English Alpinism in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Those views were then influentially restated and contextualised in Marjorie Hope Nicolson’s book *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, published in 1959, which has been one of the foundational works of twentieth-century mountain history. Nicolson’s reading of classical texts about mountains is quite cursory and at second-hand, perhaps not surprisingly given that her main aim was to understand changes in writing about mountains from the eighteenth century onwards. Her conclusions have been repeatedly cited in an oversimplified form, as if the watershed summed up in her title, and her explanations for it, are undisputed facts. I suspect that many people, when they walk or climb in the hills, even if they have read only a little of the history of mountains and mountaineering, have a sense, perhaps not consciously expressed, that the pleasure they experience in moving through the landscape and admiring it is something distinctively modern.

Nicolson’s gloom and glory narrative is starting to be challenged more and more, but it is still astonishingly tenacious. Clearly many things did change in the eighteenth century: that would be hard to deny. Mountaineering in particular developed in quite unprecedented ways from its beginnings in the late eighteenth century through the nineteenth century—that story has now been studied from many different angles. But if we give too much weight to the idea of a watershed, it can bring all sorts of negative consequences. It can stop us from seeing the many continuities between modern and premodern. At the same time it can prevent us from understanding what made premodern responses different and distinctive: if we are interested only in the question of whether the ancient world did or did not have precedents for modern ideas of the sublime, or for modern mountaineering culture, we ignore the challenge of understanding Greek and Roman responses to mountains on their own terms. The habits of mountaintop sacrifice referred to earlier are just the most striking example of how alien some aspects of ancient uses of mountains could be. Either way, whether we emphasise the similarities or the differences between ancient and modern, it is clear that mountains mattered in the ancient world, and that ancient responses to mountains were vastly more sophisticated and varied than the standard narrative suggests. It is bewildering, when you take the trouble to look, to think that anyone would ever have doubted that.

In this book, by contrast, I draw every so often on modern mountain studies to ask new questions of the ancient material, while also using the
mountains of the ancient world to give new depth and nuance to the stories told within many different corners of mountain studies about the long history of human engagement with mountains. One precedent for that approach is the work of Veronica della Dora, who ranges very widely across many different periods and places, the ancient Mediterranean included, in seeking to understand what mountains have meant for their human viewers over many millennia. In what follows I do not make any attempt to match the chronological breadth of her work. My focus in this book (which is one of my contributions to a wider project on the history of mountains generously funded by the Leverhulme Trust) is above all on the ancient world, and especially Greek and Roman antiquity, from archaic Greece in the eighth century BCE to late antiquity in the fifth century CE, although I also discuss at various times parallels from Jewish and Near Eastern traditions. But I do share with della Dora a belief that the story of human engagement with mountains needs to be told with a much greater chronological depth than is currently the case. Other publications from our project accordingly take a collaborative and comparative approach to mountain history over many centuries, with a special focus on the influence of classical texts and concepts in writing about mountains from the early modern period onwards.

One theme above all unites the diverse material that follows—that is the tendency for mountains to be both places of human engagement and at the same time objects beyond human control. The tension between those two possibilities was one of the key driving forces for human interest in mountains in the ancient Mediterranean, as it is also in the modern world. We often assume that mountains were places of wilderness in Greek and Roman antiquity, defined by their position outside the city, linked with divine presence and primitive human populations, and that clearly was one element in their fascination. But in fact mountains were often intimately tied to the cities they were close to. Ancient writing about mountains often dramatises the struggle to bring mountains under control either literally or imaginatively. How do we bring these spaces into human civilisation? How do we make them knowable? Those questions have been central to modern responses to mountains, which have often involved attempts to dominate or incorporate mountain territories and mountain peoples for political, sometimes imperial goals. Gaining knowledge about mountains has often been central to those processes. That was the case for ancient Greek and Roman culture too.

Looking at the relationship between mountains and human culture can also bring new insights into the history of human interaction with the environment
more broadly. Many of the texts I look at in this book have powerful resonances with recent thinking about human relationships with the more-than-human world in the environmental humanities, especially within the cross-disciplinary field of ecocriticism, with its focus on literary representations of human-environment relations. Of course there is always a risk of anachronism in approaching ancient literature through the framework of modern environmental thinking. There is a long history of oversimplified attempts to fit ancient responses to the environment into narratives about the development of modern attitudes and modern problems. Attempts to ascribe some kind of ‘environmental consciousness’ to ancient authors, or to argue that the ancient world experienced human-caused environmental degradation equivalent to our own, have often drastically underestimated the complexity of the ancient evidence. One thing we can gain from re-examining the ancient sources in all their diversity is the chance to challenge and complicate these narratives. We need an approach that respects the variety of ancient responses: that involves reading ancient representations of human-environment relations from end to end, with an alertness to their internal correspondences and contradictions, rather than focusing on isolated passages out of context. We also need an approach that respects the alienness of many aspects of ancient interaction with the environment, even as it seeks points of resemblance.

Nevertheless, it has become increasingly clear that there are ways in which ecocritical perspectives can raise new questions about ancient culture, and also ways in which ancient Greek and Roman literature can offer us images of relationships between human culture and the environment that are potentially valuable as resources for us today. Exploring those points of connection is still a work in progress. Until quite recently there has been very little explicit engagement with the environmental humanities within Classics, especially among those who work on classical literature. That has begun to change, helped perhaps by the move away from an exclusive focus on ‘nature writing’ in ecocriticism: any text can be open to an ecocritical reading, as a means of shedding light on its underlying assumptions about human-environment relations. That shift opens up new possibilities for analysis of classical texts, given that extended descriptions of the natural world tend to be less prominent in ancient literature than in their modern equivalents. From at least the late eighteenth century, that reticence has been taken as a sign that the ancients were simply not interested in nature, just as they were thought not to have been interested in mountains. We are in a better position now to understand the sophistication and fascination of ancient environmental thinking.
There are many possible ways of approaching the relationship between ancient and modern engagement with the environment. Perhaps most importantly, ancient literature repeatedly presents us with alternatives to anthropocentrism in its portrayal of human-environment interaction. ‘New materialist’ approaches within Classics have begun to shed light on the way in which ancient texts explore the entanglement between human actors and their environments, and the way in which they emphasise the agency of the non-human world, with the effect of questioning anthropocentric hierarchies of value. There is a high concentration of those phenomena in ancient depictions of mountains, with their interest in the tension between human control and human disempowerment.

Ancient representations of landscape and environment also offer us models for thinking about the relationship between global and local perspectives in our understanding of human-environment relations. A number of recent studies have drawn attention to the way in which modern genres often struggle to represent environmental problems on a global scale. Most prominently, Amitav Ghosh in his book *The Great Derangement* has argued that the modern Western prose fiction tradition, with its tendency to be obsessed by autonomous individuals inhabiting clearly bounded landscapes, is not well suited to dealing with the global challenge of climate change. By contrast the combination of local and global scales comes quite naturally to a lot of ancient writing about human relations with the environment. We see that in texts like the *Iliad*, with its interwoven network of similes that allow us to view countless other places side by side with the battlefield at Troy, or in the intricate structures of ancient historiographical and geographical writing, which juxtapose images of human-environment interaction from right across the Mediterranean world and beyond. In that sense there is more at stake in the choice to read classical depictions of mountains intratextually than a judgement about the aesthetic priorities and compositional habits of ancient narrative: it can also be a way of opening ourselves up to the potential of Greek and Roman literature as a resource for new modes of environmental imagination in the present.

There is also now a vast body of theory on the question of how we should understand the idea of ‘landscape’. As it developed from the Renaissance onwards that concept was linked with the idea of viewing from a distance, and associated with elite control over geographical space. In some of its manifestations that was a very modern concept, for example in the development of landscape painting and landscape gardening, but it was also founded in
classical precedents. As we shall see, the motif of viewing from mountain summits was a very widespread one in ancient Greek and Roman literature, and it was linked with authority of various kinds—divine, military, authorial. For many people, however, and in many contexts, the experience of landscape is never as detached as that image implies. Landscape is always a human construct, a product of human imagination. Landscapes also matter for identity, and the images created by humans for understanding the landscapes they inhabit and encounter are often experienced viscerally. Different meanings are imprinted on landscapes palimpsestically over time by the communities that interact with them, often in a way that reflects particular power relations and ideologies, and often through a process of contestation and negotiation between competing visions. Many analysts have found ‘place’ a more helpful term than ‘landscape’ for articulating that grounded quality of human interaction with the earth’s surface, and the way in which certain locations over time accumulate powerful symbolic and historical resonances. Another strand within modern scholarship, associated with the ‘phenomenological’ tradition, has made it clear that the human experience of landscape is often a bodily one that involves a sense of being immersed in the landscape quite different from the more detached styles of viewing that we associate with more traditional, visual conceptions of landscape appreciation.

One of the things we can gain through giving attention to ancient writing about mountains is an understanding of the way in which that whole range of possibilities for human engagement with the earth’s surface was there already in classical antiquity. The tension between visual and bodily ways of making sense of landscape is one of the recurring themes of this book: it was central to ancient thinking about mountains just as it has been in modern mountaineering culture from at least the early eighteenth century onwards, and just as it has been to modern writing about landscape more broadly. These are two different ways of making mountains knowable, or at least partially and imperfectly knowable, two different ways of understanding the relationship between mountains and human experience. Their dual importance is implied by the ‘folds’ of this book’s title, which is intended to draw attention to some of those conflicting resonances (the original phrase is from Homer’s Iliad, which will make an appearance early on in the book, in chapter 2). On one level that title suggests a focus on the physical textures of the landscape of the ancient Mediterranean, asking us to imagine a close-up view of mountain terrain, where the valleys and ravines and gullies on a mountainside can be obstructive, claustrophobic, concealing, or perhaps protective, as the folds of a
garment or even of flesh, impinging on the traveller’s experience in a very physical way. At the same time it points us towards a detached way of viewing from a distance, where the roughness of mountain terrain at ground level is smoothed away. It might make us think about a geological timescale, which can be appreciated only from a position of detachment. It points also to the textuality of ancient mountains, fixed in book form, on paper. The folds of Olympus are places of bodily experience and dwelling and at the same time places of the imagination, both solid ground and literary fantasy. Those different possibilities are repeatedly juxtaposed and in some cases inextricably intertwined with each other in ancient Greek and Roman literature.

Of course all of the mountains I talk about in what follows still exist (apart from a few that are imaginary or unidentifiable), and you can go and visit them if you are free to travel, and if you have the time and the money, and the energy and capacity to climb uphill. This is a book about real places: especially the mountains of mainland Greece, but also their counterparts in Italy, in Turkey, in Egypt and elsewhere. One of the great sources of the fascination with mountains in ancient culture, one of things above all that made them human places, was their association with the past. They were places of memory, linked with history and myth and with the celebration of communal identity, in the rituals of sacrifice that took place on Mount Lykaion and on so many other summits. The dominant fantasy of modern mountaineering culture is of the individual standing alone on the summit, where no one has trodden before. Looking at the mountains of the ancient world can help us to see more clearly the power of an alternative and equally inspiring fantasy, that is the idea of the mountain as a place of history and repeated human presence over many generations and millennia. When we stop to think about it, that link between mountains and the past is at the heart of their fascination for us too. That is true even for the great mountains of the Alps and the Himalayas, where part of the thrill is to follow the routes that others have climbed before. For those who do not climb it may be hard to understand why anyone would still want to go to Everest, as a place that it is not just extremely dangerous, but also (at least in the popular imagination) crowded with guided climbers and covered with litter and dead bodies. But the people who go up that mountain do so partly to see for themselves those iconic places from the history of mountaineering where others have climbed or died before them. The mountains of the Mediterranean offer a different kind of thrill, but one which is equally grounded in human history. You can still go to the places of myth, the famous mountain battle sites of the ancient world, the summit altars where ancient
worshippers sacrificed for millennia. That is one of the reasons why mountains matter: every time we walk on a mountain or read about it or imagine it, we have the opportunity to experience a sense of connection, albeit sometimes a tenuous and precarious one, with those who have visited it and inhabited it in the past. That role of mountains as places of memory is one of the things that unites ancient and modern responses most powerfully. The mountains of Greece in particular are some of the most wonderful places I know to walk. I hope that this book will in a small way encourage more people to visit them—or to explore them in other ways, if that option is not available. Visiting these places in person has helped me to understand the texts and the history better. It can give you a sense of the scale of particular slopes and summits and their spatial relationship with the cities beneath them. I have tried to make that clear through the occasional first-person passages scattered through the book, especially in part I. It has also given me opportunities to reflect on how we can write the history of mountains in the ancient world from the perspective of our own culture, where mountains are standardly viewed as places of sport and leisure: I have tried to explore some of the challenges involved in that process in the epilogue.

But this is also above all a book about the way in which mountains have been represented and imagined. Some sections were written during the first stages of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, at a time when going to any of these places in person was a very distant prospect. I spent a lot of time then travelling through places in my memory or in my imagination. I also spent a lot of time reading about ancient mountains and thinking about what these texts have to say to us today, at a time when our understanding of the relationship between humans and the environment has been challenged so starkly. My aim in the chapters that follow is not just to communicate some of the pleasure and fascination of that material, but also to convey something of the way in which ancient portrayals of mountains can confront us with powerful images against which to measure our own relationships with the world around us.