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The Terminal Classic in the Maya Lowlands: Collapse, Transition, and Transformation

edited by Arthur A. Demarest, Prudence M. Rice, and Don S. Rice

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Introduction

The Terminal Classic and the "Classic Maya Collapse" in Perspective *by Prudence M. Rice, Arthur A. Demarest, and Don S. Rice*

The alluringly alliterative notions of the "mysterious Maya" and the "mysterious Maya collapse" have been enduring icons since the very beginnings of archaeology in the Maya lowlands. A century and a half of exploration and public interest in Maya archaeology was spurred by the vision of towering temples and palaces suddenly abandoned, swallowed by the jungle as their inhabitants fled for parts unknown. Despite more than a century of scholarship and accelerated archaeological investigation, the

engaging "mystery" of the Maya collapse has not succumbed to the brutal truths of cold, hard, scientific fact. Even by the turn of the millennium, we still had not come to any agreement on what caused the Maya collapse or precisely how to integrate the vast amount of data, often contradictory, that pertain to this issue.

Part of the problem might have been that we were asking new questions about the Maya collapse, but our attempts to answer them were bound to outmoded concepts that no longer yield useful insights and explanations. Here we introduce the contributions to this volume by revisiting some of these time-honored concepts, like "collapse," that have guided thinking over the decades. We offer a varied set of perspectives—not necessarily right or wrong, but simply varied—on the Maya Terminal Classic period, the collapse, and related issues, to establish the deep background within which the research reported in these chapters was carried out.

Although the contributions in this volume do not resolve the many controversies, they do indicate that the discussion of the Classic to Postclassic transition has moved to a new level of detail in culture-history and of sophistication in concepts and approaches. Some scholars here still think in terms of a general collapse of Classic Maya civilization and of one or two "global" causes of this alleged cataclysm. Yet the editors and most scholars in this volume now reject such notions of uniformity of the nature or the causes of Classic to Postclassic period changes. Instead, we see this volume as the beginning of a more sophisticated process of reconstructing, region by region, the changes that occurred between A.D. 750 and 1050 and led, through varying paths, to the different societies and settlement distributions of the Postclassic period. The broader patterns and linkages that emerge in these regional sequences are discussed in our concluding chapter.

Be forewarned, however, that the variability and complexity of this Classic to Postclassic transition have increased with our greater knowledge of the archaeological and historical evidence. The plotting of these changes will tell us a great deal about the culture and political systems of both the Classic and Postclassic period kingdoms of the ancient Maya. Sadly, however, this volume also ushers in a new period in the archaeological study of this transition: the mundane and difficult work of building and linking regional histories that we have begun here will replace the romantic search for the "secret" to a presumed uniform and simultaneous catastrophe that never occurred.

Perspectives on the End of the Classic Period

Early Historicism

Explorers of the Maya lowlands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries discovered carved, dated stone monuments at southern sites, simultaneously noting that their erection ceased in the late ninth century A.D. Along with cessation of the stela-altar complex and hieroglyphic texts, there was also a decline of polychrome ceramics, sumptuous burials, and apparent abandonment of many of the Classic

southern cities. And at about the same time, they noted, occupation began to flourish at new and different sites in the northern lowlands.

In these early years, archaeological and anthropological thinking on cultural change was relatively unsophisticated, and explanations tended to be couched in terms of fairly dramatic scenarios of rises and falls of empires, or collapses of civilizations (see Yoffee and Cowgill 1988; Cowgill 1988). Probably only the fall of the Western Roman Empire has been discussed more often than the Maya as an example of the decline of a civilization. One result of this thinking was the notion of the collapse of lowland Maya civilization, that is, the "Old Empire" of the south, followed by the establishment of a "New Empire" in the north (Morley 1946; Thompson 1954). And thus was established a holy grail for subsequent archaeological research: If this was the collapse of Classic-period civilization, now we must discover its causes.

By the mid-twentieth century, numerous causes had been proposed to explain the decline and collapse of what had been envisioned as a ruling priestly hierarchy at the southern sites. These causes included (Morley and Brainerd 1956:69–73; see also Adams 1973a): earthquake activity, climatic change (drought), epidemic diseases such as malaria and yellow fever, foreign conquest, "cultural decadence," agricultural (soil) exhaustion, and revolt of the lower classes. The last was viewed as the most plausible.

The Notion of the Terminal Classic

The concept of a lowland Maya "Terminal Classic" period was formally introduced into the archaeological lexicon at the 1965 Maya Lowland Ceramic Conference in Guatemala City, Guatemala (Willey, Culbert, and Adams 1967). This meeting was held for the purpose of discussing and visually comparing ceramic complexes, particularly to compare chronologies, as published ceramic data were not widely available. The focus was primarily on relatively large sites where major research projects had earlier been carried out.

The Terminal Classic concept was intended primarily as a mechanism for separating and marking the Classic to Postclassic transition (Culbert 1973b:16–18) in the lowlands, and was initially defined on the basis of its ceramic content. Its name, Tepeu 3, was borrowed from the Uaxactún ceramic sequence, although the sphere designation, Eznab, is drawn from that of Tikal. The Terminal Classic thus referred to both a time period (roughly A.D. 830–950) and a particular set of cultural circumstances: specifically, cessation of the cultural practices that characterized the Classic pinnacle of Maya civilization. Although the term was adopted "in the hope that it [would] connote both the continuity and the destruction of previous patterns..." (Culbert 1973b:17), emphasis has more often been on their endings than their continuities. The Terminal Classic concept was always inseparably connected to the termination of Maya "Classicism"—its collapse and the attendant abandonment of the southern and central lowlands.

Participants in the 1965 ceramic conference also identified the Terminal Classic as an archaeological "horizon." A horizon is characterized as "a spatial continuum represented by the wide distribution" of recognizable artifacts, styles, or practices, defined most saliently by "its relatively limited time dimension and its significant geographic spread" (Phillips and Willey 1953:625; Willey and Phillips 1955:723; 1958:38). Choice of the horizon label for the lowland Maya Terminal Classic was dictated not by the widespread prominence of a distinctive artifact style, then and now the most common basis for defining archaeological horizons (D. Rice 1993a), but rather by the perception that the lowland Late Classic period ended everywhere with a societal collapse so widespread that it constituted a bona fide cultural horizon. As T. Patrick Culbert (1973b:16) later noted, the Tepeu 3 horizon was "the period during which the processes of the downfall worked their course."

Collapse-centrism

Not long after the Maya Ceramic Conference, leading Mayanist scholars met in a seminar at the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1970 for the first attempt to systematically compare and synthesize the data that had accumulated on the causes of the collapse. The conference, organized because "a series of major research projects [had] been undertaken in the Maya Lowlands in the last two decades that provide important masses of new data" (Culbert 1973d:xiv), revealed some of the complexity of the lowland Late Classic Maya world and the emergence of different regional patterns of change in the eighth through tenth centuries. But it is important to recognize that the data presented at the conference and published in the resultant volume, *The Classic Maya Collapse* (Culbert 1973a), represent a rather biased sample of the lowlands. Robert L. Rands's (1973a) effort to provide the chronological summary for the volume was based on data from only eight sites—essentially those from the earlier ceramic conference—particularly in the west along the Pasión and Usumacinta Valleys (Seibal, Piedras Negras, Altar de Sacrificios, Palenque, and so forth).

The Classic Maya Collapse concluded with a characteristically skillful summary by the "Great Synthesizer," Gordon Willey, assisted by Demetri Shimkin. These authors (Willey and Shimkin 1973) wove the seemingly contradictory interpretations and diverse data sets into a summation that included "structural" considerations (subsistence, population density, sociopolitical organization, religion, militarism, urbanism, trade, and markets) and dynamic features (role of the elite, social distinctions, intersite competition, agricultural problems, demographic pressures, disease burdens—especially malnutrition—and external trade). Significantly, they downplayed the role of militarism, either as internal revolt (earlier favored by Sylvanus G. Morley and J. Eric Thompson) or external invasion (see Rice n.d.). They concluded with a descriptive model of sorts that uncomfortably forced integration of all these possible causes and, as such, was unsatisfactory (Culbert 1988:76 calls it a "kitchen-sink model"). The fissions in our visions of a uniform "Classic Maya collapse" were already apparent.

Subsequently, in the late 1970s and 1980s archaeological research in the lowlands began to legitimize a new focus—the Postclassic period—and this brought about completely different perspectives on the Classic collapse. Instead of viewing the ninth and tenth centuries as the sudden ending of something (that "something" being Late Classic civilization, privileged as the principal period of Maya history worthy of study), archaeologists began to consider the view that these centuries simultaneously represented a transition and, possibly, the beginnings of something else that was also of importance (Chase and Rice 1985; Sabloff and Andrews 1986). Indeed, one conclusion drawn from such perspectives is that, in the Maya lowlands, the truly dramatic transformations "came with the fall of Chichén Itzá in the thirteenth century A.D. and not with the fall of the Classic centers in the South" (Andrews and Sabloff 1986:452).

In the years following the 1970 conference, additional scrutiny of the collapse included new approaches such as computer simulation (Hosler, Sabloff, and Runge 1977), general systems theory (Culbert 1977), catastrophe theory (Renfrew 1978), trend-surface analysis of the distribution of dated monuments (Bove 1981), and new or revised causal mechanisms, including peasant revolt (Hamblin and Pitcher 1980), decline of Teotihuacán influence (Webb 1973; 1975; Cowgill 1979), and agricultural-subsistence stress (Culbert 1988). At the same time, growing interest in settlement surveys, combined with the interpretations of massive depopulations in the ninth and tenth centuries, sparked closer attention to regional demographics and more realistic population estimates (Culbert and Rice 1990). It has been estimated that by A.D. 800 the population density was about 145 people per square kilometer, falling into the low 40s per square kilometer by A.D. 1000 (Turner 1990:312). In terms of numbers, by A.D. 800 the population peak is estimated to range between 2.6 and 3.4 million, falling to "less than 1 million or so" by A.D. 1000, a depopulation rate of 0.53–0.65 (Turner 1990:310). Also during the 1980s and 1990s, rapid advances in glyphic decipherments brought about new interpretations of events of the Late Classic period, principally leading to an emphasis on militarism and intense intersite warfare as factors in the collapse in some regions (Demarest, Valdés, *et al.* 1991; Demarest 1996; 1997; Schele and Miller 1986; Schele and Freidel 1990; also Cowgill 1979).

Culture Change

Earlier considerations of the so-called Classic Maya collapse were plagued by the assumption of a common "cause" and by vague terminology (see, e.g., Cowgill 1988). Here, in our consideration of what constitutes the decline, collapse, or transformation of a political system, such as that of the Maya, we follow recent discussions and debates of the epistemology of such considerations of culture change (e.g., Eisenstadt 1967; 1968; 1986; Tainter 1988; Yoffee and Cowgill 1988).

In particular, as Norman Yoffee (1988:14) explains, the various meanings assigned to the word "collapse" can be grouped into two categories. One category consists of words like fall, collapse, fragmentation, and death, which imply "that some meaningful entity

ceased to exist". The second category implies a change to something that is "morally or aesthetically inferior," as in the words decline, decay, and decadence. Here, when we speak of a "decline," it is in reference to a particular political system that experiences a notable decline in the degree of complexity.

In addition, Cowgill (1988:256) urges a careful distinction between the kinds of entities that are in transition, such as state, society, and civilization. The term "state" refers to a type of political organization, and its ending, unless achieved by force, should be referred to as "fragmentation" rather than collapse or fall. Civilization should be used "in a specifically cultural sense, to mean ... a 'great tradition'. To speak of the collapse of a civilization, then, should be to refer to the end of a great *cultural* tradition" (Cowgill 1988:256).

Some of these specific distinctions are difficult to apply to the lowland Maya, however. The term "political fragmentation" may or may not be inappropriate, as it depends on the degree to which Maya states are viewed as centralized or decentralized. Similarly, "civilizational collapse" is inappropriate unless one postulates a "southern lowlands variant of the Maya great tradition" (Cowgill 1988:266).

Postmodernism and Postprocessualism

The collapse of the Maya, like that of any other civilization, is a gripping metaphor for contemporary fears of individual death or societal decline, and has always been a subjective, reflexive reading of an imagined past in the present. As recent trends in social philosophy have emphasized, the ancient past has never been "objectively" or "scientifically" studied. The ancient past has always been, at best, a Rorschach test for contemporary concerns, and at worst, a text constructed in a metanarrative with a conscious or subconscious agenda of legitimating the conquering Western capitalist tradition. Clearly, the "mystery of the Maya collapse" falls somewhere between these subjective extremes as a contemporary, emotional reading of the past (cf. Montejo 1991; Castañeda 1996; Hervick 1999).

The notion of a collapse of Maya civilization has been viewed as offensive by some scholars and a few Maya activists, given the vigor of the Maya cultural traditions of millions of speakers of Maya languages in Mexico and Guatemala today. Both the intellectual confusion and political insensitivity can be attributed to careless terminology about what constitutes a "transition," "decline," or "collapse" and *what it is that experiences* the transition, decline, or collapse. Clearly, Maya civilization as a general cultural and ethnic tradition—a "great tradition"—did not experience any "collapse" or "decline." The Postclassic Maya kingdoms of northern Yucatán, Belize, and Guatemala were large, vigorous polities, and the Maya tradition of more than ten million indigenous citizens of Guatemala and Mexico is currently experiencing a great cultural, linguistic, and political florescence (e.g., Fischer and Brown 1996). Indeed, this contemporary Maya resurgence is challenging our conceptions of what is "Maya" and how

anthropologists and archaeologists view these societies (e.g., Warren 1992; Watanabe 1995; Nelson 1999; Montejo 1991; Fischer 1999; Cojtí Cuxil 1994).

In this regard, our referring to or describing a "collapse," "decline," "transition," or "transformation" of Classic lowland Maya kingdoms is neither a moral/aesthetic judgment nor a denigrating statement about Postclassic Maya polities or the later societies and cultural formations of speakers of the Maya languages and their traditions (although some earlier authors may have placed such connotations on these terms). Rather, these are more specific interpretations about what happened to particular *political and economic systems* in the ninth and tenth centuries. Similarly, talking of the decline of the Western Roman Empire or the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian hegemony is not a broader denigrating statement on the European Western tradition or modern Western society; it is a generalization about changes, some rapid, some gradual, in particular political systems.

While acknowledging the inevitably reflexive nature of archaeology, many of us still remain dedicated to the mundane, traditional task of ordering artifacts from different regions, dating them using a variety of methods, comparing them, and then attempting to construct culture-history consistent with those data sets and sequences. Our dedication to this task may simply be due to a lack of intellectual courage; that is, we are lackeys in the capitalist metanarrative construction system and this is our job! Alternatively, however, one could argue that despite the efforts of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and a host of French philosophers (and their British archaeological "translators," Ian Hodder, Michael Shanks, Christopher Tilley, *et al.*), some of us still cling to the seemingly outdated concepts of linear time, subject/object distinctions, and other credos of modern science.

A volume such as this must be viewed as traditionalist construction and comparison of regional culture-histories, together with some initial attempts at interpretation of causality in terms of traditional Western scientific "metanarrative." We did not seek in this volume to debate the epistemology or terminology of discourse as applied in archaeology, in Mayanist archaeology, or, specifically, in the study of the final centuries of Classic Maya civilization. We share concerns regarding the admittedly problematic terms used in interpretive discourse here and in general in the Maya field, such as *civilization, tradition, decline, collapse*, etc. These concerns are touched upon briefly in several articles in this volume and also in Chapter 2 by Diane Z. and Arlen F. Chase. We do not necessarily agree with the Chases' negative presentation of much earlier research, nor with their approach to "hermeneutics." Nonetheless, we do believe that awareness of postprocessual critique has enriched some of these chapters. In general, however, we leave to future forums the worthy debate and general re-evaluation of our essentialist views of "Maya civilization" and its culture-history, and the necessarily subjective and value-laden ways in which we interpret such abstractions in the archaeological record.

New Balche', Old Ollas

Since the 1970 Santa Fe conference, the concept of civilizational collapse has stirred enormous disagreement among Mayanists, particularly because such an event did not occur simultaneously in the north, where cities were flourishing. In the thirty years since the conference, an enormous amount of research has provided a wealth of data, stimulating a need for a new look at the ninth- and tenth-century changes taking place in the lowlands. This research has also revealed considerable variability in the timing of these processes and in the extent to which they took place. Most archaeologists' discussions now highlight (rather than suppress) variability within and among Classic Maya kingdoms during this period. Wholesale abandonment versus slow decline, sudden versus gradual economic change, population dispersion, endemic warfare, destruction, reorientation, and florescence—all are represented in the interpretations of change and transformation in regional lowland cultures during these centuries. In addition, the whole notion of "collapse" as the defining event of the ninth and tenth centuries in the lowlands is being rethought, and major shifts in theoretical approaches to culture-history and causality prompt similar reviews.

We adopted the term "Terminal Classic" in accumulating these papers, largely because of tradition: this is what it has been called in the southern and central lowlands. The Terminal Classic in the southern lowlands was dated ceramically from a beginning at about A.D. 800/830, to an ending around 950/1000. In the northern lowlands, however, the temporal interval of the Terminal Classic is subsumed with a longer (ca. A.D. 700–1050/1100) period usually known as "Florescent" or "Pure Florescent," alluding to the flowering of the Puuc centers in the northwestern corner of the Yucatán peninsula (see Brainerd 1958). For the northern lowlands, then, the term "Terminal Classic" is a rather ill-fitting and restrictive label for this longer period.

Consequently, we have taken the period under consideration here to be an interval of some three hundred years, from approximately A.D. 750 to 1050. This is not a conscience-stricken attempt to force-fit the southern chronology into the northern, but rather recognition that, overall, the focus of interest for Mayanists is no longer simply a political collapse in the south. Instead, research has revealed that the end of divine kingship—the termination of a key element of "classicism" in the south—is only one strand in a complex web of events and processes of intra- and intersite dynamics and broader, continuing inter-regional interactions between the north and the south. While still flawed, the "Terminal Classic" designation at least remains more neutral than terms like "collapse," "fall," or "decline."

The reader will find even greater chronological variation in the periods covered by these articles. To some degree, this reflects the great chronological variability in the changes in material culture in different regions. For example, the events and processes leading to a population decline and emigration in western Petén began before A.D. 750 and in some areas (such as the Petexbatún, and possibly the Copán Valley) were all but over by A.D. 830. Yet in some other areas, in Belize and the northern Yucatán peninsula, a variety of differing shifts and changes continued through A.D. 1100, before the material

culture and institutions associated with the Postclassic were firmly in place. This variability is especially notable in Chapters 19–22 on the northern lowland sites.

Other variations in the chronological framing of chapters is due to the interpretive approaches and theories of the authors, which draw on earlier, or later, parallel processes. For example, in Chapter 15, Richard Adams *et al.* envision a true global "collapse" that is the last of three earlier global "disasters" driven by climatologically caused droughts and famines. They trace their regional culture-history, then, back to the Preclassic to try to demonstrate such a repeating pattern. Conversely, Christopher R. Andres and K. Anne Pyburn (Chapter 18) and Marilyn A. Masson and Shirley Boteler Mock (Chapter 17) try to elucidate the changes involved in the Classic to Postclassic transition by working backward from Postclassic evidence in Belize that helps define the new, yet vigorous, Maya tradition in Belize after A.D. 1100.

What is really of interest to anthropological archaeologists, after all, are the processes underlying a broader cultural transformation, a Late Classic to Postclassic transition, taking place in this period. In the southern lowlands, the focal transition has long been the end of divine kings and the large cities they ruled. In some areas, this was an abrupt political collapse of the type that is traditionally identified with the Terminal Classic period and is certainly worthy of scholarly attention. However, contributing factors can be traced back to at least the sixth century, carved stelae continued to be erected in some sites into the early tenth century, and the aftermath—population movements and new alliances—all demand that at least several decades immediately preceding and following the Terminal Classic proper be considered in any genuine effort to understand these broad processes of cultural transformations.

Transitions, Transformations, and Collapses in the Terminal Classic: The Chapters in this Volume

What actually collapsed, declined, gradually disappeared, or was transformed at the end of the Classic period was a specific type of political system and its archaeological manifestations: a system of theater-states, identified by Emblem Glyphs, dominated by the *k'ul ajawob* (holy kings) and their inscribed stone monuments, royal funerary cults, and tomb-temples, the political hegemonies of these divine lords, and their patronage networks of redistribution of fineware polychrome ceramics, high-status exotics, and ornaments. This system ceased during the late eighth and ninth centuries in most of the west and some areas of central Petén. Its ending was often accompanied within a century by the depopulation of major cities, drastic reduction of public architecture, and other changes. Notably, however, in other areas, such as Belize, the Mopán Valley, and the northern lowlands, the close of the Classic period saw more gradual change or even florescence. There clearly was no "uniform" collapse phenomenon, but rather a sequence of highly variable changes. Yet in all cases there was a pronounced change in the Classic Maya sociopolitical order by the end of the Terminal Classic (varying from A.D. 950 to 1100), with the "termination" of the divine *k'ul ajaw* institution and most of its distinctive, archaeologically manifest features of elite culture.

The intention of this volume was not to find common cause(s) of these phenomena, but rather to plot this very variability as a starting point for future interpretations of the transition from Classic to Postclassic Maya lowland political and economic systems. The modest goal was to compile and compare summaries of the Terminal Classic and Florescent period (circa A.D. 750–1050) archaeological evidence and culture-histories from excavations and interpretations in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. With only brief epistemological digressions here and in Chapter 2, then, most chapters are archaeologists' culture-historical summaries of their data on the late eighth to eleventh centuries from their regions of research. Most scholars in the volume implicitly or explicitly apply their reconstructions (regional or pan-lowland) of decline, transition, or transformation to the *political systems* of Classic Maya lowland kingdoms. And most of the chapters end with some speculative discussion of the broader nature of the end of the Classic Maya kingdoms and the beginnings of the Postclassic in their respective regions. Indeed, several move more broadly beyond the period under discussion to describe the Postclassic florescence (e.g., Chapters 17 and 18) or to posit a more gradual transition to Postclassic political and economic systems (Chapter 2). In our final summary (Chapter 23), we argue that some chronological patterns and parallels can be discerned in the wide array of evidence presented. There we also try to more clearly delineate the nature of the disagreements about data or interpretation seen in these many chapters.

Results and Prospects

We did not expect any manner of consensus to arise from these chapters—and none has! What we did expect was that intriguing patterns might emerge, that directions for future research might be better defined, and that disagreements could be clarified as to their degree and nature. In general, the chapters in this volume provide summaries of regional archaeological evidence and culture-histories, a snapshot of the "state of the art" in Maya research on the centuries of the Classic to Postclassic transition, A.D. 750–1050. These summaries and interpretations allow comparisons and contrasts between the assemblages, the events, and the processes proposed for the many subregions of the Maya lowlands. Some contributions describe depopulation and political disintegration in their regions, while others present evidence for a more gradual change in institutions with less dramatic shifts in demography, economy, and political order. It is hoped that this compilation of data and ideas will provide an overview of the highly variable archaeological record and the wide range of scholarly interpretations of the evidence on this period, upon which research and syntheses can build.

Yet we do believe, as stated previously, that the volume represents a watershed in studies of the Classic to Postclassic transition, moving away from global projection of local evidence or grand theories to hypothesize a uniform pan-Maya catastrophe. The evidence presented here largely argues against the concept of a uniform, chronologically aligned collapse or catastrophe in all regions of the lowlands or even a uniform "decline" in population or political institutions. (Note that some recent climatological theories run counter to this trend and return to catastrophism, e.g.,

Chapters 9 and 15; Hodell *et al.* 1995; Haug *et al.* 2003). In light of the data and perspectives in most of these chapters, the enigmas of the Terminal Classic become more manageable and less value-laden problems. We can plot the various collapses, declines, or transformations of Classic Maya regional culture across the political landscape of the Maya lowlands and note the common underlying structural problems, the varying proximate "causes" and external forces, and the different results in each region. The beginning of such a comparative plotting was the principal goal of this volume and the meetings, correspondence, and debates that generated these papers.

We hope that these chapters will provide a baseline that will stimulate, clarify, and direct the continuing systematic compilation of regional culture-histories of the end of the Classic and beginning of the Postclassic period. This new epoch of research on the problem should leave behind the myth of global, pan-Maya catastrophism and the "mystery" of *the* collapse. Instead, the specifics of the varying regional sequences, and linkages between them, may lead to a more sophisticated understanding of the changes in lowland Maya political and economic systems.