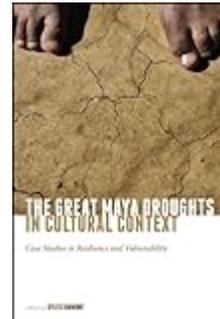


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gyles Iannone, ed. *The Great Maya Droughts in Cultural Context: Case Studies in Resilience and Vulnerability*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014. xx + 466 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60732-279-5.



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There are times when a reader venturing into outside fields feels like an eavesdropper, party to a riveting conversation that has clearly been going on long before they arrived. Gyles Iannone and contributors to this edited volume spend most of their time deep in the midst of two discussions that have been going on in Maya archaeology for decades: the causes and nature of what is popularly called the “Classic Maya Collapse” of the terminal classic period (roughly 800-1000 AD). In focusing on the relationship between climate, environment, and the waxing and waning of Maya city-states, they use the conquest as a backdrop for looking at the variety of adaptations at many Maya sites, providing case studies for the relationship between societies and their environment.

In the first three chapters, Iannone and his contributors lay out the basic conceptual framework and questions of the larger volume, while also suggesting the beginnings of a deeply ambitious intellectual project for the field of Maya archaeology. Historians of corporate institutions (such as militaries and governments) and the environment will find much to engage with in this brief overview of conceptual frameworks for adaptation and resilience. Iannone’s wider intellectual project is to provide a long-term model for environmental-human interaction using the long sweep of the Maya past; this volume

represents the first steps down this path.

The remaining chapters continue the two discussions mentioned above, after briefly addressing the deep history of the climate of the region. In the aggregate, the “collapse” of many Maya city-states appears much like the “collapse” of the city of Rome in late antiquity. People remained and sometimes thrived, but costly investments in monuments and in a royal house ended. In the Maya context, this meant abandoning a costly internal system focused on the “ideological, ritual, and military power of the central figure, the *k’ujul ajaw* [holy lord]” (p. 179). In some locations, the collapse was more catastrophic, marked by a ruinous series of wars or a cataclysmic battle (see chapters 8, 9, and 12). In many places, climate, or more broadly, the conjuncture of ecology and human action, was at least one major stressor for the complex polities of the Maya world, but in no case was it the only one, and it did not always lead to collapse.

I used the eavesdropping metaphor above because this book is not an easy read for the outsider. As a historian of early colonial Latin America, I was unprepared for discussions of oxygen isotopes in ancient deer bones (chapter 11), or for several other technical or insider discussions in this volume, and I suspect that others may

be in the same boat. However, having read contributor Arthur Demarest's 2004 book *Ancient Maya: The Rise and Fall of a Rainforest Civilization*, I was able to follow the broader arguments and themes of the book. Readers with less previous experience would do well to consult the helpful map on page 13 and Demarest's "polythetic set" of general traits of classic Maya political and economic systems (p. 179), which can function as a brief cheat sheet on the subject of the classical Maya.

Historians of Latin America may find this book useful, if, for example, they are interested in agricultural

cycles or the history of disasters in the Maya world. Conquest specialists will be interested in the long arc of Maya history before the European *entradas*, while David Webster's chapter "Maya Drought and Niche Inheritance" makes a step toward answering a basic, if unstated and unexamined, question of Mesoamerican history: namely, why were previously inhabited regions of Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize effectively uninhabited in the millennium between the terminal classic period and the nineteenth century? This chapter, with its approachable style and intense skepticism, is a pleasure to read in its own right.

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