



# The Archaeological Journal

## Book Reviews



**HUMANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY.** Edited by Matthew I. J. Davies and Freda Nkirote M'Mbogori. Pp. xxxii and 348, Illus 38. Oxford University Press, 2013. Price: £75.00. ISBN 978 019959 029 2.

This volume appears to have two underlying conceptual themes; firstly, to examine contemporary theoretical narratives of the human-environment relationship, and secondly, a view that archaeologists do, or ought to, have something to say about pressing global issues such as climate change. The chapters in the book consider these themes to different degrees, varying from in-depth and thought-provoking examinations of culture-nature reformulations, to attempts to use archaeological knowledge to inform, if not direct, environmental management. The sections that the eighteen chapters in this book are allocated to reflect this thinking: 'Archaeology and Environment', 'Environment as Artefact', 'Environmental Narratives and Applied Archaeology', 'Environment, Disaster and Memory', and 'New Directions'. All the chapters in this volume are worth reading, but there is space here only to mention a few.

After an excellent preface, the following chapter by Davies reviews 'environment' as a theme in North American and European archaeology. We journey from Cartesian duality, through memes, to cultural perception and the role of intentionality in shaping both the physical and cultural world. The optimizing assumptions of the New Archaeology get a polite kicking, as they do in other chapters, but a tension appears in some places due to the gravitational pull of pseudo-cybernetic (systems theory) models implicit in environmental adaptation and resilience theory, especially in the chapters in the final section. The 'Environment as Artefact' section commences with Ballée's consideration of landscape transformation as part of indigeneity over the *longue durée*. Interestingly, the *Annales* school concept appears in several other chapters (e.g. Davies, Chapter 4; Crumley, Chapter 17). Examples include sculpted terrace indigenous landscapes in Malesia, West African (Guinea) pre-European forest management, ecological repercussions of Amazonian mound construction altered biodiversity, and soil construction (Amazonian 'dark earths'). Chapter 4, by Davies, emphasizes the role of community, clan and inheritance in decisions concerning relocation or *in situ* intensification in Pokot farming in north-west Kenya. The question as to what would happen under abnormal conditions is not considered here, although it is the focus of a later section (Part IV).

The chapters in Part III all concern the investigations of past agricultural systems with at least a consideration of how these assumedly sustainable systems could inform contemporary land management, if not be brought back into use. Whilst the first three

chapters in this section — on Bolivian Yungas (dry valleys with small-scale field systems) by Isendahl et al., on indigenous agricultural terracing in Peru by Kendall, and on terrace systems in East Africa by Stump — come to different conclusions concerning the applicability and desirability of trying to reinstate past slope-based agricultural systems, all three help us to understand how such systems operated in both physical and social terms.

The four chapters that make up Part IV ('Environment, Disaster and Memory') further negotiate the tension alluded to above between modern conceptions of place, space and events and the past, especially the pre-literate past, but with varying degrees of success. Crumley takes the Anthropocene as given, but to many archaeologists and others, including earth-scientists, the term has nuances of 'first-world' elitism and raises serious questions as to how we recognize 'overwhelming' human forcing and how we deal with spatial diachrony of both natural and social systems. In the final chapter, Gosden takes the reader back to some highly influential and neglected perspectives on these issues. Of particular pertinence is the once well-known structuralist analysis of food and culture, epitomized by Lévi Strauss's dictum 'food is good to think with'.

Overall, this is a valuable collection of chapters which share an attempt to re-engage with the human-environment debate in new and sometimes exciting ways. To this reviewer's viewpoint, there is a tendency to erect straw persons and to marginalize science whilst simultaneously utilizing it selectively and often somewhat uncritically. Some current and appropriate developments in biology are not mentioned and potentially relevant research in psychology, such as the implications of extended mind-body, are only mentioned in the final chapter despite recourse to the importance of perception in many chapters. Despite these shortcomings, the volume contains some valuable contributions, especially in Parts I to III, and several will make excellent reading matter for both researchers and students.

TONY BROWN