

An Environmental History of the Middle Ages: The Crucible of Nature

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John Aberth is fascinated by plagues as disasters, as evidenced by his series of books with titles like *From the Brink of the Apocalypse* (2001), *The Black Death* (2005), and *Plagues in World History* (2011).⁽¹⁾ His latest book *An Environmental History of the Middle Ages* is likewise centered on the Black Death of 1348–1350 as a turning point. Aberth bases his book on the contention that ‘the unprecedented ecological crises of the late Middle Ages forced a radical rethinking of environmental attitudes, one that anticipates the “new ecology” of today’ (p. 8). As this statement indicates, Aberth wanted to write an intellectual history of ‘what medieval people *thought* about their natural surroundings, rather than what they *did* to them’ (author’s emphasis, p. 10). He argues that the Middle Ages went through four phases in attitude toward nature: eschatological in the late Antique period, adversarial in the early Middle Ages, collaborative in the high Middle Ages, and a more sophisticated nuanced view of the environment that combined the adversarial with the collaborative after the Black Death. Keeping Aberth’s own aims in mind, I will evaluate how well the book succeeds as an environmental history of the Middle Ages.

Aberth makes it clear from the preface that he believes the ‘environment’ is the ‘natural world’ excluding humans and that urban environmental history will be excluded from his story (p. xiv). To match this definition, Aberth splits the environment into three aspects – ‘Air, water, earth’, ‘Forest’ and ‘Animals’ – with each aspect organized as one long chapter. This is a perplexing choice, since the effects of plague are most acutely recorded within urban areas where people lived and Aberth wants to focus on the Black Death

as turning point. With a definition of environment limited to those things outside of humans, Aberth sets up the book with 'natural' aspects as the focus.

The first section 'Air, water, earth' is the one that stays closest to Aberth's stated aim of an intellectual history. While there are some practical details about harnessing water and wind power for milling, the majority of the chapter is dedicated to philosophical treatises about the nature of the elements. Aberth begins with a discussion of Greek understandings of how natural elements influenced human health and the lasting effects of that knowledge on Arabic and western European medical thought. According to Aberth, the early Middle Ages were characterized by an 'adversarial view' of nature (p. 5), which in this chapter is evidenced in attempts to control the weather in hagiographical literature. With the warming of the climate in the high Middle Ages, people became more optimistic about nature, moving into the third type of human-nature relationship, collaborative. The coming of plague in the 14th century forced a re-evaluation of that relationship, as ideas of man being able to affect the environment through pollution and poison became standard.

There are two main shortcomings of the first section. One is that by grouping air, water, and earth into 65 pages, none of these elements get the extended treatment they deserve. Medieval environmental historians have produced much scholarship on both water and land issues (2), so there is certainly much more that could have been said about each of these. While the grouping makes sense for Aberth's focus on the role of these elements in medicinal humor theory, it limits his ability to investigate each as environmental components. The second problem is that Aberth's timeline as sketched leaves out documents and data that do not match the author's phases; for example, there are medieval documents claiming that urban pollution leads to health problems through air poisoning long before the plague, but these are not discussed. If they had been, Aberth may not have been able to make a claim for a radical break and reordering of the relationship with nature that he sees with the plague.

The second section, 'Forests', moves away from Aberth's history of ideas to a history of practicalities. While he starts with a section on pre-Christian tree cults, he moves quickly to woodland management practices and the legal structures of the medieval forest, which takes up the majority of the section. The administration of the English forest, particularly through the eyre courts, is discussed in great detail. After that, there is a short discussion of the idea of forest and wilderness in literary and philosophical texts followed by a conclusion about reforestation after the Black Death.

Although the forestry section contains a wealth of information about medieval forests, I think it fails to live up to Aberth's goals on two counts. First, unlike the previous section, which makes an extended argument about a qualitative change in the human-nature relationship because of the Black Death, this chapter mentions only the regrowth of woods in England as a result of the Black Death. This extremely brief section is not nearly enough to prove a 'radical rethinking of environmental attitudes' (p. 8) toward the forest. The readers do not get any sense that there was a shift toward the combined adversarial-collaborative relationship that Aberth defined in the introduction. Second, the chapter is almost exclusively based on the situation in England. The vast majority of this section, from pages 97 to 123, is devoted to the English royal forest – woodland and forests in all the other parts of Europe combined gets five pages. Considering the wealth of literature on medieval woodland and forest in other parts of Europe, including works by Chris Wickham, Peter Szabó, Richard Keyser, and Karl Appuhn, such a narrow presentation of medieval forest is inexcusable. (3)

The third section, titled 'Beasts', covers animals, including farm livestock, pets, and hunted game. The discussion of farm livestock does a good job of mixing philosophical treatises that dealt with questions of whether or not animals had reason and/or a soul, agricultural manuals that recommended practices, and historical data about livestock keeping. Aberth also provides a compelling juxtaposition of hunting romance versus reality. The final third of this section argues that humans became closer to their animal companions in the late medieval period after the Black Death, exchanging diseases and making animals partners in bestiality and magical practices. While Aberth's attribution of these developments to the Black Death is not entirely convincing, the section as a whole is probably the most aligned with writing an environmental

history that encompasses both ideologies and practices. Yet, even here, Aberth is very limited in what he discusses as ‘beasts’ – he ignores non-local animals, like elephants which were put into medieval menageries or killed for ivory, and only mentions sea mammals in two sentences, despite a recent environmental history book on medieval whaling by Vicki Szabo.[\(4\)](#)

I applaud Aberth’s attempt to write an environmental history of the Middle Ages – one is sorely needed – yet I cannot help but think that this particular approach to medieval environmental history does more harm than good. First, Aberth’s litany of facts makes the book difficult to read. The book is full of rich details about the medieval environment that scholars will be able to mine for their own works, which certainly makes it a valuable addition to scholarship; but that attention to detail has also produced an incredibly dense work that students (and many others) will find difficult to make it through.

Second, and this is the more fundamental objection, Aberth fails to engage with the discipline of environmental history. By saying he will limit his discussion to nature outside of humans and excluding the urban sphere, he ignores the rich historiography of urban environmental history in the seminal works of Christine Rosen, Joel Tarr and Martin Melosi, who have successfully argued for the inclusion of the urban space in environmental histories.[\(5\)](#) Aberth could, of course, have justified his decision based on arguments by Donald Worster about the focus of environmental history [\(6\)](#), but he doesn’t. In fact, Aberth does not cite a single work of general environmental history theory – not Donald Hughes’s *What is Environmental History?*, not William Cronon’s ‘The trouble with wilderness; or, getting back to the wrong nature’, not John McNeill’s ‘Observations on the nature and culture of environmental history’.[\(7\)](#) Aberth says that the late medieval mindset anticipates today’s ‘new ecology’, but he is either unaware of or uninterested in engaging with any environmental historian’s scholarship on what modern ecological thinking entails. Aberth’s own environmental ethos is laid out in the preface: Vermont as ‘forest wilderness’ is ‘one of the most heartening environmental success stories’ (p. xiii), an ethos which he carries into his analysis of the medieval environment. But if he had been familiar with the environmental history literature, he might not have limited himself to wilderness and nature protection as the only environmental successes.

Aberth defines ‘new ecology’ as the ‘mutual, two-way dialogue between humans and nature that drives historical change’ (p. 2), but in the book, either mankind or nature always has the upper hand, forcing the other to move in a particular way. In his narrative, only environmental crisis brings humans to their knees; the *Crucible of Nature* in the book’s subtitle is the 14th-century famine followed by plague that Aberth claims forged the modern human-nature relationship. Yet I remain unconvinced that the 14th-century events created the radical break Aberth believes in, at least not from the evidence he presents.

Aberth has gathered together many interesting glimpses into the interactions between humans and nature in the medieval period, and although these may be useful as data points, he hasn’t woven them into a tale about a reciprocal relationship. In other words, while Aberth has written a history about some aspects of the medieval environment, he hasn’t written an environmental history.

Notes

1. John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague and Death in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 2001); *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348–1350: A Brief History with Documents* (New York, NY, 2005); *Plagues in World History* (Lanham, MD, 2011).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For water, see especially Richard Hoffmann, ‘Economic development and aquatic ecosystems in medieval Europe’, *American Historical Review*, 101 (1996), 631–69; essays in *Working with Water in Medieval Europe*, ed. Paolo Squatriti (Leiden, 2000); and Ellen Arnold, ‘Engineering miracles: water control, conversion, and the creation of a religious landscape in the medieval Ardennes’, *Environment and History*, 13 (2007), 477–502. For agriculture and the land, some examples include Petra van Dam, ‘Sinking peat bogs: environmental change in Holland, 1350–1550’, *Environmental History*, 6 (2001), 32–45; Lisa J. Kiser, ‘The garden of St. Francis: plants, landscape, and economy in thirteenth-century

- Italy', *Environmental History*, 8 (2003), 229–45; and Verena Winiwarter, 'Prolegomena to a history of soil knowledge in Europe', in *Soils and Societies: Perspectives from Environmental History*, ed. J. R. McNeill and Verena Winiwarter (Isle of Harris, 2006), 177–215.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Chris Wickham, *Land and Power: Studies in Italian and European Social History, 400–1200* (London, 1994); Peter Szabó, 'Sources for the historian of medieval woodland', in *People and Nature in Historical Perspective*, ed. József Laszlovszky and Peter Szabó (Budapest, 2003), 265–88; Richard Keyser, 'The transformation of traditional woodland management: commercial silviculture in medieval Champagne', *French Historical Studies*, 32 (2009), 353–84; and Karl Appuhn, *A Forest on the Sea: Environmental Expertise in Renaissance Venice* (Baltimore, MD, 2009).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. Vicki Ellen Szabo, *Monstrous Fishes and the Mead-Dark Sea: Whaling in the Medieval North Atlantic* (Leiden, 2008).[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. Christine Rosen and Joel Tarr, 'The importance of an urban perspective in environmental history', *Journal of Urban History*, 20 (1994), 299–310; Martin V. Melosi, 'Humans, cities, and nature: how do cities fit in the material world?' *Journal of Urban History*, 36 (2010), 3–21.[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. Donald Worster, 'Doing environmental history', in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, ed. Donald Worster (Cambridge, 1988), 289–307.[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. Donald Hughes, *What is Environmental History?* (Cambridge, 2006); William Cronon, 'The trouble with wilderness; or, getting back to the wrong nature', in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York, 1995), 69–90; John McNeill, 'Observations on the nature and culture of environmental history', *History and Theory*, 42 (2003), 5–43.[Back to \(7\)](#)

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