BOOKS ET AL.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Thriving in perilous times

Archaeological evidence shows human societies can reshape themselves in times of crisis **Erle C. Ellis**

Signs of catastrophe are everywhere these days: megafires and massive flooding, dizzying shifts in politics, and alarming infectious disease outbreaks. These challenges of our times might seem to transcend any society's capabilities to navigate them, but that assumption is wrong, according to journalist Lizzie Wade. "Not only have people already confronted almost every possible apocalypse, they have lived through them," she argues in her new book, *Apocalypse*. "All of them."

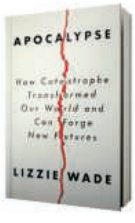
Forged in the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic, *Apocalypse* dives deep into the latest archaeological research to expose the remarkable adaptations and transformations experienced by human societies that have faced overwhelming adversity throughout history. Fictional narratives featuring firsthand accounts of living through various crises help bring Wade's reporting closer to home. For those struggling to make sense of our troubled times, the book will be very welcome.

Archaeology is at the heart of *Apocalypse*, and it is the real deal—no treasure-hunting Indiana Jones here. The book highlights the innovative science that is rapidly gaining new capabilities to reconstruct the lives of people and places across the planet from the evidence left behind. In nine chapters, each centered on a distinct lesson to be learned from societies that have faced unprecedented challenges, the reader is taken on a fascinating and eclectic tour around the world. Wade delves into the Neanderthal extinction and the submergence of the northern European region known as Doggerland under the North Sea. She describes fire and flooding in Aboriginal Australia, the climatic challenges faced by fishermen and farmers in coastal Peru, and the decline of Harappan India. Her tour includes the Black Plague in Europe, the end of Old Kingdom Egypt, the emergence of the postclassic Maya, European colonization of the Mexica (Aztecs), slavery in St. Croix, and many more harrowing incidents from history.

While this is a book about archaeological discoveries, it is also a book with a message, and the message is often personal. In essence, its teachings might be boiled down to Wade's observation that "learning to see human history through the lens of apocalypse teaches us that our past is a story of survival, transformation, and reinvention."

Throughout her reporting, Wade questions historical narratives that purport to predict upcoming perils. She exposes, for example, Ipuwer's "Admonitions"—a classic Egyptian tale about a dark age brought on by elite decline—as "propaganda" intended to preserve elite power. In this effort, she is in good company with other scholars who have likewise begun examining the deeper history of human experience to "understand who we are and where we came from" [e.g., (*1*)].

Aké, a once thriving city at the heart of the pre-Columbian Maya civilization, was transformed by numerous catastrophes.



Apocalypse: How Catastrophe Transformed Our World and Can Forge New Futures
Lizzie Wade
Harper, 2025. 320 pp.

Wade aims especially high with the book's final chapter. Here, her synthesis of site-based histories and personal experiences comes to a head with the claim that "apocalypses are also the best chance our societies have for change." Wade's writing in this section is at its most powerful, enticing, and personally impassioned. I found myself convinced, indeed, that "apocalypses are not endings. They are transformations."

Still, readers may justifiably feel that some lessons of the book are built on thin foundations. A chapter on the "apocalypse of colonialism," for example, examines the devastation wrought by the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés on the Aztecs during the 16th century. It is a powerful and telling narrative, to be sure, but it fails to capture the full complexity of the destruction caused by European colonialism as other works have (*2*). Likewise, chapter 8 ("How Slavery Created the Modern World") is almost exclusively focused on the story of one plantation in the Caribbean island of St. Croix.

To some degree, those well read on the subject of long-term social change and societal transformation may feel that this book leaves out more than it adds. Some classic works, such as Joseph Tainter's *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, are touched upon, yet other key work seems notably absent. Nor is effort made to address popular misconceptions, such as Jared Diamond's deeply flawed but highly influential misinterpretation of social-ecological catastrophe in Rapa Nui (Easter Island) (*3*). An opportunity is lost to correct the record here, and archaeologists and other experts will likely be left wanting more.

Ultimately, however, this book has the potential to serve well in many roles, including as a text for classes in the environmental humanities, anthropology, and beyond. *Apocalypse* is an inspiring book for challenging times and will be a rewarding read for everyone intrigued by archaeological discovery and the deep history of human social change. □

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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