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1177 bc : The Year Civilization Collapsed: Turning Points in Ancient History
by Eric H. Cline (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS



Eric H. Cline, *1177 BC: The Year Civilization Collapsed: Turning Points in Ancient History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pp. xx + 237. US \$29.95. ISBN 9780691140896.

The renewed interest in societal collapse—evidenced by this book, as well as by others, especially Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2005)—is, no doubt, tied to recent developments: concerns over climate change, overpopulation, and economic instability.¹ Can the study of past collapses prove instructive today? That is one of the questions posed by Eric Cline's new book, which focuses on the disruptions to the Late Bronze Age civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean. As the title (and price) may suggest, this book is aimed at a wide audience. It is written in a lively and approachable style that makes it accessible to the general public, but it is equally useful to classicists and historians who would like to be brought up to date on the latest thinking in the field, for Cline's discussion is balanced, knowledgeable, and contemporary, and unlike some books aimed at the public, it has extensive endnotes that point the reader to the most recent academic discussions.

Cline is the right person for the job. For the past 25 years, he has been one of the leading experts in the Late Bronze Age generally and in the study of international exchange within it specifically. Certainly, the end of the Late Bronze Age is an important turning point in the history of the Mediterranean and, indeed, of the ancient world and one that cannot be understood by looking only at, say, Egypt, or the Greek mainland. This is so because the world of the Late Bronze Age was highly interconnected and international. It was a sphere of sustained, complex interactions between the Aegean,

¹Diamond 2005.

Anatolia, Mesopotamia, the Levantine coast, Cyprus, and Egypt. The study of the Late Bronze Age collapse also requires historical context, which Cline amply provides. Indeed, the reader must wait for the fourth of five chapters before Cline describes the collapse itself in any detail. However, the wait is hardly boring for in these pages Cline expertly and briskly takes the reader through the power politics of the fifteenth, fourteenth, and thirteenth centuries BC with excursions on important archaeological discoveries and introductions for each of the major players. No reader with a pulse could fail to be captivated by the details: royal weddings, rebellions, invasions, and wrecks of ships loaded with precious cargoes. Cline then guides the reader through the archaeological evidence of the destruction at the beginning of the twelfth century BC from Anatolia and Greece to Mesopotamia, Cyprus, and the Levant, before diagnosing the causes of the collapse.

So what caused the collapse? No one thing, according to Cline. Although the so-called Sea Peoples are invoked early in the book as a potential primary factor for the collapse—it is their second invasion of Egypt in 1177 BC that gives the book its title—Cline rightly downplays the likelihood that the collapse can be solely, or even largely, attributed to them. There is mounting evidence, however, for natural disasters (earthquakes, drought, and climate change), external troubles (invaders), and the disruption of international trade, due to external or internal factors, all of which is surveyed by Cline. As he points out, however, none of these on its own can plausibly explain the collapse. He therefore concludes, reasonably, that a combination of these factors created a “perfect storm” that resulted in a complex cascading effect, culminating in a widespread collapse. There was no single causal chain of events (for example, drought engenders invaders, thereby provoking the disruption of trade, economic crises, and internal political collapse), but following the principles of complexity theory, Cline suggests that a variety of stressors interacted in intricate and unpredictable ways. The problem with the collapse of the Late Bronze Age world, as Cline knows well, is the fact that we have many different patients and many different symptoms. In the past, scholars have sought to identify a single cause at work, which, like a disease, could have engendered various symptoms. Unfortunately, this has sometimes led to an oversimplification of the archaeological and textual evidence. The other related problem in much of the literature on collapse is the belief in its inevitability. Cline clearly identifies, and sensibly steers clear of, both of these problems in his discussion, avoiding the “just so” stories that plague so much thinking about collapse.

In closing, I want to step back a bit and ask whether it makes sense to think in terms of collapse in the first place. Cline suggests in his epilogue that “1177 BC is to the end of the Late Bronze Age as AD 476 is to the end of Rome and western Roman empire” (172): a convenient chronological marker of the end of an era. However, as has been pointed out, AD 476 is a non-event that “has no significance in the context of the economic and social changes that were taking place in the period; it is doubtful whether even

the population of Italy at first noticed much difference.”² The Roman case is enormously complex, so much so that the very notion of collapse or decline has been discarded altogether. As Averil Cameron puts it,

the “decline” explanation appears inadequate. It is premised on the idea that it is reasonable to expect cultures and societies to be able to maintain themselves indefinitely in the same state. Phrases such as “the end of classical antiquity” and the like assume an entity, “classical antiquity”, which is not itself liable to change. But societies do not exist in a vacuum. ... Then, as now, the human environment was one of constant change.³

Similar sentiments have also been expressed by archaeologists,⁴ and recent work in Mediterranean history has tended to stress continuities over ruptures.⁵ Yet the concept of collapse seems to have real staying power for the Late Bronze Age, in part because the changes at the end of the Late Bronze Age are so sweeping and occur over a relatively short period.⁶ There has been much recent hand-wringing about the very notion of collapse, as it often acts as the handmaid of teleology,⁷ not to mention ideology.⁸ Is collapse, then, a useful heuristic? Yes and no; certainly collapse is a difficult and much-abused concept. Yet in the right hands, it can have value, as shown by Cline’s lively and accessible book, which demonstrates convincingly how remarkably complex and unpredictable the forces that transformed the Late Bronze Age were.

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² Cameron 2012: 41.

³ Cameron 2012: 211.

⁴ McAnany and Yoffee 2010.

⁵ Horden and Purcell 2000.

⁶ See too now [Broodbank 2013](#): 460–472.

⁷ Horden and Purcell 2000: 301.

⁸ McAnany and Yoffee 2010.