

Early Modern Geological Agency

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Thematic focus

“Geological agency” is a concept that transverses the boundaries of the natural sciences and humanities. It has emerged from recent debates on the epistemological and philosophical implications of the new periodization category of the Anthropocene. In particular, the merging of perspectives stemming from geo-history and human history led to a reassessment of human agency going beyond the cultural (political, social, economic) and biological realms. In fact, the geological dimension of human action cannot be neglected anymore (Chakrabarty 2009). According to the new perspective, the Earth system is not the neutral background of human history. Rather, it constitutes the entanglement of human-natural coevolution. In consideration of the enlarged scope of collective activity mediated by technology and science, scholars in science studies have gone so far as to challenge the idea that agency should be restricted to human practice, arguing that it should be understood as embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity involving knowledge as well as emotions. Some have called for a (quite problematic) “redistribution of agency,” a consequence of which is to bestow quasi-anthropomorphic attributes on natural beings and the Earth (cf. Latour 2014 reviving the ancestral subjectivity of Gaia).

In spite of the novelty of these debates, the idea of geological agency has historical roots worth investigating in the light of present concerns. Extensive engineering transformed the natural environment from antiquity to the early modern period: just think of the high (or rather, *deep*) environmental impact of such pervasive human activities as the management and redistribution of water resources, landscape engineering, and mining (Maffioli 1994, Ciriaco 2006, Mukerji 2009, Maffioli 2010, Luzzini 2016, Miglietti & Morgan 2017, Ash 2017). Moreover, geological explanations based on an anthropomorphic understanding of terrestrial processes were widespread in pre-modern and early-modern scientific paradigms, most notably in Renaissance vitalism (Merchant 1980, Bredekamp 1981, Daston 1995).

This panel aims to explore early-modern geological agency in both senses: of humans as geological agents and of the anthropomorphic visions of geological processes.

Essential References

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