
Rime of the Ancient Mariner

During the sixth century, Teotihuacan, in the Valley of Mexico, was the sixth largest city in the world. With a population of a quarter of a million in an area a third the size of Manhattan, Teotihuacan was the most advanced civilization in the Americas before the Europeans arrived a thousand years later.

We don't know for sure who laid out the city or even when it began, but we do know it flourished for at least 500 years. Teotihuacan was an intricately planned city, designed according to astrological principles, with apartments, artisans' studios, markets, temples, and 600 pyramids. The Pyramid of the Sun is reputedly the third largest in the world.

Teotihuacan collapsed during the sixth century when a 30-year drought dried up fields of maize, squash, and beans, forcing the people to either move on or starve. When Cortez passed through the Valley of Mexico in the 16th century, the ancient city had long since been abandoned. The overgrown and unrecognizable Pyramid of the Sun was just one more hill in the way of his cortege, which was on its way to crushing the Aztecs near the site of modern day Mexico City, 30 miles to the southwest.

Water—either its scarcity, its excess, or its noxiousness—has been the downfall of many a civilization throughout history. Even the early culture at Mesopotamia, the cradle of agriculture, collapsed after poisoning its soils with irrigation salts. Shortly after seeding the agricultural revolution, Mesopotamia was no longer fit for farming. A similar story is being retold today in California's San Joaquin Valley. The farmers of this rich agricultural region have tried everything from underground drainage tiles to drip-irrigation techniques to desalinization to salt-tolerant crops—so far, with little real success.

It takes a thousand pounds of water to produce one pound of grain. One pound of grain can sustain the average person for a single day. That thousand pounds of water, however, is increasingly hard to come by. Water is rapidly becoming the next great resource crisis, and FORUM is devoting this entire issue to the topic.

Ironically, Earth—a misnomer—is a water planet, and yet through overuse and misuse, we don't have enough usable water to accommodate projected growth into the foreseeable future. Unlike the people of Teotihuacan who, despite incredible ingenuity, were overwhelmed by water shortages, we do have solutions. Putting those solutions to work, however, will require time and technology and political will. We can't afford our story to trail off the way the Ancient Mariner's did with "Water, water everywhere, Nor any drop to drink."

Dennis Mc Carthy