

# The Maya Fall... And Our Own?

Book Review by Tom Andres

**L**ike many a good scientist, David Webster demythologizes with facts knowing that detailed scientific fact is often more fascinating than myth.

Webster tells of the “Maya myth” growing out of the first discoveries of the mysterious vine-covered ruins, with their “vacant ceremonial centers,” ruins that create the eerie impression of a civilization abandoned almost overnight. By the 1940s, the Classic Lowland Maya had “become a kind of intellectual Shangri-La for our wishful thinking about the past and about the human condition.”

A big part of the myth was that of the “peaceful Maya,” a wishful notion that became awkward to maintain after archeologists inconveniently began to uncover extensive military fortifications.

But myth is stubborn. Webster recalls that once on a flight to one of his archeological sites he ran across an airline magazine article with the typical popular emoting, telling how the Maya had “built palaces with 100 or more rooms, while Europeans lived in mud huts.” The problem is, Webster points out, that while many Europeans lived in mud huts, so did most Maya, and that the advanced civilizations of the Greeks, Etruscans and Romans pre-dated that of the Classic Maya.

Political correctness always tends to patronize and diminish those groups it intends to uplift. Surely, the Maya achieved enough – the art, the architecture, the hieroglyphics, the socially complex kingdoms, the extensive agricultural economy, all accomplished in an equatorial environment n to make exaggeration unnecessary. (Obviously any new information that might be uncovered showing the Maya more, or less,

“advanced” than presently believed should be welcomed as helping to further puzzle out the truth.)

It turns out that even the Maya “collapse” is something of a myth. Webster reminds us that the Classic Maya were part of a larger culture that continues today, and that there were several geographically separate kingdoms that experienced “mini-collapses” long before the final fall.

Webster also answers PC academicians who charge that the whole concept of societal evolution, of simpler societies evolving into more complex or advanced ones, is really just ethnocentric racist Social Darwinism attempting to excuse the West’s exploitation of traditional cultures: “More than a century of archaeological research in many parts of the world has documented something very much like ... cultural evolution.” Politically correct politics aside, Webster writes, “Cultural evolution, like biological evolution, is a fact, however it happens, whether we like it or not, and despite whatever lessons we wish to learn from it.”

Webster lists some of the characteristics of collapsing civilizations: Less stratification; less political centralization; less regimentation; decreased exchanges of information and resources; population decline; settlement abandonment; diminished production of Great Tradition components; invasions; diminished confidence in or even rejection of collectively held ideas and values ... (hmm, the last few sound familiar.)

Population decline and growth seem particularly tricky. Even when massive population growth is on the eve, historically speaking, of overwhelming a society’s natural-resource base, soon to bring about economic, political and population collapse, to those who are experiencing the final “boom,” population growth must seem an open-ended blessing. One thinks of today’s continual press characterizations of our Third-World-like

**The Fall of the  
Ancient Maya:  
Solving the  
Mystery of the  
Maya Collapse**  
*by David Webster*  
London: Thames & Hudson  
368 pages, \$34.95




---

*Tom Andres is a freelance writer living in Santa Barbara, California.*

post-1965 immigration-generated population growth as being merrily “robust.”

One of the many strengths of this book is that Webster seems to have no ideological axe to grind. He systematically takes his readers through the various past attempts at explaining the Maya collapse, from monument construction being too burdensome on peasants, to the disintegration of trade networks, and shows many of them to be wanting.

So, what did happen to the Maya? Read this very fine book.

Finally, any volume devoted to civilizational collapse, particularly such an outstanding one as this, is doubly interesting to those who are concerned about the decline of our own civilization.

A big part of the problem for the Maya was environmental, and the environmental Malthusian warning bells are with us today, in fact, ear-shatteringly so. But what do we make of political elites of European-based nations, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and, of course, Europe itself, who view their rapid replacement by people of some other cultural, ethnic, or racial stock, through immigration and offspring, as not only acceptable, but as fulfilling some glittering vision of the future, or as one Immigration and Naturalization Service commissioner gushed, “a wonderful transformation?”

Of course, what happened to the Maya only parallels some of our own dysfunctions, but one seemingly bizarre category of civilizational collapse catalogued separately by Webster catches the eye: a collapse brought about by “ideological pathology.”

This is illustrated by the case of the African Xhosa: “Late in the summer of 1856, the Xhosa, a Bantu-speaking people of southeast Africa, began to methodically kill their cattle, horses, goats, sheep, and fowl. They also consumed or threw away all the grain in their storage bins and stopped preparations to plant crops.” These things were not done grudgingly, but in celebration. Why?

They had listened to the prophecies of a girl who claimed to hear messages from beyond, telling her that once her people had stripped themselves down to nothing “the world would be reborn.” Of course, what actually happened was that “untold thousands starved” in one of the “greatest self-inflicted immolations in all of history.”

The case of the Xhosa “shows that under extraordinary circumstances whole societies can virtually

will themselves out of existence.”

•