Development and Disintegration of Maya Political Systems in Response to Climate Change

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The role of climate change in the development and demise of Classic Maya civilization remains controversial. Kennett will present the results of an on-going interdisciplinary study designed to examine the role of climate change (specifically drought) in the development and disintegration of Classic Maya political systems (AD 300-1000). This includes a precisely dated subannual climate record for the past 2000 years from a cave located centrally in the region (Yok Balum Cave, Belize). From a comparison of this record with historical events compiled from well-dated stone monuments he will propose that anomalously high rainfall favored unprecedented population expansion and the proliferation of political centers between AD 440 and 660. This was followed by a drying trend between AD 660 and 1000 that triggered the balkanization of polities, increased warfare, and the asynchronous disintegration of Maya polities. This was followed by widespread population collapse in the context of an extended drought between AD 1020 and 1100.