Two important points were made early in the symposium:  
(1) Prudence Rice noted that there were several kinds of collapse at different times; and Arthur  
Demarest noted that “collapse” is a terminological problem — we each have our own conception,  
from rapid to gradual, from dramatic to almost imperceptible. Demarest’s “relatively rapid decline  
in political and economic complexity” is a good median definition, and for the Classic Maya this  
involved removal of the k’uhul ajaw, the divine king, no matter whether the cause was human —  
invasion, warfare, revolution — or natural — drought or overpopulation — that removed the social  
confidence which underwrote royal authority.

(2) Takeshi Inomata made the point that we should be looking for detailed local sequences. The  
Boston politician Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill once said that “all politics is local” — all crises are local  
and run on their own timetables. Sometimes they coincide across a region, giving the appearance of  
common causality, sometimes they are site-specific: so we see Ceibal vs. Aguateca, La Joyanca vs. La  
Corona, Preclassic El Mirador vs. Preclassic Uaxactún vs. Preclassic Cival.

Keeping these ideas in mind, I would like to address four general points, each with local  
illustrations.
1. Dynamic within Maya Cities and Regions

The focus of elite life shifts in many places: while at Machaquilá there is only one main group, at Uaxactún we see a shift from Group É to Group F to Group H, then to the “new town” of Groups A and B on the hilltop across the valley to the west. Even there, there was earlier occupation back to at least 600 bc: perhaps the inhabitants became the new elite. Similarly, at Tikal there is a shift from the Mundo Perdido where the Middle and earlier Late Preclassic public architecture and royal tombs lay, east to the Great Plaza, only 400 m away, but arguably the result of a change of ruling clan. At Ceibal there is substantial early occupation from perhaps 1000 bc in Group A, then the defensive occupation of Group D in the Late Preclassic, and then back to the more open spaces of Group A in the Terminal Classic florescence. Sometimes there is a greater shift: William Saturno’s oral communication made the case for an 8 km move from San Bartolo to Xultún, probably at the end of the Late Preclassic, and also the point that this could not be due to general environmental change. Local topographic changes, such as exhaustion of a water source, or the political change of ruling family (but keeping the dynasty within the community, not imposed from outside like Yax K’uk’ Mo’ at Copán) would be feasible causes.

2. Divergence in Group Function within Sites

The functions of the royal palace are differentiated from those of the dynastic cult center, for example. In some sites these are close together, as at Machaquilá or Tikal, but at others they may be separated. In Belize we have twin-group centers such as Nohmul, Baking Pot, and La Milpa, where groups several hundred meters apart seem to separate the functions of cult center and royal residence. At Xunantunich the two functions are at opposite ends of the main site. An extreme example may exist in southern Belize, where the cult center of Nim Li Punit with its numerous stelae but tiny settlement is 15 km from the large site of Lubaantun with its palace and plazas, but no monuments except three ball court markers. The royal palace itself may also be divided between rulership and residential functions: in the Tigrillo palace at San Bartolo, the impressive presentation rooms are not accompanied by anywhere to live — this seems to have been a separate compound. At Xultún the new royal murals shown by Saturno from a small building on an ancillary courtyard suggest that this was a decorated royal residence: Saturno’s discovery reminds me of Napoleon’s one question when choosing a new Marshal of France: “Is he lucky?”

3. Unfinished Public Architecture

Several examples have been mentioned: Temple L8-8 at Aguateca; a building at Machaquilá; Structures A10, A20, and A24 at Ceibal; the second Twin Pyramid Group at Yaxhá. At La Milpa a 40 per cent expansion of the palace on the South Acropolis, a fifth major temple (Structure 21), a second ball court, and a new superstructure on the largest temple-pyramid on the Great Plaza — all were parts of a major royal program of development in progress when La Milpa was abandoned circa AD 830–850, leaving stockpiles of stone waiting to be used. Beyond the urban core of La Milpa, a cardinally-placed set of four minor centers (La Milpa North, South, East, and West) were also abandoned in varying stages of completion, evidence of an even more ambitious cosmic design. All of these examples are indications that collapse can come in the midst of prosperity; we need to ask why. The model of Hosler, Sabloff and Runge (1977) of a dangerous diversion of resources into monument-building to placate the gods might work for temples, but not for a palace expansion.

4. Sacred Places

We have heard about early sacred places — Tak’alik Ab’aj on the Pacific coast, Naranjo in the central highlands, and Cival in the Petén lowlands; some places remain sacred to the present day — two sites noted at this symposium are Q’umarkaj and El Baúl, and we can add Iximché, where I observed
ritual in progress in a discreet area in 1998. But there is also evidence of Postclassic, but pre-conquest sacralization of ancient sites: at Ceibal, Stela 22 is the inverted top section of Stela 6 reset a few meters to the west, recognized as a holy stone, but with its glyphs no longer read. At La Milpa, fragments (tops, mid-sections, and bases) of stelae were dragged into position in front of the long-abandoned Temple 1 and re-erected, probably in the sixteenth century: both the tree-covered mound and the carved fragments retained their sacred numinous quality (Hammond and Bobo 1994). At Cobá in Quintana Roo and Xunantunich in Belize, shrines were built to house ancient stelae. Here we see the collapse of Maya political structure, economy, and demography, but the persistence of the Maya mind, as noted by Stephen Hugh-Jones (this chapter) for Upper Amazon cosmography.

All politics may be local, but we have good evidence that the local can be caught up in the regional, or larger, context: there were several mentions of the “royal road” by which the Kan dynasty of Calakmul tried to bypass and then encircle Tikal in the sixth and seventh centuries. In some centers such as La Corona, we can make sense of the local — in this case a small site with too many monuments for its scale — only in a larger context (the same applies to Nim li Punit in southern Belize).

I will close by encouraging us all to broaden our horizons, while marking the importance of the local and detailed. Stephen Hugh-Jones brought a fresh externalist perspective from South America and social anthropology, but we could also look at the Old World and documentary history: the relationship between Calakmul and its clients can be seen to move from one between territorial states, between dominant and subordinate kingdoms, to effectively governorates (sajal) or satrapies. The documented record of history gives us instructive parallels, from the organization of the Achaemenid Empire to the mediatised monarchies of Bismarckian German in the nineteenth century. The relations between Maya polities may, perhaps should, remind us of the Holy Roman Empire or Renaissance Italy: the foundation of Dos Pilas apparently by a junior line from Tikal finds a parallel in the way in which the Capetian monarchy in medieval France sent its sons out into provincial centers to prosper and build a stable polity (Lewis 1976). The converse is also true: what we are learning about the detailed histories of the Maya not only removes the term “mysterious,” but gives us ideas with which to understand events, historical and environmental, elsewhere.
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