

*Ancient Maya: The Rise and Fall of a Rainforest Civilization*

Arthur Demarest

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A century of scientific study of the ancient Mayan culture has yet to deter the attention of different types of people concerning its history and, more importantly, its mysteries. In fact, Demarest notes with amusement in the book "*Ancient Maya: The Rise and Fall of a Rainforest Civilization*" that the acquisition of scientific information was spurred by the wild imaginations of scholars regarding the Mayan civilization, thus producing several problems and challenges that have helped with the establishment of the systematic investigation of the rise and fall of the civilization.

The book is composed of 12 chapters, each dealing with a specific aspect of the Mayan civilization especially regarding its growth from a very simple society to a very complex civilization. It is clear from the beginning that archaeology plays an important role in the formulation of theories in understanding the formation of the society as well as the changes that it has undergone—from its simple prehistoric roots to its complex civilization—while also attempting to dispel the pseudo-archaeological stories concerning their genesis and their decline. The book was certainly illuminating especially with regards to the Mesoamerican history and culture. While the major focus of the book was on the Classical era, it nevertheless also discussed the Archaic periods wherein the seeds of Mayan civilization began, and proceeded to concentrate on the decline and transformation of the civilization after the Classical Period (300 BC to 900 AD). Through the archaeological finds, the analysis of their living conditions and settlement, and also the hieroglyphic texts, Demarest managed to show that there is indeed the careful passing on of knowledge that initiates the importance of objects as part of the Mayans' culture (Joyce, 2003).

It is interesting to note that the text highly focuses on the political and economical changes occurring within the system over the years, especially how these have affected their daily lives. In an environment where abundance of resources is obvious, the formation of the political and economic exchange was clearly puzzling for many archaeologists, especially when pitted against the building of the cultural idea that pointed towards a complex civilization. Demarest takes care to

point out these differences, especially when noting the decline of the Mayan civilization, which can be attributed to several factors including their warfare, inability to sustain a very large population, and the rise of the elites' demands, thus also possibly increasing warfare of the different states. With these, religious practices—the core of their culture and government—were also transformed. These, the author mentions, are typical of any civilization as time passes by, and it was only later that the introduction of foreign influences—that is, the Spanish explorers—only had the unfortunate timing of stumbling into a society currently undergoing several power struggles affecting their economic growth, and thus taking advantage of their weakened positions.

The ideologies presented in the book are interesting, especially with the perspective that is quite different from the growth of other civilizations. In the light of interrogating a problem through a different perspective, Demarest mentioned that the evaluation of these information should not be solely based on the Western and Marxist perspectives on the rise of civilization—that is, dependency on the lack of resources to organize the beginnings of society. Emphasis is placed on the ability of the Mayans to adapt to their environment through their cultural beliefs that eventually influenced their political state, as well as their technological innovations.

Demarest has managed to present a general book about the Mayan empire—a spectacular feat considering the complex society with a history so long that it encompasses not only a particular period but continues on to the present. For those who may already have already done extensive research on the Mayan civilization or those who may be seeking specific assessment of certain parts of the society (such as in-depth focus on the economy or religion, or would focus on the Archaic period, among others), the book may be considered as supplementary or light reading in hopes to draw some other ideas or for inspiring researchers on approaches that can be taken in trying to solve a problem regarding the interpretations based on evidence in archaeology. The main target of the author is introduction to the society for the beginners; such book can be useful for those who are interested in the Mayan culture and have no idea how to proceed, or those who may wish to learn more about early civilizations in general, thus including the Mayan societies in their studies.

## Reference

- Joyce, R. A. (2003). "Fragments of the Clasic Maya Past." Taken from van Dyke, R. M. & Alcock, S. E. (eds.), *Archaeology of Memories*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd. pp. 103-125.