

AFTER COLLAPSE: THE REGENERATION OF COMPLEX SOCIETIES,

Edited by Glenn M. Schwartz, and Nichols, John J. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006.

The analysis of state reformation, of regeneration after earlier collapse, is a subject which seems obvious in retrospect, and yet has received virtually no explicit attention in the archaeological or anthropological literature. To be sure, virtually everyone is aware of the phenomenon in their own area of research, as is clearly evident in the global span of the papers in this volume. Processes of collapse and re-emergence have certainly been dealt with on a regional scale, and as noted by several of the authors, the issue is implicit in Marcus's 'dynamic model' of the rise of complexity. In this context, Adams's earlier works on long term resilience in Near Eastern society also come to mind. Nevertheless, we owe Schwartz and Nichols a debt of thanks for bringing the subject, as a matter of interest in itself, to the fore as a specific focus of comparative study.

After Collapse is a collection of papers originally organized by the editors as a symposium at the annual meetings of the Society for American Archaeology in 2003. The structure of the volume is straightforward, beginning with an overview by Schwartz, the body of case studies from all over the world – the Near East (Cooper; Nichols and Weber), Egypt (E. Morris), Greece (I. Morris), the Andes (McEwan; Conlee; Sims), South and Southeast Asia (Bronson; Stark), and central America (Chase and Chase; Masson, Hare, and Lope) – and two review essays by Kolata and Yoffee.

Belying this organizational simplicity, the subject itself is difficult. The case studies focus on the specifics of region and period, the mechanics of regeneration in each particular historical circumstance. These studies are illuminating with important insights concerning such general issues as the role of primary and secondary elites, the place of peripheries, the significance of environment, the adoption, adaptation, or rejection of pre-collapse ideologies, and the importance of trade in the re-emergence of complexity. However, it is precisely this diversity in the explanations and descriptions of social renaissance which renders theoretical synthesis and overview so problematic. Although the issues mentioned above are certainly germane, it is not clear how unique they are to regeneration, as opposed for example to simple secondary state formation, or for that matter, in many cases primary state formation.

In fact, regeneration is really a special instance of secondary state formation, the emergence of complexity influenced or stimulated by pre-existing state level societies. In this case those state level societies have collapsed, leaving fertile ground and the appropriate initial conditions for the reformulation of complexity. The theoretical issue is whether post collapse re-emergence is in itself a sufficiently unique analytic category to warrant or require special explanation, especially from a comparative perspective. Although several participants suggest that the alternative is explanation based on pure historical contingency and cultural particularism, it is

really simply the negation of the special category and reversion to the overall idea of secondary state formation.

At the risk of repeating some of the discussion in the three review essays, several issues are crucial. The defining characteristic in the relationship between the collapsed society and its replacement is some degree of cultural continuity. Regeneration implies that the groundwork for complexity has already been laid and the form that re-emergence takes is contingent upon that groundwork, that is, the antecedent society. Both the nature of that antecedent society and the nature of the collapse are assumed to be crucial for understanding both the process of re-emergence and the form the new-old society takes, and the case studies suggest this to be true.

Theoretically it may be difficult analytically to distinguish between the conditions giving rise to the state in the first place and those effecting regeneration after collapse. That is, if states, especially archaic states, are indeed fundamentally unstable, then dissolution and regeneration may be linked to initial rise as well, part of a single system and not so much to the particulars of the founding social complex (or rather, only the particulars are linked). An interesting test of some of these ideas might be comparison to those dissolved or collapsed societies which did not regenerate. The Mississippian comes to mind, although it is possible that regeneration was truncated by European contact.

There is much still to be worked out here. The editors are to be congratulated for launching the discussion.

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