

Eric H. Cline, 1177 B.C. The Year Civilization Collapsed. Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2014. Pp. ccxxxvii + 237. 14 illustrations. ISBN 978-0-691-14089-6 (hardback).

The title of Eric Cline's new book signals its inclusion in the Princeton University Press series "Turning Points in Ancient history." However, rather than recounting the events of a single year, the book presents it as the culmination of the complex interactive civilization of the Bronze Age in the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East that gathered momentum over four centuries from 1600 to 1200 B.C. The system produced its own tensions and drew pressures from outside its sphere that increased dramatically in the late thirteenth and early twelfth centuries and, by 1177, the collapse of that internationalism was clear.

So complex an undertaking might seem to require several volumes but the author's command and careful organization of the necessary evidence has produced a coherent account and analysis of that story within a mere 176 pages of text. A prologue is followed by five relatively short chapters ordered chronologically with multiple subtitled sections. Chapters One through Four are "acts" in describing the emergence of the internationalism among peoples of the eastern Mediterranean reaching, in the south, from Egypt and the Levant to Mesopotamia and, in the north, from the Aegean cultures of Greece to eastern Anatolia.

The nature and growth of this sphere is carefully patterned in first four chapters. Two interwoven chronologies guide the discussion: one describes the development and character of the Late Bronze Age while a second presents the changing and expanding knowledge of evidence. Tools for discovery of evidence were very limited until the nineteenth century C.E., when the pioneer archaeologists began to explore by often rough, fast digging. The twentieth century brought technologies which rapidly produced a multi-disciplinary enterprise engaging scientists from innumerable fields armed with new means of recovering the past.

The author's agenda are rich, and he admits that the reign of one king alone "could take up an entire book" (67). His focus on the enlargement of the interaction is a key tool in the account. The first chapter focuses on the major culture in that century – Egypt – describing its attraction to others as well as Egypt's expanding outreach to others. Chapter Two is fuller as the internationalism extends; Egyptian lists include Aegean cultures, the Mittani of Anatolia, Kassites of Babylon and others. By the thirteenth century, the participants have expanded in number and in the nature of their relations, mixing peaceful commerce with warfare. The fourth chapter continues the two modes of relations with a dramatic increase in confrontations and destructions.

Chapter Five is not an "act" but rather discussion of possible explanations for the collapse of this complex internationalism. Beginning with specific candidates such as earthquake, drought, famine, internal rebellions, and possible invaders, the discussion turns to potential threats to the international framework such as collapse of trade,

decentralization, or a single enemy. The author discusses the likelihood of a failure created by the system itself: system collapse, originally proposed by Colin Renfrew but initially challenged, is convincing as a century-long multiplier effect. The “trigger” may not be known but, as Cline suggests, complexity theory may demonstrate that a change in one part of that system can produce instability throughout the entire entity.

In addition to this larger framework, the author reminds readers of key points in earlier chapters and emphasizes major issues by posing questions to the reader. Frequent citation of ancient sources allows historical figures to play a role in the story through their preserved words. Illustrations are also helpful. Maps of the Late Bronze Age sphere and of the destructions provide essential guidance. In addition to ten additional illustrations, a table identifies the kings mentioned in the text according to their country or kingdom and chronology and a second table assigns the probable Late Bronze Age names to modern regions. Twenty-seven pages of the tightly-packed bibliography listing entries provides excellent evidence of the range of disciplines essential to understand not only the fate of the “Age of Heroes’ but also the book’s value for comparative history: complexity can breed forces that threaten all complex civilizations. The study is a masterly synthesis of a long-debated, critical subject. The early history of Greece that was defined as myth into the twentieth century C.E. is now verified: it is firmly linked to the primary civilizations of the Mediterranean and Near East.

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