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BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Humans and the Environment: New Archaeological Perspectives for the 21st Century*

Humans and the Environment: New Archaeological Perspectives for the 21st Century, Matthew I. J. Davies and Freda Nkirote M'Mbogori, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 384 pages, 38 in-text illustrations, hardback, June 2013, ISBN: 9780199590292

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This edited volume synthesises a number of themes prevalent in recent archaeological discourse concerning, as is evident in the title, interactions between human beings and the natural environment. The chapters within, drawn predominantly from a session held at the 2008 World Archaeological Congress in Dublin, promote multidisciplinary approaches to environmental questions, and frame much of the discussion within topical debates on how humanity might respond to future climatic change. Though both editors are focused in their own work on eastern Africa, this volume presents, if not a truly global perspective – the majority of the chapters are concerned with either Africa or the Americas – a discussion that draws together philosophically and geographically disparate examples to make a largely coherent central argument; that archaeology can offer a positive contribution within the wider environmental and development research communities.

Section one reviews how ideas of what constitutes an environment have developed in European and North American (Davies, Chapter 1) and Soviet (Smyntyna, Chapter 2) archaeology. While I felt Davies' chapter provides a useful background to recurring concepts and themes, there is no obvious Soviet influence evident in any of the later chapters. Though perhaps of interest as a stand-alone piece in its explanation of how considerations of environment during and following the Soviet Union reflected changing emphases in society and government, in the context of this volume the paper seemed slightly redundant.

Section two examines distinctions between nature and culture, questioning notions of what constitutes a "pristine" environment. Balee (Chapter 3) argues eloquently that the Amazon forest is a manifestation of long-term human manipulation recognisable via observable signatures, equating the rainforest environment with an archaeological record, "environment as artefact". A key tenet of Balee's chapter, and, indeed, throughout the volume (e.g. Kost, Chapter 7; Anderson *et al*, Chapter 15), is that human-instigated environmental change should not be considered *a priori* as negative, an argument persuasively and steadfastly expounded by proponents of historical ecology (among whom Balee

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himself is a leading light). Davies' chapter explores the notion that the environmental and archaeological records can be similarly read along a different tack, in reference to the agricultural Marakwet of western Kenya. He argues that decisions made in response to climatic or environmental change are open to manipulation, that choices are consciously taken by agents acting within a set of environmentally determined parameters. Building on this idea, Fiore *et al* (Chapter 3) describe overlapping ecological and ideological spheres among hunter-gatherers in Tierra del Fuego. Based on their observation that species of highest nutritional value and availability were not seen to be the most frequently represented in the faunal assemblage, Fiore *et al* propose that ideologically-driven decisions relating to subsistence are recognisable as divergences from optimality models. The following chapter by Chevalier argues a similar point by comparing botanical assemblages from two contemporaneous and environmentally-similar sites in Peru, suggesting that differences in the plant species being exploited are reflective of processes of identity creation and deliberate differentiation. I felt that the inclusion of this paper *and* that by Fiore *et al* laboured the point somewhat, at least in the context of a volume of such broad scope, and though of similar value to Symntyna's chapter as standalone reports, one or the other would have been sufficient here. In the final chapter of this section, Kost describes the reduction in species diversity that followed colonial attempts to impose restrictions on Noongar bush-burning activity in southwestern Australia, in favour of a return to "natural" conditions; this paper clearly and convincingly encapsulates one of the major themes of the volume – that human intervention in the landscape is not necessarily negative – and reinforces the notion that culture and nature are in many ways indistinguishable given a long-term perspective.

Section three takes its lead from the idea raised by Kost that successful conservation strategies and land-use policies require an understanding of long-term indigenous interactions with environments, offering examples of where this has been applied. To this end, this section, which seems to represent the ideological heart of the book, considers engagement with local populations both modern (Isendahl *et al,* Chapter 8; Kendall, Chapter 9) and as represented in the archaeological record (Stump, Chapter 10; Armstrong Oma, Chapter 11). The papers themselves, though, are not entirely successful; the idea that reconstructed pre-Hispanic terraces in the South American highlands might offer levels of efficiency and sustainability of cultivation surpassing any subsequent colonial interventions (Kendall) is clearly intriguing, however the work presented here documents the reconstruction of the terraces and the institution of indigenous farming techniques without providing evidence of success (or failure). Conclusion is similarly lacking in Isendahl *et al*'s contribution, although the greater degree of self-reflexivity evident there compensated for this to some extent. The latter two chapters, from Stump and Armstrong Oma, on land use policy in Tanzania and perspectives on livestock keeping in northern Europe, respectively, communicate their messages more clearly.

Section four explores the ways in which humans have perceived and managed environmental risks and disaster events, beginning with a particularly insightful chapter from Holmberg (12) considering why the Pompeii story resonates so strongly with modern understandings of the nature-culture divide. In what I felt was one of the most engaging parts of the book, Holmberg questions the temporality attributed to natural disasters, arguing that environmental change – even with events as apparently abrupt as the eruption of Vesuvius – is always a process in which humans maintain a degree of agency. Leckie (Chapter 13) follows this appropriately, with a discussion of the contradictions apparent in the lifeways of Swiss Lake dwellers, communities in which disaster, destruction and the negotiation of risk were fundamental to group identity and social cohesion. Rudiak-Gould (Chapter 14) presents a sobering account of

the threats facing the Marshall Islands from climate change, and how these islands' long history of disastrous natural events – and the recovery from them, albeit often with great loss of life and/or resources – prevents these threats being taken seriously. I found section four the most successful part of the volume, in which were presented a coherent and well-matched set of case studies followed by a effective synthetic paper from Anderson *et al* (15) looking at climate change and its effects on human societies throughout the Holocene, ending with (another!) warning against *a priori* emphases of these effects as negative.

The fifth and final section positions and explicitly examines the role of archaeology within wider debates on environmental and climatic change. Fairhead (Chapter 16) opens the section with an echo of Balee's (Chapter 3) sentiment that the human-environment intersection is universally observable, with reference to regenerative growth recorded in previously intensively cultivated areas in West Africa; he concludes with the politically-loaded but apparently measured observation that a lack of consideration of historical depth in environmental narratives, for which studies of soils and vegetation mosaics are the primary descriptors, risks understating land use intensity to the extent that, in this case, the demographic impact of the slave trade is underplayed. Crumley (Chapter 17) issues an impassioned clarion call for archaeologists to directly engage in collaborative projects connecting the historical sciences with contemporary ecological agendas, using the IHOPE (Integrated History and Future of People on Earth) project as an example of the kind of undertakings we should be thinking about. Finally, Gosden's (Chapter 18) concluding words provide a neat summary of the themes and ideas contained in the volume, themes which are expressed (for the most part) with the clarity and enthusiasm that the import of the subject matter warrants.

As might be expected given the research interests of the editors, the chapters concerning African subject matter are particularly well conceived. To single out a few other highlights, the contributions from Balee (3) and Holmberg (12) offer challenging and valuable perspectives on how environments and the changes they undergo are perceived. Unfortunately, I cannot help but think that, the papers being drawn from a conference session, the editors have allowed themselves less scope to cherry-pick the contributions and have had to sacrifice a degree of structure and coherence. These reservations are compounded by the knowledge that the conference was held over five years ago, long enough perhaps in the fast-moving world of climate change science, to leave elements of this work open to accusations of obsolescence. That said, from an archaeological perspective, there are certainly a number of important and eloquently argued ideas within this volume that many researchers – and I include myself in that number – would and will find extremely useful, and any publication that endeavours to respond to the challenges posed by environmental change in the past, present and future must be a step in the right direction.

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