



Raiders of the Lost Bronze Age?

Civilizations in the eastern Mediterranean—in Greece, Egypt, and the Near East—abruptly collapsed in 1177 BC. But were the mysterious marauding ‘Sea Peoples’ solely to blame?

BY ERIC CLINE

Across the river from Luxor, on the west bank of the Nile near King Tut’s tomb, is Medinet Habu, site of the mortuary temple of Ramses III. On one wall of the temple, chiseled into the blocks, is a huge picture with an accompanying inscription. The text records that in the eighth year of Ramses’ reign, 1177 BC, the Egyptian pharaoh faced a coalition of invaders in a double battle—one by land and one by sea. ★ Depictions of the battles are so detailed that scholars have published analyses of individual people and even their boats. One panorama shows foreigners and Egyptians engaged in a chaotic naval battle; some casualties are floating upside down and clearly dead, while others are still fighting fiercely from their boats. The invaders wear no uniforms, no polished outfits. The ancient images portray one group with feathered head-dresses and others sporting skullcaps, horned helmets, or bare heads. Some have short pointed beards and are dressed in kilts, either bare-chested or with a tunic; others have no facial hair and wear skirt-like garments. Armed with sharp bronze swords, wooden spears with gleaming metal tips, and bows and arrows, they came on boats but also on wagons

Ramses III towers above captive Philistines (on right) in this relief from his mortuary temple at Medinet Habu. The three tiers of prisoners are awkwardly bound, with arms above their heads. Other reliefs here record more victories over Sea Peoples.

oxcarts, and chariots, accompanied by their families.

The Egyptians won both the land and sea battles, which is why Ramses recorded this on the walls of his temple, as well as in other documents:

The foreign countries made a conspiracy in their islands. All at once the lands were removed and scattered in the fray. 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. They laid their hands upon the lands as far as the circuit of the earth, their hearts confident and trusting.

The places reportedly overrun by the invaders were famous in antiquity. Khatte (also called Hatti) is the land of the Hittites. Its heartland was located on the inland plateau of Anatolia near modern Ankara, and its empire stretched west to the Aegean coast and southeast to northern Syria. Qode is probably located in what is now southeastern Turkey (possibly the region of ancient Kizzuwadna), while Carchemish is a well-known archaeological site in southern Turkey. (It was first excavated almost a century ago by a team of archaeologists that included T. E. Lawrence, who was trained as a classical archaeologist at Oxford before his exploits in the Arab Revolt.) Arzawa was a land familiar to the Hittites, located within their grasp in western Anatolia. Alashiya may have been what we know today as Cyprus, a metal-rich island famous for its copper ore, while Amurru was located on the coast of Syria.

According to Ramses' inscriptions, no country was able to oppose this invading mass of humanity. Resistance was futile. The great powers of the day—the Hittites, the Mycenaeans, the Canaanites, the Cypriots, and others—fell one by one. Some of the survivors fled the carnage; others huddled in the ruins of their once proud cities; still others joined the invaders, swelling their ranks and adding to the apparent complexities of the various invading hordes. Each of these groups was on the move, each apparently motivated by individual reasons: some perhaps for spoils or slaves, while others may have been compelled by population pressures, drought, or famine to migrate eastward from their own lands to the west.

Ramses gives us the names of the invading groups; some we have heard of before, from previous Egyptian records, but others are new. They include five different factions: the Peleset, Tjekker, Shekelesh, Danuna, and Weshesh; a sixth group, named the Shardana, is mentioned in another relevant inscription. All of them are far more shadowy than the lands they reportedly overran. They left no inscriptions of their own

and are therefore known textually almost entirely from the Egyptian inscriptions. Ramses describes them as coming from islands, from across the sea, from the north, so early French Egyptologists dubbed them the Sea Peoples. Only one group, the Peleset, has been more narrowly identified: Jean-François Champollion, the decipherer of Egyptian hieroglyphics, believes (probably correctly) that they were the biblical Philistines.

Although scholarly debate continues on the others' identities, most experts agree that the land and sea battles depicted on the walls at Medinet Habu were probably fought nearly simultaneously in the Egyptian delta or nearby. Possibly the images represent a single, extended battle that occurred both on land and at sea, and some scholars have suggested that both represent the Egyptians ambushing the Sea Peoples' forces.

In any event, the end result is not in question, for at Medinet Habu, Ramses quite clearly states that he won the day and defeated these peoples, who had overrun all of the other lands of the eastern Mediterranean. The inscription on his mortuary wall claims:

Those who reached my frontier, their seed is not, their heart and soul are finished forever and ever. Those who came forward together on the sea, the full flame was in front of them at the river-mouths, while a stockade of lances surrounded them on the shore. They were dragged in, enclosed, and prostrated on the beach, killed, and made into heaps from tail to head. Their ships and their goods were as if fallen into the water. I have made the lands turn back from [even] mentioning Egypt: for when they pronounce my name in their land, then they are burned up.

In a document known as the Papyrus Harris, Ramses repeats the news of his victory and again names his defeated enemies:

I overthrew those who invaded them from their lands. I slew the Danuna [who are] in their isles, the Tjekker and the Peleset were made ashes. The Shardana and the Weshesh of the sea, they were made as those that exist not, taken captive at one time, brought as captives to Egypt, like the sand of the shore. I settled them in strongholds bound in my name. Numerous were their classes like hundred thousands. I taxed them all, in clothing and grain...each year.

This invasion in 1177 BC was not the first time that such Sea Peoples had attacked Egypt. They had invaded 30 years earlier, in 1207 BC, during Pharaoh Merneptah's reign. He too names the various groups who made up the Sea Peoples, and he too claims to have defeated them. Merneptah also describes ongoing battles with the Libyans, located just to the west of Egypt. In a text found at the site of Heliopolis, northeast of Cairo, as well

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as in another inscription known as the Cairo Column, he says, "The wretched chief of Libya has invaded [with] Shekelesh and every foreign country, which is with him, to violate the borders of Egypt." A longer inscription found at Karnak, near Luxor, gives the names of the individual groups among the invaders: "Eqwesh, Teresh, Lukka, Shardana, Shekelesh, northerners coming from all lands." Merneptah's inscriptions include no more than a very general idea of where the battle or battles were fought. He says only that his victory was "achieved in the land of Libya"—also called Tehenu. Merneptah's inscriptions indicate there were five groups in this earlier wave of Sea Peoples: the Shardana (or Sherden), Shekelesh, Eqwesh, Lukka, and Teresh. The Shardana and Shekelesh are present in both this invasion and the later one during Ramses time, but the other three groups are different. In all, between the two sets of invasions in 1207 and 1177 BC, we have nine different groups of Sea Peoples named by either Merneptah or Ramses III or both: the Shardana, Shekelesh, Eqwesh, Lukka, Teresh, Peleset, Tjekker, Danuna, and Weshesh.

Again, we know little about these groups, beyond what the Egyptian records tell us, and we are not certain where they originated: perhaps in Sicily, Sardinia, and Italy, or the Aegean or western Anatolia, or possibly even Cyprus or the eastern Mediterranean. No ancient site has ever been identified as their origin or departure point. We think of them as moving relentlessly, overrunning countries and kingdoms as they went.

In Merneptah's inscriptions, the Shardana, Shekelesh, and Eqwesh are specifically identified as being "of the countries of the sea," while the five groups are together described as "Northerners coming from all lands." The latter is not too surprising, for most lands with which the New Kingdom Egyptians were in contact (except for Nubia and Libya) lay to the north of Egypt, but this is such a generic description that scholars still dispute where they were from and where they dispersed to after their defeat.

The identification of the Shardana and Shekelesh as "countries of the sea" is one reason some scholars have suggested they are linked with Sardinia and Sicily, respectively. But there isn't any real archaeological basis for locating them there. Moreover, even if there is such a link, it is

quite possible that the Shardana only went to Sardinia and gave their name to the island *after* they had been defeated by the Egyptians. As for the Eqwesh, some scholars have suggested that they are Homer's Achaeans, that is, the Mycenaeans of the Bronze Age Greek mainland. If this is correct, they are probably the same people Ramses III identified as the Danuna in his Sea Peoples inscriptions two decades later.

With the other names, scholars generally accept Lukka as a reference to peoples from southwestern Turkey, in the region known during the classical era as Lycia. The origin of the Teresh is uncertain but might be linked to the Etruscans in Italy. The origins of the Tjekker and Weshesh are unknown; speculation has ranged from Italy to Turkey.

Of all these foreign groups, only the Peleset have been identified—as the Philistines, who, according to the Bible, came from Crete. The linguistic identification was apparently so obvious that Champollion had suggested it early on. In 1899 archaeologists working at Tell es-Safi, a site in southern Israel believed to be the biblical Philistine city of Gath, identified specific pottery styles, architecture, and other material remains as Philistine.

We do not know if all of the earlier invaders were killed by Merneptah in 1207 or if some survived, but we can probably assume the latter, since several of the groups returned in the second invasion 30 years later, in 1177. That year, as Ramses boasted, the Egyptians were again victorious. He made certain the Sea Peoples did not return to Egypt a third time, but his was a pyrrhic victory. Although Egypt under Ramses III was the only major power to successfully resist the onslaught of the Sea Peoples, New Kingdom Egypt was never the same again. For the rest of the second millennium BC successive pharaohs were content to rule over a country much diminished in influence and power. Egypt became a second-rate empire, a mere shadow of what it had once been. It was not until the days of Pharaoh Shoshenq, a Libyan who founded the 22nd Dynasty about 945 BC—and who is probably Pharaoh Shishak of the Hebrew Bible—that Egypt rose to any sort of prominence again.

Beyond Egypt, almost all of the other countries and powers in the Aegean and Near East during the golden years (ca. 1500–1200 BC) of what we now call the Late



Pharaoh Merneptah's triumph in a battle with Sea Peoples in 1207 BC is recorded in this stele.



Hittites
Based in central Anatolia, the Hittite Empire swept west into present-day Turkey and south into Syria. For much of the second millennium BC the Hittites were a major regional force, vying with Egypt and keeping lesser kingdoms, like Ugarit, under Hittite vassalage.

Mycenaean
A much younger civilization than that of the Hittites or Egyptians, the Mycenaean became upstart powerbrokers in the Aegean and Mediterranean in the late second millennium. They overwhelmed the advanced Minoan civilization of Crete and may have been among the invading Sea Peoples.

Philistines
The Philistines established Philistia in what is now Israel in the Late Bronze Age. Pottery recovered from their cities, built on the ruins of destroyed Canaanite cities, indicates they may have been associated with the Mycenaean. Whether the Philistines perpetrated the Canaanite destruction is unknown.

Egyptians
Ramses III ruled a civilization that had existed on the banks of the Lower Nile for nearly 2,000 years. His father, Ramses the Great, had fought the Hittites to a draw at Qadesh in 1274 BC, stopping their spread south. But the younger Ramses faced new and more amorphous threats.



Enameled brick figures from Medinet Habu characterize the range of prisoners, from throughout the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, taken by Ramses III.

A Burnished Age

The Bronze Age saw an unprecedented flowering of civilizations across Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean. Trade, diplomacy, and culture flourished, as did territorial wars among rival kingdoms. By the early 13th century, though, a new and more insidious enemy—the Sea Peoples—had appeared on the scene. The origins of these obscure, marauding groups remain unknown, though they apparently came from far and wide—some from the north and west, perhaps as far as Sicily and as near as western Anatolia; still others from islands that could have included Cyprus. Only one of these groups, the Pelesets, has been conclusively identified—as the biblical Philistines.

To Sardinia
180 mi/290 km



Bronze Age withered and disappeared, either immediately or in less than a century. In the end, it was as if civilization itself had been wiped away in much of this region. Many if not all of the advances of the previous centuries vanished across great swaths of territory, from Greece to Mesopotamia. A transitional era began—the world's first Dark Age. It would last at least one century and perhaps as many as three in some areas.

Early Egyptologists were baffled by what brought an end to these civilizations. Then, in the 1860s and 1870s Gaston Maspero and other French scholars postulated that the Sea Peoples were responsible. Even though the theory was based solely on the epigraphic evidence from Egypt, it remained popular until nearly the modern day and was invoked every time archaeologists at relevant sites subsequently uncovered a destruction level. However, such surmises may not be entirely accurate, for while one can almost always tell that a site was destroyed, it is not always possible to determine when it happened or who ruined it.

In fact, aside from the Egyptian texts and inscriptions, which give conflicting impressions, we have no clear evidence that it was the Sea Peoples' fault, nor do we understand much about them. Did they approach the eastern Mediterranean as a relatively organized army, like one of the more disciplined Crusades intent on capturing the Holy Land during the Middle Ages? Or were they a loosely or poorly organized group of marauders, like the Vikings of a later age? Or refugees forced out of their homes by a series of unknown events and seeking new lands? Did they attack and ultimately vanquish many of the already weakened kingdoms, or did they settle down in the eastern Mediterranean much more peacefully than has been previously assumed?

A wealth of new archaeological data has become available in the past few decades and requires a rethinking of the old ideas. First of all, we are no longer certain that all of the sites with evidence of destruction were razed by the Sea Peoples. Instead, it now seems quite possible that they were as much the victims as the aggressors in the collapse of civilizations.

Recent studies and reexaminations of old data suggest that the early decades of the 12th century BC were not a particularly good time to be alive in the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean, for a variety of reasons, including climate change. During the past decade, cores taken in wet or swampy areas in northern Syria, Cyprus, and Israel allowed scientists to extract pollen dating to the Late Bronze and Iron Ages. Based on their examination of these data, they have concluded that in all of these regions there was a prolonged period of drought, which began as early as 1250 BC and lasted for as long as 150 years in Israel and up to 300 years in coastal Syria and Cyprus.

Egyptians and Sea Peoples tangle in a naval battle in this Medinet Habu relief. The Egyptians, taller and often armed with bows, arrows, and spears, are prevailing. Sea Peoples casualties are depicted as upside down or overboard figures.



This clay tablet letter incised with cuneiform script bears the seal of the King of Carchemish and dates from the 12th century BC, when the interconnected networks of trade and prosperity that had prevailed in the eastern Mediterranean for over 300 years were collapsing.

‘If you do not quickly arrive here, we will die of hunger. You will not see a living soul from your land’

Separate studies by other scientists involving oxygen isotope data from Israel, carbon isotope data in pollen cores from western Greece, and sediment cores from the Mediterranean confirm that the entire area was suffering from drought during this period. This helps explain the references to famine and the requests for grain found in Hittite, Egyptian, and Ugaritic texts. (Ugarit was a city located on the coast in northern Syria.) In the mid-13th century BC, an unnamed Hittite queen wrote to Ramses II, “I have no grain in my lands.” Sometime thereafter, the pharaoh Merneptah said that he had “caused grain to be taken in ships, to keep alive this land of Hatti”—the land of the Hittites. Yet the relief efforts to Anatolia seem to have been in vain, for the Hittite rulers continued to request grain and other food supplies from Egypt and elsewhere. One letter sent to Ugarit sometime between 1220 BC and 1190 BC ends dramatically: “It is a matter of life or death!”

The supplies being sent by the Egyptians to the Hittites frequently seem to have been shipped via Ugarit, but the texts from this site indicate that even it was suffering. One letter from Merneptah found in the house of a merchant mentions “consignments of grain sent from Egypt to relieve the famine in Ugarit.” The king of Ugarit also wrote in a letter that, “[Here] with me, plenty [has become] famine.” Even cities farther inland suffered; one letter sent to Ugarit says, “There is famine. . . . If you do not quickly arrive here, we ourselves will die of hunger. You will not see a living soul from your land!”

Ugarit figured prominently in earlier scholarly speculation on the demise of the Late Bronze Age. Archaeologist Claude Schaeffer, excavating at Ugarit in the 1930s, believed he had found evidence of an earthquake massive enough to have caused regional chaos. His suggestion met with skepticism, since it was unlikely that a single earthquake could have been responsible, but Schaeffer may have been partially correct—except that it wasn’t one earthquake; it was a swarm of them. Reexamination of destruction levels from sites in Turkey, Israel, and Greece suggests that a series of earthquakes—what archaeo-seismologists call an “earthquake storm”—occurred over 50 years, from about 1225 to 1175 BC. Such a “storm” takes place when a fault line unzips bit by bit, releasing pressure and strain with each earthquake rather than all at once. Damage that can only be attributed to earthquakes at the end of the Late Bronze Age has been found at sites stretching across this region, including Mycenae and Troy.

In addition to earthquakes, it is clear that a number of sites were destroyed by warfare during the same 50-year period. Ugarit and Tell Tweini in northern Syria, for example, have

arrowheads embedded in the walls or found elsewhere on the site, amid piles of debris and burned homes and buildings. The destruction of many of these sites was most likely at the hands of invaders, perhaps even Sea Peoples arriving by ship. In one famous letter the Ugarit king writes: “Now the ships of the enemy have come. They have been setting fire to my cities and have done harm to the land.” But in other cities the reason for destruction is not as clear. At Hazor in Israel, for example, the palace and the temple buildings were set on fire and destroyed; the rest of the city remained essentially untouched. The same seems true at other cities, including Megiddo in Israel and Mycenae. Internal rebellion by the lower classes, rather than invasion by external forces, has long been suggested as a possible reason for the end of the Bronze Age in Greece, with peasants, farmers, and others attacking the citadels at Mycenae, Tiryns, Pylos, Thebes, and elsewhere as food and other essential supplies ran low.

The preponderance of new evidence suggests that the Sea Peoples may well have been responsible for some of the destruction that occurred at the end of the Late Bronze Age but that they were probably part of a much larger equation. It now seems that a combination of events, both human and natural, coalesced to create a perfect storm. This glorious age that had flourished from the 15th to the 12th centuries BC came to an end in a full-blown systems collapse. Such a collapse can take up to a century from beginning to end, as we’ve seen from Old Kingdom Egypt to the Indus Valley to the Maya. Usually it includes a collapse of the central administration and of the centralized economy, a disappearance of the traditional elite class, and a general population decline, together with shifts in settlement patterns. There is also typically no single, obvious cause for the collapse, and a “dark age” frequently follows. This describes perfectly the situation at the end of the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age in the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean.

While the pictures and inscriptions left by Ramses III and Merneptah concerning the Sea Peoples put a human face to the catastrophe, the invaders may have been as much victims as oppressors. However large or small their role, the magnitude of the overall disaster was enormous. The rapid demise of the civilizations at the end of the Bronze Age resulted in a loss such as the world would not see again for more than 1,500 years, when the Roman Empire collapsed. **MHQ**

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