Questioning Collapse

Human Resilience, Ecological Vulnerability, and the Aftermath of Empire

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Collapse in Ancient Mesopotamia

What Happened, What Didn’t

Norman Yoffee*

Jared Diamond makes only three claims about Mesopotamia in his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*:

1. “Some other famous collapses of prehistoric civilizations ... appear to coincide with peaks of ... drought cycles, such as the collapse of the world’s first empire (the Akkadian Empire of Mesopotamia) around 2170 B.C.”

2. “Salinization ... contributed to the decline of the world’s oldest civilizations, those of Mesopotamia.” (Salinization is the build-up of salts in soils, eventually to toxic levels for plants such as wheat and barley. It is caused by lack of proper drainage in irrigated fields and by a high water table.)

3. “There was no way for the first colonists of Australia and Mangareva to perceive that problem of soil nutrient exhaustion – nor for farmers in areas with salt deep in the ground (like eastern Montana and parts of Australia and Mesopotamia) to perceive incipient salinization.”

INTRODUCTION – PART ONE

These three comments may seem a poor excuse for a chapter on Mesopotamia and collapse that is critical of Diamond. Readers may think, oh, here’s a picky Mesopotamia specialist who spends his time pouring over clay tablets in cuneiform script, puzzling out the details of marriages, divorces, adoptions, sales and rentals of land,
court decisions about contested inheritances, and reading someone else's mail from 4,000 years ago telling us that Professor Diamond, who sees the Big Picture, missed a few things when he wrote about Mesopotamia. But Diamond has done more than offer a cartoon view of Mesopotamia. (In fact, I'm quite fond of the *Cartoon History of the Universe*, which is filled with data.) Diamond's view of collapse, and not only in Mesopotamia, is not only ill-informed, but it contradicts some of his own most interesting messages. Precisely because we know so much about the lives of Mesopotamians--how they had to cope with decisions of their leaders and how their leaders came to be leaders--we can give excellent accounts of the "choices and fates" of people in the remote past.

In addition to reading original texts about how Mesopotamians lived their lives, I have also pondered questions almost as large as Diamond's: how and why did various governments and dynasties and cities in Mesopotamia, the world's first civilization, fall and regenerate? And I have also thought about the ways in which collapse in Mesopotamia was like and unlike other collapses of ancient states. In 1998 George Cowgill, a scholar of the urban metropolis of Teotihuacan in Mexico, and I published the proceedings of a conference in which experts on Mesopotamia, the Maya, China, Rome, and other places explored the collapse of ancient states and civilizations. Our book is the second source cited by Diamond in his section "Further Readings" in *Collapse*.

Let me anticipate my conclusion: if collapse, in Diamond's words, is "a dramatic decrease in human population and/or political/economic/social complexity, over a considerable area, for an extended time," we can't find any such collapse in Mesopotamia or, indeed, anywhere else among ancient states! (This is also the view of Joseph Tainter, whose own work on the "collapse of complex systems" is the first source cited by Diamond.)

But didn't salinization cause the end of Mesopotamian civilization, as Diamond says? (No, it didn't -- see later in this chapter. And Mesopotamian farmers were not too stupid to understand their environments and how their farming practices affected them.) Diamond didn't need to spend much time in Mesopotamia because he thinks that environmental mismanagement and catastrophes were the cause of collapse everywhere! He says all of the following cultures and societies collapsed because of environmental mismanagement: the
California Channel Islands, Cahokia in southern Illinois, and Mound Builder societies (all in the eastern United States), the Moche and Tiwanaku in South America, Mycenaean Greece, the Fertile Crescent (in West Asia), Great Zimbabwe (in East Africa), the Indus civilization (of South Asia), and the Khmer (of Southeast Asia). But, as other chapters in this volume show, and many other studies demonstrate, there is no evidence of environmental mismanagement and collapse in any of these cases that Diamond so casually lists.

To be sure, Diamond qualifies his declarations that environmental reasons "may have played a role" in these transformations. He also declares that "It would be absurd to claim that environmental damage must be a factor in all collapses: the collapse of the Soviet Union is a modern counter-example, and the destruction of Carthage by Rome in 146 B.C. is an ancient one." Perhaps we can paraphrase Diamond as saying that in most instances of the collapse of ancient civilizations environmental mismanagement is the prime suspect. And this is why collapse in the past "offers a rich data base from which we can learn ... [about what might] eventually befall our own wealthy society."

Although most archaeologists do believe, along with Diamond, that we can learn from the past, we do not think that the past was the same as the present in key aspects. We are all certainly alarmed that environmental mismanagement in the present is a clear and evident danger to life on earth. What we can learn from the past is thus the more striking: ancient kings and governments, which did not ruin their environments on a massive scale and didn't have the power to do so, are no models for the present. Rather, the present situation is dire precisely because there is no clear precedent for global environmental mismanagement.

But there are other lessons from the past, and we can study them for more than academic interest. Although Diamond declared that we can't understand why the Soviet Union collapsed by looking at the past, it is just the kind of collapse of an enormous empire that we can compare with what happened, for example, in the Assyrian empire in Mesopotamia.

INTRODUCTION — PART TWO

It is astonishing to read popular accounts about the "collapse" of ancient Mesopotamia, the birthplace of the world's first cities and states and the first written language — as if Mesopotamia came to an
Collapse in Ancient Mesopotamia

![Map of ancient Mesopotamia showing Assyria, Babylonia, and sites mentioned in this chapter. (Illustration by Elisabeth Paymal)](image)

**Figure 7.1**

**Table 7.1. Dates of Mesopotamian Civilization (all dates B.C.E.)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ca. 3200</td>
<td>City of Uruk, tens of thousands of people, first written texts in cuneiform script</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2350–2200</td>
<td>Dynasty of Sargon of Akkade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2100–2000</td>
<td>Third Dynasty of Ur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795–1750</td>
<td>Hammurabi of Babylon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>604–562</td>
<td>Chaldean dynasty of Babylonia including Nebuchadnezzar (II), who destroyed the Temple of the Judeans in Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>539</td>
<td>Conquest of Mesopotamia by Cyrus the Great of Persia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>331</td>
<td>Conquest of Persia by Alexander the Great of Greece</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

abrupt and calamitous end. The first texts, written in Mesopotamian cuneiform script, appeared more than 5,000 years ago in the world’s first city, Uruk. Then Uruk flourished, though not without its ups and downs, for more than 3,000 years, through the empires of Sargon of Akkade, the kings of Ur, Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and the conquests of Cyrus the Great of Persia and Alexander the Great of Greece.
Of course, there were various "collapses" of Mesopotamian states, as kings and dynasties fell or were conquered by other kings. For a short period the city of Uruk itself was abandoned, after which it was reoccupied. You can certainly read, as Diamond has done, mainly in older history books, that these collapses of dynasties were the result of Mesopotamian kings having mismanaged their environments. And there are a few new stories about how climate changes in neighboring regions forced people to leave their villages in Syria and invade Mesopotamian cities. Neither of these explanations is correct.
Studies of Mesopotamian written tablets (which exist in the hundreds of thousands) and new research in Mesopotamian archaeology reveal substantial political instability in Mesopotamian states. Instances of internal struggle among various social and economic groups in Mesopotamian cities and states have been identified, especially in the ethnolinguistic mix that characterized Mesopotamian civilization. Furthermore, we can demonstrate how arrogant decisions by mighty leaders led to overextension and the fall of their states. If one “rule” of political stability/instability can be risked, it is that the more centralized the government, the larger the bureaucracy, and the larger the army in a state, the less stable is the
government and the more drastic and comprehensive is the fall of the state.

I now consider some collapses — and there were several — in the history of the northern part of Mesopotamia, which is called Assyria. In the last years of the seventh century B.C.E., the Assyrian empire, the largest and most militaristic in Mesopotamian history, was defeated, and Assyrian palaces, grandiose art, and libraries and learning disappeared from history. Disappeared, that is, until Assyria was resurrected by archaeologists in middle of the nineteenth century. Assyria now lives again, not only in museums and classes but also in the hearts and minds of people today who call themselves Assyrians. I shall tell a bit of their story later in this chapter.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF STATES IN ASSYRIA

To understand the rise and fall of Assyria in Mesopotamia, I first provide a bird’s eye view of Mesopotamian archaeology and history. Mesopotamian cities evolved extremely rapidly. In 4000 B.C.E. there was hardly any site larger than a modest village in either north or south Mesopotamia. These sites had at most a population of a few hundred. By 3000 B.C.E. we find extremely large cities, including Uruk, which had an estimated population in the tens of thousands. In south Mesopotamia the countryside was divided into about a dozen independent city-states. In central Mesopotamia, in which there were fewer cities, Kish ruled over its region and occasionally over the rival cities to the south. To the north lay Assyria, the political systems of which we know little before about 2000 B.C.E.

The southern city-states, which battled each other for power and autonomy, were brought together decisively by Sargon of Akkade; Akkade is the name of the capital city he founded. Although its location isn’t known, Akkade must have been near Kish because Sargon began his career as an official in service to the ruler of Kish. His conquest of the southern city-states lasted through the reign of his grandson, Naram-Sin, but the state and empire began to fall apart thereafter. This was hardly unexpected because the formerly independent city-states attempted to break away from the rule of Akkade whenever one of its kings died and a new and untried king was being inaugurated. Naram-Sin, who led ambitious military campaigns far
outside Mesopotamia, paid less attention to problems of internal
governance and was remembered in some (but not all) literary texts
as cursed by the gods for his actions.

After a century or so of anarchy—a time described by a Sumerian
text as "who was king, who was not king?"—kings from the city of Ur
managed to conquer the southern Mesopotamian cities and institute
a new territorial state. This dynasty lasted only a century, from about
2100 to 2000 B.C.E., and the enormous and unproductive bureau-
cracy of the state, along with its increasingly unsuccessful military
adventures, was effectively resisted as Mesopotamian cities again were
able to assert their cherished independence.

Now, Mesopotamian scribes provided explanations for these col-
lapses, mainly as punishments by the gods for the misbehavior of
human rulers or in some cases as the result of divine whim and hence
unknowable by humans. The agents of the gods were usually barbar-
ians, foreigners who came from the mountains between modern Iraq
and Iran. Older history books dutifully explained political change in
Mesopotamia as a result of barbarian invasions. A few modern his-
torians and archaeologists, generally unbelievers in the will of the
Mesopotamian gods, have argued that climate change at the end
of the third millennium B.C.E. caused some ancient Syrians (called
Amorites) to migrate southeastward into Mesopotamia and to bring
down the ruling house of Ur. Evidence for this climate change is
mainly seen in a layer of sterile soil, interpreted as a time of aridity,
and in the abandonment of some sites in Syria at this time.

This explanation, however, doesn't consider that neighboring
regions in Syria were not abandoned. Furthermore, the texts from the
period of Ur's rule show that many Amorites were peaceful inhabi-
tants of southern Mesopotamia, some of them holding high offices in
the realm of the Ur kings.\textsuperscript{11} Finally, previous claims that the rulers of
Ur overcultivated their landholdings and caused salinization in the
land, which led to collapse, have been refuted by newer research.\textsuperscript{12}
Indeed, at the capital of Ur life for most citizens went on much as
before after one ruling dynasty was toppled, and, after a short time, a
new dynasty came into power.\textsuperscript{13}

Similar stories of short-lived rulers and territorial states can be
told, such as of the state ruled by Hammurabi of Babylon. This state
took shape in the last few years of Hammurabi's rule and lasted
only until the tenth year of his successor. Hammurabi’s famous law
code, which has in fact nothing to do with how cases were decided in
Babylonia, was mainly intended to justify Hammurabi’s conquest of
the independent city-states who were to supposed to prosper under
the tyrant’s self-proclaimed perfectly just rule.14

So far, I have told several very short stories about the middle and
south of Mesopotamia. The northern part of Mesopotamia, Assyria,
has a different history, and it is to this I now turn.

STATES AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN ASSYRIA

If Assyria in the third millennium B.C.E. – the time of rival city-states
in the south, the empire of Sargon and his successors, and the short-
lived reign of the kings of Ur – is little known, the region is well docu-
mented after 2000 B.C.E. The chronology of Assyria can be broken
down into three periods:

Old Assyrian period (ca. 1920–1780): time of merchant colonies
Middle Assyrian period (ca. 1450–1000): birth of an Assyrian
expansionist state
Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 1000–612): the Assyrian empire.

Situated in a dry-farming area and thus not dependent on irrigation
for agricultural productivity, which was the case in the south, Assyria
was not a land of many cities until the Neo-Assyrian period, when new
capitals were built. The Assyrian dialect of Akkadian was not greatly
different from the Babylonian dialect of southern Mesopotamia. One
might say that Assyria and Babylonia were more or less equal part-
ners in what we call “Mesopotamia.” In fact, there was no word for
“Mesopotamia” in Akkadian. “Mesopotamia,” meaning “the Land
between the Two Rivers” in Greek, is what the classical Greeks called
the area between the Tigris and Euphrates.15

The Old Assyrian Period

Ironically, the Old Assyrian documents for the most part do not come
from Assyria itself, but from a colony of Assyrian merchants called
Kanesh located in the heart of Anatolia (Asiatic Turkey), 470 miles
northwest of the city of Assur, the capital of Assyria in this period.
During the Old Assyrian period Assyrian family firms moved goods from where they were plentiful to where they were scarce and made huge profits from their ability to market these goods.

Assyrian merchants got gold and silver from Anatolia, which they bought with tin and luxurious textiles that they transported from Assyria. Assyrian merchants negotiated long-term business contracts to amass the capital needed to buy the tin and textiles, and the Assyrian kings and state made it their business to keep trade routes open by campaigning selectively and by negotiating treaties with polities. But for the most part it was left to Assyrian merchants to bring goods via donkey caravans to Anatolia; they paid bribes to highwaymen and taxes to the local princes in Anatolia, where they had founded their colonies. These were colonies in the absence of colonialism, since Kanesh and other settlements of various sizes were under the control of Anatolian palaces and royalty.

Although there were kings, administrators, and armies in Assyria, there were also councils of "great and small" men and a "city hall" that shared power with the crown in Assyria and its bureaucracy. The
Old Assyrian hierarchy
(hypothesized and simplified)

Assyrian culture, identity, belief-systems

**Figure 7.5** Schematization of Old Assyrian hierarchy. (Drawn by Elisabeth Paymal)

The elite consisted of eminent traders and landowners. Figure 7.5, which to an extent is necessarily hypothetical, depicts the social and political hierarchy of Assyrian society in the Old Assyrian period.

The diagram shows three interrelated hierarchical branches. In the center there is the government, consisting of the army, the bureaucracy, and the land and workers under the governmental administration. On the right it depicts the temple estates, with priests and administrators. In Mesopotamia temples owned property in order to feed and clothe the gods. The Mesopotamian word for temple is “house of the god,” and the god’s “house” (or, better, the god’s household estate) included those who ministered to him (or her), performing ceremonies, as well as administrators and workers who produced and prepared food and rich garments for the god. The gods (and there were many of them) needed large estates and many dependents for their households. When the (statue of the) god finished consuming the meal prepared for him (or her) and, dressed in fine raiment, departed the ritual meal chamber, the leftovers were given to priests and workers.¹⁶

In the third branch of this hierarchy, on the left side of the diagram, is shown the councils, consisting of traders and gentry, their kinsmen, and their villages. The councils enjoyed real power in Assur
(and in the Assyrian colonies in Anatolia). Lawsuits were decided in councils, payments by merchants to the council were set, and in Anatolia taxes were collected to be given to the local rulers who suffered the Assyrian colonies to exist in their midst.

Note especially in this diagram that the workers in villages, soldiers, and laborers on all the agricultural estates were Assyrians. Toward the end of the Old Assyrian period, about 1820 B.C.E., Shamshi-Adad, a usurper king, originally from the Middle Euphrates area, conquered Assur and incorporated it in his realm. This conquest, to be sure, affected events in Assyria, leading to increased centralization of royal power, but it did not in itself explain the demise of the Assyrian merchant colony system and the end of the Old Assyrian period.

The short-lived empire of Shamshi-Adad, essentially the later years of his life, was resisted in various quarters, not least by people in his Middle Euphrates homeland and the city of Mari. On the empire’s demise the Old Assyrian trading system also disappeared. For all its immense prosperity, the mercantile arrangements were extremely fragile. The Old Assyrian colonies and the political economy in Assyria itself were dependent on the relatively unrestricted passage of traders over long distances. This was relatively easy because both Babylonia to the south and Anatolia in the north didn’t contain powerful territorial states. City-states and local princes in Babylonia contested for power both in their own cities and in their regions. In the eighteenth century B.C.E., however, Hammurabi unified the south, and a new people in Anatolia, whom we know later as Hittites, disrupted local political systems. When constraints were apparently imposed on the movement of goods by the rise of strong centralized governments in Anatolia and Babylonia, trade from the south, east, and north, into and out of Assyria was brought to a halt.

When the artificial state imposed by Shamshi-Adad collapsed after his death, the Old Assyrian political and economic system seems to have been reduced essentially to the rural countryside that was its original base. If we look at the diagram, it was essentially only the governmental system that collapsed soon after the reign of Shamshi-Adad. The association of local elites, now without the traders but still consisting of traditional Assyrian gentry and workers, survived, and so did, as far as we can tell, the temples and their landholdings.
The Middle Assyrian Period

From the end of the Old Assyrian period, about 1750 B.C.E., for 300 years we know practically nothing about Assyria. No texts are known from this period, which as a result is called a dark age; only later lists of kings and chronicles reflect something of an oral tradition that remembered – and constructed – a line of monarchs that may or may not have existed during this time. In the fourteenth century, however, Assyria experienced a political renaissance substantially in response to new states and military campaigns that impinged on its borders. To combat these enemies, which included the Kassite state in Babylonia to the south, the neighboring state of Mitanni to the west, and the Hittites in Anatolia to the north, Middle Assyrian kings began to centralize their power and create an effective military resistance that soon turned into an expansionist army.

The structure of this newly centralized state in Assyria is depicted in Figure 7.6. Comparing this with the diagram of the Old Assyrian empire, you can see that the councils of the Old Assyrian period
that shared power with the king and the palace establishment have disappeared. In fact, the centralizing program of the Middle Assyrian kings was intended to displace the traditional powers of the Assyrian nobility.

However, the nobility was far from toothless and contested their subordination in the administration of the Middle Assyrian state. When an Assyrian king named Tukulti-Ninurta built a new capital across the Tigris River from the venerable capital, Assur, which he named Dur-Tukulti-Ninurta, “Fort Tukulti-Ninurta,” to house his new administration and distance his rule from the old-line elites, Assyrian nobles assassinated him. They justified their actions in part because Tukulti-Ninurta had committed the sacrilege, in their eyes, of sacking Babylon and Babylonia, the cultural heartland of Mesopotamian civilization. Other Assyrians, however, were proud that Assyria was not only strong enough to defend itself against the likes of an aggressive Babylonian foreign policy but also to take the battle into Babylonia itself. There’s a moral here: ancient states, like more recent ones, were characterized by factions, parties, and politicians. Any attempt to reduce ancient states to vague and undifferentiated “societies” (as in “how societies choose to fail or succeed”) disregards the very pulse of the past.

In our diagram of the Middle Assyrian state and society, we may note how Middle Assyrian kings, again in contrast to the Old Assyrian system, attempted to streamline and simplify the administration of the land, bringing the army, temples, gentry, and local villagers under their direct control. Although royal power was resisted by the Assyrian nobility, this power of the kings grew in this period. Whereas events around 1200 B.C.E. in which regional warfare, piracy, and movements of foreign and displaced peoples disrupted the plans of the Assyrian kings, the process of centralization in Assyria soon resumed and continued into the first millennium B.C.E.

The Neo-Assyrian Period

Neo-Assyrian kings, beginning in earnest in the early ninth century B.C.E., transformed the army into an expeditionary force, one that was enormous, professionalized, and battle-toughened. The army began to campaign yearly, to the north into Anatolia, east into Iran, and west
to Syria and the Levantine coast. The highpoint of the Neo-Assyrian expansion was shortly after 700 B.C.E., when Assyrian hegemony extended to the Mediterranean coast, Egypt, Babylonia, and southern Iran. Readers of the Old Testament will know that the “Ten Lost Tribes of Israel” got lost because their king unwisely did not pay tribute to Assyrian kings in the 720s, and the Assyrian army swept through Israel and deported thousands of Israelites into the Assyrian homeland and its various provinces.

The highpoint of the Assyrian empire, however, was short lived, and conquered territories soon won their freedom. The Assyrian army became bogged down in adventures to the north, where they met tough enemies in mountainous regions, and in the south, where they became enmeshed in a Mesopotamian civil war. Finally, at a time when internal succession to the Assyrian throne sowed confusion in Assyria, Medes from Iran, Babylonians from the south, and various northern enemies all invaded Assyria between 614 and 610 B.C.E. and destroyed the Assyrian capitals. With the exception of a few outposts and individuals named in later Babylonian documents, the existence of both an Assyrian political system and most Assyrian social and cultural institutions vanished.

Why did the Assyrian state collapse, and more importantly, why did it not regenerate — as had so many other defeated and “collapsed” Mesopotamian states? One salient reason was the policy of the Assyrian kings themselves. In Figure 7:7 we can see some of the policies of extreme centralization that Assyrian kings pursued, including the construction of new capitals and the promotion of generals into offices close to the king.

In the terms of those who study the formal properties of systems, the three upper levels of the hierarchy were closely coupled horizontally, while the vertical bonds connecting the upper levels to the lower ones were increasingly loosely coupled. That is, the close interconnections of the place, the army, and the elites, who no longer owed their status to their place in the traditional Assyrian kinship system and landholding traditions, but whose rank and power derived solely from their state offices, made the top levels of the system “disarticulated” and vulnerable to being wholly erased. It was not simply the government that disappeared, as in the Old Assyrian period, but the upper three levels of Assyrian society as well (in this hierarchical rendering).
FIGURE 7.7 Schematization of Neo-Assyrian hierarchy. (Drawn by Elisabeth Paymal)

But the lower levels of the Neo-Assyrian hierarchy were changed even more profoundly than the upper levels. Beginning in the Middle Assyrian period, but increasing at an enormous rate in the Neo-Assyrian times, kings deported conquered peoples – like the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel – into the new and old imperial cities, where they worked constructing magnificent palaces and works of art. Deported peoples were also moved into the countryside as agricultural workers and canal laborers. Indeed, much of the countryside was in the hands of generals who were rewarded by the king for their military successes. Workers on these newly created estates were not Assyrians and did not speak Assyrian (but overwhelmingly spoke Aramaic, the main language of Syria/Palestine/Israel). These workers knew little and presumably cared less about Assyrian culture and history.

These laborers – to use again the terminology of our diagram above – were strongly coupled horizontally, kinsmen, and cultural neighbors – but only loosely connected vertically to the upper levels of the Assyrian hierarchy. Normally, in Mesopotamian collapses,
when the top level of the hierarchy was removed, it would be rebuilt, as it were, by the lower sections of the system (as the Assyrian state was rebuilt after the Old Assyrian period). This was simply not possible in the Neo-Assyrian case, because the inhabitants of villages were increasingly not Assyrian in ethnicity, religion, or language and had little interest in reconstructing anything that was “Assyrian.”

Since I’ve noted that Assyria and Babylonia were both parts of what we call Mesopotamia, and Assyrian and Babylonian were dialects of what we call the Akkadian language (first written under Sargon of Akkade), it is interesting to examine the relations between Assyria and Babylonia during the period when Assyria collapsed.

One interesting cultural aspect of the Neo-Assyrian policies of political centralization was the so-called cultural struggle or Babylonian problem of the Neo-Assyrian kings. The Assyrian royalty regarded Babylonia as the heartland of Mesopotamian culture (as I’ve noted in characterizing the adventures of Tukulti-Ninurta in the Middle Assyrian period). Even as they felt that Mesopotamian literature and ritual needed to be imported from the Babylonian south, they saw Babylonia as chaotic and even decadent.

When a rebellion broke out in Babylonia – which was governed in the last century of Assyria’s power by Assyrian puppets – against the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, and the king sacked Babylonia, this was regarded in some parts of Assyria as an act of impiety. Indeed, after Sennacherib was assassinated, his son Esarhaddon repented his father’s deed. Thereafter, the two sons of Esarhaddon divided their rule, one in Assyria and one in Babylonia. Perhaps unsurprisingly the Babylonian king (who was an Assyrian) rebelled against his brother in Assyria, and after a four-year civil war, Assyria conquered the south. However, this long war cost Assyria in soldiers and in lost tribute that would have been brought in by the campaigns of the Assyrian army. The civil war was a Pyrrhic victory for the Assyrians, who, in their weakened state, soon succumbed to the superior forces of their enemies.

Assyria without the State

Figure 7.8 shows why the Assyrian state was not rebuilt after the defeat of its king and army in the latter years of the seventh century B.C.E.
Assyria without the state
(hypothesized and simplified)

FIGURE 7.8 Schematization of Assyria without the state. (Drawn by Elisabeth Paymal)

The removal of the horizontally connected top layers of the Neo-Assyrian hierarchy did not proceed to a level of landed gentry and Assyrian nobility (as in the Old Assyrian case), since these traditional local elites had been systematically removed by Assyrian kings in their drive to establish a centralized government and an enormously large army. The successes of the army propped up the state, and the officers essentially replaced the traditional gentry of the countryside.

In that countryside and in the royal capitals lived mostly non-Assyrian workers, who, as I’ve noted, had little connection to Assyrian culture or even the Assyrian language. They had been deported from the west into Assyria, and after the fall of the Mesopotamian capitals, many still inhabited the ruined cities, although most lived in the countryside.

Although the Assyrian kings were defeated by foreigners, it was only the Assyrians themselves who could have destroyed the very qualities that made Assyria Assyria. Gibbon famously described the fall of the Roman empire as the “triumph of barbarism and religion.” When we depict the collapse of Assyria, it is the disappearance of the religion, culture, and language of the Assyrians, which had lasted for hundreds of years, that is most significant and that explains why Assyria did not rise again. Gibbon would have understood this perfectly. People continued to live in Assyria, and remnants of the most ancient city in the land, Nineveh, are cited in a variety of sources, but Assyria was gone.
THE FATE OF ASSYRIA AND THE CHOICES OF ASSYRIANS

Today, Assyrians still walk among us. They live in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. Although they are Nestorian Christians, members of the Church of the East, they trace their origin to ancient Mesopotamia, and this connection with the ancient Assyrians is a crucial part of their identities. The language of their liturgy is Neo-Aramaic, that is, the modern version of the language of many of the people who were brought to Assyria from the west. Some Aramaic speakers in effect became Assyrians because their ancestors lived in Assyria when there was an Assyrian state, and they were in Assyria when the Assyrian state was no more.

If the beliefs and language of modern Assyrians have little in common with those of the ancient Assyrians, modern Assyrians' self-identification as Assyrians should not be denigrated. Indeed, pride in ancient Assyria and a desire to learn about Assyria can be traced in considerable measure to the nineteenth-century archaeological excavations in northern Iraq that disclosed the palaces, temples, artifacts, and written documents of Assyrian civilization. Today's Assyrians rightly claim an attachment to the most ancient history of Iraq. Perhaps as interesting as any story that can be told about the collapse of Assyria is an account of the rebirth of Assyria in the lives and imaginations of these modern Assyrians.

MODERN ASSYRIANS

Early Christians, in the first few centuries C.E., debated the nature of Christ's divinity and humanity and the oneness of his person. Five patriarchates, in Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, became administratively independent with a chief bishop or patriarch at the head of each. The debates were not only theological, but also concerned ecclesiastical politics, nationalism, and cultural factors. From the various ecumenical councils that took place in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E., a Nestorian Church – so named
because it refused to excommunicate Nestorius, a defender of the "Dyophysite" view that Jesus was both human and the embodiment of the logos (Word of God) – became independent of Constantinople. For centuries this Church, whose liturgy was in Syriac, a medieval dialect of Aramaic, was known as the Nestorian Church (especially by Europeans and Arabs) and the (Old) Church of the East. These terms were in use through the nineteenth century.

In the seventeenth century a schism in the Nestorian Church/Church of the East occurred as a group converted from the Nestorian Church to Roman Catholicism. They called themselves the Chaldean Church, since the center of this church was in present-day Iraq, often called "Chaldea" in premodern times. Their leader is the Patriarch of Babylon (or Babylonia), probably because modern Baghdad was then thought to be ancient Babylon or near it (the latter is the case). The liturgical language of the Chaldean Church was also a dialect of Syriac, which was often called Chaldean. The term Chaldean, known from the Hebrew Bible and in the writings of Greek and Arabic historians, referred to the area we now call Iraq.

In the mid-nineteenth century, British and French excavators working in northern Iraq discovered the ruins of the Neo-Assyrian capitals, their palaces, monumental art, and written tablets. As these excavations continued and especially as the tablets were deciphered and shed light on the periods previously known only from the Hebrew Bible, Christians in the area, many of whom worked for the European excavators, began to adopt the name "Assyrian" for themselves and to assert their connections with the most ancient past of their land, more ancient than the majority Arab Muslims.

In the course of the last 150 years, many of these Iraqi Christians emigrated to Europe and the United States (and other countries). In 1976 the Nestorian Church/Old Church of the East officially renamed itself the Assyrian Church of the
East. Its bishop (catholics) now lives in San Francisco. Although most professional historians of Mesopotamia, Assyriologists, are not impressed by these claims to descent from ancient peoples of Mesopotamia, a case can be made that many Assyrians and Chaldeans were precisely those deported to Assyria and Babylonia by kings who had conquered Syria and the eastern lands of the Mediterranean or those who had migrated from those lands into Mesopotamia’s rich cities.

A modern Assyrian, Dr. Norman Solhkhah, writes: “I designed the Assyrian Martyrs Monument ... to honor my father and brother, as well as other Assyrians who were killed simply for being Assyrian.” Perhaps extraction of genetic material from ancient cemeteries and comparison with modern people could shed light on these connections. In any case, ethnic and cultural affiliations are always, to an extent, matters of choice and acceptance by members of social groups. People construct, again to an extent, their own pasts, deciding who are their ancestors and
who aren't. (I have a friend who is part German, Polish, and Irish. He thinks of himself as at least 100 percent Irish. He spent a year in college in Dublin and throws the greatest St. Patrick's Day parties. He married a Brazilian woman of Japanese descent. They have two children, one of whom has a Portuguese name (Frederico), the other an Irish one (Padraic). They report on the census tracks that they are Asian Americans.)

MODERN CHALDEANS

If scholars tend to reject modern Assyrians' and Chaldeans' claims as descendants of Mesopotamians, modern Mesopotamians are separated by religion and by country of origin, since most Chaldeans are of Iraqi descent, whereas Assyrians come from a variety of Middle Eastern countries. The two groups are not necessarily friendly. Yasmeen Hanoosh, a Chaldean born in Iraq, grew up in Detroit and has just finished her Ph.D. at the University of Michigan. In an e-mail "interview" with her, I have selected and edited some comments and used (with permission) some material from her dissertation draft.

The dispute among contemporary Chaldean and Assyrian nationalists does not revolve around the question of whether or not the ancient Assyrian and Chaldean populations survived. There is no proof that the ancient Assyrians and Chaldeans vanished after the fall of their empires in the late seventh century B.C.E. (Assyria) or late sixth century (Chaldean Babylonia). No one disputes the assumption that some indigenous people continued to live in their homelands. The survival of some versions of the Aramaic language attest to that, as does the fact that Mesopotamia continued to be populated throughout the centuries that followed the destruction of Nineveh and Babylon.
Rather, the current oppositional debates center upon discourses of history and power: was it the Chaldeans or the Assyrians who created the most powerful empire and ruled the other “ethnic” group? Which group had first settled the region and was the predecessor of the other group? And which group came last, having supplanted the other group, and preserved more accurately the language and the culture of Mesopotamia?

Amer Fatuhi, in his self-published _Chaldeans since the Early Beginning of Time_, locally promoted by many Chaldean Churches in Michigan, argues that Chaldeans are the only indigenous people of ancient Iraq, and hence its first inhabitants. Assyrian Edward Odisho, professor at Northeastern Illinois University, writes that “Assyria was literally resurrected” during the Parthian period (ca. 129 B.C.E.–224 C.E.) and Assyrians rebuilt Assyria.

These debates impact the lives of tens of thousands of Assyrians and Chaldeans in Southeast Michigan and can result in conflict among teenage gangs. This is an ironic, modern
commentary to a conflict that has its roots in ancient times when Assyrians and Babylonians often fought one another.

Teaching courses on Mesopotamian history and archaeology at the University of Michigan is quite different than for teachers in other universities who do not have Assyrians and Chaldeans in their classes. Archaeologists and historians may rightly consider ourselves stewards of the past, who calmly and rationally try to understand the past. However, we must also acknowledge that our work not only creates that past, literally bringing it to the modern world, but also has helped create the present of people for whom the past is part of their present, and not just of academic interest.


CONCLUSION

I hope that this rather long account of “collapse” in the Assyrian part of Mesopotamia has not been too full of strange names of people and places. I also hope that my diagrams, which have necessarily simplified the structure of life in Assyria, have helped readers understand the changes in social and political structure in Assyria over about 1,500 years.

My story has included normal citizens as well as political leaders, how they lived, and how they participated in the creation and re-creation of their history and culture. This story is, as you can see, much different than Diamond’s version of collapse, which leaves people out, except for vaguely identifying certain elites as the actors who ruined their own environments or were helpless victims of a train of climatic circumstances, such as Diamond’s favorite calamities, drought, and salinization.
In Assyria we can see how councils of elders and entrepreneurial traders were gradually eliminated by powerful kings, how traditional lands were given to generals and high-ranking bureaucrats, and how imperial successes led to the incorporation in the empire of people, like the "Lost Tribes," who had nothing in common with their rulers.

This study of Assyria and ancient Mesopotamia does, I submit, have some lessons for us modern observers of our own world. Ill-considered foreign military adventures by a state with vast but still limited resources and with leaders who paid progressively less attention to the internal problems of their own state sound all too modern. But the lessons from the past do not lead to straightforward recipes for policy, and those who think learning from the past should work in that way haven't really learned anything at all.

Archaeologists and ancient historians do not often have the luxury of knowing and saying exactly what happened in the past. However, we are very good at saying precisely what didn't happen. Ancient pyramids were not built by astronauts from other planets, and ancient states like Assyria did not collapse because their leaders mismanaged their environments. Also, just when you might think that an ancient civilization is dead and gone, you find that the past can be conjured up, in our case, by archaeologists and historians, and resonate in important ways with people who find their roots in that past. One lesson we may learn about the transformations of ancient civilizations, as we see in Assyria, is that, in an important sense, they didn't collapse at all.

Notes

* In my scholarly career I have tacked between the fields of Mesopotamian studies and anthropology. I studied anthropology (which includes archaeology) as an undergraduate at Northwestern University and participated in an undergraduate field school in archaeology in north-central Arizona. I then studied Mesopotamian languages, history, and archaeology at Yale University. After getting my Ph.D., I taught for twenty-one years in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Arizona. I then moved to the University of Michigan to chair the Department of Near Eastern Studies and to hold a joint appointment in the Museum of Anthropology and the Department of Anthropology.

My publications are divided between texts and articles on Mesopotamian social and economic institutions and studies of social

1. Diamond 2005: 174, 48, and 424, respectively.
6. For the lists of areas Diamond says collapsed, see pp. 3 and 545–547. Although Diamond says (p. 11) that he doesn’t “know of any case in which a society's collapse can be attributed solely to environmental change,” he makes it clear that such engineered disasters to the environment are the most important factors by far in the collapse of societies. He doesn’t spend much time on any other factors.
8. Diamond also sees differences between the past and present, such as in technology and globalization. There are more differences between ancient and modern states than these.
9. The best textbook on Mesopotamian history is Van De Mieroop 2007. A recent assessment of climate change, abandonment, and migrations brought about by climate change is the conclusion to Kuzucuoğlu and Marro 2007.
10. For plans of prehistoric sites and of the first city, see chapter 3 of Yoffee 2005. For a discussion of Uruk, see Liverani 2006. Newest research at Tell Brak in Syria has revealed a large town site in northern Mesopotamia at about 4000 B.C.E.
11. The latest word on Amorites is Michalowski forthcoming.
12. The idea that salt and silt problems caused the end of the Ur III dynasty (so called because it is the third dynasty in Ur in the “Sumerian King List”) can be dated to Jacobsen and Adams 1958. Powell 1985 refuted this.
13. For life in Ur after the fall of the Ur’s dynasty, ca. 2000, see Van De Mieroop 1992.
16. The concept and phrase “the care and feeding of the gods” is from Oppenheim 1964.
17. The best exposition on the major source about Tukulti-Ninurta’s deeds is Machinist 1976.
18. For an extensive bibliography on the Assyrian empire and directions to further bibliographies, see the syllabus to my course, "Ancient Mesopotamia," which can be found on my web site, sitemaker.umich.edu/nyoffee, under courses. Interested readers can find up-to-date literature on Mesopotamian history in the syllabus.

19. Adams 1981 reports that salinization did occur in Mesopotamia in the following circumstances. When Persian dynasties (called Sasanians) ruled Mesopotamia in the mid-first millennium C.E. and then Islamic caliphates were in power in their new capital of Baghdad in the later first millennium C.E., rulers of truly unprecedented centralized states constructed enormous canals from the Tigris to the Euphrates and demanded ever more resources from the fertile lands in south Mesopotamia for their own political goals. Eventually farmers in the south, who understood their own environments well, were forced to give up practices of following every other year. The water table and its salt component rose, and the land became unproductive. None of this characterizes what happened in ancient Mesopotamia.

Bibliography


Michalowski, P. Forthcoming. Gender and Sites of Contestation in Epistolary Discourse: The Correspondence of the Kings of Ur. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.