

REVIEW

Detachment from Place: Beyond an Archaeology of Settlement Abandonment. MAXIME LAMOUREUX-ST-HILAIRE and SCOTT MACRAE, editors. 2020. University Press of Colorado, Louisville. xii + 268 pp. \$72.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60732-814-8. \$58.00 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-64642-008-7.

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After reading this excellent book, I will think twice about using the term “abandonment.” It glosses over the complexities of why people leave and, just as significantly, how the places they left continue to have important roles (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson, “Rethinking Abandonment in Archaeological Contexts,” *The SAA Archaeological Record* 6 [1]:137–141, 2006). Maxime Lamoureux-St-Hilaire and Scott Macrae have assembled scholars to tease apart these complexities, using cases from throughout the world and from different time periods. *Detachment from Place* focuses not only on the movement of people but what is left behind—sacred or otherwise important places, including cemeteries, landmarks, and multigenerational residential settings.

The introduction to the book poses questions about what stressors or enablers resulted in people detaching from place, how people and former abodes were transformed, and how we can address these issues archaeologically. The editors state that “sedentism . . . is a historical illusion” (p. 4), because migration is so much part of history, human and otherwise (Shah, *The Next Great Migration*, 2020). This book comes at a critical moment, when migration has been touted in negative terms as a phenomenon demanding border closures and the building of walls.

Patricia A. McNany and Lamoureux-St-Hilaire focus on recursive place-making and unmaking. They make the case that place-leaving is just as significant as place-making, illustrated through, for example, termination rituals that not only cap a moment but simultaneously set the stage for the next cycle of

engagement. One of the most critical points they make is that as households are embedded in community relations, the latter must be discussed when talking about detachment from place.

Donna M. Glowacki unpacks the Mesa Verde emigration, starting with the point that reasons for leaving are difficult to discern archaeologically, and most explanations “are overly reliant on Malthusian narratives” (p. 23), exemplified in the U.S. Southwest, where droughts are commonly cited as causes of emigration. Patterns are actually much more complex, nuanced, and dialectical. Oral histories provide critical clues about how complex movement is, and how common emigration is, resulting in landscapes with deep histories—whether or not people were inhabiting certain places.

Jennifer Birch and Louis Lesage discuss emplacement and displacement in Huron-Wendat ancestral landscapes. This tour-de-force chapter excellently highlights how mobility is part of human existence—and how complex “abandonment” can be, resulting in “vast landscapes of contextual experience and social memory” (p. 55), in this case, materially represented in burial grounds. They emphasize that settlement is only one part of a community from which people detach—there are also such features as forests, fields, and trails. Serial migration was the norm. Places were never socially abandoned.

Kenneth E. Sassaman and Asa R. Randall take a novel approach, and their chapter title says it all—“Cosmic Abandonment: How Detaching from Place Was Requisite to World Renewal in the Ancient American Southeast.” They look to the sky to help explain why people “abandoned” the Poverty Point earthworks in Louisiana 3,100 years ago, and they tie it to water, including rainfall and sea level. “Detachment from place was integral to the renewal of society and the cosmos” (p. 81), and so movement was part of renewal, set in motion by movements of water, and was required to reset cosmic balance.

Macrae, Gyles Iannone, and Pete Demarte take a historical-ecological approach to explain the

differential abandonment of the medium-sized Maya urban center, Minanha, a hinterland area (Contreras Valley), and a small nearby settlement (Waybil), in Belize. They consider intersections of the sense of place and *landesque* capital, and the importance of these intersections in differential settlement histories. In another Classic Maya case, Lamoureux-St-Hilaire, Marcello A. Canuto, Tomás Q. Barrientos, and José Eduardo Bustamante focus on the royal palace of La Corona, Guatemala. Their interpretation of the last 150 years of palace life indicates gradual abandonment interspersed with termination rituals and new activities including craft production until the final retreat in approximately AD 900. These developments reflect the waning political power of the royal court.

Moving to the Bassar region of northern Togo, Africa, Phillip de Barros further illustrates that human mobility is the norm, especially in the face of conflict (e.g., raiding for slaves), sorcery, and/or tribute demands on this ironworking group. Because of attachments to place (such as sacred groves, principal spirits of clans, or *diwaal*), the Bassar maintained relationships with abandoned landscapes via rituals, resulting in landscapes reflecting migration histories and maintenance of material and spiritual rights to former abodes.

The following chapter by Michael D. Danti discusses migration in Early Bronze Age northern Mesopotamia, and he argues against massive abandonment during several megadroughts between 4,200 and 3,900 years ago. Rather, the story is more complicated,

depending on local environment and circumstances. In several instances, agropastoralism worked in response to droughts, nixing the need to emigrate. When people did have to leave an area, detachment was gradual.

Moving to Southeast Asia, Iannone discusses the multifaceted history of Bagan, the Buddhist capital in Myanmar between the ninth and fourteenth centuries AD, and the dispersed support population surrounding it. Power shifted between the *sangha* (Buddhist community of monks) and royal power; both competed for tribute, support, and labor. Even when political power was lost, Bagan continued as an important center for pilgrimage and the construction of stupas and temples—that is, for Buddhist merit-making activities.

Discussion chapters differ noticeably in their approaches. Catherine M. Cameron compares case studies in the book, discusses different scales of detachment, and highlights how the importance or meanings of place are determined by cultural and historic perspectives. Jeffrey H. Cohen, a cultural anthropologist, compares challenges in the archaeology and cultural anthropology of migration. Most notable is his point, as illustrated throughout the book, that anthropologists should focus on decisions and processes rather than just movements. His approach is aptly summarized as “abandonment . . . does not signify emptiness but instead defines an action” (p. 199). Indeed.

History and engagement do not end when people leave a place.