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Eric H. Cline, *1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. xx, 237. ISBN 978-0-691-14089-6.

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In *1177 B.C.*, Eric Cline (George Washington Univ.) seeks to explain how and why the major Bronze Age kingdoms of the eastern Mediterranean and western Asian regions, from Mycenaean Greece to Kassite Babylonia, collapsed at roughly the same time in the twelfth century BC. This is a work of synthesis rather than original research, blending text-based historical analysis with the results of new archaeological work. Though written for a broad audience, its scholarship and scope of inquiry will give specialists food for thought.

Cline takes 1177 BC as his starting point because in that year the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses III repulsed an invasion of the Nile Delta by an assortment of peoples hailing from areas ranging from Sicily to Anatolia, whom modern authors commonly call the Sea Peoples. Thanks to the detailed commemorative inscriptions and reliefs Ramses commissioned to celebrate his victory, this event is better documented than most of the others the author examines. Evidence of several decades of upheavals, migrations, and conflicts, including an earlier attack on Egypt by the Sea Peoples, supports his larger argument that the collapse of Bronze Age civilization was a prolonged process and the product of multiple causes.

A wealth of new data ... now needs to be considered within the equation. We are no longer certain that all of the sites with evidence of destruction were razed by the Sea Peoples. We can tell from the archaeological evidence that a site was destroyed, but not always by what or whom. Moreover, the sites were not all destroyed simultaneously or even necessarily within the same decade. As we shall see, their cumulative demise spans several decades and perhaps as much as a century. (10)

This provides a starting point for Cline's examination of several Bronze Age kingdoms and cultures, notably Mycenaean Greece, the Hittite, Assyrian and Kassite kingdoms in western Asia, New Kingdom Egypt, and various smaller independent and tributary states. He describes their sophisticated commercial and diplomatic relations and their collective prosperity over several centuries. He then assesses competing theories about their eventual decline.

Cline exposes many misinterpretations of evidence at specific sites, especially with regard to the devastation typically ascribed to the Sea Peoples. Concerning the city of Ugarit, for instance, he reconsiders the significance of a letter addressed to the king of Cyprus, but never sent, indicating that "the ships of the enemy have come."

According to the original report, it was found in a kiln, along with more than seventy other tablets, where it had been placed for baking. The excavators and other scholars initially hypothesized that the enemy ships had returned and sacked the city before the urgent request for assistance could be dispatched, and this is the story that has been repeated over and over in scholarly and popular accounts from the past several decades. However, a recent reexamination of the find-spot by additional researchers now indicates that it was not found in a kiln after all, but rather was probably stored within a basket that had fallen from the second floor after the building was abandoned. (113-14)

Further complicating our understanding of events along the eastern Mediterranean coastline, Cline notes, is the fact that several other sites seem to have been attacked and destroyed ca. 1192-1190 BC; that is, between the two major assaults of the Sea Peoples on Egypt in 1207 and 1177. There are even indications that some of the earlier invaders had settled peacefully among the locals, only to be attacked by the later group. Thus, the Sea Peoples became victims as well as aggressors.

The author assesses the roles of groups other than the Sea Peoples in the destruction of Bronze Age states: for example, the Hittites in Anatolia and the Kassites in Babylonia fell victim in part to assaults by neighbors to the north and east. Cline also considers environmental factors. A number of Mycenaean sites were struck by earthquakes, and there is also evidence that long-term climatic changes significantly reduced food supplies. These factors may have triggered the migrations of some of the Sea Peoples, but even if not, food shortages likely caused serious economic problems across the region.

Cline's tour of Bronze Age civilizations touches on such familiar topics such as Akhenaten and the Amarna period in Egypt and biblical traditions of the Exodus and the Israelite conquest of Canaan, but with a perspective likely unfamiliar to general readers. For example, he is less interested in Akhenaten's religious innovations than in the network of diplomatic connections between Egypt and its neighbors, as attested in the archive of letters from the Amarna period. This buttresses Cline's case for relatively peaceful and prosperous coexistence of various kingdoms in the region before the thirteenth century. Like most secular scholars, he dismisses the traditional fifteenth-century date for the Exodus; he notes that Egypt controlled Canaan at that time, which makes nonsense of the story of the Israelites leaving Egypt via Sinai. Cline prefers a thirteenth-century date, though he notes a general lack of destruction at enough sites from the period to corroborate the biblical accounts. After surveying alternative theories and archaeological findings, he acknowledges that fundamental questions about the historicity of the Bible remain unanswered.

Turning to less well known subjects, the author uses the archaeologists' detailed picture of the history of Cyprus to gauge the health of Bronze Age civilization as a whole. He highlights evidence of trade and diplomatic ties crisscrossing the region, as well as of wars, famines, migrations, climate change, and natural disasters. He does not, however, identify any single cause of economic or political decline on the island. Instead, each site seems to have been destroyed or abandoned at different times for distinct combinations of reasons. There is also evidence of recovery by at least one site that prospered until about 1050, some two centuries after the broader regional catastrophe.

The book's title is ultimately misleading. Cline does not isolate any single cataclysmic Bronze Age event, but traces a series of smaller interrelated events that precipitated what he calls "a perfect storm" by the mid-twelfth century. Some kingdoms disappeared entirely (the Hittites and Kassites) or declined in power (Egypt and Assyria). Some cities were destroyed by attackers, but far more, including Mycenae, lost influence and power even as some of their inhabitants remained in the area; still others seem not to have been devastated at all. Specialists may object that not all the collapses of specific states were caused by the mix of developments Cline proposes. Instead, the weakening of one state may have damaged the regional economy and contributed to the decline of others. Even so, Cline offers a better developed and more nuanced interpretation of the fall of Bronze Age civilization than does any other survey of the problem. Moreover, he also clarifies the conditions that nurtured new states and cultures that would have tremendous influence over the long term, including Archaic Greece, Phoenicia, and the Israelite kingdoms.

One weakness of Cline's work is that he tries to do too much too briefly. The book's whirlwind tour of the eastern Mediterranean with its lurches from one time and place to another will pose problems for readers without much prior knowledge of the subject. No very clear view of the Sea Peoples emerges—just who they were or where they came from—to the extent that the sources allow us to speculate. Even major states like Egypt or the Hittite kingdom get less coverage than they deserve. To be fair, this is probably due to the intricacies of the topic and the need to keep the volume to a manageable size. And, too, the archaeological research Cline must rely on tends to concentrate on specific sites and assemblages of evidence.

That said, archaeological methods have so advanced in sophistication in recent years that researchers have been able to unearth and publish a great deal of new evidence that undermines traditional assumptions about late Bronze Age history. Eric Cline's skillful synthesis of this material, with full documentation and an exhaustive bibliography, will be of great service to beginning students of Bronze Age history and, for that matter, their teachers. Even specialists, though they may quibble about details, will find many useful and provocative ideas and insights in *1177 B.C.*