

REVIEWS

***The Power of Nature: Archaeology and Human-Environmental Dynamics.* Monica L. Smith, editor. 2022. University Press of Colorado, Denver. xii + 282 pp. \$72.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-64642-351-4. \$58.00 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-64642-352-1.**

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With *The Power of Nature: Archaeology and Human-Environmental Dynamics*, Monica L. Smith and the contributing authors add to a growing body of research that seeks to center nature in human-environment histories. Building from fields such as human ecodynamics and multispecies studies, this perspective situates humans as integral components of natural systems, not the other way around. However, putting theory to practice presents unique challenges for archaeology. On the one hand, avoiding a reductive approach can mean that the sheer number of included variables renders an explanatory framework ineffective; on the other, a fragmentary archaeological record can result in uneven sampling across natural and human variables. Smith in her introductory chapter and the authors of the 11 case studies ask, and move toward answering, these questions: What does a multiscalar, multispecies, nature-centered archaeology look like? And what new insights might archaeologists gain from these perspectives?

This case studies cover different scales of agentive power in nature, including “mass events,” incremental or cumulative processes, and biotic agents. For Smith, this kind of coverage is theoretically productive. She uses the term “anthroposcape” to describe a dialectic approach to the interactions of sentient and nonsentient beings, in contrast to “Anthropocene,” which, Smith argues, foregrounds human agency.

The book begins with three case studies scaled to the level of “mass-event natural phenomena”: hurricanes, monsoons, and earthquakes. By placing what would typically be treated as “natural disasters” in conversation with plants, animals, and pathogens, *The Power of Nature* achieves an innovative reframing: rather than being treated as social laboratories, these events are investigated as natural agents in their own right.

Hurricanes have received little archaeological attention due, in part, to the spatial and temporal incongruence across different scales of data—an important theme that reappears in later chapters. Matthew C. Peros, Jago Cooper, and François Oliva offer three examples of hurricane agency reflected in society or human behavior: “divine” intervention in a naval attack by Mongol fleets on Japan, the relative absence of hurricanes contributing to drought in the Terminal Classic Maya period, and Taíno resilience encoded in architectural design in the Caribbean.

Drawing from selections from the *Rig Veda* and various archaeological examples, Kanika Kalra offers a fascinating look at the interaction of monsoons and South Asian societies over time. Monsoons are widely acknowledged as crucial to ecosystem health, but they are also capricious, varying in intensity from year to year, and they are potentially threatening. The Harappan civilization (3300–1500 BC) emerged in the Indus Valley in the context of chronic environmental variability, conditions that shaped patterns of settlement location and the development of autochthonous water management and storage systems. “Water awareness” continues into the historic period in this region, and states formed built landscapes based on what Naomi Miller (*Sustainable Lifeways: Cultural Persistence in an Ever-Changing Environment*, 2011) calls “predictable unpredictability.”

What about the role of these events in creating opportunities for revision? Jordan Pickett’s chapter covers earthquakes in ancient Rome, where accounts from Naples Bay and Pompeii reveal a rhetoric around potentiality and restoration, particularly in urban landscapes. In Pickett’s case, earthquakes can

enter the political sphere to determine in part when, how, and in what image a crumbled Roman city is rebuilt.

Smith's own chapter serves as a transition from mass events to the incremental power of nature. Early hominids encountered naturally occurring fire on the landscape, which likely conditioned them to consider fire as a resource. Over time, manipulating fire had cumulative cognitive effects that would contribute to the development of more and more complex pyrotechnologies. Similarly, pathogens and people engage in constant feedback. Sara L. Juengst and coauthors discuss the elements—ecological and anthropic—that created microbe-scapes in the ancient Lake Titicaca Basin of Bolivia, demonstrating that pathogens were particularly sensitive to shifts in human subsistence and sedentism over time.

For Harper Dine, Traci Ardren, and Chelsea Fisher, weeds wielded power over place-making and the formation of ancient Maya landscapes. Similarly, bird behavior (Katelyn J. Bishop) is shown to have dictated human practices of bird procurement. Long-term interaction with these birds gave rise to a value system that had implications for ritual life in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. Rats, bats, and birds were powerful agents in the local ecologies of East Polynesia; as Seth Quintus and coauthors suggest, their population dynamics may have played a major role in forest contraction and consequent declines in the agricultural productivity of Rapa Nui and other Polynesian islands.

Steven Ammerman's chapter on wild and feral animal activity complements Silvia Tomášková's fascinating chapter on reindeer, which the author describes as both wild and tame and therefore representative of a different kind of co-domestication process. John Robb concludes *The Power of Nature* with a reflection on the Black Death as a crisis. *Yersinia pestis*, he points out, shares characteristics readily observed among other natural agents: flexibility and ecological and social contingency.

With its rich case studies and theoretical implications, *The Power of Nature* will appeal to all those with an interest in human-environment dynamics. At times, the wide-ranging coverage of this book inhibits it from working as a cohesive whole; yet, that same ambition offers a provocative panorama of a truly "nature-centered" archaeology.

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***Gods of Thunder: How Climate Change, Travel, and Spirituality Reshaped Precolonial America.* Timothy R. Pauketat. 2023. Oxford University Press, New York. xvi + 330 pp. \$29.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-19764-510-9.**

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This accessible and well-written travelogue boldly frames the hypothesis that late medieval Indigenous eastern North Americans embraced rain-bringing wind gods, originally conceived in Mesoamerica, along with maize agriculture. The spread of these beings and their cults was similar to the spread of the faiths in the Old World—Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam: they were conveyed by sages with their words, bundles, and visionary charisma early on, as much as by force in later colonialism. Author Timothy R. Pauketat has traveled and contemplated the places that witnessed the turn to these gods, from the Maya Lowlands through the Valley of Mexico, the Gulf of Mexico, the Sonoran Desert, the American Southwest, Caddo country, the Mississippi Valley, and the American Bottom. The introduction presents the case for environmental change in the late medieval era triggering an embrace of wind and rain gods.