



After Collapse  
The **Regeneration** of  
**Complex Societies**

Edited by Glenn M. Schwartz and John J. Nichols

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Tucson

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## **After Collapse**



# 1

## From Collapse to Regeneration

Glenn M. Schwartz

In the 1960s and 1970s, comparative studies of early complex societies in anthropological archaeology focused overwhelmingly on the emergence of the first states and urban societies.<sup>1</sup> Prime movers, primary states, and the earliest urban systems were the subject of intensive investigation and theorizing. An investigation of the origins of civilization is certainly an appropriate task for archaeology, since the formation of the new institutions, technologies, and modes of thought inherent in that process represents one of the most important transformations in human history. Moreover, archaeology can preside in near-total isolation over the topic, since textual evidence is likely to be minimal or absent until states are well ensconced.

But by at least the 1980s, dissatisfaction with the emphasis on civilization's rise had emerged. On the one hand was the critique levelled against processual archaeology and its reliance on the band-tribe-chieftdom-state evolutionary model. On the other was the problem that a focus on origins assumed that there was little else to learn about complex societies once they appear; it implied that social evolution was complete when cities and states emerged. But the more the workings of early complex societies were exposed, the more apparent it became that these were not smoothly functioning machines that ran perfectly once their engines were turned on. Complex societies could be unstable phenomena, prone to episodes of fragility and collapse.

As a result, the study of collapse in early complex societies has become a research focus of considerable significance. Among the studies devoted to collapse are Yoffee and Cowgill 1988 and Tainter 1988, not to mention discussions of specific episodes of collapse such as that of the Classic Maya (Culbert 1973a, 1988; Webster 2002), the Indus civilization (Kenoyer 2005; Possehl 1997), and Near Eastern urban systems of the late third millennium BC (Courty and Weiss 1997; Wilkinson 1997).

The recognition that early complex societies were prone to episodes of falling and rising has led to the advancement of a cyclical model in which societies oscillate from periods of urbanism and sociopolitical centralization to intervals of ruralism and local autonomy (Yoffee 1979). Such a model departs from traditional neo-evolutionist assumptions of linear progression, allowing for the possibility of decreasing as well as increasing sociopolitical complexity.

The goal of this book is to push the investigation one step further. A focus on rise and collapse still leaves the consideration of social evolution unfinished; what happens *after* collapse? In this volume, our emphasis is on the reappearance of societal complexity after periods of disintegration. How do “second generation” states form in regions that experienced political disintegration? How do they differ from or resemble the states that preceded them? And why are urban systems and states reestablished in some regions but not in others?

Compared to the interest in the emergence and collapse of civilizations, the regeneration of societal complexity is a relatively neglected topic. Models of societal birth, growth, and death—well known from the ideas of scholars such as Edward Gibbon, Oswald Spengler (1918–22), and Arnold Toynbee (1933–54)—have been echoed in more recent work in archaeology and elsewhere, but revival and resurrection are largely excluded from attention. As Joyce Marcus (1989:201) has commented, “most scholars have devoted more attention to the ‘rise and fall’ of civilizations than to the processes that subsequently led to a reorganization of the population remaining in their territories. And relatively few archaeologists have studied the processes of dissolution, recovery, and reorganization, preferring instead to study the ‘golden ages’ of ancient civilizations, when those societies were ‘in full flower.’” Despite this neglect, the study of the regeneration of complex societies is an especially appropriate subject for archaeology as opposed to text-based history, since written texts are likely to be meager or totally lacking in “dark ages” after collapse, in the absence of central authorities, bureaucratic administrations, and scribal installations. While narratives of the collapse period might have been produced in subsequent eras, their frequently propagandist character and chronological remove from the period in question renders their utility limited (Renfrew 1979).<sup>3</sup>

I became interested in the question of regeneration as a consequence of my fieldwork at Tell Umm el-Marra in Syria (Curvers and Schwartz 1997; Schwartz, Curvers, Gerritsen et al. 2000; Schwartz et al. 2003), where excavations have yielded a sequence of occupations spanning periods of early

urbanism, collapse, and regeneration (see Nichols and Weber, chapter 3). It was my expectation that a cross-cultural examination would not only assist in comprehending regeneration at Umm el-Marra, but would also contribute to a general understanding of the phenomenon. A comprehensive, cross-cultural investigation of regeneration might also be expected to broaden and strengthen theoretical frameworks on the character and workings of early complex societies (Trigger 2003). As a result, John Nichols and I organized a symposium on regeneration considered from a cross-cultural perspective at the Society for American Archaeology annual meeting in Milwaukee in April 2003. The chapters in this volume derive from that meeting, with the addition of Ian Morris's contribution (chapter 5) on Archaic Greece, solicited so as to include that well-documented and extremely influential case.

It might be observed (or objected) that in recent years—largely due to the postprocessual critique—comparative, diachronic studies of the sort we are attempting, with a focus on developmental issues, have frequently been avoided in favor of synchronic analyses of individual societies and their historical specificities. But a total abandonment of the comparative and diachronic would be misguided (DeMarrais 2002; Trigger 2003:3–4, 25–39; Yoffee 2005:194). While each society is historically unique, societies nevertheless display common patterns whose recognition allows for a better understanding both of individual societies and of human society in general. An appropriate analogy might be supplied by the human individual: each person is unique, with his or her own unique history, but the behavior of an individual usually can be better understood given an awareness of broader-scale phenomena such as the individual's gender, nationality, and economic status. I concur with Gil Stein (1998:25–26) that “the challenge is to develop a new synthesis that can incorporate the historically unique developmental pathways of specific polities within a more general approach that elucidates cross-cultural regularities in the processes of social evolutionary change.”

## **Collapse**

Regeneration presupposes collapse. Consequently, it is necessary to define collapse before investigating and explaining regeneration. In the archaeological literature, collapse usually entails some or all of the following: the fragmentation of states into smaller political entities; the partial abandonment or complete desertion of urban centers, along with the loss or

depletion of their centralizing functions; the breakdown of regional economic systems; and the failure of civilizational ideologies. As the contributors in Yoffee and Cowgill 1988 concluded, rarely does collapse involve the complete disappearance of a group of people or of a “great tradition.”

Suggested causes for collapse are manifold and have been much debated. Scholars do not refer to invasions as much as they used to, but they frequently consider other external variables such as climate change, particularly episodes of desiccation that weaken the agricultural base of urban societies dependent on agricultural surpluses (Dalfes, Kukla, and Weiss 1997; Gill 2000; Hodell et al. 2001). Other approaches emphasize internal variables, noting the tendency of complex societies to impose heavy demands on their physical environments, rendering agricultural systems vulnerable to crisis (Abrams and Rue 1988; Shaw 2003; Tainter 1988; Wilkinson 1997). Ideological failures may occur as a consequence of other failures of the central authority (Lucero 2002): if the economy suffers or the government neglects to perform its expected tasks in other ways, the populace may lose its faith in the governing ideologies and abandon its allegiance to the system. Another perspective focuses on the tension between traditional kinship systems and the centralizing, socially stratifying activities of the elite (Iannone 2002; McAnany 1995). In this view, elites may have found it difficult to maintain “large-scale inegalitarian structures for long periods of time” (Marcus 1998:94).

An additional problem when considering collapse lies in assessing the sociopolitical organization of postcollapse societies. Do states and complex societies that have experienced collapse “devolve” to chiefly or tribal societies? If such ideas of reversion are rejected, what are the ways in which sociopolitical and economic organization are structured in periods of collapse?

In Norman Yoffee and George Cowgill’s edited volume on collapse (1988), many if not most of the contributors agreed that collapse is almost never total or complete. As Shmuel Eisenstadt asserts (1988:242), “Ancient states and civilizations do not collapse at all, if by *collapse* is meant the complete end of those political systems and their accompanying civilizational frameworks. Thus, the investigation of collapse in ancient states and civilizations really entails identifying the various kinds of social reorganization in these types of societies and so viewing collapse as part of the continuous process of boundary reconstruction.”

## Regeneration

One such manifestation of boundary reconstruction is regeneration of societal complexity. If collapse entails, at least in part, the disintegration of states, urban systems, economic systems, or ideologies, then regeneration should consist of the reconstruction of the same kinds of institutions and phenomena. It is important to emphasize that by regeneration we mean the reappearance of societal complexity (states, cities, etc.) after periods of decentralization, not the reappearance of *specific* complex societies.

Although previous considerations of the reasons for, and mechanisms of, regeneration have been minimal, several case studies can provide information on the range of ideas on the subject previously advanced. One of the first well-known considerations of historical decline and regeneration is found in ibn Khaldun's fourteenth-century AD work the *Muqaddimah*, which conceives of history in terms of cycles of ruling dynasties or states. States disintegrate and are replaced by new entities headed by former lower-level administrators or rebels, who emulate the institutions of the preceding dynasties. But perhaps the best-known example of regeneration in recent historical scholarship is that of the reemergence of cities and states in western Europe after the collapse of the western Roman empire. By the middle of the first millennium AD, cities were largely abandoned except for ritual purposes, the infrastructure of the Roman empire had been dismantled, and most of the institutions of classical civilization had disappeared. How did the states and complex societies of medieval Europe emerge out of this prototypical Dark Age?

An extremely influential perspective on this issue is that of Henri Pirenne (1925, 1939). In his view, the key factor for understanding both the decline and the reemergence of western European complex society was long-distance trade. According to Pirenne, the barbarian invasions were not responsible for the collapse of Roman institutions and urban systems, since the barbarians preserved what they could. Instead, the crucial factor was the detachment of western Europe from Mediterranean trade networks by the Muslim Arab conquests of the seventh century AD. With the disappearance of the commercial classes and the wealth derived from Mediterranean trade, urban life collapsed and political institutions disintegrated. Only with the establishment of new trade networks in northern Europe and the Mediterranean in the late first/early second millennium AD did cities and centralized states revive. The static, closed economy of the Dark Ages was opened up, and regeneration began.

Subsequent revisions and critiques of Pirenne's thesis have continued to emphasize the importance of trade in the regeneration of European complex society, while modifying the details (Havighurst 1976). Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse (1983), reviewing archaeological data, concluded that demographic and urban decline was observable in western Europe several centuries before the emergence of Islam. Although they maintained that Europe's disconnection from Mediterranean trade was not critical in the formation of early medieval Europe, they concurred with Pirenne that regeneration entailed the opening up of new trade networks in northern Europe in the late first millennium AD. Rejecting Pirenne's insistence on the isolation of Europe from the Islamic world, Michael McCormick (2001) has advanced a model in which Europe, a periphery, offered a raw material—slaves—to the Muslim core in exchange for specialized goods: “the voracious appetite [of the Muslim world] for northern slaves provided the first great impetus to the development of the European commercial economy” (McCormick 2001:768). In all these discussions, the importance of long-distance trade networks for the maintenance and regeneration of urban systems and states is repeatedly underlined.

Within archaeology, perhaps the most extensive discussion of regeneration has been offered by Joyce Marcus (1989, 1992, 1993, 1998; see also Iannone 2002). Considering the cyclical patterns exhibited by Mesoamerican states such as Teotihuacán and Monte Albán, Marcus observes that urban-based states typically exerted control over vast territories early in their lifespans, but they fragmented as provincial centers broke away. A secondary center would eclipse its former overlord to become the capital of a new and more powerful state. Despite this change in fortunes, the original centers grew even larger after their political power began to wane.

In this cyclical pattern of peaks and troughs, which Marcus terms the “dynamic model,” regeneration is powered by the rise of ambitious elites in provincial contexts forging alliances and re-creating large-scale political entities. While Marcus's observation of cyclical patterns of centralization and decentralization is significant, some details of her model may not always be applicable beyond Mesoamerica. In Bronze Age Syria, for example, there is much continuity in the centers of power before and after the collapse circa 2000 BC, rather than a scenario of provincial elites establishing new capitals (see Cooper, chapter 2; and Nichols and Weber, chapter 3). It is also questionable whether the earliest states were uniformly large-scale, unitary, territorial monoliths, as is asserted in the dynamic model (cf. Uruk period Mesopotamia, which is more likely to have consisted of an array of city-states [Algaze 2001:55]).

## Nobles and Commoners

A frequent emphasis in discussions of regeneration (and collapse) is on elites, leaving the impression that regeneration relied primarily on the ambitions and aspirations of would-be rulers and that collapse mainly involved a failure of elite policies. In contrast to such “top-down” views of collapse and regeneration, some scholars have stressed the importance of rural or non-elite resilience (cf. Adams 1978) in the reconstruction of complex societies. Gray Graffam (1992) maintained that in the period after the collapse of Tiwanaku in the southern Andes, raised field farming—thought to be a state-associated, labor-intensive practice—continued to be practiced by rural populations. Such a retention of precollapse institutions in rural contexts may have served later as a foundation for the reconstruction of complex societies.<sup>3</sup> Mary Van Buren (2000) suggests that non-elites played a crucial role in the transmission of Andean “high culture” in periods of collapse; the derivation of the Inca cult of the sun god from pre-Inca non-elite populations is cited as an example of this phenomenon.

How much do either regeneration or collapse affect the peasant, and what part do the non-elite sectors of society play in those processes (Freter 1994; Joyce et al. 2001)? In this volume, Lisa Cooper (chapter 2) suggests that the resilience of extrastate kin-based social structures in the Bronze Age middle Euphrates was significant in the region’s recovery after urban decline. Diane Chase and Arlen Chase (chapter 11) posit that symbolic egalitarianism was crucial in the reestablishment of societal complexity under the Classic Maya. Similarly, Ellen Morris (chapter 4) observes that the social mobility characteristic of the First Intermediate period in Egypt influenced the strategies of the rulers of the regenerated Middle Kingdom, who represented themselves as attentive to the needs of the common people. Perhaps the most blatant example of the role of non-elites is provided by Archaic Greece (Ian Morris, chapter 5), where city-states (*poleis*) are characterized by a “middling” ideology centered on the male citizenry that culminates in the formation of democracy.

With the disintegration of traditional sociopolitical and ideological structures, new opportunities for social mobility and individual agency may emerge during periods of collapse. Ambitious non-elite individuals may find new avenues for the acquisition of power, with less hindrance from traditional hierarchical structures. As Ellen Morris (chapter 4) points out, social class may have mattered less in situations of severe crisis than did a talent for making things work.

## Survival of Preexisting Institutions

It is likely that a crucial factor in regeneration is the survival of institutions or ideas from the era before collapse, supplying a base for the eventual re-creation of complex societies: the chances are good that regenerated complex societies did not have to totally “reinvent the wheel,” literally or otherwise. In such a scenario, one might imagine that lower-level administrative units or personnel from collapsed states survived in local contexts, or that ideologies and values of earlier complex societies provided reference points for second-generation states.<sup>4</sup> The contributors to this volume repeatedly emphasize the importance of sociopolitical, economic, ideological, and other models from precollapse periods in the processes of regeneration.

If building blocks left over from the collapse of complex societies were available to the survivors, it is necessary to explain how they were used to reconstruct societal complexity, by whom, and why. Ostensibly, one may envision ambitious local leaders or groups intensifying their power through competition and warfare (Brumfiel and Fox 1994; Rees 2001), accumulation of dependents, and alliances, resulting in the reconstruction of large-scale polities. A model of peer polity interaction enacted in a secondary context may also be applicable (Renfrew and Cherry 1986). If trade is identified as a decisive variable, leaders may have participated in long-distance exchange networks, acquiring exotic goods with which to gain and reward followers; alternatively, mobilization of foodstuffs from agricultural surpluses in a staple finance system may have been significant (D’Altroy and Earle 1985). The use of ideology, ritual, and privileged access to the spirit world by nascent leaders is also likely to have been important (Chang 1983; DeMarrais et al. 1996; McAnany 2001).

Such strategies are already familiar from studies of how the first complex societies emerged. It would be useful to ask, therefore, if the regeneration of urban and state societies can be understood as a “replay” of the processes from earlier developmental episodes, or whether the formation of second- or third-generation states involved new trajectories and strategies for the acquisition of power not seen in primary or pristine cases. In some cases discussed in this volume, the formation of regenerated complex societies appears to entail totally new strategies of power acquisition (Conlee, chapter 7). In others, such as Middle Kingdom Egypt (Ellen Morris, chapter 4), we see a partial reappearance of processes familiar from the formation of the first state, but these are accompanied by innovations resulting from changes that occurred during the period of collapse.

The deliberate rejection of previous ideologies and institutions may also have played a significant part in the process of regeneration (see Ian Morris, chapter 5; Conlee, chapter 7; Sims, chapter 8; Chase and Chase, chapter 11; and Masson, Hare, and Peraza Lope, chapter 12).

### Other Variables

Additional factors that may have been instrumental in the regeneration of complex societies can also be proposed. One is the role of external societies: economic, ideological, technological or political stimuli from foreign complex societies, and/or emulation of those societies might result in a “repeat” of secondary state formation (Price 1977; Thurston 2001). As Bennet Bronson (chapter 9) notes, regenerating states often emulate neighboring complex societies even while claiming to derive their primary inspiration from ancestral groups. Trade with external societies, identified as a crucial variable in the revival of complex societies in medieval Europe, also figures prominently in Bronze Age Syria (Cooper, chapter 2; Nichols and Weber, chapter 3), Archaic Greece (Ian Morris, chapter 5), and Postclassic Mesoamerica (Masson, Hare, and Peraza Lope, chapter 12).

If climatic deterioration is implicated in societal collapse, then enhanced climatic conditions might be correspondingly influential in regenerative processes. In such circumstances, climate amelioration could facilitate agricultural surpluses and the regeneration of elite power based on those surpluses (see Ian Morris, chapter 5). Alternatively, if anthropogenic environmental degradation was a causal factor in collapse, then environmental recovery during periods of decentralization could also be instrumental to regeneration, given the reappearance of natural resources important for the reestablishment of societal complexity.

Technological changes may also facilitate new hierarchies of power. For example, Lynn White (1962) proposed that a decisive variable in the revival of urban society after the collapse of Roman civilization in northern Europe consisted of innovations in agricultural technology, particularly the introduction of the heavy plow.

Complex societies are often characterized by overcentralization and organizational rigidity (Kolata, chapter 13), which may render them vulnerable in times of social or environmental stress. Lisa Cooper (chapter 2) and John Nichols and Jill Weber (chapter 3) argue that strategies of flexibility may allow for survival and adaptation during periods of decentralization and may be crucial in the reconstruction of complexity. Such strategies

entail diversity in subsistence activities or in social organization, as in the tribal or heterarchical structures described for Bronze Age Syria in chapters 2 and 3. Cooper suggests that regions with corporate or heterarchical political organizations are more likely to experience a revival of societal complexity after collapse.

It might be argued, as in the case of the Amorites of Middle Bronze Age Syria (Nichols and Weber, chapter 3), that newly successful ethnic groups previously on the margins of power may have been motivated to restore the institutions and symbols of earlier centralized authority to legitimize their power and confirm that they “belonged” (Renfrew 1979:484; see also Marcus 1998 on the role of peripheral elites). A similar process is described by ibn Khaldun (1969): in weakening polities, rebels from outside the core of power sweep in and assume political control, all the while emulating earlier institutions and concepts of those polities.

Finally, the influence of extraordinary leaders and other agents (Flannery 1999) in the implementation of new institutions and ideologies should not be overlooked. As Ellen Morris points out (chapter 4), such individual actors are likely to have been consistently important in the process of regeneration.

As is the case with the formation of the first complex societies, it will be imperative to consider large-scale spatial contexts when investigating cases of regeneration: societies tend not to be closed, discrete units but are usually better understood as tapestries of interconnected and interweaving entities, each influencing and transforming the other (Stein 2002). Approaches such as world-systems theory have emphasized that developments in one society cannot be understood without reference to others, and it is likely that individual episodes of regeneration will be better understood within larger “international” contexts.

Also important is the consideration of cases in which regeneration does not take place. In the Tumulaca example (chapter 8), Kenny Sims concludes that the exclusion of local elites from imperial administrations that existed prior to collapse was responsible for the absence of regeneration. Regeneration may be likely to fail in regions without vigorous and long-lasting traditions of complex political structures (Bronson, chapter 9) or long-held hegemonic worldviews (Kolata, chapter 13).

## **Organization of the Volume**

In this volume, specialists from a wide range of geographical areas are represented—including Southwest Asia, Egypt, the Aegean, East Asia, Meso-

america, and the Andes—controlling different varieties of data and with different theoretical orientations. An even broader geographical range would have been desirable, but constraints of space require a certain selectivity. When considering the problem of regeneration, the participants were asked to consider such questions as the following: Why does regeneration occur in some areas but not in others, and with different schedules of emergence? Which institutions survived collapse, and which proved instrumental in regeneration? Did collapse and regeneration entail changes to a “bundle” of institutions (Yoffee 1993:64), or, as is perhaps more probable, did some institutions or phenomena fail while others did not?

Recognition of cross-cultural patterns should not obscure the likelihood of significant variability in our data: regenerated states are likely to occur with a diversity of organizational styles (e.g., Blanton et al. 1996), and the trajectory of regeneration is likely to exhibit different patterns in each case and in each region. Such variability is well illustrated by the results detailed in this volume’s chapters.

Chapters 2–4 consider the effects of collapse and processes of regeneration in the Near East in the transition from the Early to Middle Bronze Age, late third to early second millennium BC. Lisa Cooper (chapter 2), discussing the middle Euphrates Valley in Syria, postulates that the relatively marginal environment of the region gave its inhabitants an edge over people in “core” areas in times of collapse, because the region’s diversified subsistence economy allowed for flexibility and resilience. The relatively autonomous character of local settlements may also help to explain their success at regeneration: not tied to the fate of a higher, more centralized power, they could adapt to crisis more successfully than regions more tightly integrated into large, powerful states.

In chapter 3, John Nichols and Jill Weber document collapse and regeneration in the Jabbul Plain of western Syria and its regional center, Tell Umm el-Marra. They observe that regeneration involved both the retention of precollapse phenomena (e.g., economic specialization, traditions of public ritual, resilient subsistence strategies) and important innovations such as the hunting of onagers for leather production in the context of an expanded commodities sphere. Nichols and Weber also underline the importance of ethnic changes and possible reasons for such a development; the newly powerful Amorite group’s flexible subsistence practices (see also Cooper, chapter 2) may have provided an advantage in periods of environmental stress.

Although pharaonic Egypt was relatively stable, it experienced several “intermediate periods” of decentralization, as discussed by Ellen Morris in