

What caused the disappearance of the mayan civilization



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It is still a great mystery how the Mayan civilization disappeared. This complex society reached its zenith around approximately 750 AD. However, within the next two hundred years, this civilization which was epic in its time collapsed and disappeared leaving minimal traces and even more scanty detail about what could have caused this disappearance. This knowledge gap has led to a lot of debate among scholars over the various possible reasons behind what seems to us to be the abandonment and desertion of these sites.

Some of these explanations are suppositions made without convincing proof. It has been understood widely that the collapse of Late Classic Maya civilization involved more than the disintegration of political structure and that it could have involved a total systemic failure in which both centres and dependent villages were abandoned by elites and commoners alike. The lowland rainforest habitat where Maya civilization developed was not significantly reoccupied until comparatively recent time.

Theories for this “Mayan Collapse” are wide-ranging and varied, and recent scholarship has postulated over seventy different theories including, but not limited to climate change, deforestation, drought, warfare and invasion, social upheaval or revolution. Some theories even go to the extent to postulate a lack of affirmative action by Mayan kings which could have saved the civilization. Archaeologists have made several attempts to come up with explanations for this collapse; however no specific theory has greater empirical sway than others.

Why did such a mighty civilization collapse? Are there any Mayan descendants who can tell us anything? Where do we turn for informant given the dearth of evidence? This essay will critically examine the theories of demographic constraints, climatic changes including drought and warfare and invasion as they attempt to explain the disappearance of the Mayan civilization. Each theory's overview and merits will be discussed and interrogated such that convincing models can be used to explain the collapse of this civilization.

This essay will eventually conclude by establishing the aptness and viability of the chosen theories in order to offer conclusions which are as plausible as possible under the circumstances of insufficient tangible evidence and the paper will attempt further to explain why these could have been the main causes behind the collapse of the Mayan civilization. A large part of the Mayan economy was agriculture. They mainly grew maize, beans, and squash. Since Mayan cities were basically located in tropical forests, 'slash and burn' technique was utilized in order to create strips of land for farming.

This proved as a sophisticated method and the Mayans were able to sustain a good agro based economy. However, the constant use of this technology resulted in the destruction of land, making it almost barren. Since the Mayan region was inclined to natural drought and human induced drying due to deforestation, this combination may well have wreaked havoc on Maya civilization. Climatic changes played a huge role in agricultural subsistence because complete deforestation had major impacts on temperature and precipitation.

Thus, it is very likely that complete deforestation contributed to changes in climate which were unfavourable for the Mayans right at the peak of their civilization (Oglesby, Sever, Saturno, Erickson & Srikishen, 2010: 7). This is because climatic elements determined the nature of temperature and rainfall that was adequate for the plantation and harvesting of crops. If the climate was unfavourable, the staple diet would be upset and this could cause in starvation and disease.

So the combination of deforestation and cultivation of fertile land tampered with the climate, and in turn the climatic changes caused an upset in the agricultural system as a whole, which drastically interrupted the usual function of society. This could mean starvation, an epidemic, both that could force populations to resettle in different areas in order to escape death. On the contrary, a causal link between climate and the late Classic collapse cannot be simply drawn directly, for the region inhabited by the Maya was geologically, ecologically and climatically diverse.

The response of climate to any single forcing factor may not have been the same throughout the Mayan region, so it cannot be singlehandedly a strong contributing factor, but seen as a secondary reason behind the total collapse. (Hodell, Curtis & Brenner, 1995: 393-394). This theory however manifests a strong reasoning as it provides evidence of climatic changes owing to deforestation or natural climate in the Mayan region for agricultural disaster.

Savannas in some localities show possible remnants of an invasion of grass throughout the whole region as a result of excessive shortening of the

swidden cycle in response to population pressure, leading to this agricultural disaster because grasslands could not be cultivated with aboriginal equipment (Cowgill, 1964: 152). This is ironic because the Mayans practised sophisticated agricultural methods, but their agricultural tools were not as sophisticated in order to go hand in hand with the practises.

This can also be understood as a demographic constraint because the elite class and artisans thrived on the cultivation by peasants and possibly did not have the sufficient knowledge on what kind of tools to make. This is an important factor to understand because the peasants had no access to education of any sort and they did not build tools; all they did was laborious based jobs and although they had the experience, it was not permitted to be experimented in areas where their social status denied them opportunities.

This will be highlighted further along in the essay. Climatic changes heavily influenced demographic constraints, and therefore gains primary status as a theory to explain Mayan collapse. As the Mayan civilization peaked around 750 AD, with it came very complex societal characteristics. These included population explosion in a socially stratified society. With an exponential population curve, land became scarce and this led to greater ruling class control over resources which were also growing scarce.

This manipulative tactic conveys the possibility of growing social discomfort, and possibly leading to peasant revolts. On the other hand, lack of resources may have led to the lack of sophistication in farming tools. Agricultural ramifications may have played a contributing role in the collapse of the Mayan civilization (Turner, 1974: 123). This is because “ the ensuing

breakdowns in trade and agricultural activity would lead to population movements promoting the spread of disease, local overloading of agricultural resources, and hunger.

Such disturbances if continued through a century of decline would be sufficient to deplete heavily both the labour force and the reservoirs of skilled economic leaders, even without catastrophic droughts, hurricanes, or wars” (Willey & Shimkin, 1971: 13). This theory stands on point that the Mayans brought collapse upon themselves because of the nature of their complex society. There were obviously some loopholes, for example class stratification with selective education, and oppression of the commoners that could have incited potential revolt against the Mayan kingdom.

So the agricultural and economic link poses the theory of demographic constraints as one of the man made causes of Mayan collapse. It cannot be the sole reason on its own though because this would take several years to collapse. However, this can be accentuated by the entry of warfare and invasion. However, “ this failure occurred in what are designated as the southern lowlands over a period lasting something over a century-from A. D. 790 to A. D. 950.

Afterwards, there was no recovery to any manifestations resembling the old levels or old standards in cultural, socio-political, or demographic dimensions” (Willey & Shimkin, 1971: 15). Although it took social stratification to set apart the Mayans from simple societies, complexity was attained but at a price. Given the demographic circumstances, it is no

wonder that “ the Late Classic hierarchy imposed an expanded building program on a weakened, undernourished population.

With such an unfavourable, and deteriorating, marginal return on investment in complexity, the collapse of the southern Classic Maya was to be expected” (Tainter, 1998: 190). In the case of this theory, one can then conclude that demographic constraints owing to maintaining control over society has played a heavy role in the collapse of Mayan civilization ironically as it was the same reason why the Mayans even became a complex society. Internal revolts could have been caused by this social upheaval.

Therefore it can be said in a nutshell that complexity marked the rise and fall of Mayan civilization. During the early 20th century, archaeologists shared the common belief that the Mayans were peaceful people and did not engage vehemently in military aggression. This preconceived notion began to change when cuneiform writing on monuments and temple walls dated between the 8th and 10th centuries were being deciphered. The idea of peasant revolt versus external invasion in particular, or militarism and warfare in general have only reemerged as a major theory behind the Mayan collapse.

Conflict and competition were likely to have been constant undercurrents among the Lowland Maya from the civilization’s earliest days, seen mainly in only some areas that had conflict intensified by and during the Late and Terminal Classic, as seen in resettlement of easily defended sites, widespread construction of fortifications, and other evidence (Rice, 2007: 176). Monuments and temple walls provided written and pictorial evidence

that emphasized the tales and lineage of dynasties, battles and conquests, proving that endemic warfare existed in this time frame.

Although military warfare was an integral part of Mayan life, a lot of time, energy and resources were invested in the military effort. Celebrations and ceremonies were held in honour of this as well. This theory brings to light the possibility of social and political enmity between neighbouring Mayan villages. It also raises the notion of warfare as an effect of depletion of resources to facilitate military efforts, which in turn would affect the commoners and peasants as opposed to the ruling elite class who had control over the society's resources and redistribution.

This could have caused the peasant revolt owing to lack of resources and starvation which would either end in death or mass desertion. The theory of warfare may also be viewed as a domino effect of drought that resulted in bad harvests and starvation, leading the peasants to revolt, which would have essentially dismantled the upper class control over the society, resulting in death or desertion in the hope for looking for greener pastures. Invasion could also have been initiated by societies outside the Mayan civilization.

This has been proven by the presence of Fine Paste pottery as an important marker of possible foreign intrusion (Sabloff & Willey, 1967: 324). The element of Central Mexican identity has also been established (Sabloff & Willey, 1967: 327). Therefore, this theory of warfare and invasion has a fair amount of credibility because it not only proves to have been a cause of

Mayan collapse by itself, but also contributes to the occurrence and understanding of demographic constraints.

This is because conflict and raiding created a reason to defend land and agriculture, which would in turn sustain the economy (Tainter, 1988: 189). It further explains the notion that external invasion could have been successful, leading to the captivity of Mayans as slaves and those who could escape, forced to resettle into other areas away from their villages. Therefore, external invasion and internal warfare would only result in destruction and desertion, which would result in the lack of a sufficient amount of people to cultivate on and contribute to subsistence for the society, under the same rule.

Invasion would change the dynamics of the occupied Mayan villages. After choosing to critically assess the credibility of the above mentioned theories, it comes to light that the interactions of the natural environmental, ecological, demographic, economic, social, and political factors all had a role to play in the collapse of the Mayan civilization. Changes in the climate were not necessarily natural. It has been proven that deforestation caused climatic changes which were detrimental to Mayan agricultural subsistence. However, this was unfortunate because deforestation was done in order to create more space for cultivating land and to settle population while the society was expanding. This also overlaps the idea of demographic constraints because the population explosion and restricted amount of space did not help the situation. It only added further problems of subsistence.

This in turn created more ruthless dominance of the upper ruling class over the lower common class of people within the society. Quite obviously then, this social discomfort caused internal revolts and this made the kingdom fragile and susceptible to external invasion as the society was crumbling and unable to survive on its own wits anymore. Possibly the most viable theory of the three chosen would be warfare and invasion because that defines the ultimate state of affairs.

Climatic changes and demographic constraints did add pressure to the Mayan situation, however, warfare and invasion involves violent and direct confrontation. Disease could be a strong contender as a possible outcome of demographic constraints, but not enough valid evidence was found in the prior research of theories explaining the possible reasons behind Mayan collapse. It is impossible that only one theory singlehandedly explains the disappearance of the Mayan civilization, even though written and pictorial evidence was found.

Further research in this area would most likely produce a collaborative theory whereby natural environmental, ecological, demographic, economic, social, and political factors all cohesively explain the ultimate collapse of Mayan civilization because it was far too complex to just disappear in the blink of an eye. The other possibility is that the Mayan civilization as a whole just disintegrated into smaller and more complex civilizations in other areas after abandoning the villages and resettling in different locations away from the centres. This should provide grounds for further research.