

The Political Economy of Bread and Circuses:
A Reinterpretation of the Classic Maya Collapse

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Extended abstract: In early states, government elites provided very different types of public goods, ranging from productivity-enhancing infrastructure such as roads and irrigation systems, to costly but seemingly useless pyramids and temples. The nature of this "bread-and-circuses"-tradeoff in early public goods provision is not well understood. In this paper, we study the Classic Maya civilization (250-950 CE) where elites had a choice between on the one hand non-productivity enhancing public goods like statues and ballcourts, and investments in essential water infrastructure (reservoirs, canals, sluice gates) on the other. We exploit information and analyze text messages from 870 dated monuments from the period among 110 Mayan cities. Using a novel proxy for rainfall and a finer time resolution, we find that monument construction activity was more intense during drought years. This result is at odds with a common view that more rain should imply more resources for (and provision of) public goods and that an extended drought was what finally caused the Mayan collapse. We rationalize our findings with a model proposing that in the highly competitive setting of the numerous small and autonomous Classic Maya city-states, monument construction functioned as a costly distraction and signalling device about state capacity, targeted towards mobile populations in times of low rain and failing maize harvests. Taken together, our analysis sheds new light on the climate-related background and dynamics of the Maya collapse and, more generally, of the tradeoff for ruling elites between bread and circuses.