



PART 2

Read the text below and answer questions 14–26.

THE COLLAPSE OF CIVILIZATIONS: CLIMATE VS. HUMAN AGENCY

A

When complex societies decline, climate is often blamed first: drought, flood, cooling episodes, or abrupt shifts in seasonal rainfall. Yet in archaeological and historical research, “collapse” is rarely treated as a single dramatic moment with a single trigger. More commonly it is understood as a drawn-out process of political fragmentation, demographic contraction, and institutional failure, sometimes followed by reorganisation at smaller scales. Environmental stress can matter greatly, but it usually interacts with human factors such as inequality, conflict, disease, trade disruption, and the capacity of governing systems to coordinate adaptation. The central question is not whether climate played a role, but when it became decisive—and why some societies changed form while others disintegrated.

B

Climate shocks can destabilise states by striking at the foundations of administrative power: food, water, and the surplus that sustains taxation. Multi-year drought can reduce harvests, shrink taxable production, and weaken rulers who rely on grain stores to pay soldiers and officials. Conversely, unusually intense rainfall can trigger flooding, spread crop disease, and damage transport routes, undermining the movement of supplies and the repair of public works. Timing is crucial. One bad year may be absorbed by reserves, but repeated failures can exhaust buffers, force migration, and intensify competition over remaining fertile land. In such circumstances, the stress is not only ecological; it becomes fiscal and political, as the state’s capacity to provide security and stability is tested.

C

Even so, identical climatic pressure can produce very different outcomes depending on human choices. Some societies diversify crops, maintain irrigation and drainage, and invest in public provisioning systems that limit scarcity-driven unrest. Policies that preserve food storage, distribute water access more equitably, and reduce the burden on marginal producers can increase sociopolitical resilience. Other states amplify vulnerability by concentrating land, extracting high tribute, or tying legitimacy to rigid institutions that are expensive to maintain during shortage. In this view, climate functions less like a single “killer” and more like a stress test: it exposes maladaptation, weak governance, and the social resentment that can accumulate when elites protect themselves while pushing risk onto others.



D

The Akkadian Empire is frequently invoked because several environmental datasets point to increased aridity around the period when central authority weakened in Mesopotamia. Some researchers highlight dust deposits and shifts in settlement patterns as signs that farming zones contracted and populations moved toward more reliable water sources. Yet political evidence complicates any simple narrative. Written records indicate military strain, regional rebellion, and instability along the empire's periphery. Akkadian power depended on long-distance supply networks and administrative coordination, both of which can fail through conflict, contested legitimacy, and logistical breakdown as well as through environmental pressure. Even if drought reduced yields, the speed and form of the empire's fragmentation still depended on governance, coercion, and the ability—or inability—to manage competing regions.

E

The Classic Maya illustrate even more clearly why single-cause explanations often mislead. Paleoclimate reconstructions indicate repeated drought episodes in parts of the lowlands, conditions that would have strained maize production and local water supplies. However, Maya cities were highly diverse in their responses. Some invested heavily in reservoirs, canalised channels, and other forms of water management, while others relied more directly on seasonal rainfall and local catchments. At the same time, inscriptions and defensive architecture point to intensified warfare and elite rivalry, suggesting that political conflict sometimes amplified ecological stress. In many regions, city-based authority weakened while people persisted in rural settlements, implying transformation and decentralisation rather than a uniform, total disappearance.

F

Angkor's decline is often linked to climate variability at both extremes: severe droughts punctuated by intense monsoon floods. Such swings could damage canals, silt reservoirs, and undermine the elaborate hydraulic engineering that supported agriculture and dense urban life. Yet the system was also shaped by human priorities and maintenance regimes. Large prestige projects required labour and administrative coordination, potentially diverting capacity from routine repair. Some modifications to waterways may have improved short-term distribution while reducing resilience to sudden surges. Here, environmental volatility mattered, but so did engineering choices, upkeep, and the state's ability to mobilise coordinated responses across a complex network.

G

In Norse Greenland, climate is frequently cited because cooling temperatures and expanding sea ice would have made survival more costly in a marginal environment and



made sailing routes less reliable. Reduced trade could limit access to iron, timber, and other supplies, increasing vulnerability. However, many scholars argue that cultural and economic commitments were equally decisive. Dependence on European status goods, constraints on dietary flexibility, and strained relations with neighbouring Inuit groups could narrow the range of viable adaptations when conditions worsened. The settlement's fragility, on this account, was not created by climate alone but by choices that locked the community into a narrower set of options under rising stress.

H

These debates have intensified as evidence has become more precise. Climate signals are reconstructed through proxies such as tree rings, lake sediments, cave deposits, and ice cores, while archaeology tracks population patterns, diet, and conflict through settlement surveys, burials, and material culture. A major difficulty is chronology: a climate shift dated broadly to a century cannot easily be tied to a specific political crisis or succession dispute. Researchers therefore prioritise high-resolution records, careful modelling, and transparent uncertainty estimates. The goal is to avoid confusing correlation with causation by asking whether environmental change directly constrained key resources, or whether it acted indirectly by triggering social tipping points such as migration, rebellion, or breakdown in cooperation.

I

Across cases, the most consistent finding is interaction. Climate can reduce margins of safety and intensify competition, but institutions determine who bears the burden, how quickly adaptation occurs, and whether collective solutions remain feasible. Some societies decentralise, migrate, or alter production and continue in new forms; others fracture when inequality, conflict, and administrative rigidity block coordination. Collapse, then, is best seen as environmental pressure filtered through human agency—where climate sets constraints, but people shape outcomes.

Questions 14–19

Choose the correct heading for each paragraph.

List of Headings

- i Cultural commitments in a marginal environment
- ii Different outcomes among Maya cities facing water stress
- iii A debated empire where politics and environment intersect
- iv Climate as a stress test shaped by social decisions
- v Why scientific timelines can be hard to match
- vi A hydraulic system challenged by extremes and maintenance demands



vii How drought and flood can undermine state resources

viii Why collapse is usually a single sudden event

14 Paragraph **B**

15 Paragraph **C**

16 Paragraph **D**

17 Paragraph **E**

18 Paragraph **F**

19 Paragraph **G**

Questions 20–23

Choose **TRUE** if the statement agrees with the information given in the text, choose **FALSE** if the statement contradicts the information, or choose **NOT GIVEN** if there is no information on this.

20 The passage suggests that climate factors are irrelevant once political conflict begins.

21 Some Maya populations may have continued living in rural areas even when city-based power weakened.

22 The passage states that Angkor's temple construction stopped completely before any major climate variability occurred.

23 The author argues that high-resolution climate records help researchers avoid confusing correlation with causation.

Questions 24–26

Complete the notes below. Choose **ONE WORD ONLY** from the text for each answer.

Key points in the climate-and-collapse debate

- States can worsen vulnerability by placing **24** ownership in fewer hands and demanding high tribute.
- Some Maya cities invested in **25** and channels to reduce dependence on seasonal rainfall.
- Without precise **26**, a broadly dated climate shift cannot be tied confidently to a particular political crisis.

Answer Key



- 14. vii
- 15. iv
- 16. iii
- 17. ii
- 18. vi
- 19. i
- 20. FALSE
- 21. TRUE
- 22. NOT GIVEN
- 23. TRUE
- 24. land
- 25. reservoirs
- 26. chronology