

Why do Civilizations Die? Case Studies: Ancient Egypt and Ancient Mesopotamia

Although civilizations are often sad to fall, Egypt and Mesopotamia did not “fall”; they just withered undramatically away, their passing marked somewhat by the fact that their latest native ancient historians Berosus (c. 290 BC) and Manetho (c. 280 BC) wrote of them in Greek rather than in cuneiform or the hieroglyphics. (Watch next fall for a translation and commentary on the two by Verbrugge and John Wickersham.)

Is the real reason for Mesopotamia and Egypt dying the Greeks (Alexander and his successors)? That would be a nice easy solution, but the rise of anthropological/social analysis of history casts some doubts. Before the Greek arrival, both civilizations had fallen to outside invaders, but they had not died as civilizations; they continued vibrant, even into the period of the Greek takeover.

The research of the last 30 years has placed more emphasis on continuity versus change. Interpretations used to be based on the perceptions of the peoples of those times, who saw drastic changes – as they understood it. But there still might have been more continuity than disruption.

So, how do historians determine when a civilization has died? How can his be applied to Mesopotamia and Egypt? What do the Roman and Byzantine empires tell us about this? The 19th and 20th centuries, influenced by Gibbon, had agreed that the Roman Empire fell (though Gibbon himself took the story down not just to 476 AD but to 1453). But scholars in the last 30 years have stressed that though 476 made a big difference to the emperor, life went on pretty much the same in agriculture, law. Language and the like. The Byzantine empire's holdings in the Near East fell to the Arabs in 632-642, but did it really disappear in Egypt and Mesopotamia? Averil Cameron sees a transformation, without changes in economic and social structure, and disparages writers of the time who despaired because of the military defeat and “fall”: “History is about change, and those living in the midst of it are least likely to recognize it.” Thus, the notion that a civilization dies has changed to the notion that all is (merely?) transformed.

As for Mesopotamia and Egypt, nobody now much cares about those civilizations having died and the writers of those times and places seemed unaware that a significant change had taken place. What do we mean by a “civilization” and by its “dying”? A *civilization* (versus a *culture*) is often defined as highly organized, with society and cities, class structure, government, organized trade, literacy, all of these seen in Egypt and Mesopotamia, with further socialization into soldiers, priests, etc. A civilization's literacy lets us know what these peoples called themselves (by about 3000BC). Mesopotamia used cuneiform (wedge-shaped writing) for Sumerian and Akkadian, as well as later Mesopotamian languages, while Egypt used hieroglyphics. These writing systems continued about 3000+ years, to 1st cent AD for cuneiform and 4th cent AD for hieroglyphics. The same gods persisted from 3000BC to the 3rd, 4th or 5th centuries AD. Priests and temples of these gods continued, and thus religion and worship. But Greeks had taken over these areas by the 4th century BC (and the Persians before them). The Greek kingdoms in the Near East fell to Parthians, the west to Rome. Sassanids succeeded Parthians in Mesopotamia, and yet the civilization persisted 3500 years. What, then, did cause the deaths? No one still writes in cuneiform or worships Marduk or Isis. What finally happened?

Old notions (as far back as Seneca the Elder) likened civilizations to the ages of humans: birth, flourishing, death (of old age). But Verbrugge cannot explain the demise of Egypt and Mesopotamia. The concept of continuity works only partially, because these civilizations did eventually disappear. Was it that a new phase in civilization no longer cares about the older civilization? Old Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts (including god stories) seem not to have been translated into Greek or Aramaic; Gilgamesh, for example, disappears. Tacitus tells about Germanicus in Egypt getting an old man to

translate for him a hieroglyphic text on a wall, but there is no suggestion of any large-scale translating. Christianity (partially because of its monotheism) eclipsed religious structures and concepts, but conquering nations often changed very little in structure or even personnel. Even when structures collapse, cultures often continue, but it may be difficult to put a finger on any precise points.