



McDONALD INSTITUTE CONVERSATIONS

The Evolution of Fragility: Setting the Terms

Edited by Norman Yoffee



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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------|
| Contributors | vii |
| Figures | viii |
| Tables | ix |
| Acknowledgements | x |
| <i>Chapter 1</i> Introducing the Conference: There Are No Innocent Terms | 1 |
| NORMAN YOFFEE | |
| Mapping the chapters | 3 |
| The challenges of fragility | 6 |
| <i>Chapter 2</i> Fragility of Vulnerable Social Institutions in Andean States | 9 |
| TOM D. DILLEHAY & STEVEN A. WERNKE | |
| Vulnerability and the fragile state | 12 |
| Mediated political orders: succession and partition | 13 |
| The mediated state | 19 |
| Conclusions | 20 |
| <i>Chapter 3</i> Why Early Cities Failed: Fragility and Resilience in Bronze Age China | 25 |
| LI MIN | |
| The first quarter of the second millennium BC: collapse of the great Longshan centres | 25 |
| The second quarter of the second millennium BC: the emergence and decline of Erlitou | 28 |
| The third quarter of the second millennium BC: the rise and decline of Zhengzhou | 33 |
| The fourth quarter of the second millennium BC: the rise and decline of Anyang | 35 |
| The first quarter of the first millennium BC: addressing fragility and resilience in the Zhou political order | 38 |
| Conclusion | 42 |
| <i>Chapter 4</i> Fragile Authority in Monumental Time: Political Experimentation in the Classic Maya Lowlands | 47 |
| PATRICIA A. McANANY | |
| Political experimentation | 47 |
| Large 'anomalous' aggregations | 48 |
| Preclassic Maya lowlands: E-Groups and patron deity shrines | 50 |
| Authority and hereditary rulership hybridized: southern lowland Maya experiment | 52 |
| Northern ambivalence to monumental time | 54 |
| Fragility in its many guises or how political experiments end | 56 |
| Final considerations and conclusions | 57 |
| <i>Chapter 5</i> Ancient Egyptian Exceptionalism: Fragility, Flexibility and the Art of Not Collapsing | 61 |
| ELLEN MORRIS | |
| Dangers skirted, bullets dodged | 61 |
| Politicide, state effects and near death experiences | 64 |
| Resiliency | 75 |
| An autopsy report on Egypt's first failed state | 76 |
| The case for re-considering the role of a climate hostile to the state | 79 |
| <i>Chapter 6</i> Fragile Cahokian and Chacoan Orders and Infrastructures | 89 |
| TIMOTHY R. PAUKETAT | |
| Cahokian social and material history (AD 950 to 1250) | 89 |
| Chacoan social and material history (AD 800s to 1130) | 96 |
| Discussion | 102 |

| | | |
|-------------------|---|-----|
| <i>Chapter 7</i> | Diversity, variability, adaptation and ‘fragility’ in the Indus Civilization | 109 |
| | CAMERON A. PETRIE | |
| | Fragile and/or robust? (Re-)Introducing the Indus Civilization | 109 |
| | Indus settlements: from village to city (and back?) | 110 |
| | Diversity, variability and adaptation in the Indus context | 116 |
| | Mediation of politics and power <i>within</i> Indus settlements: hierarchy, heterarchy and collective action | 119 |
| | Mediation of politics and power <i>between</i> Indus settlements: the Indus state debate | 121 |
| | ‘Crisis, what crisis?’; the 4.2 kya event and the Indus | 122 |
| | Urban ‘stability and fragility’ and rural ‘resilience’ | 125 |
| <i>Chapter 8</i> | Fragile States in Sub-Saharan Africa | 135 |
| | PETER ROBERTSHAW | |
| | Three African states | 137 |
| | State formation | 141 |
| | Fragile African states | 148 |
| | Conclusion | 154 |
| <i>Chapter 9</i> | Universal Rule and Precarious Empire: Power and Fragility in the Angkorian State | 161 |
| | MIRIAM T. STARK | |
| | Universal rule and the Angkorian state | 162 |
| | Context: place, structure and scale | 164 |
| | The structure of sovereignty: Angkorian landscapes | 167 |
| | The structure of sovereignty: Angkorian power and patronage | 168 |
| | Collapse, resilience and patronage | 173 |
| | Fragility, resilience and regeneration | 173 |
| <i>Chapter 10</i> | Negotiating Fragility in Ancient Mesopotamia: Arenas of Contestation and Institutions of Resistance | 183 |
| | NORMAN YOFFEE & ANDREA SERI | |
| | A history of academic resistance to views of the totalitarian nature of political and economic power in Mesopotamia | 184 |
| | Fragility in literature | 186 |
| | Historical examples of fragility and resistance | 187 |
| | Contestation, resistance and fragilities in early Mesopotamian states | 193 |
| | Coda | 194 |

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Figures

| | | |
|------|---|-----|
| 2.1 | <i>Location map of Chimor state.</i> | 10 |
| 2.2 | <i>Location map of Inka empire.</i> | 11 |
| 2.3 | <i>The Inka ruler addresses the huacas.</i> | 16 |
| 2.4 | <i>Schematic of Andean political organization.</i> | 17 |
| 3.1 | <i>Map of major sites mentioned.</i> | 26 |
| 3.2 | <i>The archaeological landscape of the Luoyang Basin.</i> | 29 |
| 3.3 | <i>Turquoise inlaid objects from Erlitou elite burials.</i> | 30 |
| 3.4 | <i>The distribution of archaeological sites associated with Xiaqiyuan material culture.</i> | 31 |
| 3.5 | <i>The routes of campaigns of pre-dynastic Zhou kings.</i> | 36 |
| 3.6 | <i>The mortuary context and the distinctive double-niche construction of Fu Hao's tomb.</i> | 37 |
| 3.7 | <i>The political landscape of early China from the perspective of Zhouyuan at the turn of the first millennium BC.</i> | 39 |
| 3.8 | <i>The archaeological landscape of the Quwo Basin in Jinnan.</i> | 41 |
| 4.1 | <i>Plan of Preclassic E Group at Cenote, Belize.</i> | 50 |
| 4.2 | <i>The 33 m-tall Preclassic deity pyramid at Lamanai.</i> | 51 |
| 4.3 | <i>Late Classic funerary pyramid of Tikal ruler, Jasaw Cahn K'awiil.</i> | 52 |
| 4.4 | <i>Part of inscription from Stela C, Quirigua.</i> | 53 |
| 4.5 | <i>Stela D, Copan.</i> | 54 |
| 4.6 | <i>Entrance to burial chamber of Ukit Kan Le'k Tok' behind ornate white stucco façade on the Acropolis of Ek' Balam.</i> | 55 |
| 5.1 | <i>Map of Egypt showing sites mentioned in the text.</i> | 62 |
| 5.2 | <i>First dynasty Abydos.</i> | 65 |
| 5.3 | <i>Steles belonging to the sacrificed retainers of Djer.</i> | 65 |
| 5.4 | <i>Tomb of Qa'a; stele of Qa'a's sacrificed retainer Sabef.</i> | 66 |
| 5.5 | <i>Major monuments of Saqqara and Abusir until the end of the Old Kingdom.</i> | 67 |
| 5.6 | <i>The body count of slain northerners depicted on Khasekhem's limestone statue; Horus dominating the personification of the north from the Narmer palette.</i> | 68 |
| 5.7 | <i>Probable early representations of Seth from Nagada and its environs.</i> | 69 |
| 5.8 | <i>Scorpion macehead, dedicated to the Horus temple at Hierakonpolis.</i> | 70 |
| 5.9 | <i>Seth makes an appearance in the Cairo Annals.</i> | 71 |
| 5.10 | <i>Peribsen with Seth atop his serekh; inscription of a vase dedicated by Horus Khasekhem; Horus-Seth Khasekhemwy.</i> | 72 |
| 5.11 | <i>Some of the millions of multi-ton blocks that make up Khufu's pyramid.</i> | 74 |
| 5.12 | <i>Starving Bedouin from the causeways of Sahure.</i> | 80 |
| 6.1 | <i>Location of the Greater Cahokia and Chaco regions.</i> | 90 |
| 6.2 | <i>The physiography of the Greater Cahokia region.</i> | 91 |
| 6.3 | <i>The city of Greater Cahokia, showing its primary precincts.</i> | 93 |
| 6.4 | <i>LiDAR plan map of Cahokia, highlighting monumental features that date to the Lohmann phase.</i> | 95 |
| 6.5 | <i>San Juan Basin physiography and the location of Chaco.</i> | 97 |
| 6.6 | <i>Schematic view of Chaco Canyon's great house locations.</i> | 98 |
| 6.7 | <i>Aerial view of Pueblo Bonito.</i> | 99 |
| 6.8 | <i>Schematic map of original Chetro Ketl field system.</i> | 100 |
| 6.9 | <i>Aerial view of Peñasco Blanco.</i> | 101 |
| 7.1 | <i>Plans of Indus cities and smaller settlements.</i> | 111 |
| 7.2 | <i>Plan of Mohenjo-daro and expanded views of the Mound of the Great Bath, the DK-Area, and the HR-Area.</i> | 113 |
| 7.3 | <i>Plan of the 'Great Hall' at Mohenjo-daro and isometric view of the 'Great Hall' at Harappa.</i> | 114 |
| 7.4 | <i>Maps of the Indus River basin showing the distribution of modern winter and summer rainfall in relation to the distribution of urban period settlements and urban centres.</i> | 117 |
| 7.5 | <i>Maps of the Indus River basin showing the distribution of modern winter and summer rainfall in relation to the distribution of post-urban period settlements.</i> | 117 |

| | | |
|------|--|-----|
| 8.1 | <i>A sampling of the precolonial states of sub-Saharan Africa, together with archaeological sites mentioned in the text.</i> | 136 |
| 8.2 | <i>The Great Enclosure and adjacent stone walling at Great Zimbabwe.</i> | 138 |
| 8.3 | <i>Khami – restored elite stone walling.</i> | 139 |
| 8.4 | <i>Danangombe – a later Rozvi capital.</i> | 139 |
| 8.5 | <i>Kilwa – audience court of the Husuni Kubwa palace.</i> | 140 |
| 8.6 | <i>Mapungubwe Hill.</i> | 143 |
| 8.7 | <i>Kilwa – the Great Mosque.</i> | 146 |
| 8.8 | <i>Great Zimbabwe – the Great Enclosure viewed from a royal residence area on the hilltop formerly known as the ‘Acropolis’.</i> | 149 |
| 8.9 | <i>Gedi on the Kenyan coast.</i> | 151 |
| 9.1 | <i>One view of twelfth-century Angkor in its broader Southeast Asian World.</i> | 162 |
| 9.2 | <i>Greater Angkor region (NW Cambodia).</i> | 164 |
| 9.3 | <i>Mapped roads in the Angkorian network.</i> | 165 |
| 9.4 | <i>Angkorian-period inscriptional data: royal vs non-royal.</i> | 166 |
| 9.5 | <i>Banteay Srei inscription, a tenth-century temple constructed by the guru of Prince Jayavarman V.</i> | 169 |
| 9.6 | <i>Angkorian hierarchy, derived from epigraphic sources.</i> | 170 |
| 9.7 | <i>Image of Jayavarman II from South gallery of Angkor Wat.</i> | 171 |
| 9.8 | <i>Oath-swearing to Sūryavarman II on Mount Sivapada, southern gallery of Angkor Wat.</i> | 172 |
| 9.9 | <i>Control as ‘communication corridor’.</i> | 175 |
| 9.10 | <i>Total area under Angkorian ‘control’ from c. 802–1308.</i> | 176 |
| 10.1 | <i>Map of major sites mentioned in the text.</i> | 184 |
| 10.2 | <i>Uruk levels V and IV.</i> | 187 |
| 10.3 | <i>Uruk Eanna level III.</i> | 188 |

Table

| | | |
|-----|--|----|
| 6.1 | <i>A comparison of Cahokian and Chacoan histories.</i> | 92 |
|-----|--|----|

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Norman Yoffee, 2019

Chapter 1

Introducing the Conference: There Are No Innocent Terms

Norman Yoffee

From 2–5 December 2017, the conference on ‘the evolution of fragility’ was held at the Getty Museum, Los Angeles. I presented an introductory paper (‘The Evolution of Fragility: Towards a New History of the Ancient World’), and James Scott offered a response. During the next two-and-a-half days we – that is, eleven participants – discussed pre-circulated papers, the discussions led by a designated respondent for each paper. The sessions were recorded, and notes were taken by Aparna Kumar.¹ The chapters in this volume are the revised papers from the conference. A subsequent volume, provisionally entitled ‘The Unfolding of Fragility: New Directions in Archaeology and Ancient History,’ written by me and the members of the conference, will appear in due course.

Jan Bemmman (who discussed the fragility of early Mongolian cities²) offered an epigram for the conference: ‘there are no innocent terms’. What do we mean by ‘fragility’? and why do we use the term to bring together research into a variety of societies so that we can study both their differences and the ‘differences, which resemble each other’ (as Broodbank, citing Lévi-Strauss, has written [Broodbank 2013, 20]). Much archaeological literature and ‘social evolutionary theory’ treats the appearance of early cities and states,³ and other more-or-less complex, stratified societies as ‘integrated’ (by political or ideological means) and thus ‘stable’. Explanations for the ‘collapse’ (see Middleton 2017) of such societies assumed that this occurred when something bad happened, usually climate/environmental change (whether caused by humans or not) or because enemies overwhelmed them. In fact, many of these early cities and states represented in this volume lasted for a relatively short time (in archaeological reckoning). Others were longer-lived, struggled to overcome structural weaknesses and historical contingencies that eventually resulted in the fragmentation or a large-scale undoing of political orders.⁴

The central theme of this volume is to undermine some of the traditional themes of evolutionary narratives, namely those that naturalize the state and thus legitimize its historical claims to permanence. This, of course, was the view propagated by rulers of early states themselves as well as some scholars who seem to regard the state as having an adaptive advantage over small-scale societies. In this volume, we explore the logic of these claims about early societies. However, we do not relinquish the term ‘evolution’ to narratives of political integration which are façades hiding instability and, at times, the incoherence of state orders. Indeed, the evolution of states includes earlier systems of kinship and local authority that endure and are refocused as part of the development of cities and states.

Our case studies do not seek to elide the variability among early cities, states and civilizations (see Yoffee 2005), their specific histories and socioeconomic formations. Rather, we explore how rulers attempt to impose their goals of governance and how elites, sub-elites and a variety of community leaders tried to resist these goals. That is, we study the social infrastructures and the vulnerabilities of the new political and socio-economic systems of early cities and states, their fragile nature and the means by which rulers sought to manage their fractious infrastructures. We also consider how the collapse of some political systems did or did not lead to the regeneration of rulers and dynasties, and how new systems of political organization emerged from these collapses.

The evolution of the first cities and states, as we can measure these from settlement pattern changes in certain areas, was a demographic revolution in which people from the countryside moved into new urban centres, often quite rapidly. The countryside of these cities was then created as new villages and settlements were founded as peripheral to and dependent on the new urban centres.

That is, long-term population growth and a gradual development of increasingly larger sites don't account for the rise of the new cities. These new capitals/centres of smaller and larger territories consisted of people coming from various places with their own social organizations and beliefs and rituals and migrating to cities for defence, exchange and markets, and celebrations of the high gods. New conceptions were invented justifying why diverse people should live together, how they should settle disputes, why there should be rich and poor, and that everyone should be ruled by kings. This is the stuff of what some commentators call 'integration'. However, local organizations, ethnic groups and their leaders, and diverse cultural systems did not disappear with the appearance of rulers. In fact, the existence of a variety of local (community) organizations could (and did) become cleavage planes of resistance to the goals of the leaders. Whereas 'fragility' appears to be a widespread condition of states, we use the term as an analytic, a lens that focuses the observer's eye on the cracks and fissures that lurk under the ruler's pretensions of sovereignty (Smith 2011, 2015).

In recent archaeological literature, there are discussions of 'cooperation', 'collaboration', and 'collective action' (Halperin 2016, Jennings & Earle 2016, Blanton with Fargher 2016, Fargher & Heredia Espinoza 2016) that rightly draw our attention to 'bottom-up' aspects of early cities and states. They see that small-scale cooperative units, such as households, lineages, or neighbourhoods (Halperin, p. 285) are vital components of early cities and states. However, these discussions also contend that some early cities and states were 'held together' (Halperin) by these putatively cooperating groups – not that local groups could also resist sovereign authority. For example, some authors hold that the putative stability and integration of some early cities and states depended on consensus-making by these groups which 'constrained' the formation of 'a centralized system of government' (Jennings & Earle 2016). The literature on collective action has not included studies that delineate the nature of such collectivities or how such a society was governed by a collectivity and, in many cases of early cities and states, why such societies collapsed.

In our conference there was much discussion about how we need to break-down the notion of the 'collective actions' of non-ruling actors. We point to research, for example, about the interaction of various kinds of elites, for example, mercantile elites, political elites, religious elites, kin and ethnic-group leaders. We find that urban assemblies, community courts and judges, and wealthy landowners co-existed with kings and bureaucrats, royal courts, state military officials,

tax collectors, and various state dependents, including slaves. We also identify farmers, craftspeople, wage-labourers, corvée workers, and others who worked in state-enterprises, and who sometimes received contracts from the royal estate. Early cities and states were mixtures, as it were, of royal enterprises and those outside the absolute control of kings. Many of our authors find the widely used term 'heterarchy' useful because it calls for an examination of various hierarchies in any society and the possibility that an actor could have different roles in several such hierarchies, for example, in kin hierarchies, economic hierarchies, and political hierarchies.

Our studies attempt to discern the local rules of incorporation and the various hierarchical structures that lay outside state controls. Indeed, we find that the 'glue' holding social parts together in early cities and states was not necessarily strong. The evidence for the short(ish) duration of many of our early cities and/or states implies that such social and political integration was fragile. We also perceive instances of local conflicts, external wars, war captives as part of the social fabric, slaves, unfree labour, corvée labour, and the flight of citizens from state-imposed duties and taxation. These characteristics of oppression and dissent are found in most of the examples in this book.

In our studies we foreground the arenas of competition within early cities and states. We ask about the reasons for internal resistance to the power of kings. We speculate about the irony that the most centralized states with the most brutal kings and mighty despots are often the most fragile and subject to dismemberment and collapse. If the rulers of early cities and states seek to 'simplify' their societies (Scott 1998), that is, to regiment them for purposes of bureaucratic control and to disembed resources from local communities, the process of simplification can lead to instability and impel resistance. Resistance, of course is not always successful because resistance, like sovereignty itself, is constrained by historical understandings and cultural commitments. When states break-down, we must also study the products of break-down, why some states regenerate and why some do not.

In brief, the purpose of our conference and this volume is to re-evaluate the evolution of early cities and states. Many of our authors propose that early political systems were 'experiments' (see Wright 2006). Instability was a likely result of unprecedented amounts of population aggregation and the new rules of statehood and divine rulers who had special access to the high gods. And, in instances when instability is balanced by flexibility in the construction of political institutions, and resilience shows the innovative responses to failing experiments, we can consider how and why this

happened. We do this by studying not only political institutions but also the survival of ideological systems or, indeed, their replacement. Peter Robertshaw asks: is apparent stability (for several centuries) in some early states a result of constant adjustments and accommodations with internal and external forces? We submit that by examining the fragility of early cities and states, we provide points of entry into critical social dynamics, and we contest the notion that ancient societies were in any way social wholes. It is perhaps obvious that early cities and states were the products of emergent properties, the roles of kings and the naturalization of social and economic inequality. However, fragility is also an inherent property of early cities and states, part of the evolutionary (or just historical) past, played out in various dimensions, across many stages, and over a variety of chronological scales. Fragility is thus conceptually and empirically the subject of our chapters.

Mapping the chapters

The chapters in this volume are vademecums to their regions. They delineate aspects of fragility, how societies are constructed, and what are sources of political vulnerability which lead to resistance and how, in some instances, resistance is forestalled. The chapters in the volume are authoritative depictions of considerable research and new ideas about research. (A synthesis volume that digests data and condenses explanations and which is intended to reach a public of non-specialists will follow this on-line publication).

Here I introduce the chapters in groups. The groups are not, however, silos but beginning efforts to stimulate comparative studies. They are: (1) long-term apparent stability, including chapters on Egypt, Cambodia/Angkor, and the Indus; (2) the fragility of city-states, but which ironically are long-lived, in Mesopotamia and the Maya. In this volume, we define 'states' as the specialized political system of the larger cultural entities that we denominate as 'civilizations'. Civilizations may be made up of many states, notably city-states, or of one state. The tension between city-states and the attempt to create an overarching and culturally appropriate territorial state is evident. (3) The infrastructural fragility of ideological power in a variety of sub-Saharan African states and in the North American polities at Cahokia and Chaco. (4) Imperial fragilities in early China and the Inka.

Apparent long-term stability

Ellen Morris discusses fragility and 'the art of not collapsing' in Old Kingdom Egypt, a state that persisted for nearly 800 years. Whereas there were many instances of management failure, corruption, graft,

local resentment and resistance to royal power, and constraints on the actions of kings through Egyptian concepts of proper action (*ma'at*), there were also strategies employed to mitigate social and economic problems. Changes in dynasties can be correlated with overt strategies to overcome these problems. Underlying these strategies, furthermore, was the 'exceptional' physical situation of the Egyptian state: the Nile provided 'soil that could not be more fertile' as well as the transportation link that connected regions and various resources. Egypt was also 'exceptional' in being located in a relatively narrow river valley bordered by significant deserts. Not only were invasions from the periphery of Egypt unlikely, but both efficient governments and local communities could be engaged for mutual benefit. Of course, the Old Kingdom state did end, and new strategies of negotiation within Egyptian cultural norms were born in the regeneration of a new Egyptian state. If in the Old Kingdom state there were aspects of fragile social and political relations, there were also norms and institutions of flexibility and a cultural commitment with attendant historical understandings.

Miriam Stark finds an inherent fragility in the Angkorian state in Cambodia which flourished for about 600 years. This state was largely rural with a megalopolis capital in which kings lived, central temples were located, and where ceremonies, parades, and spectacles took place. (These spectacles are characteristic of many early states; see Baines 2015 for an Egyptian example). However, rulers were also dependent on their subjects for rice and other subsistence goods and labour. The state was held together in a Hinduized 'cosmopolis', and kings were tied to priestly elites in Angkor and to local temples in the countryside. Whereas the collapse of Angkor (as centre of a large state, but not as an urban centre) has been variously ascribed to failure of an enormous hydraulic regime and also to the defeat of the city by Thai forces in 1431, Stark also points to the disequilibrating factors of the sponsorship of Buddhism by a late Angkorian king and the failure of the always fragile ability of the royal court to negotiate with the local powers in the countryside. Stark shows that these local social systems survived the disintegration of central authority.

These two chapters both emphasize the continuous adjustments and negotiations within the inner elite (Baines & Yoffee 1998, 2000, 2018) and between the rulers and local systems of organization. The study of fault lines and cleavage planes in the two regions differed significantly, just as the environments, agricultural regimes, nature of belief systems, social systems, and histories are also different. Nevertheless, it is the study of 'fragilities', rather than posited 'successful'

mechanisms of rule that can lead to understanding of political and social change. George Cowgill and I (1988, viii) wrote 'societies in trouble may often reveal more about what is really vital for their operation than societies in reasonably good shape.' Now, at the distance of some 30 years, it seems that 'societies in reasonably good shape' may well be rarities and chimeras.

Another instance of a relatively long-lived political and cultural system is the Indus civilization, whose half-dozen cities lasted around 700 years. Cameron Petrie uses the term 'civilization' because, unlike Egypt or Angkor, the Indus civilization consisted in a number of city-states, politically independent from one another, but with a common material culture inventory and presumably cultural system. The common material data include painted pottery, seals and script, weights, bangles, and beads. The small number of cities in the large territory of the Indus civilization leads Petrie to describe the settlement pattern and demographic character as 'mostly rural'. Indeed, our knowledge of the rural nature of the Indus civilization is largely due to Petrie's recent research. Petrie finds significant similarities in the better-known Indus cities, Mohenjo Daro and Harappa. In the former, Petrie reviews arguments of elite residences (palaces according to Vidale 2010) and aspects of planning as well as organic growth. In Harappa, Mark Kenoyer's research (1997) identifies local, rival communities within the site. The fragility of the Indus cities lies in the 'predictable unpredictability' (as coined by Naomi Miller) of the South Asia environment, the increasing reluctance of the rural countryside to support cities, and the intra-urban rivalries among local leaders. The Indus cities, that Petrie describes as 'experiments', were abandoned while, as in the Angkor case, rural life was 'embraced' without the demands of supporting the cities.

The fragility of city-states in the desert and in the jungle

The political scene in Mesoamerica, particularly in the Maya region, and in early Mesopotamia was dominated by city-states. In Mesopotamia, Andrea Seri and I discuss the fragility of territorial states and the resistance of the city-states to be governed by a powerful king from one of the city-states. Although there was a belief that Mesopotamia should be governed by a single city-state, the reality was that this was impossible. War was the enduring condition in Mesopotamia: there was hardly a year from c. 3000 to 1500 when there was no war. Guillermo Algaze (2018) has considered disease vectors in Mesopotamian cities. Morbidity and mortality in cities and the demands (such as corvée labour) on people led to serial in-migrations

of 'foreigners' into Mesopotamia. Within city-states various corporate groups existed, kin-groups, elite mercantilists, temple and palace dependents. Community assemblies decided trouble-cases in courts in which royal authority was notably absent. Constant negotiations and adjustments were in play in order to support any king or dynasty which was normally far from stable. Nevertheless, Mesopotamian cities were long-lived, some for more than two millennia, enduring the vicissitudes of conquests and attempted incorporation into territorial states.

In Mesoamerica, Patricia McNany discusses urban 'experiments'. In a dramatic episode the largest city of all, Teotihuacan, which flourished from around 200 BC to AD 550, crumbled. There was not a competitor in sight who could have been responsible for the massive burning of the ceremonial district of Teotihuacan. McNany supports the view that it was internal resistance to rulers that led to end of the regional dominance of Teotihuacan.

McNany notes significant differences between the northern and southern Maya regions. As in Mesopotamia, there was competition among cities in the Classic period to establish large, territorial states, but those states that managed to effect a regional hegemony were successfully resisted. As in Mesopotamia, alliances among urban rulers were also unstable. It is striking that new evidence of markets, traders, and crafts people characterizes the diverse nature of Maya cities. The role of kings, especially in the south, was to intercede with the gods and to create 'monumental time' as a charter of rulership. This appears to have enhanced fragility and diminished long-term sustainability of cities. Increasingly, kings were reliant on rural agricultural production and labour in the Late Classic when everything was peaking (population, monument dedications, conflict). Kings and their courts abandoned untenable positions, moving to other cities where new conflicts inevitably ensued. In the northern region, cities and their kings were able to adapt to regional instability by changing overarching ideological justifications for their power and to live within increasingly important mercantile structures and among newly wealthy elites.

The infrastructural fragility of ideological power

In the previous sections, our conference considered the apparent stability of political and urban systems, the negotiations and transformations that resulted in kings and cities persisting for centuries. In some cases, urban experiments resulted in abandonments while the resilience of a rural countryside survived political change. The research into fragility was not to find a single form of vulnerability of political power or

resistance to the goals of leaders, but to examine the structure of governance and the social infrastructure that rulers sought to simplify and control.

In the examples briefly described in this section, I report on the conference's discussions about fragility in parts of the world in which political systems developed precociously, how societies were transformed by these political systems, and which by any estimation are significant examples of new forms of stratification. The appearance of new socio-political and economic institutions requires explorations into the fragility of these polities.

Peter Robertshaw reports on polities in sub-Saharan Africa, three examples of many states in Africa (see his map of such states). One case is Great Zimbabwe, a territorial state that lasted two centuries, whose monumental capital included a population of around 2000 people. The region included numerous 'peer-polities' and short-lived peripatetic 'capitals'. Nevertheless, the importance of the site in the memory of the region's people and its monumentality are why this ancient capital was chosen to give its name to the modern country of Zimbabwe. Swahili city-states, bound into an Indian Ocean trading network and competing within an Islamic sphere of merchants and clerics, were also embedded in the local system of trade and kinship networks. Kings negotiated with fellow kings and with their own councils of elders. Bunyoro (or Nyoro) states were led by kings who sought to construct multi-clan polities based in part on their claims to healing power. Common to these polities was a struggle to accumulate wealth in followers. These potential subjects constituted at times a 'disgruntled peasantry', and would-be leaders appealed to 'alternate' ideological powers, spirit-mediums, and tried to link into traditional forms of ancestor veneration. These examples are complex and the three regions and their histories are not identical. In all of them, however, Robertshaw notes the resilience of 'the system', that is, local forms of authority and organization, which could be and often were restraints on the various forms of overarching political power.

Whereas Robertshaw could employ archaeological, historical, and ethnographic information for his study of sub-Saharan African states, Tim Pauketat's chapter is based on archaeological evidence, with reference also to oral histories. The data for the rise and abandonment of Cahokia in the American middle west and of Chaco Canyon in the Southwest are impressive. Cahokia was born in a 'big bang' explosion around AD 1050, whereas the Chaco Canyon 'phenomenon' appeared in the late AD 800s (and underwent a major expansion c. 1040). Both arose from modest settlements in their regions; their resulting size was unprecedented.

A native in these areas would have been awed by the major constructions in these places. Cahokia was then effectively abandoned by AD 1250; Chaco was similarly abandoned by AD 1150. In both cases, explosive growth could not be sustained.

The two cases, however, were significantly different. Cahokia was a city, with several major neighbourhoods (including Cahokia itself, St. Louis mounds, and East St. Louis mounds), with a regional population estimated from 40,000 to 50,000 people. Chaco had relatively few permanent residents, perhaps 2000–3000, but was the centre of the 'four corners' area of the American Southwest. In the summer, many 'pilgrims' came to Chaco, and distant Chacoan 'outliers' were connected to Chaco in material culture, by actual and ceremonial roadways, and through a common belief system. Both Chaco and Cahokia were major centres in their regions and influenced far-flung settlements.

According to Pauketat, Cahokia was the scene of much immigration of various people in its region. And, Chaco was also the centre of belief of distant people who were connected to Chaco. In both places leaders were vested in ritual power. Processions of people came to Chaco to celebrate rituals seasonally; in Cahokia Monks Mound was the centre of ritual activities (which also took place in other mounds). Pauketat writes that neither place was sufficiently 'inscribed' in its landscape. In oral histories of Chaco, the place was abandoned by the gods who were displeased by the hubris of its leaders. In Cahokia, the attempted 'integration' by ritual leaders could not succeed in holding together the numerous constellations of people and the social orientations of its many inhabitants.

Imperial fragilities

At 1200 BC the largest city in the world was Anyang, the last capital of the Shang dynasty. It covered roughly 30 sq. km and is estimated to have had 200,000 inhabitants. It lasted less than two centuries. Across the globe from China, the largest pre-modern empire in world history was the Inka empire in South America. It lasted less than a century (AD 1425–1515). These two cases, early Chinese cities of the second millennium BC and the Inka empire, require investigations of their fragility.

The popular conceptions about the Inka – that the empire provided benefits to its far-flung subjects through economic integration and by a bureaucracy whose accounting practices through knotted-strings were as sophisticated as any writing system; and that the 'insatiable appetite' for expansion was curbed only by an armed but modest Spanish expeditionary force – are contested by Tom Dillehay and Steven Wernke. The Inka empire was pre-assembled by the

Chimor, whom the Inka conquered. The royal succession was marked by corruption, crises, and regicide. Although the empire provided material and services to conquered peoples, the far-flung network of roads and infrastructural facilities often left constituent local authorities, in ayllus, with practical control of their everyday lives. The struggle to ‘mediate’ the reciprocal obligations of the state, including provisioning of ancestors, was fraught with vulnerabilities of supply and demand and ‘little cohesion’ over large distances. Spanish invaders found the Inka empire enmeshed in a succession crisis and on the brink of civil war. The empire was already in its death throes.

A few years ago the Longshan culture of central and northern China, in roughly the third millennium BC, was described as ‘Neolithic’. Now, as Li Min reports, cities like Taosi flourished in the late Longshan, and earlier cities like Liangzhu also flourished. The great cities of the second millennium, Erlitou, Zhengzhou, and Anyang are only some of the cities now being studied in this time period. As Li Min makes clear, however, large cities, powerful and brutal kings, vast palatial areas, extensive craft industries, and ‘giant conglomerates of residential communities’ which were migrants into the new mega-sites were not commensurate with stable regimes. There was factional competition at court, and even the mighty kings of the late Shang period were travelling men, their hegemony over territory, and their capture of massive numbers of people were dependent on their yearly campaigns to put down revolts. None of the great cities lasted more than a couple of centuries before they were abandoned. This new research on the spectacular early cities and states in China is matched by the important studies of their fragility.

The challenges of fragility

In this introduction with its bowdlerizations of detailed and complex chapters, I only intend to advertise the data-rich contributions and authoritative analyses of the participants of this conference. What brings the chapters together and makes this book more than a series of excellent studies is the goal of understanding how early cities and states struggled to survive and often did not. The volume represents a new agenda in research, the attempt not only to get beneath the structure of the ruling stratum, but also to recognize the institutional strands of resistance to central power in early states. Whereas many studies have been written about ‘the evolution of complexity’, that is, the rise of states and political hierarchization, new research must consider ‘the evolution of fragility’. Traditional studies have sought to understand how states arose

and how political leaders sought to ‘integrate’ their societies. In short, many scholars have sought to identify ancient states and to understand what states do. The chapters in this volume, while not ignoring such questions, now seek to identify what states do not and cannot do.

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Notes

- 1 Aparna Kumar, PhD candidate in art history at UCLA, was my research assistant during my autumn residency at the Getty Museum.
- 2 Jan Bemmman could not contribute a chapter in this volume.
- 3 That is, ‘early’ in their regions.
- 4 I thank Adam Smith (Cornell University) for his perceptive critique of the first draft of this chapter. I have clarified my text and have shamelessly adopted many of his locutions. I am also grateful to Pete Robertshaw and Vernon Scarborough for their advice on this introduction.