Conference and Workshop Reports

Anthropology, Weather and Climate Change

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From May 27th to 29th 2016, the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (RAI) hosted a large international conference on the theme of weather, environment and climate change at the British Museum in London. The topic is of course timely in the extreme, with issues of climate change and questions of how to deal most appropriately with it looming large in public debate, in policy-making, and in research funding arenas such as the EU’s Horizon 2020 framework programme. With nearly 600 attendees and substantial press coverage, this was by all standards a high-profile academic convention. As stated in the conference booklet, the meeting was to appeal to an anthropological audience in the four-field definition of the discipline, i.e. social/cultural anthropology, biological anthropology, linguistics and, last but not least, archaeology. The latter discipline was, however, only poorly represented outside the one session organized by us – but more on this below.

In the opening speech of the conference, Lord Deben, the Chairman of the UK’s independent Committee on Climate Change, delivered a rhetorically powerful barrage of arguments against the denial of anthropogenic climate change and for the critical roles of knowledge, of academia and of academics in this domain. This politically and ethically charged tone was mirrored in most of the sessions and plenaries. Anthropologists working on human-environment relations are increasingly unable to disentangle their work from evermore pressing issues of climate change, environmental change, and environmental catastrophe. Although these processes have for some time now been relegated to ‘nature’ (and so bracketed from serious enquiry within humanities-based disciplines), the increasing realization that humans have and are impacting this nature now combines with the increasingly obvious insight that ‘natural’ processes articulate with economic, political, cosmological and moral patterns and processes. This new wave of interest is succinctly encapsulated in the term Anthropocene, the proposed new geological epoch where humans are supposedly ‘overwhelming the great forces of nature’ (Steffen et al. 2007, 614) and the emergence of the Environmental Humanities (Nye et al. 2013), which mark the (re)discovery of the environment as a significant historical agent by environmental historians and so-called eco-critical literature scholars (see Bergthaller et al. 2014).

Archaeologists are participating in the Anthropocene debate (see TEA 47 and, for instance, Boivin et al. 2016; Braje 2016; Edgeworth 2014), but their voice remains almost unheard within the Environmental Humanities. Curiously, archaeological sessions or even papers were markedly few and far between during this major conference. The majority of sessions concerned with archaeology were focused on the Pleistocene record on the relationship of climatic and environmental process on human evolution. These sessions were excellent in their own right, presenting new ideas, new data, and new approaches. However, they were also somewhat distanced from the more overtly political and ethical emphasis of the conference at large. The historical actors in the sessions focused on human evolution were species, not societies or communities; the terminology used consistently that of geologists and palaeoecologists; the substantive relevance of these studies to contemporary concerns was left largely implicit. But has archaeology – with its long and fruitful tradition of interdisciplinary environmental investigations – nothing to contribute to anthropology’s disciplinary engagement with climate change?
In a session with the title *Past weather, past climate – archaeology as Environmental Humanity*, we were trying to address this lacuna. Our session was well received: with many abstracts submitted and eleven papers making the final cut, it was one of the larger ones at this conference; our assigned conference room filled to near capacity throughout. We were also delighted to welcome Mike Hulme, the Professor of Climate and Culture at King’s College London, one of the keynote speakers for the conference and a central figure in contemporary climate change debate – as our discussant. Contributors came from the US, from Sweden, Norway, Denmark as well as from the UK, reflecting in part our own professional networks and in part perhaps also the vitality of this research in different regions of Europe and beyond. The session began with a short scene-setting by ourselves where we highlighted that the political and ethical concerns as well as the methods of the Environmental Humanities are most akin to those of post-processual, interpretative or historical archaeologies, but that these have largely and indeed often actively eschewed climate and environment as topics worthy of study. Vice versa, environmental archaeologists have been described as ‘theoretical Luddites’ (Barker 2001, 312) and as such are more likely to seek disciplinary articulations with the earth sciences than with politics. Our opening thesis was that in the Anthropocene, the once foundational culture|nature divide that provides the rationale for disciplinary categorizations collapses. All history arguably becomes also environmental history, all archaeology environmental archaeology. We further suggested, perhaps provocatively, that one of (environmental) archaeology's major concerns should be issues of human climatic and environmental impacts. And in continuation we asked how we can move towards an engaged archaeology that not only writes environmental deep history, but also critically addresses the valorisation of consumption, control, and environmental engineering implicit in much of archaeological research, heritage management, and dissemination.

These issues were first taken up with a regional focus on the North, where the impacts of contemporary warming are felt acutely. Mikkel Sørensen from Copenhagen University and Anne Eg Larsen from the City Museum of Odense each presented papers on perceived changes in weather and climate in Greenland, and the human responses to them. Sørensen focused on the Inuit of prehistoric Greenland, whilst Larson drew on colonial documentary evidence to elicit perceptions of weather during pre-industrial historic times with an eye towards better understanding the earlier and unsuccessful Norse colonisers’ interactions with the climes they faced. Britt Solli then moved to Norway and discussed heritage concerns of melting glaciers and snow patches.

The second regional groups of papers took us to warmer climates with Cameron Petrie, Cambridge University, presenting interim results from his ERC-funded *TwoRains* project on the emergence and decline of Indus Civilisation. Simon Stoddart, also from Cambridge University, presented key results from his ERC-funded project *FRAGSUS*, which focuses on the longue durée of human-environment interaction on, as he fondly and repeatedly referred to it, ‘little Malta’. Further, Paul Lane of Uppsala University reflected on the use of historical ecology and archaeological investigations for discussions of sustainability in his study region of East Africa. Concluding this block and providing a direct bridge to the following was Julia Shaw (UCL), who suggested that interdisciplinary studies of past environmental ethics in India can enlighten contemporary debates and identity-building vis-à-vis environmental concerns.
The final set of papers further delved into the ethical dimensions of environmental archaeological research. In a stimulating, erudite and eloquent paper, Karen Holmberg (New York University) drew tantalising parallels between surprise sightings of giant squid and unexpected and catastrophic environmental events such as volcanic eruptions and its attendant lightning. Then, the session organisers themselves took over with first Felix Riede (Aarhus University) reporting on a field project at the former brown coal mine of Søby in Central Jutland aimed at investigating the ‘shallow’ Anthropocene starting around 1950 from a specifically archaeological perspective. Using both traditional archaeological methods as well as novel absolute dating methods, this is one of the first projects that takes up the challenge of dealing with the very recent Anthropocene from an archaeological perspective, rather than arguing for a deep-time starting point for this new epoch that intuitively comes more natural to archaeologists. In addition to field investigations, this project has also fed into an exhibition that tells the story of brown coal extraction not as an economic adventure but an environmental catastrophe. Then, Alison Klevnäs (Stockholm University) focused in on how material culture and the narratives many museums construct around it relate – implicitly, uncomfortably – to entrenched Western notions of individualism, self-realisation and consumption. Her powerful critique lead us to discuss alternative ways of seeing and presenting material culture that connect better with the proposed solutions for future green economies. Finally, Christina Fredengren, from Stockholm University and the Swedish National Heritage Board, explicitly addressed how the unfortunate distinction of nature and culture remains strongly entrenched in the heritage sector. Benefitting from Mike Hulme’s perceptive comments, the session was interspersed with lively debate that often returned to how we can – perhaps must – use our work to contribute to contemporary debates on climate change and human environment relations. Archaeologies can tell evidence-based stories of past peoples’ resilience as well as their vulnerability. While narratives of catastrophe and collapse run the risk of suffering from sensationalism, narratives that all too strongly focus on resilience in turn risk portraying human societies as infinitely adaptable and thus immune to climate and environmental changes. This is a difficult but important balance to strike. In setting archaeology up against the emerging Environmental Humanities, one argument throughout has been that scholars working in the latter tradition often quite explicitly articulate their scholarship with political and ethical concerns. Indeed, the Environmental Humanities draw their relevance and not least their success from this very argument. A similar engagement would require archaeologists to take responsibility for, for instance, prognoses of societal responses to future climate change, but would also give archaeological work a degree of relevance not unwelcome in these times when the Humanities are under pressure due to their perceived lack of useful input in relation to pressing societal challenges.

The recent rise in high-profile studies concerned with past human-environment interactions underlines the perceived importance of this work. Yet, for humanities-based perspectives also to acquire relevance beyond academia and, in particular, be used in policy-making, archaeologists must probably make themselves better heard in the public sphere – another point the discussion returned to repeatedly. Precisely this issue of how to make anthropological knowledge usable was the topic of the conference’s main plenary forum: here, members of the American Anthropological Association’s (AAA) Global Climate Change Task Force were invited to present their specific views – including
University of Wyoming Professor Robert Kelly’s specifically archaeological one – on how the discipline can contribute. This Task Force has recently released a report (Statement on Humanity and Climate Change), meant to provide a guiding document to recognize anthropological contributions to global climate change-related issues. Mirroring this initiative, the EAA’s sister organization the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) has in 2015 put into place a standing Committee on Climate Change Strategies and Archaeological Resources (CCSAR) and also recently made a powerful statement on the relation between archaeology, cultural heritage and climate change. The US National Parks Service (another important cultural heritage actor there) likewise has draft its Climate Change Response Strategy that also is concerned with the substantial cultural heritage under its jurisdiction (Rockman 2015). These reports recognise both the threat climate change poses to the archaeological record, but at the same time argue that this same record also offers potentially important insights into past (and hence also future) societal solutions to climate challenges. Importantly, the president of the AAA Ed Liebow made the concluding argument that anthropologists should make use of their collective representation to speak out, as a profession and as concerned scientists, about these issues. In Europe, such efforts are at present less coordinated, it seems. Similar concerns are represented by the global Integrated History and Future of People on Earth (IHOPE) initiative, anchored in Uppsala in Sweden, which provides an important clearinghouse and articulation between studies on the ground and higher-level policy initiatives such as Future Earth. One of the conclusions we took away from this inspiring RAI conference is, however, that European archaeology and European archaeologists could also benefit from reflecting on how important collective bodies such as our EAA can and should take a stance on climate change, environmental change and environmental catastrophe. Europe’s historical and archaeological records of these processes and events is actually unrivalled and could potentially provide a strong evidence base for engagement with such issues, not only at academic levels but also at the levels of dissemination and policy advice. We hope that such a dialogue will begin at coming EAA meetings.

References


