

Book Review



MAXIME LAMOUREUX-ST-HILAIRE & SCOTT A. MACRAE (ed.). 2020. *Detachment from place: beyond an archaeology of settlement abandonment*. Louisville: University Press of Colorado; 978-1-60732-814-8 hardback \$72.



While archaeologists have long examined settlement abandonment and collapse, Maxime Lamoureux-St-Hilaire and Scott A. Macrae's volume adopts a comparative approach to reframe the process as detachment from place. Unlike abandonment, which implies a complete severing of ties, detachment is a "decisive social process" (p. 5) wherein migration differentially changes or erases the relationship between people and places. Although "sedentism ... is a historical illusion" (p. 4) and migration defines human history, this volume presents case studies from around the world and from different time periods to demonstrate how sites are rarely completely abandoned; instead, they are revisited, repurposed and reimagined by people old and new. The volume thus shifts emphasis from abandonment to interrogate how and why people leave places, how leaving impacts people and landscapes, and how people engage with 'abandoned' landscapes.

Laying theoretical groundwork for the case studies, Patricia McAnany and Lamoureux-St-Hilaire expound on place-making and unmaking, underscoring how "detachment from place is not unilinear, but rather a dialectical process" (p. 18). They also question why sedentism has been valued over mobility, suggesting that rootedness is laden with Western notions of success and prosperity.

Moving beyond Western perspectives on settlement, Donna Glowacki employs an ethnographically informed perspective to examine Pueblo emigration at Mesa Verde in the American Southwest between AD 1140 and 1290 (Chapter 3). Upending Malthusian narratives that attribute depopulation to factors such as droughts, Glowacki argues that relocation and emigration consistently shaped the Puebloan social landscape. Pueblo oral histories clarify how serial migration transpired, with settlement patterns becoming writ large in the landscape.

Jennifer Birch and Louis Lesage focus on north-eastern North America, considering serial migration in the ancestral landscape of the Huron-Wendat from c. AD 1000 onward (Chapter 4). While archaeologists have previously used environmental factors to explain community movement, the authors contend that settlement patterns were flexible, and that village relocation was not an 'event' but a process that strengthened social and political ties. Huron-Wendat ancestors relocated to the extent that the "locus of identity formation ... may not have been the village itself, but rather the landscape" (p. 57). Even after moving, they maintained attachments to the landscape, reflecting how detachment is neither complete nor

final. As contemporary Huron-Wendat emphasise, they never relinquished their rights to these landscapes.

To the south, Kenneth Sassaman and Asa Randall investigate why people ‘abandoned’ the monumental earthworks at Poverty Point in Louisiana 3100 years ago (Chapter 5). Because “syncing movements of the sky with earthly movement and with moving bodies and objects was how the world was renewed” (p. 67), they suggest that people left Poverty Point to restore cosmic balance when the sea level stopped rising around 3400–3200 years ago. River flooding also increased and the climate became cooler and wetter. Faced with such unanticipated changes, the ‘cosmunity’—the regional community who subscribed to Poverty Point cosmology—reevaluated their understanding of the cosmos and dispersed. Five hundred years would pass before Southeastern “native peoples” (p. 79) resumed terraforming.

The next two case studies relate to the Maya. Macrae, Gyles Iannone and Pete Demarte adopt a historical ecology approach to investigate ‘abandonment’ in the Late Classic polity of Minanha in Belize (Chapter 6). Comparing rural Waybil and the Contreras Valley, they assess how residents generated *landesque* capital—enduring landscape features (e.g. terraces, fields and walls) that enhanced agricultural production and reduced labour. Although in both places people transformed the landscape through terracing, the process took only 125 years in Waybil *versus* 425 years in Contreras. Through their sustained landscape management, Contreras residents probably developed a stronger sense of place, which would have helped their community endure the climatic fluctuation and turmoil of the Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic periods.

In Chapter 7, Lamoureux-St-Hilaire, Marcello Canuto, Tomás Barrientos and José Eduardo Bustamante concentrate on “detachment from power” (p. 105) at the royal palace of La Corona, Guatemala between AD 750 and 900, which coincides with the Classic Maya collapse. Analysing the architectural landscape, they demonstrate that initially the royal court adapted to an evolving geopolitical landscape, but was gradually abandoned, as evidenced by waning political activity and less orthodox use of palatial space. The palace was eventually abandoned with little fanfare, probably with the presumption that the court would rise again.

The next case study reinforces the centrality of migration to human history. Attending to the Bassar region of northern Togo, West Africa, Phillip de Barros examines site abandonment during the Late Iron Age, especially from the sixteenth century onward (Chapter 8). While factors such as slave raiding, sorcery and tribute demands prompted communities to move, de Barros highlights how they forged attachments to place through rituals. To create a new settlement, people had to “capture the land” (p. 127) where a *diwaal* (principal spirit) had been discovered. Someone thereafter keeps it ‘beautiful’, or spiritually healthy—occasionally even after resettlement—reaffirming community rights to ancestral lands.

Michael Danti likewise challenges traditional notions of collapse in a study of Early Bronze Age northern Mesopotamia (Chapter 9). Although settlement abandonment between 4200 and 3900 BP had previously been attributed to a series of megadroughts, the research reveals that urban centres such as Sweyhat not only survived but thrived during the climate event.

Particularly important to their survival was the support of agropastoralists. If people decided to leave an area, detachment was a gradual process rather than sudden and catalysed by catastrophe.

The final case study by Iannone describes the multiscalar detachment process at Bagan, capital of the First Burmese Empire in Myanmar, between the ninth and fourteenth centuries AD (Chapter 10). As power passed between the *Sangha* (Buddhist Church) and the Crown, the two entities became differentially dependent on merit systems, wherein citizens donated capital and labour to secure social and spiritual benefits. Ultimately, declining agricultural productivity and land scarcity prompted citizens to gradually turn away from the Crown toward the Church. Despite the past political decline of Bagan, its “historical gravity” (p. 176) still attracts people today who want to affirm their power.

To conclude the volume, Catherine Cameron synthesises the eight case studies, examining the scale of movement and the meaning that abandoned places hold for people past and present (Chapter 11). Cultural anthropologist Jeffrey Cohen has the last word and contemplates the issues confronting archaeologists and cultural anthropologists who study human mobility (Chapter 12). Although archaeologists often have a “long-focus, low-resolution approach” (p. 194), Cohen challenges us to ask not only why people migrate, but “why now?” This volume meets that challenge, capturing “the complexity of the process—not only the sojourn” (p. 209) through its focus on detachment from place.

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