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doi:10.1017/eea.2020.15

Guy D. Middleton. *Understanding Collapse: Ancient History and Modern Myths* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, xx and 441pp., 28 Illustr., 16 tables, 18 maps, pbk, ISBN. 978-1-316-60607-0)

There is something about the fall of past societies that captures the minds of observers and interpreters. The Romans of the Republic carried with them the memory of the Gallic sack of the city in the fourth century BC, and their own near demise at the hands of their enemies. They traced their roots back to Hercules, to Romulus, and importantly to a lost prince of Troy. They stitched their identity to Aeneas, to the Greek myth, and to the fall of Ilium. Medieval writers, living amongst the colossal ruins of empire, wondered what could bring such a world to its knees, and trace their own futures and fears through the lens of imperial demise, largesse, and religious failings. Modern commentators are no different. Every discussion of the fall of empires, states, kingdoms, and nations reflects contemporary concerns not just about the present, but also about the shadowy future that could yet be. It is no

surprise that, in recent years, climate change, over-industrialisation, and geological disasters have loomed large in modern depictions of ancient destructions (e.g Rome and the Maya). Where once it was religious discord, disharmony, or heretical belief that undermined states, now, more often it is human greed, exploitation, and disregard for ecological balance, such as in Harper (2017). Whenever we study the demise of past societies, through whatever lens we can find, we must bear in mind it says as much about us, and the world we inhabit, as it does about the ancient past.

A textbook that looks at ‘collapse’ and brings together a variety of different case studies is a most welcome endeavour; and, moreover, one that recognises the modern narratives guiding discussions of demise and fall. Middleton notes that ‘[c]ollapse stories appeal to our narrative desires [...]

as both tragedy and parable' (p. 5). It is this recognition, this stepping back, and the corresponding scholarly focus, that is the book's greatest strength. It is only when recognising our own desires to categorise collapse through certain lenses that we can move beyond them to tackle the realities of demise in the past aware of the academic baggage we carry with us. Archaeology provides a critical route to understanding the collapse of complex societies and a necessary barometer to test and measure historical sources. Middleton's book is, in parts, very useful. He demonstrates an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of the scholarship devoted to collapse and shifts with care between different periods and approaches. This volume has been anticipated by several insightful articles, and Middleton is an excellent guide to what is a vast variety of different approaches and ideas.

Middleton's work is divided between a substantial, fifty-page introduction ('Introducing Collapse'), and twelve chapters that look at a variety of societies (Egypt, Akkad, the Indus Valley, Minoan Crete, Mycenaean Greece, the Hittites, Rome, Mesoamerica, the Maya, Andes, Angkor, and Rapa Nui). The opening chapter is the strongest section of the volume. Anyone interested in the collapse of societies will gain much through only reading this section of the book. It opens with a conversational anecdote, with the author listening to a three-minute radio piece as he sits down to write, that had 'solved' the fall of the Maya. Middleton then looks at stories of collapse, provides clear definitions (grounded in the scholarship), and forces us to recognise what we are looking for (i.e. what has collapsed). The introduction then moves onto asking why collapse happens, again moving through a strong array of scholarly approaches, before briefly thinking about post-collapse and why collapse in and of itself is important. This is an excellent

opening; carefully framed, well written, and deeply authoritative.

The following chapters are of rather more mixed quality. The geographic scope of these case studies is impressive; but each of them could have been two or three times as long, to fully explore every point that Middleton presents. Greater comparison between them would have been useful, and each section (so weighted on synthesis of other scholars' work) presents a rather speculative and superficial depiction. As a textbook this works to provide informed introductions to each case study; but the student reader would benefit from rather more maps, images, and stream-lined debate. The chapters that look into Mycenaean Greece (pp. 129–54), the Maya (pp. 244–75), and Rapa Nui (pp. 317–38) are strong. In each, Middleton demonstrates an excellent grasp of the shifts in scholarship and the various ways of reading and interpreting these stories. Each chapter reaches confident conclusions and provides important windows into 'collapsology'. However, the other chapters are not always as clear or well explored.

To give an example of this I will discuss the chapter on the fall of Rome (pp. 182–212). The fall of Rome is one of the most familiar tales of the ancient world: the erosion of a once vast political system, and its replacement by and transformation into successor states. It is also one of the most studied periods in Roman history, with a vast amount of literature, competing arguments and dominant voices, such as Halsall (2007) and Heather (2005). The opening here highlights some approaches, but projects a rather superficial allusion to the many different ways into this topic (pp. 182–85). The focus then shifts to the role of barbarians, still an essential area of study and research that invites divergent scholarly perspectives and arguments. The historical writing of Ammianus

Marcellinus is drawn upon, but without full context any analysis of his work can only ever be superficial (p. 186). He is often seen as the best historian of late Rome, and his *Res Gestae* provide detailed discussion and analysis of the Roman state from AD 353–378. In one sense he is the heir of Tacitus, and he has personal knowledge and understanding of the barbarian peoples encountered during this period. He was one of the most important ancient sources used by Gibbon (2008 [1776]). Much more context is needed if his work is to be analysed fully. Although Middleton provides useful extracts that look to the Huns, the failings of Roman administration, and the presence of barbarians within the borders of the empire (pp. 186, 204), there is no real engagement here with recent perspectives on Ammianus Marcellinus, such as found in Feldherr (2009) or Bocci (2013). Marcellinus is one of the most important guides to the Huns and the Goths, being both the product of the scholarship that preceded him and a valuable eyewitness. When writing of the Alamanni he tells us about the complexities of their political system, with seven kings, but two who have greater authority. He also recognises that they are not a single people, but a collection of different nations and tribes. In the same breath however, he falls back upon standard Roman labels and tradition (e.g. *germani*, *barbari*). It would be useful for students to be given some of this information, and perhaps with direct comparison to the work of other late Antique scholars, such as Priscus, Procopius, or Jordanes.

The recognition of the resettlement policy is an important one, as there were undoubted political mistakes leading to the conflict between the Goths and the Romans. This has been well-discussed and established as one of the crucial moments in the disintegration of western Roman

power. However, this is a highly complex issue, and one that needed to be set out with greater care and focus (pp. 187–88). Coupled with this, any discussion of Roman and barbarian needs to recognise the intellectual creation and culture leading to these heavily loaded artificial terms. This section in particular needed an awareness of identity, classical ethnography, and the alteration of Roman sense of self in the late empire. The section on decline and transformation is good, and recognises important schools of thought, and the ‘rhetoric of decline’ being a persistent feature of western culture’ (p. 189). While Gibbon of course must loom large here, there is lack of clear methodology guiding the choice of other scholarly voices, e.g. Potter (2006), Haywood (1960) and Bury (1958). Heather (2005), Halsall (2007), and Ward-Perkins (2005) all dominate discussion (and thus need to be present); but the scholarship needed to be examined with greater care, and the choice behind each explained rather more fully. Finally, and echoing the concern regarding Ammianus Marcellinus, each of the other contemporary sources needed a little more context, in particular Aelius Aristides (p. 189). The speech delivered to Antonius Pius is one of the more famous public speeches of the period, and a full examination here of how and why attitudes to empire could be positively framed would have been useful.

The conclusion returns to the strong analytical focus seen in the introduction (pp. 339–66), with a much clearer authorial voice and a passionate urgency to some of the prose: ‘the message to take from many collapses is clear—collapse cautions us to build fair and inclusive societies that minimise room for disaffection and for potentially harmful divisions to arise’ (p. 341). This is not just about climate change and the earth around us, but the political and social realities faced by so

many. This is a laudable approach, and one that allows Middleton to remind us that we can learn from the stories we create, have read, and study so often, and that, at the heart of each, there exists human agency and human choice. This conclusion is also where the scholarship becomes rather more adventurous. All of a sudden, the comparative focus, hinted at in the main body of the volume, is given space to develop. This is where collapsology is strongest, in inviting and thinking about similar narrative trajectories, as well as crucial differences. The Roman, Wari, Akkadian, Tiwanaku, and Hittite can present similar political instabilities to one another. Others can be interpreted together through the windows of climate concerns, famine, the threat of invasion and external pressures. This comparative element is the most important, and useful, way of studying collapse, as it opens new and insightful definitions both of the states involved, but also of the nature of their collapse. The comparison of Detroit with Rome (pp. 355–59) is nuanced and identifies the issues prevalent in archaeological research as well as the limits of what the evidence can tell us.

To close, there is much to commend here, and I would not want my comments about the chapters in the main body to discourage readers. The book is successful in defending collapsology as an area of research in its own right, and the introduction is deeply thought provoking and provides an excellent route into the topic. In many ways, this is the model of how a textbook opening *should be* written, with a willingness to ask difficult questions and recognise the fascination of stories of collapse. Any volume of this nature, that covers so much fertile ground, will be

hindered by consequential issues. It remains, however, an important textbook, and one that will aide students and scholars alike, when thinking about collapse.

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doi:10.1017/ea.2020.16