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Book Review: Eric H. Cline. 1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.

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Book Review

Stan Prager

Many scholars consider the last several centuries of the Bronze Age in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean as the first great age of internationalism that engaged dominant powers in highly complex networks of trade, treaties, relationships and alliances far more sophisticated than previously manifested. This remarkable era closed with the exclamation point of its abrupt and mysterious fall somewhat coterminous with the memory of the legendary Trojan War, a shadowy collapse that has left generations of historians scrambling to satisfactorily explain. The latest contender is *1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed*, by Eric H. Cline.¹ Adding to the book's luster is its 2014 publication launching a new series—*Turning Points in Ancient History*—edited by noted historian Barry Strauss.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century it was Heinrich Schliemann who—after famously discovering the ruins of ancient Troy on the northwest coast of present day Turkey—later uncovered the forgotten Mycenaean civilization of Bronze Age Greece. Once among the great powers of the mid-to-late second millennium BCE engaging in international trade and swaggering with the likes of Egyptians, Hittites, Mitanni, and Kassite Babylonians, the Mycenaean seem to have gone down in flames with the abrupt breakdown of Bronze Age civilization in the Mediterranean and Near East circa the twelfth century BCE, which spawned a dark age lasting several hundred years where the Greeks seem to have actually lost literacy.

The Bronze Age collapse has received much scholarly attention but has never found satisfactory explanation. Part of the challenge in unravelling the mystery is that not all states were affected equally: the Hittites almost entirely disappeared from history; Egypt lost its empire but otherwise endured; some states saw decline and rebirth, others extinction. Various theories have been advanced over the years—including climate change, earthquakes, plague and more—but none seems to fit all circumstances and all geographies. Perhaps the most famous focuses upon the mysterious “Sea Peoples,” unknown invaders described in various sources who brought sudden fierce attacks to the region and undermined multiple states. While

assaults by the “Sea Peoples” seem to have been an actual historical phenomenon, it is not clear whether their appearance represented a cause or effect of widespread destabilization that sparked a mass movement of populations. It is now commonly accepted, for instance, that the Biblical Philistines had their origins in Mycenaean Greeks who settled in Canaan. Upon arrival, they were no doubt “Sea Peoples,” as well.

That Cline, an archaeologist and eminent historian at George Washington University, seeks to take on such a fascinating time-honored mystery from an academic perspective only adds to the appeal of this volume. Unfortunately, the reader will be annoyed almost at once to discover that the book’s sensationalized title is wildly misleading: this work is a survey of life and trade and war and interdependence in the “globalized” world of the Bronze Age Mediterranean and Near East—not its fall, as implied. Those familiar with *From Egypt to Babylon* by Paul Collins will find little new ground broken here.² In a book comprised of 176 pages (not including end matter), Cline does not even address generalized collapse until the final chapter that begins on page 139. It turns out that even the year 1177 enshrined in his title is rather arbitrary, since there was no single year of systematic multi-state cataclysm, as Cline explains in the book’s final pages that “the eighth year of the reign of the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses III—1177 BC, to be specific . . . stands out and is representative of the entire collapse.”³ Even more disappointing is that the final chapter, entitled “A ‘Perfect Storm’ of Calamities?” is little more than a reasoned discussion of *all* of the various theories of what might have brought on a multi-regional catastrophe. Cline suggests that a concatenation of nearly simultaneous calamities might have pushed the entire civilizational structure to a kind of unrecoverable tipping point. While that may indeed have been the case, in frustration some readers may be unfortunately reminded of the denouement to Robert Mayer’s novel *I, JFK*, which concludes by whimsically trumping all conspiracy theories to reveal who was really behind Kennedy’s assassination—which turned out to be absolutely everyone: Cuba, Russia, the Mafia, the CIA, and the FBI!⁴

Cline should be credited with assembling the latest scholarship about Bronze Age civilization into a single volume with supporting citations to serve as an excellent source to a reader seeking to steep him or herself in what is known—as well as what has yet to be learned—about this fascinating period of ancient history. There is a wealth of data supplemented by solid maps, tables, and a biographical list of key figures. On the other hand, while Cline places a great deal of his emphasis on

the interdependence of the states and cultures of that era, he manages to do a rather poor job of weaving this into a coherent narrative, which instead tends to jump around from one place or theme or notion to another. Possibly a better editor was called for; Cline, after all, does not seem to be a bad writer, just a highly disorganized one. Perhaps he was put off course by being assigned to write to the book's title, rather than what he had really hoped to communicate. If one seeks to learn more about the Bronze Age and can overlook a somewhat uneven narrative, then look for the Cline book, but if seeking groundbreaking revelations of what may have led to its collapse, be sure to look elsewhere.

Notes

1. Eric H. Cline, *1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).
2. Paul Collins, *From Egypt to Babylon: The International Age 1550-500 BC* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).
3. Cline, 172.
4. Robert Mayer, *I, JFK* (NY: Dutton, 1989).

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Our reviewer: Stan Prager earned a M.A. in History with honors from APU, with a concentration in Public History, and was selected by the School of Arts & Humanities as its Academic Scholar of the Year. Stan is a member of both *Pi Gamma Mu* and the newly-minted APUS History Honor Society. Stan's abiding passion is the marriage of history and technology: he is owner and president of GoGeeks Computer Rescue, a computer repair and manufacturing business, and has applied focused elements of his recent degree to a new venture focused upon digitization called Digital Archive Solutions. Stan has served on his town's Board of Library Trustees, and frequently appears as a technology expert on a local television station. An avid reader with eclectic interests, he authors his own book blog, www.regarp.com. Stan, who has two adult children, lives in East Longmeadow, MA with his wife Susan.