



10-2018

### Eric H. Cline, *1177 B.C. - The Year Civilization Collapsed*. Princeton University Press, 2015

Mariana Tepfenhart

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

#### Recommended Citation

Tepfenhart, Mariana (2018) "Eric H. Cline, *1177 B.C. - The Year Civilization Collapsed*. Princeton University Press, 2015," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 79 : No. 79 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol79/iss79/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

**Eric H. Cline, *1177 B.C. - The Year Civilization Collapsed*  
Princeton University Press, 2015.**

Reviewed by Mariana Tepfenhart

Eric Cline is a professor of Classics and Anthropology at Georgetown University, a Fulbright scholar, co-director of many archeological excavations and winner of many national and local awards for his teaching and research.

The book examines the dramatic events that led to the collapse of the civilizations around the Mediterranean Sea in the late Bronze Age, about 3000 years ago. It was a world with a globalized economy and an intense diplomatic system. Based on the latest archeological discoveries, the author, Eric Cline, challenges the previous theory that it was “the sea people” who brought down the Mediterranean civilizations during that time. He analyzed all the factors that led to their decline and argues that the “sea people” could have been both victims of natural catastrophic events and aggressors as well. What I found very interesting about this book is the analogy the author made between the events that occurred during the Bronze Age and the present time, characterized by global economy, culture, political tensions and mass migration.

In the Prologue, Cline examines the so called “sea people.” Previous historians made these people “scapegoats” for the destruction of the Bronze Age civilization, but they relied only on inscriptions left by the Egyptians, long before archeological excavations brought forth new evidence. What is known is the fact that they were not a homogeneous group but five different groups with different cultures, coming from Sardinia, Sicily and other places. Recent excavations showed destruction, but it is from different time periods and it is not clear who was responsible for it. Cline suggests that the fall of the civilizations around the Mediterranean Sea cannot be entirely attributed to the “sea people.”

The author has divided the book into four acts to provide the historical context of the major players of this drama.

Act 1 introduces the most important civilizations of the fifteenth century B.C. on the Mediterranean Sea. It starts with the Hyksos and their invasion of Egypt during the Middle Kingdom period (2134-1720 B.C.). Due to advanced weapons, the Hyksos ruled Egypt, but they were expelled around 1550 B.C. by the pharaoh Kamose as it was recorded. It was the beginning of the New Kingdom when the country was rebuilt and established trade and diplomatic connections with various cultures. As evidence for this period of growth, the author mentions the marriages of the Egyptian pharaohs to foreigners, as well as the art that decorated the palaces that had a great Minoan influence.

Next there is a focus on the relations between Mesopotamia and Crete, which were well documented by the discoveries of 2,000 clay tablets in 1930. There were inscriptions about administration, business contracts, and lists of gifts between the rulers of different kingdoms and cities. Quoting different sources, such as inscriptions on the tombs and papyri, the author presents more connections between the Minoans and Egypt, and between Egypt and the kingdom of Punt, identified as possible Yemen.

There were other civilizations, less known, such as the Mitanian kingdom that came into existence in the fifteenth century B.C. and was in the northern part of Syria. The kingdom of the Hittites, previously known only from the Hebrew Bible, was discovered in Turkey. In 1906, German archeologists unearthed numerous clay tablets, which provided extensive information about the state, everyday life, their code of law, their interaction with other people and kingdoms, as well as poems and stories. All this information showed the beginning of globalization in the Mediterranean and Aegean world in the fifteenth century BC. The kingdoms were getting interconnected sometimes through trade and diplomacy, or through war.

Act II focuses on the type of items that were traded. The discovery of the list with names of items on the base of a statue of Amenhotep III, known as the Aegean List, shows the connection of Egypt with different places such as Greece, Crete, cities in Canaan, Babylon, etc. As the author stated, "it looks suspiciously like an itinerary of a round trip voyage from Egypt to the Aegean Sea and back again" (p. 47). More impressive than the Aegean List is the discovery in 1887 A.D. of the Amarna Archives that prove sustained international relations between Egypt and kingdoms of Eastern Mediterranean. It is a rich correspondence of Amenhotep and his son Akhenaten with different rulers, and it contains lists of gifts, diplomatic relations, and requests for help. Among the items traded were gold from Egypt, copper from Crete, ebony from Nubia, raw glass from Mesopotamia, spices and figs from Canaan, and swords and daggers from Italy and Greece. Trade was not limited to various items but also ideas, innovations, skilled workers, physicians, masons, and artists. This would explain the similarities in architecture between Egypt, Anatolia, Canaan, Syria and Israel.

This chapter also includes an unsolved mystery from the Bronze Age. It is known as the Zannanza Affair and was recorded in the Deeds of Suppiluliuma, king of the Hittites. Supposedly a letter was sent from the queen of Egypt with a strange request. She wanted to marry one of the king's sons and make him pharaoh of Egypt. Suppiluliuma was persuaded and sent one of his sons, Zannanza, but unfortunately, he was assassinated on the way to Egypt. A war broke out between the two countries. However, the Egyptian prisoners taken by the Hittites were infected by a terrible disease that claimed the life of the king. It remains a mystery who sent the letter and who killed the Hittite prince.

The thirteenth century BC is the focus of Act III. The author selects two legendary events that, although they were not proved historically, are important to understand this century. These are the Trojan War and the Hebrew Exodus.

Troy was discovered in what is today Hisarlik in Turkey. It was a rich city situated between the Hittite Empire and the Mycenaean world, two super powers of the Bronze Age period. The excavations showed nine cities, one on top of the other. The debate is around cities number six and seven, which contain elements of destruction. However, scholars could not determine if it was the result of an attack of the Mycenaeans, an earthquake, or an invasion of the “sea people.” Cline makes a very interesting and persuasive argument regarding the Trojan War. He argues that the war was actually a rebellion of a group of states known as Assuwa that rose up against the Hittites in 1430 B.C. The presence of Mycenaean warriors from mainland Greece in Anatolia is attested in the records of the Hittites. They were fighting as mercenaries for the Assuwa coalition.

The biblical story of the Exodus is famous, but ancient texts and archeological excavations did not substantiate it. According to the Bible, the Exodus took place in the fifteenth or fourteenth century B.C. but there was no evidence that Israelites were in Canaan. A more accurate estimate would be the thirteenth century B.C., when many sites in Canaan were destroyed, but it is difficult to prove who was responsible. The author concluded that Israelites established themselves in Canaan, and that together with the Philistines and the Phoenicians built a new civilization on the ashes of an old one.

Act IV explains the title of the book. The year 1177 B.C. marked the destruction of the Mediterranean and Aegean world. Cline lists many sites that were destroyed and different interpretations of their demise. Although the “sea people were blamed for this, historical data cannot prove that they were the only perpetrators.”

Other factors such as climate change, drought, famine, rebellions, invaders, collapse of international trade, decentralization or the elusive “sea people” are introduced as individual events, none powerful enough to bring down any of these civilizations on their own. However, together they created “the perfect storm.” Nations of the late Bronze Age were globalized and interdependent, therefore one failure could affect and destabilize them all.

It was a long process lasting approximately between 1125 B.C. and 1175 B.C. The year 1177 is significant because it was in this year that Ramses III was fighting against the “sea people” for the survival of his own country. It was a year when some major civilizations were already in decline or had ceased completely. City-states replaced great empires. There was not only a loss of people and buildings, but also a loss of knowledge and ideas. Cuneiform writing disappeared and was replaced by an alphabet.

Monotheistic religion started. New powerful states later appeared, such as Assyria, the Phoenicians and Israel. It is an inexorable process that repeats itself over and over.

The author reminds us that we are vulnerable to this process also. We are experiencing climate change, globalization, dependency on products and services, and we could experience something similar. Cline concluded with a quote from Robert Zoellik, president of the World Bank, who stated “the global financial system may have reached a tipping point” which is “the moment when a crisis cascades into a full-blown meltdown and becomes extremely difficult for governments to contain.” (p. 176)

It is a brilliantly researched study. Eric Cline makes a compelling argument regarding the collapse of civilizations during the late Bronze Age. He explored all the events that took place during that period to create “a perfect storm,” which led to the demise of the Mediterranean civilizations. He draws on his own research, but also presents other studies and interpretations. Using many details, photos, different tables and original documents, he portrays a vivid picture of the cosmopolitan world of the late Bronze Age. He concludes with a warning for the present time, that global interdependence makes us vulnerable to a “perfect storm.” His style is lively and gripping, and one can forget that this volume is a history book not a novel. Everyone interested in ancient history or ancient mysteries should read this work.