

UNST 124g fall 2011
change, change, change

1 introduction

We have been introduced to two examples of cultural response to environmental challenges this term, drought at the end of the Akkadian Empire and the North American Dust Bowl. The more you read about the history of humans, the more such examples you will discover. Anthropologists and archaeologists consider both climate and social stresses to be driving factors in major cultural reorganizations, with different weight given to each by different scholars at different times. It seems likely that climate and social stresses act in concert, not in isolation, and that different groups have different capacities for response to stresses of any origin. In the readings and accompanying assignment presented here you are asked to research a new example of cultural response to an environmental challenge and to consider how these lessons from the past might be relevant to us today.

The first step in any research project should be to ask yourself a few questions. What is the question you are trying to answer and what kind of information do you need to answer it? Where should you look to find that information? Librarians at Portland State's Millar Library have created a very good "Research Survival" guide that you can read online:

<http://www.lib.pdx.edu/instruction/survivalguide/index.htm>

You will need to find and read several independent sources of information for this project. You may use scientific journal articles, textbooks, dated and referenced websites maintained by professional scientists and historians, as well as popular books grounded in scholarly research.

- **Print media** means anything that has been published in print form. This can be a newspaper or news magazine, book, or journal article. Electronic versions, such as pdf files, of materials that have been published in print media are considered print media.
- **Electronic media** means anything that is available only in electronic format, such as a website.
- A **scholarly** reference is one that has a clearly defined date and authorship, and reports on research performed by the author ("primary research") or is a synthesis, with conclusions, of research performed by others ("secondary research"). Any reference that has undergone a peer-review process is considered scholarly. Millar Library's survival guide offers some good advice for evaluating references. The wikipedia entry for scholarly method is also worth reading. Examples of scholarly references include all journal articles, some books, and some web sources. You need to find at least 4 scholarly references, which can be in either the print or electronic media.
- A **popular media** reference is everything else. Popular resources are intended for a general, non-specialist, audience and are either reviews of research conducted by others or opinion articles. Examples include most of the material available on the web, books written for a general audience (unless they are well sourced, as is the case for our textbook, *The Worst Hard Time*), news

magazines, and newspapers. Some of this material can be very useful but because it represents either opinion or is not written by a specialist in a relevant field, it is a less reliable source of information than scholarly research.

2 assignment

Read the articles by deMenocal (2001) and Steffen (2008). Both authors make a case that understanding the history of climate and cultural change can help modern societies frame the challenges we face today. We will discuss this idea in class on February 29th. You are asked to prepare for that discussion in two ways, first by finding out more about the examples in deMenocal (2001) and second, by writing a short essay motivated by Steffen (2008).

1. The cultural groups introduced by deMenocal (2001) all experienced cultural change during times when there is paleoclimatological evidence for environmental change as well. Each mentor section is asked to select, as a group, one of the cultural groups presented by deMenocal (2001). (*The larger mentor section should divide into two groups.*) Each individual is asked to investigate—in more detail than the review article by deMenocal—who those people were and what challenge they faced. Consider the climate stress encountered by the group you are studying and how the group responded to it. Were social and political factors important in that response? What do you think are the relative roles of environment and culture in the story you have discovered?

Write a short, two to three page, review of what you have learned. You cannot cover every detail of these complicated topics in that short space so you will need to be selective. Find a theme in your research and write about that one thing within the overall framework of the challenges faced by the group you have selected. For example, you could not possibly write the entire story of the collapse of the Akkadian Empire in three pages but you could write about the paleoclimatological evidence for the profound drought at the time of collapse or about the external threat presented by the people living in the Zagros Mountains at that time. Focus on a particular *issue* but write about that issue in the *framework* of environmental challenges and cultural change. You must use and correctly cite at least two scholarly sources.

2. Steffen (2008) makes the case that “human activities are now rivaling many geophysical processes in their influence on the functioning of the Earth system.” How should the 20th century transition in human capability affect our thinking about sustainability? What are the missing pieces in what Steffen calls the “quest for global sustainability.” Please write a short essay, 3 to 4 pages, reflecting on these

3 references

deMenocal, P. (2001). Cultural Responses to Climate Change During the Late Holocene. *Science*, 292, 667-673.

Steffen, W. (2008). Looking Back to the Future. *Ambio*, 37, 507-513.