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This is an excellent and beautifully-produced overview of where North American medievalists and their European colleagues stand today as environmentally conscious medievalists. It describes how we have begun to think about medieval (and indeed modern) climate change, but it is so much more, proposing new methods to apply to the many as yet unanswered questions about the relationship between feeding people and maintaining ecosystems, whether in medieval Europe or the modern world. Thus both a state of the question analysis but also an agenda for further research, Hoffmann’s book pushes us beyond the usual descriptions of medieval population ebb and flow, attacking some explanations that no longer apply, like the Lynn White thesis that medieval Christianity encouraged an antipathy for the natural world, as something to be dominated. It gives skeptical consideration of long-held explanations such as the »failure of the commons«, encouraging medievalists to look beyond the complaints of late medieval British lords about falling income on their estates. Hoffmann inspires the researcher and the reader to move beyond earlier explanations that considered only single sides in what were then and are now overlapping and multidirectional interactions between Nature and Culture that become in Hoffmann’s first chapter a series of increasingly complex Venn diagrams to describe those forces and feedback systems.

Much more than are modernists, medievalists are prisoners of our sources. As a consequence, the study of medieval environmental history is one of first documented evidence and how to date non-written sources. Often this has meant that we study Nature and Culture on the margins at meeting places on the edge of crisis. For the early medieval period Hoffmann evokes early medieval Frisia and early medieval Venetia, with useful maps of each, as stand-ins for a wider picture of both changes in settlement and environmental responses, as well as possible climate change along coastlines. It is particularly clear from Hoffmann’s discussions that drainage of fens and coastal marshes had long-term consequences in the subsiding of land as it became less water-logged; that nearly any anonymous peasant could dig channels that helped drain areas for pasture or even cultivation, but when the inevitable, but unanticipated, flooding of land that had sunk as it become drier and less waterlogged, anonymous peasants soon turned to higher authorities to protect those lands with dikes and additional pumping out of water. Whether it was water boards, countesses of Flanders, or monastic communities tasked with the protection of such »land« that had once been marsh, collective culture was compelled to respond. Such margins are evoked in many other ways as climate changes...
are traced by study of how settlement pushing further and further up on the mountainsides of the Alps, or the sides of Norwegian fjords, or how Greenland was abandoned, or Iceland had to turn to increasing fishing to survive. In Hoffmann’s descriptions these are not just events, but the outcome of significant global forces, as are volcanoes, earthquakes and epidemics. The picture will continue to change as more attention is given to the extension of river deltas or the failure of Portuguese agriculture that led to an increased sea-going in that nation.

Conclusions are never unidirectional. Hoffmann cites royal legislation that limits destruction of northern French fisheries by limiting the numbers of mills and weirs, but recognizes that some of the same rulers were less conservative about waterways when it came to the mining of silver or lead or gold. He describes how different the outcomes were with regard to disease versus natural disaster. In medieval Europe there was always someone to blame for epidemic disease, but recoveries from pandemics was apt to distribute the same resources among a smaller population – one of the interesting questions that modern experience can apply is, of course, how the distribution of that income changes across society. In contrast, natural disasters, whether flood or earthquake, drought or fire, as well as warfare that destroyed populations and resources, drastically reduced assets available for distribution. Comparing the outcome of epidemics versus the collapsing of infrastructure in natural disasters, suggests that »acts of God« varied in how Culture reacted to Nature.

Hoffmann’s analysis of medieval agriculture is extensive and he introduces some of the best descriptions of what was much more often forest management such as coppicing and pollarding, rather than indiscriminate cutting and uprooting. In this case he draws on some of his earlier work with figures showing some of the changes in forest and cereal cultivation in the duchy of Wroclaw circa 1150–1250 and again circa 1300 with the introduction of German law in the surrounding villages. There are also examples of new cultivation and change introduced at Montady in Languedoc, at Villafranca and at Moncalieri in Italy.

In the medieval world that Hoffmann considers, the motivations of both those with power, the lords, and those who did the work, the peasants, are given consideration. At what points did coercion fail, at what others were peasant gains what spurred expansion and innovation. What Hoffmann calls »increased cerealization« of the landscape, associated first and foremost with an increased consumption of bread, brought with it a whole panoply of new tools and practices, including heavy plows and the sharing of oxen to pull them, transformation of wasteland into cereal producing fields, building water- or wind-powered mills to grind flour more efficiently, concessions and control over firewood to stoke what increasingly became communal ovens.

What Hoffmann describes as the projects of the future will continue to require well-trained medievalists capable of doing the hard work that medievalists do in deciphering the archaeological and documentary remains. There remain many untouched documents in the archives that will reveal new
things, whether fishing engines used by peasant/fishermen near Arles, or wives’ spinning wool to assist household subsistence. Much remains to be done, but Hoffmann provides new pathways in the ways that we will analyze the data that is waiting to be discovered.

Aimed initially at an undergraduate and graduate audience, the volume can be frustrating for readers in its lists of sources cited rather than footnotes; if this was the necessary price to pay for such wonderful tables, charts and illustrations, they are well worth it.