

Complexities of Collapse

*A Review of **Understanding Collapse: Ancient History and Modern Myths**, by Guy D. Middleton (2017)*

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This book might better have been titled *NOT Understanding Collapse*. This is nothing against it; the purpose of the book is to demolish simplistic popular explanations of the decline or collapse of past societies. As the author puts it in the conclusion: “I set out to explain the place of collapse in our cultural heritage and how certain ways of thinking about historical endings are embedded in our popular modern culture ... Throughout the book I have tried to emphasise the complexity of collapse and the problem with trying to explain collapse through single or simple explanations—especially environmental ones” (pp. 339–40). Related to this is an intent to counter the widespread stereotypes of vanished civilizations: “Throughout this book, I have taken an anti-apocalyptic view of collapse, seeing it as part of normal transformations of history, often constructed in hindsight affected by the nature of our traditions ...” (p. 359). This might make the reader surmise that a major target of the book is Jared Diamond. Such is indeed the case.

The author is an archaeologist, and thus picks societies known only or primarily from archaeology, with the exception of the decline and fall of Rome—no one can resist that decline, surely. In the other cases, lack of textual materials conveniently eliminates any hope of resolving differences of opinion about the role of human decisions and conflicts. Stones and bones may record fires, earthquakes, and storms, but they are mute on the subject of the countless arguments, planning meetings, foolish policy decisions, and secret betrayals that characterize history. The archaeologist’s mantra, “more digging is required,” was already a rather rueful joke in my student days.

The very definition of collapse is problematic. In a rare look at modern declines, Middleton assesses the degree to which we can say Detroit has collapsed (pp. 355–59). Its population has declined to just over a quarter of its former glory. The central city looks like a bombed-out war zone. Yet, obviously, it continues, and its suburbs remain modestly affluent. It is not yet ready for Indiana Jones. Middleton shows that many or most of the collapses of the past were rather like this: life went on, culture continued. Even when a whole civilization was destroyed and disappeared, as in the case of Minoan Crete, the successors (Mycenean Greeks and allies) restored the cities and continued much of the former way of life. One expects that

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Citation: Anderson, Eugene N. 2020. A Review of *Understanding Collapse: Ancient History and Modern Myths*, by Guy D. Middleton (2017). *Clodynamics* 11 (1): 54–58.

Cretans today are genetic heirs of the Minoans. The two most famous and perhaps most spectacular collapses in history are the fall of Rome (the Western Roman Empire) and the disintegration of the central Maya lowlands political system in 800–1000 CE, but in both cases the civilizations, the languages, and the cultures went right on flourishing, so Middleton is hesitant to call even these rather extreme cases “collapses.”

Middleton considers a large range of societies, in chronological order, beginning with the ancient Near East. The Old Kingdom of Egypt collapsed in an interdynastic mess, but Egyptian civilization went on with little change and the country reunited in time. Akkad fell, but Mesopotamian civilization continued to flourish. The Indus Valley Civilization is a more serious case, since it represented a genuine fall and abandonment of a huge tract of highly urbanized and well-managed land, but again humanity went on and the area recovered—though surely with different languages and clearly with new cultures. The Bronze Age civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean hit a rough spot around 1200 BCE, leading to something of a “dark age,” but the degree of darkness is highly debated. Most of the cultures endured, though the Hittites and some other Anatolian groups slowly disappeared. Then came the fall of the Western Roman Empire: “Historian Andre Demandt has compiled a list of some 210 suggested reasons for the fall of the Western Roman Empire” (p. 182). Middleton discusses a thick sampling of these.

Turning to the New World, Middleton speculates on whether revolution, or at least violent popular uprisings, could have had to do with the terminal troubles of Teotihuacan, Tiwanaku, and Wari. The Maya take up a major part of the New World section, since their collapse has been so enormously hyped in both scholarly and popular literature (to say nothing of grade-Z movies). The Maya decline in the central lowlands was a very long, slow process. It occurred largely in the tenth century, but started in the ninth (or even eighth) and went on into the thirteenth. Drought remains the major suspect, but Middleton points out it is not a sufficient explanation, and evidence shows warfare was also highly significant. (One may add that shifting trade routes were a clear factor after 900 CE. The last independent hieroglyphic-using Maya state did not fall until 1697, over 200 years after the Spanish “conquest.”) Middleton does not treat more local declines, such as the change from Pueblo III to Pueblo IV and from Hohokam to its successors in southwestern North America.

After the New World, following chronological order, come Angkor and the Khmer, declining for obscure reasons but finally conquered and subjugated by the Thai. Drought has been postulated, but came at the wrong time. Claims of failure to maintain irrigation works are not credible, for several reasons. Civil unrest, allowing eventual Thai conquest, seems the likely cause.

Finally, he treats Easter Island, Jared Diamond's poster child for human-caused collapse. Diamond believed, and exaggerated, a tale in which the Easter Islanders deforested their land, causing soil loss, lack of canoes for fishing, and consequent cannibalism and population crash. Middleton follows later findings showing that deforestation was not total, population was never high enough to crash as much as Diamond thought, and Easter Island was doing quite well at contact—only to be devastated by disease, massacre, slave-taking, and the other consequences of colonization. (I know the major archaeologists he quotes for this version of the story, and certainly trust their scientific, level-headed research over Diamond's sensationalism. They know Polynesia and Easter Island well, and Diamond does not.)

Middleton does not list all 210 reasons for the fall of Rome, but he does give an enormous number of postulated reasons for decline and fall. Many of these are environmental, including volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, plagues, droughts, floods, river course changes, and climate changes. Many involve environmental mismanagement: overcultivation, deforestation (Easter Island), lead water pipes (Rome), neglect of irrigation and water supply systems (Angkor), famine (almost everywhere), and so on. Finally, there are social explanations: conquest, revolution, civil war or civil chaos, invasion, and of course the ever-increasing pressure of the "barbarians" that was certainly a part of Rome's trouble. These various explanations are not mutually exclusive, and scholars often combine them. Middleton is sympathetic to this approach, holding the view that one quick shock cannot bring down a whole system unless it is fatally weakened by other factors.

Middleton is highly skeptical of the degree to which cultures and civilizations collapsed. One must, however, observe that if the US lost 90% of its population, the remaining 10% were overwhelmingly impoverished and illiterate, and skilled manufacturing disappeared except in (say) Seattle and New York, people might think there was something more than a "market correction." This is what happened to the Maya. I have lived and worked in Maya lands, and can testify that in most of those lands it takes only a short walk in what appears to be trackless old-growth forest to find yet another ruined city unknown or barely known to archaeology—this on top of the hundreds of excavated sites.

Rome, too, really did collapse. There is a matter of what Alison Wylie (2004), a philosopher of archaeology, calls "standpoint." In 600 CE, a Byzantine citizen would have laughed at the idea of collapse: the capital had simply moved to where it should have been in the first place, and "Rome" in its new home was now better than ever. He would have said that the eastern empire had kept all the real sources of wealth: the Egyptian and Balkan granaries, the Black Sea trade, the Silk Route and Indian Ocean trade, the sophisticated manufactures and crafts of Syria, and so on. Rome got the miserable peripheral lands of western Europe. An inhabitant of Rome itself, one of the wretched few people dwelling in miserable hovels at the

foot of the vast, ruinous Colosseum, would have a *very* different view. In between would be the British, who would no doubt have thought what many of them (including Middleton) now think: that the decline of urban life and fine manufactured goods was deplorable, but at least Britain was free and under its own government, and was slowly developing an independent, original civilization of its own.

It would be valuable to differentiate collapse of a *regime* (the Old Kingdom, or the Chinese dynasties) from the collapse of a *region*, and this in turn from the collapse of a *civilization* with all its knowledge and technology. The former two are common, even routine, in history. The last literally never happens, so far as we know, though Minoan Crete and the Indus Valley Civilization came close.

Middleton has a healthy doubt of the role of natural causes. All civilizations deal with droughts, floods, plagues, earthquakes, and the rest, and these never bring them down. People clean up the wreckage and go right on. Yet environmental explanations are popular with archaeologists, partly because it is easier to find evidence of drought and flood than to find evidence of quarrels over policy among the elite. Social-environmental causes are more plausible, but traditional people usually learn to manage their environments somewhat sustainably. Population growth is slow, technological change not much faster, and people have time to learn from their mistakes—something often shown by the archaeological record. The Maya may be an exception, since Maya population did increase significantly until the beginning of the decline, and Maya maize agriculture was (and is) extremely susceptible to drought.

Purely social explanations include international and civil war, factional and succession struggles, revolutions, and failure of the polity to hold onto the people. The effects of these on societies is hard to assess. Even major war cannot often be conclusively tied to collapse. Precise timings are hard to establish, and some societies successfully fight off invaders. Even with copious historical records, we cannot establish how much the “barbarians” had to do with the fall of Rome. The sack of Rome in 410 was merely a blip in a long, slow decline, and had little long-term effect. The rise of Byzantium and its possession of all Rome’s most valuable territories seems to have had more of an impact.

Middleton briefly mentions C. S. Holling’s resilience theory, which originally applied to ecological models but can easily be applied to civilizations. He concludes that it is more descriptive than explanatory, and thus “may not offer anything very new in terms of explaining how collapse comes about” (p. 46). Middleton also notes Ibn Khaldun’s theory of dynastic cycles, basing his knowledge of Ibn Khaldun on recent writings by Peter Turchin (2006; Turchin and Nefedov 2009), Christopher Chase-Dunn, and myself (Anderson and Chase-Dunn 2005), and gives a brief (and not very adequate) summary. The theory is based on the rise and fall of *‘asabiyah* (loyalty and solidarity), and is impossible to test in the archaeological record—“it

will never be straightforwardly quantifiable” (p. 41). Even where records exist, specifically in the case of the Roman Empire, the data are equivocal, and suggest that *‘asabiyyah* had little to do with Rome’s fate. The barbarians may be assumed to have more of it than the Romans—Ibn Khaldun in fact assumed that—and Rome was corrupt and disunited, but details are hard to tease out from records that describe failure of unity on both sides. It should be noted (contra Middleton) that Ibn Khaldun’s theory is not a theory of collapse, but of regular changes of government, normally involving little change to the cultures in question.

Middleton concludes that sudden, dramatic collapses of civilizations and regions into utter chaos and mass death do not occur. Change is slow, depopulation is never as great as sensationalist accounts claim, and cultural continuity almost always occurs. Decline and urban abandonment are frequent in the archaeological record, but when causes can be ascertained, all such events turn out to be complex, with no one variable adequate to explain the change. He brings us no closer to understanding collapse, but he does demolish simplistic claims, basing his conclusions on a worldwide sample that captures most of the more striking archaeological instances of decline.

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