

## UNKNOWN'S PODCAST

### Clip from Episode 7: Origins of Complex Societies Transcript

**Host:** David Christian, historian, founder of Big History, and emeritus professor at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia.

**Guest:** Peter Bellwood, archaeologist and emeritus professor of archaeology in the School of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Australian National University.

#### Causes of Collapse

**David Christian:** Peter, can I end by asking you, returning to the idea of mysteries, what big questions about the evolution of social complexity still really puzzle you?

**Peter Bellwood:** As for mysteries, well, when it comes to civilizations, I think we can see how they grow through the rise of cities and the archaeological traces of those cities. They just get bigger, and the temples get bigger. But what the great mystery is not so much how they were founded, but it's how they, what happened to them when they died. And of course, we do have great mysteries over the Roman Empire, but especially you have a culture like the famous civilization in Pakistan, it's called the Indus Valley civilization. That is thought by many people to have been totally extinct, and the one in Crete, the Minoans. They're thought to have been totally extinct civilizations that did not speak known languages, and that have vanished. I don't agree entirely, I think like the late Roman Empire, they just shifted. And I think that the Indus Valley people were ancestral to Northern Indians, as they are today, they spoke Indo-European languages. In the case of Crete, those Minoans, I'm sure, spoke a language related to the language that the Mycenaeans were speaking in Greece at the same time. I can't prove it, but to me it's pretty obvious.

**David Christian:** So, this is a reminder that the rise of complexity is not a continuous process that rises and falls, and what you're saying, I take it, is that the falls remain steadfast.

**Peter Bellwood:** You see the Maya are another fall because they abandoned their ceremonial centers, they didn't die, there are millions of Mayan speaking people in Mexico and Guatemala, millions, but they shifted. Something happened in the organization that broke down and people, ordinary people, had to move away and abandon. They didn't all die, we don't find skeletons everywhere, but they moved. Probably went back to peasantry again.

**David Christian:** So, as societies got more and more complex, I guess just holding them together got more and more difficult, and eventually a breakdown. And that is a terrible warning for us today, isn't it?

**Peter Bellwood:** And you see with the people who lived in the Indus Valley, they abandoned their cities in the Indus Valley itself, but they didn't vanish, they moved into northern India. They moved into the region around Delhi, in the upper Yamuna and Ganges valleys, and founded much smaller settlements, more like peasant villages, I suppose.

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**David Christian:** So, this is one more example of something you've talked about a lot, which is environmental change that created both problems and opportunities that modern humans were able to take advantage of, or to solve.

**Peter Bellwood:** Yeah. Environmental change of course is immense.