1177 B.C. The Year Civilization Collapsed


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This book is the first in a new series edited by the influential historian Barry Strauss under the title Turning points in ancient history. The series aims to highlight with each publication a “crucial event or key moment in the ancient world” (xiii). Eric H. Cline, professor of classics and anthropology as well as director of the Capitol Archaeological Institute at George Washington University, successfully undertakes the difficult task of summarizing and analyzing the disparate sources and scholarly works on the events or processes that led to the collapse of several powerful polities in the Aegean, Anatolia, Mesopotamia and the Levant at the end of the Bronze Age. This dramatic transition to the early Iron Age, also known in the Aegean as the Dark Ages, is undoubtedly of crucial significance but less present in the common historical consciousness - a situation that Cline’s knowledgeable and comprehensive work is clearly capable of changing.

The book is presented in five chapters and a pro- and epilogue. In the Prologue Cline revises the long-prevailing scholarly paradigm of the Sea Peoples, who have traditionally been considered to be the perpetrators behind the destruction occurring in the late thirteenth and twelfth century BC in vast areas of the Aegean and east Mediterranean. Cline gives space to the few original sources, all stemming from Egypt, that report on battles with a confederation of peoples coming from the sea, highlighting the thin basis on

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which the entire theory of the invasion of the Sea Peoples eventually rests. He also leaves no doubt about his opinion that the Sea Peoples were used in academic circles as a “convenient scapegoat” (11) for explaining the sudden decline of a couple of influential late Bronze Age powers.

In order to demonstrate the development and high degree of inter-polity relations in the east Mediterranean prior to the collapse, Cline starts his overview in the first chapter with the fifteenth century BC. This is the time when Egypt frees itself from the foreign rule of the Hyksos and the New Kingdom comes into being. He discusses the trade network and other connections between Egypt, the kingdom of Mitanni, the Minoans and Hittites. The second chapter covers the fourteenth century BC, which is rich in contemporary written sources, for instance the clay tablets from the Amarna archives. Cline’s examination of the sources shows the political and true or imaginary family relations that tied the elites of several kingdoms to one another (53ff.). Particularly revealing is the network analysis of the connections between kings and officials from several polities that can be extracted from the archived correspondence (fig. 7). Chapter three deals with the thirteenth century BC, which is not only characterized by the continuity and intensification of connections between the east Mediterranean kingdoms but is also the assumed timeframe for two events from the realm of mythology that are extensively reconsidered by Cline, namely the Trojan War and the Hebrew Exodus from Egypt. Chapter four unfurls the situation of the twelfth century BC, which is the time of large-scale destruction and site abandonments in numerous localities in the Aegean, Anatolia, Mesopotamia and the Levant. Cline provides an overview of the destruction by region and discusses the archaeological evidence from key sites. It turns out that there are a number of verifiable reasons for the demolition of formerly large and powerful settlements. Besides natural disasters, warfare seems to be a plausible cause in particular cases but it remains completely unclear whether the attackers were the enigmatic Sea Peoples, warriors from neighboring polities or even inhabitants of the city who rose up in an internal rebellion. Cline indicates that the frequent practice of equating attackers and people who occupied a site after its destruction is by no means justified by the sparse evidence or even plausible (135).

The fifth chapter encompasses the discussion and synthesis of the information that was particularly compiled in chapter four. Cline discusses