



Monica L. Smith, ed. *The Power of Nature: Archaeology and Human-Environmental Dynamics*. Louisville: [University Press of Colorado](#), 2022. 288 pp. \$72.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-64642-351-4.

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Not often do we as a society think of or treat nonhuman forces as agents in their own right; we are invested in thinking of humans as the sole perpetrators of and reactors to change. *The Power of Nature: Archaeology and Human-Environmental Dynamics* challenges this narrative by exploring a range of case studies from across space and time that emphasize the agentic capacities of nonhuman beings and forces. From hurricanes shaping ancient Japanese and Maya societies to Siberian reindeer resisting full domestication, this volume highlights the relevance of archaeological investigations, methods, and perspectives in showcasing the vast array of past human creativity and ingenuity in our interactions with all types of nonhuman agents.

The Power of Nature, edited by Monica L. Smith, convenes a stunning array of archaeologists and anthropologists who make their work engaging, conversational, and question-provoking, even for the nonanthropologist. Smith starts from the argument that the “study of human-environmental dynamics has been heavily weighted on the ‘human’ side of the equation” (p. 3)—as such, this volume seeks to show that humans are not the only agents that can cause measurable impacts. The authors center “initiat[ion] of an action, whether a movement or a thought” (p. 216) as their definition of agency, eschewing the “animacy, intentionality, [and] personhood” (p. 10) found in many other definitions of the term; they then explicate how a plethora of climatic, floral, and faunal agents actively shape their relationships with us.

The first few chapters explore events that humans can neither predict nor alter (at least pre-climate change) and the ways natural phenomena cause changes that human must both react to and prepare for. Matthew C. Peros et al. write about hurricanes’ effects and the difficulties and necessity of gathering hurricane data from centuries past to link with archaeological records of how affected groups responded to such chaotic climatic events. Here, hurricanes are the agentic instigators of events that have “had significant geopolitical influence,” including sparing Japan a Mongol invasion and contributing to Terminal Maya collapse through low groundwater levels (p. 34). Kanika Kalra explores monsoons in South Asia and how socioeconomic circumstances and population densities have affected the strategies people have used, from reservoirs to floodplains, to embrace the monsoonal water deficit. Not embracing the monsoons is not a viable option; humans must always respond to them while never being able to control them, refuting the belief that humans are always the arbiter of their environments Jordan Pickett then examines the long history of earthquakes around the Mediterranean—the Romans exhibited much political creativity in their preemptive and reformative responses to earthquakes that the quakes seemed to be a creator of potential. Earthquakes are the ultimate nonhuman agent because they are rarely predictable let alone controllable, and yet their actions necessitate often urgent and large-scale responses from humans.

A middle portion of the volume deals with phenomena that humans can at times partly control; this section shows how humans are co-agents who iteratively and cumulatively shape and are shaped by fire, pathogens, and weeds. Monica L. Smith explores how fire exists along a spectrum of human control but always maintains the potential to escape; that is, it always possesses agency. We likely would not be the *Homo sapiens* we are today had it not been for our curation of fire, but the phenomenon will always have the potential to destroy many other things that also enable us to be

just as *Homo sapiens*. Sara L. Juengst et al. write about how microbe-scapes are cocreated with human landscapes: microbes both form and are formed by the activities we do and how we do them. They use data from prehispanic Bolivia to illustrate the ways pathogens that Titicaca Basin unwittingly enabled through changes in subsistence strategies in turn affected their health in terms of decreased stature, disrupted dental enamel, and increased bone lesions. Following this, Harper Dine et al. beautifully explore the concept of a weed and its inherent relativity. They use Maya houselots to show how plants defy the neat boundaries Western humans try to put on “nature” and “culture” and instead are agentive forces that generations of humans have had to react to; weeds enable human cohesion and social memory as we constantly negotiate our relationship to them, though we can never fully control them.

The last chapters explore how animals living alongside humans are not simply the passive recipients of our actions but rather are agents in their own right and cocreate their relationships with us. Katelyn J. Bishop aims to quantify the various ways birds work to eschew human control through identifying characteristics relevant to human-bird interactions, which make control by humans either more or less likely, and applying these factors to bird remains found at Chaco Canyon. Seth Quintus et al. show how rats, bats, and birds in Polynesia shaped the agricultural and material environments that humans lived in by altering, for example, seed dispersal and thus vegetation patterns, or nutrient cycling in soils and food webs; these animals were agents who participated in altering the carrying capacities of land parcels as the humans themselves did. The authors exhibit how our material and social lives are never solely our own creation, but are instead a collaborative and cumulative process that happens between ourselves and the rest of the world. Steven Ammerman expands on the concept of animal agency, explicating a definition of agent that leaves room for domesticated, feral, and wild animals to all initiate action vis-à-vis humans and obfuscating the typical idea that animals live much at the mercy of our human actions. He beautifully outlines how, given the vast array of wild animals and the relative paucity of domesticates, the species that became domesticated were not entirely the prerogative of humans; instead the animals themselves were also agents in constructing our relationships with them. Silva Tomášková explores narratives around the partial domestication of reindeer, as they have continued to resist what we often think of as full “domestication” and remain in a liminal state vis-à-vis the humans around them where they are neither fully wild nor domesticated. The reindeer themselves are agents who defy the typical wild-domestic binary and push us to use more imagination when it comes to the labels and categories we use to view the world.

John Robb ends the volume with a discussion of the nature of crises. Crises are never absolute or objective but instead are mediated and created by social, ecological, and political factors, among others. Thus we have the ability to allow or disallow for crises, both in the moment of definition and in the ways we structure our worlds.

The takeaway message from this volume is that humans have never been and will never be fully in control of the world around us, despite what we often consciously and subconsciously think, especially in this age of technological supremacy. Everything from microbes to weeds to earthquakes acts on us (and despite us); the ways we react to these forces exhibit both our lack of control and the immense potential of human creativity. At no point in this volume is the power of the nonhuman world to shape our lives in the most basic, material, and important ways in question; it is always a given that we are participants in this world, not its directors. We are co-agents in a world composed entirely of other agents, despite whatever beliefs we may have about our own species’ supremacy.

The most effective chapters in the volume forgo the dive into methodological details in favor of big-picture messages that make the actions of ancient humans relevant to our current existence in the world. They show that there are a plethora of ways to exist in (response to) this world, and that the interactions between human and nonhuman agents are iterative, cumulative, and infinite.

The volume as a whole also illustrates the complexity of life itself—each chapter is a sliver of one instance of human and nonhuman agents meeting at one point in history, and their compilation galvanizes questions of all the possible convergences. What were the microbe-scapes in the Roman Mediterranean, or the weeding practices of the inhabitants of Chaco Canyon, or the ways birds evaded human control in ancient monsoonal South Asia? The volume portrays instances of the “intricate dance of coexistence” that happens always and everywhere (p. 244); it illustrates that we may find compelling and intricate dances where and whenever we look.



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