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SBS 348: MD01 Maya City Comparison

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Tonina and Copan

The comparisons between Tonina and Copan can be subtle or extreme but one thing is for sure, they both help tell in detail about the way an ancient civilization probably went about their daily lives. It is not a mystery that much of the Maya culture was influenced by the heavens or stars, moon and sun at the time and Tonina and Copan are not different. Much evidence from their specific mathematical equations and stela can be translated to show proof and is also a reference of recorded written history for scholars today.

Tonina will be examined first followed by Copan. Each City will then have a comparison of its physical location and relationship to other tribes if any. Also the dynastic style or rule will be examined by understanding the chapters read from the text book. Finally an educated guess will be given as to why each city might have fallen or vanished from society from a personal opinion. Ancient cities from the Maya might not tell all their secrets, however, we can continue to explore and discover Maya artifacts to help slowly uncover those secrets starting with Tonina.

Tonina is located about 400 kilometers northwest from Copan and 80 kilometers directly south of Palenque. Tonina is built on seven terraces nestled in the side of a hill unlike most of the other pyramids from Mesoamerica. It is in the highlands as well and is surrounded by peaks and pines. Because of its location, the city is assumed to have been part of a great trade route for many of the surrounding tribes. Along with its unique location, Tonina has the very last long

count date on a Maya monument which tells the end of its Classic civilization in AD 909 (Martin, Grube 177).

There are a total of ten rulers from 514 to 909 but some of the information for earlier rulers from 530 to 595 is incomplete because the stela or monuments were damaged. The style in which Tonina was ruled at first does not seem to be a dynasty due to the lack of history told by the glyphs, but towards the end of the reigning kings. Some of the monuments tell of dynastic rule by indicating a successor within the glyphs. Unlike many other Maya sites, Tonina seems to have forged a timeline without the classical reign of family member succession. This is supported by how each ruler contributed something different to the Tonina timeline. Ruler number four, unknown name, has a birth date but it is not known for the long count date. Therefore his age of succession is unknown but the amount of time he ruled was no longer than about five years. This is determined by the monuments that were installed when new kings are honored. Again, unfortunately not much information is available for many of the rulers, but the evidence still strongly suggests an individualistic, not dynastic style of rulers were the majority of Tonina's timeline.

From 806 to 836 there was very little evidence of anything for Tonina, so much of the latter years are a mystery. This is one of the few sites that lasted quite a long time, about 100 years longer than Copan. One of the reasons for its longer survival is considered to be the fact that they were located in an isolated area. But like what was said before, many stela and monuments have been lost to time towards the end of a great cities era. There are many great artistic works found at Tonina, but from 830 to 904 there was a drastic decline of artwork that is quite noticeable. This can be seen as possibly a society suffering from a change in lifestyle and maybe leaving with hopes to restart the society that was once flourishing hundreds of years

before. The text book makes a remark that the Maya from Tonina was clinging to a fast-fading tradition. This alludes to maybe their beliefs were being questioned or challenged by different tribes. And ultimately lead to being conquered by a larger dynasty that wanted to show its power. It is hard to guess what exactly could cause the demise of this great ancient city, however, it seems most likely a political strife and a failing belief system had a large part of their downfall. Copan, on the other hand, has a shorter timeline than Tonina but has more evidence available to investigate from which leads to a clearer picture of Copan's lifestyle.

Copan is located in Honduras 400 kilometers southeast of Tonina. It sits about 5 kilometers east of the Honduras/ Guatemala border in the middle and is nestled in a valley lowland area next to a large river called Rio Copan. Copan's location is significant because unlike Tonina, Copan was vulnerable from the river flowing so close to the city and over the centuries many ruins were destroyed but at the same time the river excavated miles of tunnels that made it easier for explorers to find artifacts today.

Copan had a total of 16 rulers, however not all of them were a dynastic set of kings or queens. It is true that Copan has a larger and longer example of family rulers than Tonina but both Cities have their own individual king contributions. One example from Copan was the king Smoke Immix who had the longest reign from 628 to 695. His contributions included many monuments and finishing the northern boundary of the great plaza. In addition he started his rule at the age of fifteen which could be considered unusual but one mystery is the way Smoke Immix arranged his last set of monuments which does not conform to much of Maya architectural layouts know today. From the text, it seems that much of the governing consisted of preserving much of the history through art, writing and building structures. Copan was much

bigger than Tonina and the rulers took advantage of the space. The style in this semi-dynastic rule is similar to many other sites as far as history, death and entertainment is concerned.

With much of Copan's art and history being preserved, some evidence shows that the art was to promote and sustain power. Maybe some of this art was thought as bragging or similar type of thinking which can cause a system to fail on a large scale. According to the textbook though, the obsession of erecting monuments and stela in a larger expanse than their original land space created a larger population in which sustainability could not be reached. In the end it was a passion for incredible sculpture including the first to have one three dimensional that must have inspired the Maya people to support such an artistic site.

After reviewing much of what was read in the textbook it is definitely easier to see the differences from location and environment, style of rule, and reasons for collapse. However, they both contain an innate essence of similarity which can be defined by their beliefs, art and timeline. Although at first it was hard to realize the small details, styles, and ideas that are present in reading both Tonina and Copan chapters, I now have a better understanding of the differences and similarities between them. As a student, understanding the differences between cultures, especially an ancient one, helps us to think in a more critical way. Without an understanding of the past how are we to shape our future?