

1177 B.C.—The Collapse of Bronze Age Civilization

By [Eric H. Cline](#)

Ed. note: This article contains images of human skeletal remains.

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A recent survey of leading scientists highlighted the range of interrelated emergencies that we face today: climate change with weather extremes, species loss, water scarcity, and a food production crisis, to name but a few. The scientists noted how these crises are weakening societal governance and infrastructure, further exacerbating food and water shortages that, in turn, are fueling large-scale immigration and global inequity. If such crises continue to occur in parallel, the scientists conclude, “It would cause catastrophic outcomes all over the world.”¹



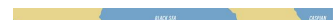
As someone who has spent a career studying the ancient world, I believe the situation we face today has many similarities to 1177 B.C. That was a time more than 3,000 years ago, when the Bronze Age Mediterranean civilizations collapsed one after the other, changing the course of history.² I believe that taking a closer look at the events, peoples, and places of that era is more than merely an academic exercise. History has a lot to teach us—if we are willing to listen and learn.

1177 B.C. was a pivotal moment in the history of civilization—a turning point for the ancient world. By that time, the Bronze Age in the Aegean, Egypt, and Near East had lasted nearly 2,000 years, from approximately 3000 B.C. to just after 1200 B.C. When the end came, as it did after centuries of cultural and technological evolution, most of the civilized and international world of the Mediterranean regions came to a dramatic halt in a vast area stretching from what is now Italy to Afghanistan and from Turkey down to Egypt. Large empires and small kingdoms, which had taken centuries to evolve, collapsed rapidly. These included the Mycenaeans on mainland Greece and the Minoans on Crete, the Hittites in Anatolia (modern Turkey), the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Mitannians in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq and inland northern Syria), the Cypriots on Cyprus, and the Canaanites in the Levant (modern coastal Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan), and, of course, the Egyptians.^a

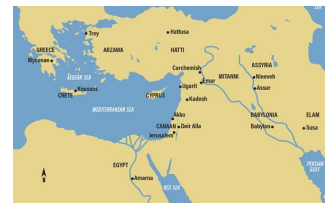
We know that all of these societies and civilizations were in contact with one another over the course of the Late Bronze Age, c. 1550–1200 B.C. The evidence for this is overwhelming, including objects imported from Egypt and the Near East that have been found by archaeologists in the Aegean and, vice versa, Minoan and Mycenaean ceramic vessels found in Egypt and elsewhere, not to mention additional artifacts found on shipwrecks from the period—at Uluburun and Cape Gelidonya—both excavated off the southwestern coast of modern Turkey.^b

We also have recovered texts written on clay tablets, found in diplomatic and mercantile archives at sites such as Amarna in Egypt, Hattusa, the capital city of the Hittites, in Turkey, and Ugarit, on the north coast of Syria.^c These describe activities commensurate with an intertwined network of commercial and diplomatic interactions, with at least eight different cultures working together on a scale not often seen in the history of the world, bound together through an integrated supply chain that traded in raw materials such as copper, tin, gold, silver, and glass.

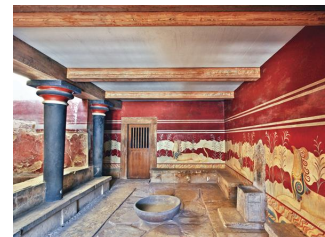
The Late Bronze Age was more similar to today’s globalized



world than we might imagine. For example, we have textual evidence that in the Late Bronze Age 043 Aegean and eastern Mediterranean there were diplomatic embassies and economic trade embargoes, magnificent marriages and unpleasant divorces, international intrigues and deliberate military disinformation, rebellions and migrations, and climate change, including drought.



But what brought about the end of one of the most interconnected periods in human history, more than 3,000 years ago? The evidence suggests it was a “systems collapse”—a series of events linked together via a multiplier effect, in which one factor affected the others, thereby magnifying the effects of each. For the Late Bronze Age, we know of several factors that created stress on one or more parts of the system.



We have evidence for invasions, especially the Sea Peoples, who are recorded in the inscriptions of Pharaohs Merneptah and Ramesses III:

No land could stand before their arms, from Khatte, Qode, Carchemish, Arzawa, and Alashiya on, being cut off at [one time]. A camp [was set up] in one place in Amurru. They desolated its people, and its land was like that which has never come into being. They were coming forward toward Egypt, while the flame was prepared before them. Their confederation was the Peleset, Tjekker, Shekelesh, Danuna, and Weshesh, lands united.

We have evidence for additional attacks by unnamed enemies, as recorded on a recently published text from Ugarit:

May my lord know that now the enemy forces are stationed at Ra'shu [the port city of Ugarit], and their avant-garde forces were sent to Ugarit. Now may my lord send me forces and chariots to save me, and may my lord save me from the forces of this enemy!³

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We have archaeological evidence for earthquakes, shaking and destroying cities in Greece, Anatolia, and the Levant. Such destructions can be seen at a number of cities and towns in southern Canaan, including Deir Alla, Tall al-Umayri, and Tall es-Saidiyeh in Jordan and Akko in Israel. There are also earthquake destructions visible at the city of Troy in Anatolia and at various sites in the Aegean, including at Mycenae on the Greek mainland. At some of the sites, archaeologists recovered the remains of victims trapped in the debris.



We have evidence for drought, gleaned from studies of ancient pollen, lasting up to 300 years in an area stretching from modern Italy to Iran. The new data come from studies of lake sediments, stalagmites in caves, and coring from lakes and lagoons. All point ever more conclusively to the occurrence of a megadrought that impacted much of the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean beginning around 1200 B.C.

We have evidence for famine, recorded in the texts, as well as for disease. One letter sent to Ugarit from the city of Emar, in inland Syria, says plaintively, “There is famine in our house; we will all die of hunger. If you do not quickly arrive here, we ourselves will die of hunger. You will not see a living soul from your land.” One Hittite king said, “It is a matter of life or death!” The list of calamities goes on and on.

Perhaps the inhabitants could have survived one disaster, such as an earthquake or a drought, but they could not survive the combined effects of drought, famine, invaders, and earthquakes all occurring in rapid succession. A domino effect then ensued, in which the disintegration of one civilization led to the fall of the others. Given the globalized nature of their world, the effect upon the international trade routes and economies of even one society's collapse would have been sufficiently devastating that it could have led to the demise of the others.

Many questions remain unanswered, however. We do not know whether the various peoples (Hittites, Mycenaeans, Egyptians, etc.) knew they were in the midst of a collapse. We do not know whether there were organized efforts to evaluate and remedy the overall evolving situation and look to the future. We do not have any indications in the archaeological remains or textual records that anyone at the time was aware of the larger picture, though we know that there were certainly individual efforts to counter the effects of famine and drought. For example, texts found at Ugarit and Hattusa mention grain ships sent by the Egyptians, to help those who were starving in Anatolia and northern Syria. There is also archaeological evidence that the Egyptians were crossbreeding for drought-resistant cattle and crops in the Levant, most likely in response to the early years of the drought. Such efforts were apparently for naught, however. It was too little and too late.



Are we today at a similar pivotal moment in history? In our global economy, the fortunes and investments of the United States and Europe are inextricably intertwined within an international system that also involves East Asia and the oil-producing nations of the Middle East. Think also of what we have all been going through recently, where in just the past few years we have had complex diplomatic embassies (think North Korea) and economic trade embargoes (think Russia and China), magnificent royal marriages (William and Kate; Harry and Meghan), deliberate military disinformation and war (think Ukraine), rebellions (Arab Spring) and migrations (Syrian refugees), and, of course, climate change and pestilence (COVID-19).



Are we at the beginning of another perfect storm of stressors on our interconnected societies? Although most people will survive the current pandemic, its repercussions, both economic and otherwise, are likely to be felt for a long time. Furthermore, we may try to slow down climate change, but some effects are probably already irreversible, and famine is now widespread in the developing world. Are other cataclysmic events on the way? Are we headed for a collapse of multiple elements of our complex global society?



And if our interconnected world is nearing the breaking point, are there lessons we can learn from the Late Bronze Age collapse to help prevent or stave off our collective demise?

First, we should be aware that no society is invulnerable. Every society in the history of the world has ultimately collapsed. The collapse of similarly intertwined civilizations just after 1200 B.C. should be a warning to us that it can certainly happen again.

Second, while it is clear that climate change and pandemics have caused instability in the past, there is at least one major difference between then and now—we are aware of what is happening, both scientifically and socially, and can respond accordingly.

Our world has the knowledge, technology, and resources to meet the challenges posed by a “systems collapse.” If we are aware of serious problems on the horizon that can affect the world order, such as climate change, it behooves us to take steps to fix them as best we can and as soon

as we can.

We would do well to heed what happened to the flourishing kingdoms of the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean during the collapse at the end of the Late Bronze Age. We are not as far removed from those days as one might think; COVID-19 has just exposed a vulnerability of modern societies to one of the forces of nature. The story of their collapse has its own inherent fascination, but it should also remind us of the fragility of our own world.

Footnotes:

- a. For more on the Late Bronze Age powers, see Gernot Wilhelm, “When a Mittani Princess Joined Pharaoh’s Harem,” *Archaeology Odyssey*, May/June 2001; Marian Feldman, “The Iconography of Power: Reading Late Bronze Age Symbols,” *Archaeology Odyssey*, May/June 2002; Barry Unsworth, “Imagining the Minoans,” *Archaeology Odyssey*, March/April 2004; Hershel Shanks, “The Hittites: Between Tradition and History,” *BAR*, March/April 2016.
- b. Cemal Pulak, “Shipwreck! Recovering 3,000-Year-Old Cargo,” *Archaeology Odyssey*, September/October 1999; Eric H. Cline, “Littoral Truths: The Perils of Seafaring in the Bronze Age,” *Archaeology Odyssey*, November/December 1999.
- c. Hershel Shanks, “The Trowel vs. the Text: How the Amarna Letters Challenge Archaeology,” *BAR*, January/February 2009; Edward L. Greenstein, “Texts from Ugarit Solve Biblical Puzzles,” *BAR*, November/December 2010.

Endnotes:

1. Cited in Fiona Harvey, “Humanity Under Threat from Perfect Storm of Crises—Study,” *The Guardian* (February 6, 2020).
2. For more on this pivotal moment in antiquity, see Eric H. Cline, *1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2021). Parts of this essay are adapted from material in that updated edition; footnotes and full citations have not been included here but can be found therein.
3. English translation courtesy of Yoram Cohen, Tel Aviv University.

SIDEBAR

Collapse and Rebirth

By Eric H. Cline



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For every end, there is a beginning. This was certainly true of the ancient Near East following the Late Bronze Age collapse. We have firm evidence that it took decades, and even centuries in some areas, for the people in these regions to rebuild and reclaim their societies and to forge new lives that would bring them back up out of the darkness into which they had been plunged.

When the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean areas emerged from the catastrophe, beginning around 1000 B.C., it was a new age. It was time for a new set of powers and a fresh start with new civilizations, including the Neo-Hittites in Anatolia and Syria; the Israelites, Philistines, and Phoenicians in the former lands of

Canaan; and the Greeks in mainland Greece and the Aegean islands. Out of the ashes came regular use of the alphabet and other inventions, not to mention a dramatic increase in the use of iron, which gave its name to the new era—the Iron Age.

It is a cycle that the world has seen time and time again: the rise and fall of empires, followed by the rise of new empires, which eventually fall and are replaced in turn by even newer empires, in a repeated cadence of birth, growth and evolution, decay or destruction, and ultimately renewal in a new form.



COLLECTION OF ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY/PHOTO © ISRAEL MUSEUM, JERUSALEM

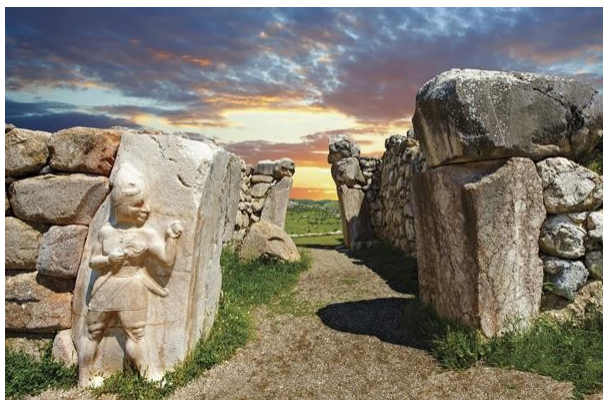
THIS IVORY PLAQUE, depicting a sphinx, came from Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It dates to the ninth or eighth century B.C. and measures about 4 inches tall.

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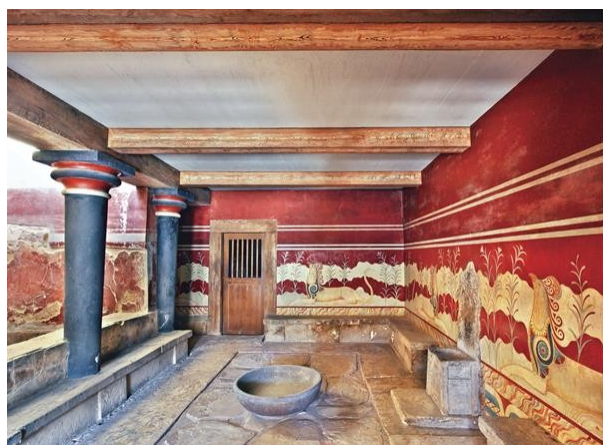
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PAUL WILLIAMS / IMAGEBROKER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

In the Late Bronze Age, Hattusa (near modern Boğazkale, Turkey) was the capital of the Hittite

empire until its destruction around 1200 B.C. Massive fortifications ringed the ancient city. The double wall guarding the upper city had five gates and more than 100 towers. The King's Gate, situated in the upper city's southeast wall and dated to c. 1500 B.C., was once fitted with wooden doors and used in religious processions. Its name derives from the sculpted figure on the inner gate, whom excavators first thought must have been an important king. However, they later identified the figure as a Hittite war god. Standing more than 7 feet tall, the figure holds an ax and wears a horned helmet, tunic, and crescent sword tucked into his belt.



HERCULES MILAS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

KINGLY KNOSSOS. Knossos was the center of Minoan civilization on Crete, and its palace is legendary. According to Greek mythology, it was the home of King Minos and the Minotaur—housed within a labyrinth. Large and richly decorated, the palace complex spanned 5 acres. At its center was a throne room (see reconstructed room, above), built in the 15th century B.C. as an addition to the palace. Lined with benches, its walls were covered with bright frescoes of griffins and leafy palms and water plants. On its north wall sat a stone throne, the oldest in the Mediterranean, in front of a stone bowl. The palace's rich decoration demonstrates the power, wealth, and grandeur of the Bronze Age kingdoms of the Aegean and Near Eastern worlds.



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UNDER THE SEA. Excavated off Turkey's southwestern coast, the Uluburun shipwreck provides a snapshot of life in the Late Bronze Age. Excavation director Cemal Pulak recovers Canaanite and Mycenaean pottery from the shipwreck. The ship's cargo included copper and tin ingots (to make bronze), pottery, luxury items, and personal items of the crew and passengers. Many of the personal items were Syro-Canaanite in style, suggesting that the crew came from the Levant. The ship itself, which was made of Lebanese cedar, seems to have had similar origins. Although it never completed its journey, the ship demonstrates the interconnectedness of the Bronze Age kingdoms.



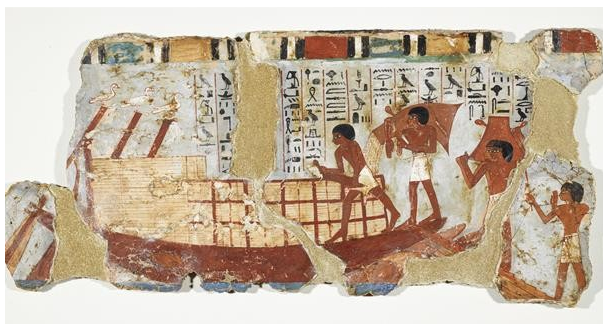
ALEXANDER SCHICK/BIBEL AUSSTELLUNG.DE

MOVING ACROSS THE MED. Stretched across a wall of Ramesses III's temple at Medinet Habu near Luxor, a 12th-century relief documents the Sea Peoples' dramatic arrival in Egypt. The "Sea Peoples," a confederation of people from the "islands" whose homeland had been disturbed, traveled in ships, wreaked havoc across the eastern Mediterranean, and attacked Egypt. But the Egyptian forces, led by Ramesses III (the large figure on the right), defeated them. The Egyptians later settled the Sea Peoples—including the Peleset, or biblical Philistines—in the Levant.



COURTESY OF IONE MYLONAS SHEAR

COLOSSAL COLLAPSE. Around 1200 B.C., earthquakes hit numerous Mediterranean sites. Archaeologists digging at Mycenae, located in southern Greece, found evidence of earthquake damage, including the remains of six victims buried in destruction debris. The woman seems to have died suddenly when a house collapsed around her. After a stone crushed her skull, she was buried beneath rubble. Although such isolated disasters might have been overcome, their occurrence alongside other natural and manmade catastrophes likely triggered a wider systemic collapse of the Late Bronze Age kingdoms.



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SPECIAL DELIVERY. The Egyptians regularly used ships to convey grain to ports both near and far, as depicted in this 15th-century B.C. painting from the Tomb of Unsu in Thebes, Egypt. During the 13th century, Egyptian grain ships sailed to Syria and Anatolia to try to alleviate the devastating impacts of drought that had brought wide-spread famine to the land. Such droughts likely contributed to the period's collapse.

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