

Why did Ancient States Collapse?

The dysfunctional state

Malcolm Levitt

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Contents

Abstract	iii
Preface	v
Acknowledgments	vii
I. Introduction: meaning, origins, fragility, cyclicity and collapse of ancient states	1
Meaning	1
Increasing complexity	1
Farming.....	2
Population growth	2
Chieftdoms and pathways to states	2
Competition, coercion, consensus	3
Fragility.....	3
Cyclicity	3
Meaning of collapse	4
Evidence of collapse	6
Explanations of collapse.....	7
II. The dysfunctional state	9
The state's core functions	9
Conditions necessary for fulfilling the state's functions	9
Collapse as dysfunction.....	10
III. Egyptian Old Kingdom	11
Collapse	11
Explanations of collapse.....	12
IV. Mycenaean Palace States	15
Collapse	16
Explanations of collapse: Earthquakes	16
Climate change	17
Decline in foreign trade.....	17
Warfare techniques.....	18
Sea Peoples	18
Interstate Mycenaean warfare	18
Internal strife	18
Rural collapse.....	19
Systems collapse.....	19
Conclusions	19

V. The Western Roman Empire	21
What Collapsed?	22
What caused collapse?.....	23
Christianity.....	23
Barbarians.....	23
Failure of the Eastern Empire to help	24
Internal strife	24
Economic factors	25
Natural Disasters	25
Conclusions	26
VI. Classic Mayan collapse	27
Collapse	27
Causes of collapse	28
Climate Change, Drought	28
Internal and external strife and violence.....	29
VII. Inequality	31
Inequality and state collapse.....	31
Inequality and violence in ancient states.....	31
Evidence of popular resentment	32
Conclusions	33
VIII. Summary and Conclusions	35
Bibliography	37

Abstract

Ancient states were rooted in agriculture, sedentism and population growth. They were fragile and prone to collapse, but there is no consensus on the causes or meaning of collapse, and there is an ongoing debate about the importance, nature and even existence of state-wide collapse

Explanations of collapse in terms of competing mono-causal factors are found inferior to those incorporating dynamic, interactive systems. It is proposed that collapse should be explained as failure to fulfil the ancient state's core functions: assurance of food supplies, defence against external attack, maintenance of internal peace, imposition of its will throughout its territory, enforcement of state-wide laws, and promotion of an ideology to legitimise the political and social status quo.

To fulfil these functions certain necessary conditions must be met. The legitimacy of the political and social status quo, including the distribution of political power and wealth, needs to be accepted; the state should be able to extract sufficient resources to fulfil its functions such as defence; it must be able to enforce its decisions; the ruling elite should share a common purpose and actions; the society needs to reflect a shared spirit (*asibaya*) and purpose across elites and commoners who believe it is worthy of defence.

Weaknesses and failure to meet any condition can interact to exacerbate the situation: maladministration, corruption and elite preoccupation with self aggrandisement can induce fiscal weakness, reduced military budgets and further invasion; it can induce neglect of key infrastructures (especially water management). Inequality, a commonly neglected factor despite ancient texts, can erode *asibaya* and legitimacy and alienate commoners from defence of the state.

These themes are explored in relation to the Egyptian Old Kingdom, Mycenae, the Western Roman Empire (WRE), and the Maya. They all exhibit, to varying degrees, weaknesses in meeting the above conditions necessary for stability. (Some of the explanatory political and social factors involved have modern analogies but that issue is not examined).