

BOOK REVIEW

1177 B.C. The Year Civilization Collapsed. By ERIC H. CLINE. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pp. xx + 237. Hardcover, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-691-14089-6.

1177 B.C. represents the first work in a new series of Turning Points in Ancient History edited by Barry Strauss. The series aims to “present accessible books ... [with] fresh interpretations [which] provide a narrative synthesis that integrates literary and archaeological evidence” (ii). Cline’s familiarity with the archaeology (and archaeologists) of the Eastern Mediterranean, Anatolia, Near East, and Egypt makes him an excellent guide to the region and the events that mark the end of the Bronze Age. In his preface he outlines his approach as a “story in four acts,” in which he attempts “to answer the question of why a stable international system suddenly collapsed after flourishing for centuries” (xvii). Each “act” or chapter reports the archaeology of a century, moving from the fifteenth through the twelfth, and includes the texts which supplement or contextualize that archaeology. He also uses the texts to make one of his central arguments, namely that the Bronze Age civilizations were much more interconnected economically than we might have assumed, and that the breakdown of this globalization is one of the factors contributing to the collapse. He will insist throughout, however, that the collapse is complex—not to be explained by reference to any one event or people.

The title of the book is intriguing but rather misleading and Cline knows it; consequently he uses both his prologue and epilogue to correct any misconceptions. In the former he explains the date with a report of Ramses III’s account of the raids of the Sea Peoples up the Nile in 1177 BCE, while noting that any attempt to blame them for the collapse oversimplifies a far more complicated story. In the epilogue he will repeat that 1177 serves simply as a kind of academic shorthand for multiple events that occurred in the late thirteenth and early twelfth centuries.

The core of the book consists of four chapters or acts reviewing chronologically archaeological evidence gathered from throughout the ancient Near East. In order to contextualize his narrative, he begins, as historians invariably do, by taking us well back; thus a chapter nominally about the fifteenth century actually begins

with the Hyksos occupation of Egypt, Middle Minoan palaces on Crete, and Akkadians in Mesopotamia. That done, Cline moves us quickly forward and introduces the people and places that will form his fifteenth century narrative—primarily Hatshepsut and Thutmose III in Egypt, but also the Mitanni in Mesopotamia, Canaanites, Assuwa in NW Anatolia, and the Hittites of the central Anatolian plateau. He emphasizes peaceful trade and gift exchanges among these but admits that sometimes the only connections were hostile.

Act two, the fourteenth century, again uses Egypt as its focal point because the Aegean List of Amenhotep III and the Amarna archives offer the most compelling evidence for the interconnectedness of the Late Bronze Age world. To these he grafts the *Deeds of Suppiluliuma*, the Hittite king. He notes that, while the Hittites were reaching the limits of their military and economic expansion, relations with their immediate neighbors in the Mycenaean world were non-existent. And so while he believes that this was a very inter-connected world, he does not rule out the possibility of economic embargoes.

Act three, the thirteenth century, opens with a discussion of “globalized trade” as attested by the Uluburun ship and the records of the Ugaritic tradesman Sinaranu. To this he adds the story of Qadesh and the treaty that ended hostilities between Egyptians and Hittites. Turning about, however, Cline moves to more ominous events—events that herald the beginning of the end. The Trojan War, the fortification of the Mycenaean palaces, the Hebrew Exodus, and the rise of Assyria all suggest that “things were beginning to fall apart in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean regions” (101).

Cline entitles his account of the twelfth century “the end of an era.” Here the story of Ugarit takes center stage, as the archives there provide an unusually rich record of its widespread trade connections and great prosperity. But Ugarit was destroyed suddenly and quite violently early in the century, and its fate was not unique. Cline leads us on a tour of Ugarit’s neighbors in northern and southern Syria, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Mainland Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt. What do the various sites teach us? “Although it is clear that there were mass destructions ... at the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the twelfth century bc, it is far from clear who—or what—was responsible” (137). But of one thing he is certain: the Sea Peoples, “so often fingered as the sole culprits responsible” (138), were likely as much victims as perpetrators.

Having concluded his four act drama, Cline offers a review in chapter five. The usual suspects all appear: earthquakes, climate change, internal strife, invasion, collapse of global trade, and Sea Peoples are all considered. Cline thinks that

all may have played a role and reviews the arguments for a systems collapse. However, he then introduces complexity theory “to take catastrophe theory and systems collapse one step further” (169). There was, he argues, no linear progression in the collapse but a “number of different stressors” perhaps operating simultaneously.

This conclusion may come as no surprise to ancient historians, but Cline has validated it with a wealth of archaeological and archival detail. In the end, the Sea Peoples are off the hook; as Cline says, “The reality was much more messy” (170).

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