

ANP 363

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Question 1: The Important Factors of Collapse in Ancient States

Even though the title of this course is "Rise of Civilization", with us spending the whole semester examining and analyzing various ancient cultures and states through archaeological records, in order to have a glimpse of those common factors that behind the rise of each states, we almost spent as many efforts for those discussions over collapses of each ancient states as well. Just like what we have discussed since the first class, no one can avoid talking about the topic of collapse when he tries to see not only the rise of the state, but its history as a whole. So before I get into specific examples of each ancient states and their reasons of collapse, we need to understand what were some important factors that could contribute to the collapse itself.

It is vitally important to realize that many of the factors that lead to the rise or formation of one ancient state could eventually become the reasons that broke its limit and lead to its collapse. We have seen throughout the semester that, despite various attempts to balance the situation practiced by elites and authorities, they often failed to maintain the capacity to adapt to those stresses from various sources, either for a lack of technology, or they simply lost their power and authority over lower-statuses people. While it is important to note that no matter what exactly led to one state's collapse, it's all due to the inability of stress adaptation.

The main factors that lead to collapses of ancient states can therefore, divided into two main categories: stresses from the outside and stresses from the inside. Those outside stresses would often inevitably cause the state to collapse due to the fact that the states were placed in the most vulnerable position when facing those outside stress. These outside stresses were either catastrophically environmental changes or invasions and colonization from other more powerful cultural groups.

While the environmental changes were often the most vicious and hardest to adapt to, due to the fact that it would often challenge the ways of life those people had been practiced for years, especially for their agricultures, which was the foundation of the formation of one state.

Those inner stresses, on the other hand, were often ironically associated with ancient states' own strategies for maintaining and expanding their reigns. Those new solutions, be it improving and large-scales agricultures, various bureaucracy groups that assist the rulers, trade-networks with neighbor cultural communities, or heavy state-wide public works for political or religious proposes, would often brought higher costs to the states themselves, and eventually the society broke up.

Two things we should keep it mind, that for one the causes of collapses in ancient states were often contributed by both outside and inner stresses, which is why I have to analyze both of them before get into specific examples of those states. The second thing was, most of those ancient states/cultures would not just "vanished" due to one collapse, they would often broke into less complex and smaller communities/polities, and continue to develop themselves and repeat the circle of Rise & Fall. For instance, in Ancient China, where various dynastic kingdoms constantly conflicted with each other for the central rule of the land, without a actual collapse of the civilization. However, in America we could see some exceptions, the collapse of Mayans, Aztecs, Incas, and the Mississippian groups (for those issues over whether they were a unified state), they lost their capacity to maintain as states after the collapses and remained as various smaller cultural groups, while their cultures and traditions were still preserved and practiced by their dependences.

So let's look at some cases of ancient states' collapses and what contributed to them. First lets looked up the first three ancient states we discussed in this semester, since those three not only the earliest complex societies that were able to expand their territories and even developed into empires, especially for the Old Kingdom period of Egypt, where it was a single unified state with a quite huge territories. The inner stresses were mostly associated with the way authority powers were distributed.

According to the lecture, even though Pharaohs were essentially the single ruler who had such great political and religious power, he had to be distribute parts of his authorities to nomarchs, who oversaw each nome while were directly responsible to the vizier. Even though nomarchs were required to pay tribute to the pharaohs by visiting the capital each year and essentially they were just subordinates of the central state authority, near the end of Old Kingdom there were evidences that the grasp of central authority started to loss its power over nomarchs, where we could see signs of their own political independences: they no longer visit the state capital, they started to built their own large tombs near their own provincial capital, and they started to passed their authority hereditarily. While the outside stresses would be more devastating and might be one central reasons behind the decrease in central authority's political power over the state. According to the lecture, archaeological evidences like the causeway to the pyramid of Inas and regional dendrochonology all suggested that there was a huge drought happened in the Nile valley at the end of 5th Dynasty, where ancient Egyptians' unique ways of agriculture that closely relied upon Nile were greatly impacted and it no longer have the capacity to supply the state population, which eventually led to the decentralization and collapse of the Old Kingdom Period Egypt. However, ancient Egyptian civilizations were still able to continue and improve after the collapse of the Old Kingdom, according to the textbook, until it was conquered by the massive foreign invasions by Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, and British started around 500 B.C. (389)

One central reason that associating the ancient Egypt, Mesopotamian States, and Harappan State together when we discussed the collapse of the first is the how closely and constantly these three distinct cultures interacted with each other. The interactions were mainly based on a huge trade network that these three states established, where through archaeological records, especially in Harappan cites, where exotic material cultures like beads and ceramics were found. These trade network would also leave the foundation of the later collapses of Harappan states. According to the

lecture, due to the Mesopotamian dark age (Akkadian Empire collapsed due to the three century drought and Gutian invasions) and the collapse of the Second Intermediate Period Egypt, this former trade network vanished as well, which brought devastating impacts on Harappan populations. However, as both the textbook and lecture argues, the main reason behind Harappan collapse might be drastic environmental changes and how essentially it affected the agriculture. According to the textbook, B. K. Thapar argues that Harappan collapse might closely associated with the changes in tectonic movements, which shifted the Indus and other rivers greatly affected the water level in Indus Valley and brought huge flood (423). The lecture also argues that during the end of Harappan states, the Moonsoon that Harappan agriculture highly depended on, shifted southward and decreased the overall amount of precipitation. These environmental changes, plus the devastation Harappans had done on their lands through overpopulation, intense agricultures and deforestations, simply crashed the basic foundations of Harappan societies. These stresses, alongside with that collapse of trading network with ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian states, were so intense that Harappans lost their capacity to adapt, leaving them no choices except accepting their inevitable doom.

Then lets shift to America and see how the rise and fall of ancient civilizations there had any interesting characteristics. Even though those different cultures in North America, Mesoamerica, and South America were in fact unique to each other, essentially caused by their different adaptation techniques to each's own unique environmental conditions, those complex societies and states from those three regions were quite similar when it comes to the formation and the collapse of their states. Especially in Mesoamerica and South America Andean regions, we could see that most of the constant conflicts between each neighbor states in order to fight for the limited resources and expand through conquests, while many of them share the same or similar traditions and beliefs, which is quite similar to what we've seen in Ancient China. The intensity of warfare contributed to both the rise and collapse of those states in these regions as well, for instance, in the lowland Mesoamerica,

during the Classical Mayan period, where the conflicts between newly risen cities and the central states were prominent, resulted in several regional independent capitals. However, even though those intense warfare made Mayan states quite unstable, the textbook suggested that the attempts to reestablish control, maintain communities, and revive ancient traditions were also never stopped. For instance, Mayan cities in northern lowland like Chichen Itza successfully completed its expansion during the Classic period, while many of the Mayan capitals in southern Lowland collapsed (514).

The two major strategies complex societies in Mesoamerica practiced in order to maintain themselves, which were the constant interactions among Highland and Lowland states (one strategy to adapt to the natural disasters like drought) and intense and increasingly militaristic religious practices through state-wise public constructions, would eventually become the factors of collapse (515). According to the lecture, for the Lowland Mayan states, the collapse of trading network with Teotihuacan and cumulating burdens added upon lower classes due to public constructions in many centers, would eventually disturbed the economic bases and led to revolts. The textbook also adds up that, those constant interactions between centers was also a strategy to adapt to the other stresses such as drought, so the bad thing Classic Mayans would think of when those previous trading network collapsed would be devastating environmental changes (514). Unfortunately, as the textbook claims, drought in fact played a major role in the collapse of Classic Mayan states. According to Richardson Gill, three major droughts happened during the latter period of Classic Maya, where archaeological findings indicated drastic reduction of rainfalls, and left Mayan centers, especially those in southern Lowland, quite vulnerable and soon easily collapsed (515).

The other major factor behind the collapses of states in Mesoamerica and South America would be the foreign invasion, especially for the Aztecs and Incas. While the direct reasons might be the Spanish invasions for both states, they had become quite invulnerable prior to the Spanish contact. According to the lecture, for the Aztecs, like many of their predecessors (Teotihuacán and Toltecs),

the signs of intense rituals, militaristic religions, and public constructions were prominent. While for the Incas, due to their unique practices of split-inheritance, which made new king's processions quite limited. Therefore they had to acquire their own power through constant expansions and ordered adult citizens to conduct heavy public service as labors. Those inner factors would eventually resulted in unstable internal political conflicts for both Aztecs and Incas, while the Spanish invasion just accelerated the process of their collapses, but more directly and tragic, concerning those devastating impacts left own those two cultures and their traditions.

To briefly summarize the points, we cannot separate the collapses from the conversation when we talked about the rise of the states as a whole, since they were actually quite connected with each other. The essence of collapse can be seen as the decrease of capacity of each state to adapt to stresses. Those factors that contributed to the collapses can be mainly divided into two categories - from outside stresses and inner stresses, while through our analysis, devastating environmental changes would often be the major causes of each state's collapse due to its unpredictability and how greatly it can destroyed the adaptation strategies for the environment each state had been used to (especially agricultures). On the other hand, inner stresses like overpopulations, intense agricultures, heavy public-work out of political and religious proposes, and constant warfare/conflicts within state itself or with neighbor complex societies, would weaken the state from the inside, and left them vulnerable to those stresses from the outside.