

The Collapse at the End of the Bronze Age

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Abstract and Keywords

General loss of faith in “invasion theories” as explanations of cultural change, doubts about the value of the Greek legends as sources for Bronze Age history, and closer dating of the sequence of archaeological phases have undermined the credibility of this reconstruction, and other explanations for the collapse have been proposed. This article recalls that the general impressions given by the material suggest a relatively prosperous and stable world dominated by a few major centers, the capitals of the “palace societies”; the best known are Mycenae, Thebes, and Pylos. These are the sites, along with Khania in Crete, that have produced almost all of the evidence from the thirteenth century BC for a sophisticated system of administration. This system, comparable in many ways to those used in the Near Eastern states, relied on the use of the seal and the Linear B script.

Keywords: Bronze Age, Collapse, palace societies, Mycenae, Thebes, Pylos, seal, Linear B

THE history of the Aegean Bronze Age has often been presented in terms of long periods of development and apparent stability that are brought to an end by a disaster that afflicts one or more of the major subdivisions of the Aegean region. Such disasters are typically recognized in “destruction horizons,” which show evidence for the destruction of major buildings, often by fire, at a series of important sites at roughly the same time, as defined by the presence of types of diagnostic finds, particularly pottery, in the destruction strata. In Crete, such disasters have generally, though not always, been attributed to earthquakes, but destruction horizons identified on the mainland have more commonly been attributed to hostile attack, most often by external “invaders.”

This was an interpretation favored for many years in dealing with the last such horizon, which I hereafter refer to simply as the Collapse. This occurred around the end of the Late Helladic IIIB pottery phase, probably a bit after 1200 BC on the currently accepted absolute chronology (Shelmerdine 2001, 332–33). Originally the destructions were

identified as the archaeological evidence for the population movements and resulting conquests that are reported in the Greek legends to have occurred after the Trojan War, the most famous of which is generally referred to as the “Dorian invasion,” though this is a modern term. Some modern accounts have directly linked the legendary movements of other Greek groups to the east Aegean, referred to generically as the “Ionian migration,” to this “Dorian invasion” by interpreting them as representing the flight of refugees before the Dorian advance. However, this is not (p. 484) what the legends say, for they place the “Ionian migration” a generation or more after the supposed Dorian conquests in the Peloponnese and attack on Athens.

General loss of faith in “invasion theories” as explanations of cultural change, doubts about the value of the Greek legends as sources for Bronze Age history, and closer dating of the sequence of archaeological phases have undermined the credibility of this reconstruction, and other explanations for the Collapse have been proposed. In part, these have reflected a heightened appreciation of what was involved in the Collapse. In the first flush of the enthusiasm aroused by the decipherment of the Linear B script as Greek, Wace, wishing to see continuity of development from Mycenaean Greeks to Classical Greeks, attempted to minimize the cultural changes involved in the transition from the period of the Mycenaean palaces to later times (1956, xxxiii-xxxiv). However, it has become abundantly clear from detailed analysis of the Linear B material and the steadily accumulating archaeological evidence that this view cannot be accepted in the form in which he proposed it. There was certainly continuity in many features of material culture, as in the Greek language itself, but the Aegean world of the period following the Collapse was very different from that of the period when Mycenaean civilization was at its height, here termed the Third Palace Period. Further, the differences represent not simply a change but also a significant deterioration in material culture, which was the prelude to the even more limited culture of the early stages of the Iron Age.

Mycenaean civilization of the Third Palace Period is discussed elsewhere (Nakassis, Galaty, and Parkinson, this volume). Here it is sufficient to recall that the general impressions given by the material suggest a relatively prosperous and stable world dominated by a few major centers, the capitals of the “palace societies”; the best known are Mycenae (with which Tiryns and Midea, impressive sites in their own right, were surely closely associated), Thebes, and Pylos. These are the sites, along with Khania in Crete, that have produced almost all of the evidence from the thirteenth century BC for a sophisticated system of administration. This system, comparable in many ways to those used in the Near Eastern states, relied on the use of the seal and the Linear B script (I here follow the view that the Linear B archives from Knossos are fourteenth century). To what extent the rulers of the most important centers were in diplomatic contact with their contemporaries in the Near East remains debatable. It seems virtually certain that the state Ahhiyawā, whose kings had diplomatic contacts with Hittite kings, was Mycenaean, and its center is very likely to have been Mycenae or Thebes, but there are no certain references to this state outside Hittite documents, and, while there is plausible

evidence for some Aegean diplomatic contacts with Egypt in the fourteenth century, there is nothing later.

However, there is much evidence to show that the Aegean was closely tied into the international trade networks that encompassed much of the Mediterranean at this time, and the leading Aegean centers could well have acted as emporia for their less important neighbors by distributing the commodities acquired by trade, particularly raw materials like metals. Thus, their activities could have been fundamental to the general standard of living in the Aegean as a whole, even outside their own territories.

(p. 485) To judge from the evidence of Pylos, the palace centers also supplied and supported teams of craftworkers who produced specialized commodities such as perfumed olive oil and decorated textiles, which were probably used in foreign, as well as Aegean, trade. These and other sites, that seem just as large as the leading centers but have not yet produced clear evidence of the administrative use of Linear B, were also able to invest considerable resources in major building projects, especially fortifications. However, by no means all of the really large sites were fortified, and the spread of a multitude of apparently undefended settlements, ranging from substantial to small, over the countryside in many parts of Mycenaean Greece suggests general stability. It also suggests that the land was farmed on a scale not seen again until Classical times, but it remains unclear whether this led to overexploitation, and the data hardly support any theory of overpopulation. Nevertheless, the level of “civilization” attained should not be overemphasized. Even the biggest centers are dwarfed by the great capitals of the Near Eastern civilizations, and no Aegean centers conformed to the Near Eastern pattern of the walled city.

The impression of stability given by the archaeological remains of phases that lasted at least several decades may be deceptive. Arguments have been advanced for supposing that in the final stages of the Third Palace Period difficulties were beginning to beset the palace societies (Dickinson 2006, 41–46; Shelmerdine 2001, 372–73). There are hints that their economic position was deteriorating, as well as rather more tangible indications from the construction or extension of fortifications that precautions were being taken to guard against attack. This development seems to follow a group of destructions that affect important buildings at Mycenae, Tiryns, Zygouries, Thebes, and the massive fortified site at Gla, but these were not all contemporary and cannot be assumed to have had the same cause, let alone one related to warfare (that at Mycenae seems more likely to reflect earthquake damage).

There is also a famous set of Linear B tablets from Pylos recording what are apparently military detachments stationed at various points along the coasts of the Pylos state. However, as Shelmerdine has pointed out (2001, 375), the arguments that these form part of the evidence for an immediate crisis at Pylos are not cogent, and it would be dangerous to assume that this was an extraordinary, rather than normal, arrangement.

The most telling evidence of troubled times is provided by the abandonment of Gla and the building/extending of fortifications at other sites, but, since constructing these massive walls would have taken a considerable time, such projects can hardly be interpreted as evidence of reaction to an immediately perceived threat. (In this connection, no reliance should be placed on the “Isthmus wall” as evidence that a specific threat was perceived from north of the Peloponnese. The nature and even the date of this structure remain in doubt.) Also, several major centers apparently remained unfortified even at this stage, of which two (Orchomenos in Boeotia and Dhimini [= Iolkos?] in Thessaly) would seem particularly vulnerable to any threat that might originate in central or northwestern Greece. If some of the mid-LH IIIB destructions are to be interpreted as evidence of warfare, as seems possible, this could have occurred between Mycenaean states and, like the new fortifications, could bear (p. 486) witness to the development of dangerous tensions in a period of economic decline. However, the new defenses also indicate a capacity to marshal major resources at some leading centers even in the final stages of the Third Palace Period, and overall the Collapse still comes as something of a surprise.

It is far easier to summarize the main features of the Collapse and its most obvious effects than to explain it. A whole series of leading centers, widely spread on the mainland—Mycenae, Tiryns, Midea, the Menelaion site, Pylos, Thebes, Krisa, Dhimini (the Megara A and B complex), and probably Teikhos Dymaion (Achaea)—has produced evidence of severe destruction, frequently including fire. Such evidence has also been identified at some less important sites, and the process of abandoning settlements, both small and substantial, which has been deduced from the results of excavation and survey in many parts of the Greek mainland, began now if not before. Although it is hard to establish a precise chronology for this abandonment, it is noteworthy that a great many of the deserted sites, even the most substantial, show no evidence of reoccupation for many centuries, if ever. A major and surely highly significant shift in the distribution of population was clearly taking place, and the total population seems to have diminished very markedly in some regions (e.g. Messenia). Unfortunately, it cannot be stated with any certainty when this process ended, but it was probably completed by the end of the Postpalatial Period.

The sequel to the destructions at the major excavated sites varied: Some seem to have been totally abandoned (e.g. Krisa), while at others there was continued occupation and rebuilding. But at no site were new buildings erected over the old on a comparable scale, as typically happened in Crete earlier in the Bronze Age. The new rulers of these centers were evidently no longer able to command resources and labor for the large-scale architectural projects that were typical previously. This as much as anything symbolizes the complete disappearance of the palace societies, which is apparent also in the absence of evidence for the use of Linear B and seals in strata following the Collapse. Similarly, the high-quality arts of the Third Palace Period such as fresco painting, ivory working, and the production of precious vessels and inlaid items of furniture barely survived, if at

all; the need for them disappeared with the ruling elite whose position they were used to enhance. Although there undoubtedly were rulers in the Postpalatial Period, their distinction from their subjects was not so conspicuously marked.

However, there is no need to present the effects of the Collapse in the apocalyptic terms sometimes used. Many major sites continued to be occupied, and some even seem to have grown in size (e.g. Tiryns, Lefkandi). There is evidence for exchange both within the Aegean and beyond it to east and west, in the course of which various innovations were spread, including the first functional iron items, and some notable indications of prosperity can be identified, especially in the middle stages of the Postpalatial Period (Dickinson 2006, 67–69, 73–74). Still, these features cannot be identified in every part of the Aegean, and the recovery that they represent was not sustained. The Collapse did not cause a total and immediate catastrophe, but it fatally undermined the stability of Aegean society. Indeed, the evidence from the Postpalatial Period suggests chronic instability. A significant section of the population (p. 487) seems to move about restlessly, gathering at major sites and then after a few generations abandoning them again, and sites that had survived the Collapse and apparently prospered for a considerable while were eventually abandoned (e.g., Korakou) or dwindled to shadows of their former selves (e.g., Tiryns).

There were wide variations in experience. In some of the provinces and islands (e.g., Laconia, Achaea, Rhodes), it is impossible to identify a single site that was certainly occupied in the earliest stages of the Iron Age, although this must partly reflect the chances of discovery and the much greater difficulty in identifying pottery types diagnostic for this period. However, there is a multitude of sites in Crete, and their material includes signs of prosperity and overseas contacts that are hard to parallel elsewhere in the Aegean. Even on and near the mainland, sites like Lefkandi, Mitrou, and the Elateia-Alonaki cemetery provide evidence that the picture was less gloomy than that traditionally presented. Nevertheless, centuries were to pass before levels of stability and prosperity comparable with those of the Third Palace Period were achieved again throughout the Aegean.

If, then, the Collapse had such a marked effect on social development in the Aegean, what caused it? The explanations advanced fall into three classes: some form of warfare, whether invasion or raids from outside the Mycenaean world or internecine or civil war, which could include revolts by overburdened subjects; natural disasters of some kind, such as earthquake, drought-induced famine, or disease; and “systems collapse,” an internally generated failure of the palace societies to function, which might represent the culmination of inherent weaknesses in their management or an inability to withstand unexpected shocks.

Such explanations, which tend to focus on a single cause for the Collapse, characteristically fail to take account of all facets of the evidence, including the potential signs of trouble and decline earlier, and they frequently involve the use of questionable premises. Among the reasons for caution in advancing explanations, most important is that the time period over which the Collapse took place cannot be closely measured.

There are no outstanding diagnostic types that could suggest that the destructions took place within a very few years of each other (as in the destruction horizon that ended the Second Palace Period in Crete). Although some, as in the Argolid, are agreed to fall very closely together, there is no reason why the whole group should not have been spread over twenty or thirty years, and, as already noted, the process of abandonment of sites may have taken much longer. Such points are bound to undermine all theories that rely on the idea of a single intolerable shock, whether natural or human-delivered.

Also, theories that start from a view that the palace societies were overcentralized, even rigid and oppressive, and dependent upon a narrow economic base are quite open to question. In particular, doubt can be cast on any theory that argues that the palaces encouraged specialization in just one or two crops throughout the territories they controlled, or fostered local specialization that required exchange of commodities through the palace to secure all of the foodstuffs required. Neither of these quite popular ideas can actually be sustained on the evidence of the Linear B tablets or archaeology. Rather, it seems likely that the intensive production of a few (p. 488) commodities was a feature of the palaces' own estates and that the average settlement had a broadly based agricultural economy (Shelmerdine 2001, 359–60; Galaty and Parkinson 2007, 4–5; Halstead 2007). It follows that the removal of the palaces would probably have meant that the communities they controlled found it harder to get supplies of essential metals and of good-quality manufactured goods, but it should not have affected their ability to farm and otherwise exploit the land, and they would no longer have to pay whatever taxes were previously demanded.

Further, it seems highly unlikely that the palace administrations—and the ruling elites in less complex societies—would not have taken the possibility of bad years into account in their planning, in a region where such years are a recurrent feature. So they would have tried to maintain substantial stores to use in an emergency, and would not have been so vulnerable to some short-term natural disaster (such as a drought resulting from a freak weather pattern in one year) that they could not recover. Palynological and dendrochronological evidence does not support the theory of a long-term (but ultimately reversed) shift in weather patterns put forward by Rhys Carpenter 1966, which, like the theory of a freak alteration in one or two years, is not supported by the settlement pattern following the Collapse (Shrimpton 1987; Drews 1993, ch. 6, especially 79–80).

Earthquakes, another recurring hazard in the Aegean, have greater capacity to deliver a really damaging blow because they may destroy stores and administrative records as well as buildings. But the history of the great centers in Crete shows an ability to recover from severe earthquakes, and while there seems to be growing agreement that the Argive centers were quite probably destroyed by earthquake, perhaps simultaneously, it is hard to accept that earthquake should also have badly damaged so many other places, more widely separated than in Crete, in the same period.

This is a reminder that the experience of any one site or region, however important, cannot be taken as typical, a point of particular relevance when the quite exceptional level of site abandonment in Messenia is considered. Here it is tempting to suggest a special explanation, such as the outbreak of serious disease, although the fourteenth century “plague” in the Hittite empire is not reported to show such a marked effect archaeologically. It is perfectly possible that disease was one of the problems affecting Aegean society, but it is not easy to see why the destruction of major centers should be one of its effects; it is no more likely to have caused complete social breakdown than historically recorded plagues did.

Explanations that see warfare as the main cause also have considerable drawbacks. It is hard to believe that any form of warfare should be so destructive, especially if this was no more than raids, however damaging temporarily, while theories that the ruling elites were overthrown by rebelling subjects must raise certain questions: “Where are the victorious subjects? Why is this followed by such evident decline and movements of population?” Theories that a successful invasion was the cause also have to explain, first, why the putative invaders wrecked the centers of power rather than simply taking them over, as is more normally the case with conquerors (e.g., the Hyksos in Egypt), and second, why there is no material trace of such invaders. For the material culture of the Postpalatial Period (p. 489) essentially continues earlier traditions, without major change in any important feature. The much-discussed handmade burnished ware is found at certain centers before the Collapse and occurs far too sporadically to represent a whole new population; rather, it seems to reflect trade links with Italy.

Drews has argued 1993 that the Collapse in the Aegean and serious disruption in the Near East were the result of the introduction of new weapons and tactics, that allowed hordes of “barbarian” infantry to defeat armies centered upon chariotry and to sack most of the centers of wealth in the Aegean and Near East over a period of decades. This raises a host of questions (Dickinson 1999; 2006, 47–50), not least whether traditionally organized Bronze Age armies were so dependent upon chariotry, especially in the Aegean; whether the “barbarians” can be shown to have adopted the new weapons first; and whether the “Sea Peoples,” who figure so largely in the theory, were as extraordinarily effective a fighting force as represented in this and other modern reconstructions. Drews's attribution of the destructions in the Aegean partly to warlike “north Greeks,” who then take over territories, again provokes the questions posed earlier.

All of these difficulties and objections, taken together with the growing evidence for variations of experience in different parts of the Aegean, point to the conclusion that it is a waste of effort to try to isolate a single cause or prime mover for the Collapse. It seems very likely that the course of events was too complicated to be reconstructed without the help of written documents. Nevertheless, it does seem possible that the system that depended to a great extent on the palace societies was coming under increasing strain in the later thirteenth century BC, one element of which was the tensions developing between some of the major Mycenaean states. One or more localized incidents, which

could be of very varied types—interstate wars, civil wars, earthquakes, crop failures—could have set a process in motion that grew beyond the ability of any power to control it. The more difficult conditions became, the more the palace-based elites would lose the trust of their followers and subjects (earthquakes and other natural disasters might especially be taken as evidence of the gods' anger with the ruling elite; cf. the Hittite “plague”). Conditions may have been truly chaotic for a short while. The more or less concurrent sequence of damaging events in the Near East, especially the collapse of the Hittite empire, ensured that, when some degree of order was restored in the Aegean, the old systems could not be resurrected, for the conditions in which they had flourished were gone forever.

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