

# THE COLLAPSE OF COMPLEX MEDITERRANEAN CIVILIZATIONS

## Course description and objectives:

The ruins of ancient civilizations fascinate us with their scale, their sophistication, and their beauty. We elevate their builders for their power, and often attempt to tie our own culture and history to these forbearers. Yet for all their successes and all their strength, these ancient civilizations lay in ruins because they have collapsed. In this course we will examine the root causes, the immediate impacts, and the long-term consequences of the collapse of complex societies. We will examine how societies adapt, or rather failed to adapt, to changing environments and economies, population pressures, social and technological changes, and warfare. We will discuss the implications that the collapse of ancient civilizations may have for modern civilization today.

We will draw on evidence from archaeology, demography, environmental studies, and historical texts to illustrate a number of case studies of societies in collapse, including the Bronze Age Aegean and Near East, the empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia, and the Roman Empire. We will also examine the aftermaths of those collapses for both their immediate survivors and, in the longer-term, for the civilizations built on the ruins of the old.

## Learning outcomes

1. Students will gain familiarity with the main theoretical concepts and archaeological evidence for the collapse of complex civilizations in the ancient Mediterranean.
2. They will be able to research, analyze, and present archaeological information, and to apply anthropological concepts to the analysis of individual case studies.
3. They will be able to evaluate environmental, economic, and socio-political changes, and propose historically-grounded policy changes in response.

## Coursework:

A central question of this course will be whether or not complex civilizations are ultimately sustainable. Students will read numerous scholarly articles which debate collapse. From these they will choose a “symptom” of collapse that they find the most compelling as a research topic. At the middle of the semester, students will write a paper (5-8 pages) which provides an in-depth analysis of a single case study. Potential case studies will be suggested, but students are encouraged to seek out their own examples from world archaeology. They will also present their case study and its analysis to the class in a 10 minute presentation. Students will then create an annotated bibliography that demonstrates their research into this topic and their consideration of examples which illustrates it. At the end of the semester, students will submit a final paper (10-12 pages) that examines their chosen symptom of collapse and proposes steps which may be taken today to mitigate the danger of that symptom in the future. The papers should demonstrate how understanding past collapses may help to shape modern policy.

**Grading:**

1. Attendance and participation (10%)
2. Case study paper (20%)
3. Case study presentation (20%)
4. Annotated bibliography (20%)
5. Final paper (30%)

**Required texts:**

Cline, E. 2014. *1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed*.

Diamond, Jared. 2005. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. (This book is particularly useful for identifying case studies, but students are strongly encouraged to look beyond it for their papers and presentations.)

Tainter, Joseph. 1988. *The Collapse of Complex Societies*.

Ward-Perkins, B. 2006. *The Fall of Rome: And the End of Civilization*.

Wickham, C. 2010. *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages, 400-1000*.

*N.b.:* Additional readings will be assigned in the form of articles, websites, and book chapters. These will be made available to students via the course website, and are marked below with an asterisk.

**Schedule:**

Week 1: The Beginning of the End! An Introduction to the Study of Collapse  
Read: Diamond, prologue & chapter 1

Week 2: What's Complex about Complexity?  
Read: Tainter, chapters 1 & 2

Week 3: Theories of Collapse, Continuity, and Change  
Read: Tainter, chapters 3 & 4  
Diamond, chapter 14

**Case Study Paper & Presentation Assigned**

Week 4: The "Global" Civilizations of the Bronze Age Mediterranean: the Aegean, Near East, and Egypt  
Read: Cline, prologue and chapters 1 & 2

Week 5: Rumors of War: The Historicity of the Trojan War  
Read: Rutter, *Aegean Prehistoric Archaeology*, lesson 27,  
[http://www.dartmouth.edu/~prehistory/aegean/?page\\_id=630](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~prehistory/aegean/?page_id=630)  
\*Morris, 2007, "Troy between Bronze and Iron Ages: Myth, Cult and Memory in a Sacred Landscape,"  
in *EPOS: Reconsidering Greek Epic and Aegean Bronze Age Archaeology*, 59-68.  
\*Vermeule, 1991, "Myth and Tradition from Mycenae to Homer," in *New Perspectives in Early Greek Art*,  
99-121.

Week 6: Theories for the Collapse of Bronze Age Aegean Civilizations

Read: Rutter, *Aegean Prehistoric Archaeology*, lesson 28

[http://www.dartmouth.edu/~prehistory/aegean/?page\\_id=615](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~prehistory/aegean/?page_id=615)

\*Routledge and McGeough, 2009, "Just What Collapsed? A Network Perspective on 'Palatial' and 'Private' Trade at Ugarit," in *Forces of Transformation: The End of the Bronze Age in the Eastern Mediterranean*, 22-29.

\*Nur and Cline, 2000, "Poseidon's Horses: Plate Tectonics and Earthquake Storms in the Late Bronze Age Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 27, 43-63.

Week 7: The End of the (Bronze Age) World

Read: Cline, chapters 3 - 5

Week 8: Aftermath I: The "Dark Age" of Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean

Read: Rutter, *Aegean Prehistoric Archaeology*, lesson 29

[http://www.dartmouth.edu/~prehistory/aegean/?page\\_id=608](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~prehistory/aegean/?page_id=608)

\*Coldstream, 2003, *Geometric Greece*, chapters 1 – 3

**Case Study Paper Due**

Week 9: Case Study Presentations

Week 10: The Mediterranean and Europe under the Roman Empire

Read: Wickham, chapters 1 - 4

**Final Paper & Annotated Bibliography Assigned**

Week 11: The Collapse of the Western Roman Empire

Read: Ward-Perkins, chapters 1 - 6

Week 12: The Survival of the Eastern Roman Empire

Read: Wickham, chapters 11 - 13

**Annotated Bibliography Due**

Week 13: Aftermath II: From Crisis to Renewal

Read: Ward-Perkins, chapters 7 & 8

Wickham, chapters 16 - 18

Week 14: Will It End Again? Applying Lessons from the Past

Read: Diamond, chapters 15 & 16

Tainter, chapter 6

**Final Paper Due**