



## Book Reviews

### **UNDERSTANDING COLLAPSE: ANCIENT HISTORY AND MODERN MYTHS BY GUY D. MIDDLETON**

*Cambridge University Press. 2017. 441pp, 28 illustrations, 16 tables, 18 maps, pb, ISBN 978-1-316-60607-0, £29.99*

The end of empires, the archaeology of abandoned monuments and deserted settlements, all are indicative of the possible drama that might have accompanied the end of a social order. In this volume, Middleton presents us with 12 archaeological case studies ranging geographically from Rapa Nui in the Pacific, through central and southern America, Europe, south-western Asia, Egypt and the Indus valley, to Cambodia, to emphasise the uncertainties that must accompany any archaeological attempt to explain the transformation of these very diverse social and economic conditions by reference to a more general process that might centre upon such factors as environmental change and populations pressure. Clearly there is no single process that can possibly offer the explanation for the 'collapse' of so diverse a set of social conditions. Why, then, are we continually invited to consider this as a single historical theme?

Middleton opens the book with a wide-ranging discussion that explores the ways that narratives of collapse can appeal to contemporary moral, political and environmental prejudices before considering the kinds of 'units', ranging from individual communities, 'cultures' 'world systems' and 'populations', whose archaeologies might be taken to imply that each could suffer a period of collapse in its organisation. These poorly defined units, along with the very general causes for systemic change that have been proposed, each occurring over varying lengths of time, only contributes to the feeling that the problems accompanying attempts to define, let alone understand, the archaeologies of possible 'collapse' lies in part with this lack of analytical precision.

The, admittedly brief, case studies that Middleton offers clearly illustrate the considerable variation characteristic of the social, political, economic and cultural histories of those systems that have been taken to represent a period of organisational collapse. Middleton admits that many of these cases 'should not really be called 'collapses' at all', and if this proves to be the case, then one can only wonder again as to what is gained by gathering these and other cases together under such a general theme of historical change. It is at this point that Middleton

identifies the question that lies at the very heart of this discussion. It is not a question as to whether a general historical explanation can be offered for the collapse of ancient societies, but rather why the possibility of organisational collapse, whenever and wherever it seems to have occurred in the past, matters so much to us today. It is at this point that we begin to understand that the past might offer us a metaphor through which we can reflect upon our present condition. In this way the attempts to explain the historical collapse of political structures as the result of a very limited set of causes is likely to tell us more about our contemporary concerns than it is to clarify our understanding of the actual trajectories of the past.

Archaeologists have a number of ways by which they might characterise the past with reference to the surviving evidence. In all these cases the material is treated as if it revealed the existence of different kinds of bounded organisational coherency, a coherency that has traditionally been expressed in terms of economic, political or cultural organisations, thus providing us with images of 'cultures', 'societies', 'polities' and 'empires'. And as we trace these patterns forward in time, we notice that things changed, leaving us at times with jungle engulfed cities, undecipherable texts and decaying monuments. These periods of dislocation and loss include those that are often referred to as the dark ages that cut across what would otherwise be treated as trajectories of continuity and development.

In his criticism of the claim by Hempel that historical generalisations were necessarily based upon the operation of 'covering laws', William Dray accepted that historians describe historical conditions in general terms, in the same way, we might assume, that archaeologists use such generalities as 'state societies', 'chiefdoms' and, presumably, 'systems collapse'. Dray's point was, however, that the historian does not then attempt to explain such conditions as if they were the product of the laws of history, but seeks instead to investigate the particular forces that guided each historically specific example. It was the historically particular variables that, for Dray, undermined the idea that historical events might be explained as the playing out of the laws of history, and it was the historian's task to identify these historically particular variables, rather than confirm some overarching law of process. The example Dray offered was of the history of the French revolution, that is understood by reference to the conditions and the strategies that had been at work among the different sections of the 18th-century population of France. It was these that gave rise to that particular revolution, rather than the events of 1789–1799 being explained as the playing out of a supposedly timeless law governing the rise of all revolutionary conditions (Dray 1959).

Middleton's case studies seem to make exactly this point. Each archaeological example may have converged upon what we are pleased to identify as 'organizational collapse', but it did so via historically particular conditions. The conclusion is that any attempt to explain each case as

resulting from a commonly operating force, such as population pressures resulting in environmental failure, tells us more about contemporary preoccupations than it does about past realities.

This is a frustrating book for the simple reason that if, as the title suggests, Middleton's case is that the coherency with which we characterise the past is forged from the relationship between our current preoccupations and the complex trajectories of history, then that case is made too subtly in this volume for it to have the impact that it deserves.

## **Reference**

Dray, W. 1959. "Explaining What" in History. In P. Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History*, 403–408.  
New York: The Free Press

*John C. Barrett*

*Emeritus Professor in Archaeology, University of Sheffield, UK*

Review submitted: November 2018

*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews  
Editor*