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 soci-
ety 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 forma-
tion 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 never-
theless 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 archaeologi-
cal finds, the analysis of their living conditions and settlement, and also the hiero-
glyphic 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 re-
sources 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