

## Understanding Collapse

*Understanding Collapse* explores the collapse of ancient civilisations, such as the Roman Empire, the Maya, and Easter Island. In this lively survey, Guy D. Middleton critically examines our ideas about collapse – how we explain it and how we have constructed potentially misleading myths around collapses – showing how and why collapse of societies was a much more complex phenomenon than is often admitted. Rather than positing a single explanatory model of collapse – economic, social, or environmental – Middleton gives full consideration to the overlooked resilience in communities of ancient peoples and the choices that they made. He offers a fresh interpretation of collapse that will be accessible to both students and scholars.

- An engaging, introductory-level survey of collapse in the archaeology/history literature.
- Ideal for use in courses on the collapse of civilisations, sustainability, and climate change.
- Includes up-to-date case studies of famous and less well-known examples of collapses.
- Illustrated with twenty-four black and white illustrations, five line drawings, sixteen tables, and twenty-two maps.

Guy D. Middleton studied Ancient History and Archaeology at Newcastle University, where he won the Shipley Prize. For his Ph.D. at Durham University, he studied the collapse of Mycenaean states around 1200 BC. His works on collapse include: ‘Nothing lasts forever: Environmental discourses on the collapse of past societies’ (*Journal of Archaeological Research*, 2012) and *The Collapse of Palatial Society in Late Bronze Age Greece and the Postpalatial Period* (2010). He also has a B.A. in Humanities and English Language and an M.Ed. in Applied Linguistics and has worked extensively with international students. As well as teaching at universities in the United Kingdom, he has lived and worked in Greece, Korea, and taught for some years at the University of Tokyo, Japan. He is now a Visiting Fellow in the School of History, Classics, and Archaeology at Newcastle University.

# Understanding Collapse

*Ancient History and Modern Myths*

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*To Yoshie and our baby Elise Saki, and to my parents Jennifer and  
Denis, and my family and friends*

The great old days have gone, and all the grandeur of earth; there are not caesars now or kings or patrons such as once there used to be, amongst whom were performed most glorious deeds, who lived in lordliest renown. Gone now is all that host, the splendours have departed. Weaker men live and occupy the world, enjoy it, but with care. Fame is brought low, earthly nobility grows old, decays, as now throughout this world does every man.

*The Seafarer.* In R. Hamer.  
*A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*

The myth is of even more importance, historically, than the reality ...

Bertrand Russell.  
*History of Western Philosophy*

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## Preface

This book developed naturally out of the years I have spent studying collapse. I first became interested in collapse on a tour of Greece with the British School of Archaeology in Athens in 1999; there I decided that, if I could, I would study Late Bronze Age (LBA) Greece and end of the Mycenaean palace period for a PhD. That study, done at Durham University, brought me to other collapses – I looked at the Hittites, an imperial state close in time to the LBA Greeks which collapsed at around the same time, as well as the Classic Maya, who, with their land of many interconnected states and kingdoms, seemed in some ways more comparable with the handful of Mycenaean states that existed in Greece. I looked at the collapse of the Western Roman Empire too, which seemed similar in kind to that of the Hittites both in the possible causes of collapse and its aftermath. And so I began to wonder about collapse in general, about the possibilities and problems of comparative studies of collapse, and to think of collapse as a problem area in its own right to be studied and investigated in archaeology and history generally.

But when I started studying collapse, I soon realised that there was no accessible general summary or introduction, as there are for, say, the archaeology of empires or ethnicity, gender or trade, or some other theme; yet there was a vast literature spread through numerous more or less separate fields of study, from environmental policy to geology, as well as the distinct subfields of archaeology, delineated by culture, period, region, or theme. The basic idea that there was

no easy way in to such a tangled field stayed with me, and led me to this project by way of a paper written for the *Journal of Archaeological Research*, in which I (rather optimistically) sought to review recent work and ideas on collapse, and really learnt how much was going on. With this book, I hope to provide that introduction; an easy, hopefully interesting, up-to-date point of entry to the study of collapse. That said, the aim of the book is not to ‘solve’ once and for all the ‘mysterious’ collapses of past civilisations or introduce some new ‘grand theory’ – I, and many others, do not believe there to be one ‘solution’ that can usefully apply across the board – but rather to question the idea of collapse, and introduce the variety of ways in which such collapses have been seen and explained by scholars.

In the book, I focus on past collapses known from both archaeological and textual sources, and it should become clear that the sources available and the history of study of a given area both construct and influence our knowledge and views of any particular collapse. This is why I have opted for a case study approach rather than a thematic one. It has been said that there is a divide between archaeology and history; as Lester L. Grabbe has put it: ‘textual scholars largely ignore archaeology, and archaeologists seem to believe a flat, uncritical reading of the text is fine’, but this is an overstatement.<sup>1</sup> My tendency, bred by studying both ancient history and archaeology, is to think more inclusively, and though I will refer to both archaeology and archaeologists and history and historians, I regard them as overlapping fields, with people from both engaged in researching the past and constructing history and historical narratives, and therefore sometimes dealing with collapse.

Theories of history are important – they underpin our every thought, whether we know it or not. Collapse challenges our theories of history for it forces us to interpret evidence and shape narratives of cultures, politics, and sites on a variety of scales, temporal and geographical. Often collapse figures in grand historical narratives – the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, for example, ushering in a dark age out of which eventually developed the nations of modern Europe (to grossly oversimplify). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, a tendency has been to see collapse as an environmental issue, with collapse blamed on climate change or anthropogenic environmental damage (‘ecocide’). A hundred years earlier

it was often, though not exclusively, seen in terms of migration; theories thus change with the times. But as we shall see, collapse is rarely so easy to explain as these dominant theories would suggest.

#### PLAN OF THE BOOK AND JUSTIFICATIONS

The book follows a simple plan. The first chapter introduces collapse as a ‘hot topic’ in current affairs and as a constructed narrative that has a long history in our culture. The subsequent chapters each take an instance of collapse as their subject, running in roughly chronological order; we shall encounter the Egyptian Old Kingdom, the Akkadian Empire, the Harappans, Minoan Crete, Mycenaean Greece, the Hittite kingdom, the Western Roman Empire, Mesoamerica and Teotihuacan, the Classic Maya, the Andes, Angkor and the Khmer, and Rapa Nui (Easter Island) – introducing the context and presenting and evaluating a range of explanations (Figure 0.1).

The case study approach taken here needs some justification. Both Joseph Tainter and Jared Diamond adopted such an approach in their books on collapse, so the format is one favoured by authors writing about collapse.<sup>2</sup> However, Tainter’s case studies were, for the most part, exceptionally short and lacked contextual detail, without which any discussion of collapse makes little sense except to specialists in that particular field. Plus, his longer case studies were written to validate his own grand theory of collapse, rather than as critiques of previous explanations. Diamond’s case studies were also written with his own environmental slant in mind, rather than as objective enquiries. The case studies in this book offer contextualising detail – background on the history of the field and on the society being discussed, sometimes detail on how the field has developed, where I think relevant, as well as critically examining the proposed causes of collapse. I have tried to strike a balance in doing this, though some will undoubtedly think there to be too much or too little of one thing or another. Furthermore, I offer no grand theory – rather I am interested in what each collapse was or was not and how people have tried to explain what was happening. I hope that this approach will provide a good introduction to each collapse, and to general ideas about collapse, allowing the reader to judge the theories for themselves, rather than trying to persuade them of one particular view. The case

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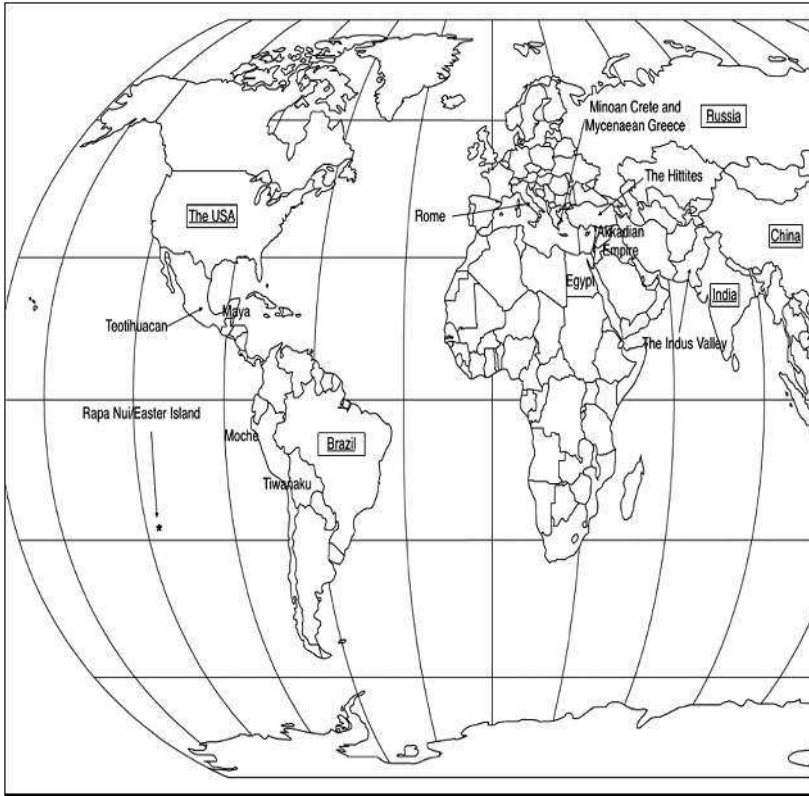


FIGURE 0.1. Map showing the locations of cultures discussed in the book.

study approach also means that readers are free either to read the book from beginning to end or just to dip in to read the parts that interest them or which they are studying.

Some justification for the choices of case studies may also be necessary. The examples have been chosen for their fame, interest, and variety, and for the work done on them, and for their ‘archaeological’ and, in some cases, primarily ‘prehistoric’ nature; others could have been used instead. Norman Davies, for example, in his *Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-Forgotten Europe*, deals with fifteen historical polities that have come and gone in Europe from the fourth century AD to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly, we could study at least some of these in the guise of collapse, examining the archaeological changes that political and social change drove. However, none of those primarily historical examples is examined here. There are also no examples from North America, even though the Ancient Puebloans (Anasazi, etc.), from the American southwest, and the Cahokians from the Mississippi Valley are fairly well known and discussed archaeological examples of collapse.<sup>4</sup> Collapses, state fragmentation, and dynastic change in China, Korea, and Japan – all of which, like ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, experienced periods of unity and disunity, often referred to as ‘intermediate’ or ‘warring states’ periods – are also not discussed, and no examples have been drawn from the Indian subcontinent, with its many empires and states.

The examples chosen are therefore somewhat arbitrary, and so I make no claim to comprehensiveness – a work that was truly comprehensive would really be a study of global archaeology and the history of human societies from the dawn of human civilisation to the present. Even with more modest aims, and despite devoting a chapter to each case, it has still been necessary to be both brief and selective, though hopefully not too partisan. While collapse is defined in different ways by different authors, the examples I have chosen have all been labelled ‘collapses’ by scholars, though, as I try to show, there is variation in what happened and how their histories have been interpreted and explained. I hope to make it clear in this book that sweeping pronouncements that collapses can be explained by climate change<sup>5</sup> cannot be generally true, since collapse happened around the world at various times (that is, they do not all synchronise with

climate ‘events’), and clearly in some cases (take the collapse (or fall) of Carthage, for example, or the end of the Vandal kingdom in North Africa, or the destruction of the Aztec or Inka Empires) were simply caused by other people.

A word about style. In writing about these collapses, I have very deliberately tried to represent the voices and opinions of the scholars who have contributed to their study and to our understanding of what might have been happening. Collapse is a field that has its own cast of characters and it is helpful to know them. Some may find it heavy going, with a lot of names, facts (sometimes), and opinions, but I have attempted to weave together their different ideas into a coherent and, I hope, interesting narrative, with my own critique presented as well.

Finally, I hope the book will appeal to a wide audience – primarily as an introduction to ‘collapsology’ for students and for the interested reader, the first of its kind. I also hope that it will be read and be stimulating for experts in each field covered. No doubt the latter will find a lot to disagree with, but even this is a positive, since it can help push along collapse studies by forcing all of us to think more carefully about what we are investigating and how we explain it to others. It is difficult to find a format and style appropriate for such a wide intended audience, but again, I hope I have struck a reasonably acceptable balance that will please some, if not all.

Each collapse has its own story within its particular field of study, and books, chapters, and articles will continue to be written about each one, but I hope with this book at least to offer a way into this fascinating subject.



## Acknowledgements

It is only possible to write a book of this kind, one that summarises and synthesises, argues, critiques, and interprets, because of the hard work and dedication of many other people – those who uncovered the evidence, translated the texts, and put forward their own ideas and theories; I gratefully acknowledge my debt to them and hope not to have misrepresented them here. Whilst I hope to have acknowledged the ideas of others in the usual ways, it is an inevitable outcome of research and reading done over years that ideas become mixed together and their origins become cloudy and obscure – more than once I have reread something I first looked at years ago and found that it expressed my own thoughts perfectly; I offer my apologies for any omissions.

I would like to offer specific thanks to several people and institutions. George Cowgill and Gary Feinman (and several anonymous reviewers) were encouraging and helpful as I wrote my review article on collapse for the *Journal of Archaeological Research*, the research for which informed this book. For reading specific chapters, spotting errors, and making helpful suggestions, I thank James Aimers, Trevor Bryce, George Cowgill, Oliver Dickinson, Jan Driessen, Arthur Joyce, J. M. Kenoyer, and Norman Yoffee. James Whiting read and gave feedback on an early draft and Richard Carter-White, a later draft. I owe special thanks to fellow collapsologist Arthur Demarest for his enthusiastic response to the book at the review stage and for his many pages of helpful and stimulating comments on the whole text (and

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This book was begun in Tokyo, where I was a Project Associate Professor at Tokyo University between 2008 and 2015, and completed in Newcastle upon Tyne as a Visiting Fellow in the School of History, Classics, and Archaeology at Newcastle University. I would like to thank Jakob Wisse for kindly granting me this position at Newcastle.

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