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Teresa Bürge and Peter M. Fischer (eds), *The Decline of Bronze Age Civilisations in the Mediterranean: Cyprus and Beyond*. Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology 154. Pp. 442, black-and-white and color illustrations. Nicosia: Astrom Editions. 2023. ISBN: 9789925793532, paperback €80.00.

The rise-and-fall of civilisations paradigm is intellectually sexy, as it makes that provocative and emotional claim that flourishing societies can, or appear to, 'abruptly' take new directions, and it is

without any doubt that a volume titled *The Decline of Bronze Age Civilisations in the Mediterranean: Cyprus and Beyond* would be approached with excitement by anyone interested in the historical change of human conditions, although especially within academic circles. Product of a 2020 meeting held in Gothenburg, Sweden, organised within the framework of a larger research project (2016–2021) led by Peter M. Fischer on *The Collapse of Bronze Age Societies in the Eastern Mediterranean*, this imposing and beautifully edited volume of nineteen chapters, edited by Peter M. Fischer and Teresa Bürge, brings together fifteen papers delivered at this workshop, alongside three additional contributions from external scholars. Collectively, nineteen chapters invite a broad reconsideration of the transformation, weakening or utter collapse and its aftermath of Bronze Age cultures throughout the Aegean, Anatolia, Syria-Palestine, and Egypt, around the twelfth century BCE. Each chapter is consistently and generously illustrated, with a well-curated selection of colour maps, photographs and line drawings enhancing the visual and scholarly appeal.

The end of the Late Bronze Age in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean has remained a topic of enduring scholarly fascination for several decades, so much so that in the very same year, two other volumes on the subject appeared in print,¹ and major funded projects were ongoing.² For too long it has been sandwiched between interpretative models that treated the downfall as a singular, dramatic event and more recent approaches that seek to reconstruct a more complex and regionally variable process of transformation (one in which the passing of established structures gave rise to new configurations). The present volume engages directly with that historiographical tension. While traditional scenarios recur throughout the volume (competing economic systems, interregional connectivity, warfare, pandemics...), these are never taken as self-evident, and contributions collectively transcend simplistic assumptions, truisms, and monocausal models (such as migration/invasion theories by the shadowy ‘Sea Peoples’) by closely dissecting archaeological materials, contexts, texts, and visual sources, so as to illustrate the full palette of variables and convincingly demonstrate why

such complexity is fundamental for understanding whatever happened at the end of the Bronze Age.

As such, the combination ‘of diverse approaches towards a broader and contextualised understanding of the decline of Bronze Age societies in the Eastern Mediterranean’ (p. 3), as noted by the editors, has inevitably led the 34 authors of the volume go in a variety of ways. This accords with the growing diversity of perspectives on the ‘collapse’ in history,³ notwithstanding there will be no clear, once-for-all piece of evidence that will ever suffice. That said, beyond the synopsis of each contribution given in Chapter 1 by Peter M. Fischer and Teresa Bürge, which serves as an introduction to the volume (as well as some reflections tied to the ongoing excavations of the editors at Hala Sultan Tekke), one might have wished a gesture towards a more synthetic reflection, however tentative, which would have enriched the impact of the volume as a collective statement.

The volume is structured around five principal themes.

The first thematic section (*The ‘Sea Peoples’ and the Late Bronze Age crisis in written sources*) provides an assessment of the economical and political dynamics of the eastern Mediterranean at the end of the Late Bronze Age as through the Egyptian, Ugaritic, and Hittite written sources (Chapters 2 to 4).

Wüthrich and Matić (Chapter 2) present a contextual analysis of two textual and visual sources mentioning the incursions of displaced groups (i.e. the shadowy ‘Sea Peoples’), specifically the reliefs of the monumental Funerary Temple at Medinet Habu and the *Papyrus Harris I*, dated to the reign of Ramesses III (c. 1187–1156 BCE, a period that sits squarely within the timeframe of the Late Bronze Age transformative events). The originality of their approach lies in how the authors foreground the nexus between medium (and the setting of texts and images) and audience, directing attention to the dynamics of information transmission and viewer/listener engagement, which are shaped by the differing accessibility and visibility of these two different media. Although the theoretical orientation outlined in the introduction frames the study through the lens of ethnicity (invoking traditional questions about ‘who’ the Sea Peoples were), the actual analytical thrust of the chapter shifts toward a semiotic or reception-oriented paradigm, focusing on how the narratives about the Sea Peoples were constructed, communicated, and interpreted. The main idea is that texts and

¹ Millek, 2023; Jung and Kardamaki (eds) 2023 [see preceding review].

² ERC-funded project *The Fall of 1200 BC: The role of migration and conflict in social crises at the end of the Bronze Age in South-eastern Europe* (PI: Barry Molloy, Grant Agreement No. 772753, 2018–2024) has produced major results on patterns of migration and conflict between c. 1300 and 1000 BCE, particularly in relation to the collapse of Europe’s first urban civilisation in the Aegean and the transformation of proto-urban societies in the Balkans.

³ Middleton 2017: 78–105.

images do not live in isolation, but as elements embedded in processes of reading and response. From this structured perspective, the authors found that both the monumental reliefs and the papyrus, although presumably destined to 'different' audiences, 'offered the same narrative of these campaigns [which] indicates that the story of the conflict of Ramsesses III with the Sea Peoples was intended to reach as many people as possible' (p.33), whatever this means. Roche-Hawley (Chapter 3) offers an unprecedented analysis of the House of Urtenu archive, based on a substantial body of approximately 545 texts, many of which were previously unpublished or newly published. The archive provide a snapshot of life in Ugarit (Ras Shamra) and mounting signs of social, economic, and political fragilities that likely converged to its destruction c. 1190 BCE. Lodeiro-Pichel's contribution (Chapter 4) then closes this thematic section in offering a dense, comprehensive review of Egyptian, Ugaritic, Hittite and Mesopotamian texts, combined with a review of recent archaeological excavations, on the nature of connections and interactions between Alašiya (which, according to the author, and in line with the prevailing scholarly consensus, would correspond to all or part of the island of Cyprus) and the Hittite Empire, presenting her work as the first comprehensive study dedicated to the connections between Anatolia and Cyprus during the Late Bronze Age. The findings suggest a re-evaluation of the status of Alašiya in international diplomacy, the role of Cyprus as a place of exile for Hittite political opponents, the military campaigns of Tudhaliya IV and Suppiluliuma II, and the material exchange evidenced in tribute lists and inventories. As the author convincingly argues, however, Hittite control was likely both temporary and rather symbolic. Further in the volume, Ekin Kozal (Chapter 10) complements Lodeiro-Pichel's study by using archaeological data to evaluate connections between Cyprus and various parts of Anatolia from the 14th to the 12th century BCE, mainly through the circulation of pottery both ways – a perspective that we would miss in texts solely.

The next set of chapters (5–8), in my view, most closely reflect the methodological priorities outlined by the editors in their introductory chapter (p.13): micro-scale settlement histories and locally contingent responses to regional disruptions grounded in ongoing excavation and landscape study, in order to resist teleological models of collapse and use these data in a holistic historical reconstruction.

Site- and region-specific evidence are presented from:

- The Paphos area, gathered through the Palaepaphos Urban Landscape Project (PULP), where Maria Iacovou (Chapter 5), traces the gradual transformation of the urban structure, and places emphasis on continuity, resilience, and local agency.
- The fortified, short-lived settlement of Pyla-Kokkinokremos suddenly abandoned in the early 12th century BCE, where Jan Driessen, Joachim Bretschneider and Athanasia Kanta (Chapter 6) incorporate material from both the old and new 2014-2019 excavation campaigns, with a particular focus on the hoards (containing valuable objects such as fine Cypriot cylinder seals, semi-precious stones, bronze objects...) discovered along the east side of the plateau which act as, as the authors argue, as 'a time freeze or capsule' (p.86) 'illustrating the abruptness of the abandonment process of the settlement' (p.92) for which the authors propose various scenarios in a realistically complex manner.
- Cyprus as a whole by Igor Kreimerman, through a tentative panoramic picture of the chain of events between the late 13th-12th centuries BCE is then given through an analysis of destruction evidence from fifteen Cypriot settlements dated to the LC IIC-III A transition (i.e., the period around 1200 BCE), based on existing data sets (Chapter 7) and building on his earlier typology of destruction layers originally developed for the Southern Levant. While commendable in the efforts to nuance the understanding of that uniform category of 'destruction', the archaeological interpretation of destruction is inherently fraught, particularly when one seeks to reconcile the incompleteness, ambiguity, and complexity of the evidence with broader questions about the magnitude of devastation and its impact on urban centres and regional systems. Kreimermann appears to be on less solid ground with regard to his contention that destruction is anthropogenic if burning of an entire site occurs. However, Kreimerman's effort is particularly commendable: the author proposes a tentative storyline for the destruction events in Cyprus during the 13th and 12th centuries BCE with interesting propositions based on long-range weapon typology found on-site (sling bullets, arrowheads). Ultimately, his findings suggest that while violent episodes were disruptive in the short term, they were not, in most cases, sufficiently severe to undermine

the economic foundations of the affected settlements. This contrasts notably with the situation in the Levant, where destruction often coincided with abandonment and more profound systemic disruption.

- Crete and the Greek mainland between the 14th and 12th centuries BCE are presented through a lively and engaged discussion by Jan Driessen and Florence Gaignerot-Driessen (Chapter 8) on the economic and political reconfigurations. The authors propose that the destruction of the palatial centre at Knossos, dated to between 1350 and 1320 BCE, constituted a pivotal destabilising event whose repercussions were felt across the wider Aegean in the subsequent decades. As a case study, they draw on evidence from Sissi, a site under excavation since 2007 under the direction of Driessen, where the collapse of the Knossian palatial system, followed by a destruction episode in the early 13th century – tentatively associated with the She/a/rdana or Sherden, one of the groups identified among the so-called Sea Peoples – marks a turning point in local patterns of activities, notably in the domain of textile production. A new type of loom weights of spool shape appeared, and the argument that this might be linked to the arrival of Italian population during the second half of the thirteenth century (based on typologically similar loom weight used in North Italy in the Late/Final BA) is exciting.

The third section, *Regional and interregional connections and the management of economic resources*, presents chapters that deal with for the most part recent excavations and reanalyses of older excavations in Cyprus. A significant portion of this section, together with much of the next, *Radiocarbon and climate, sciences and technologies*, is devoted to Hala Sultan Tekke (Chapters 11–13, 15, 17–18), which might usefully have been parcelled together into a dedicated section. For the purposes of this review, I have therefore chosen to treat them as a unified group.

Reinhard Jung, Hans Mommsen, Tatiana Pedrazzi (Chapter 9) collect proxy data with neutron activation analysis (NAA) from ceramics with stylistical influences from the Greek mainland, imported jars from Syria-Palestine, and pottery of local manufacture (fine and cooking ware) from three settlements in Cyprus (Maa Palaekastro, Pyla, and Enkomi). Their aim is to refine macroscopic and stylistic assessments of ceramic origin, while contributing to the broader goal on shedding new

light on the historical processes that took place in the region. Results are made transparent over eleven pages of tables, and followed by an intensive, careful contextualisation of each sample (p.150–189), which serves overall as a starting point for questions concerning trade routes, cultural contacts, knowledge transfer, consumption practices. The maps are particularly helpful. Ultimately, the authors argue for an updated understanding of the Enkomi Level IIB (p.193), which the authors cautiously suggest may belong to Late Cypriot IIC, although they emphasise the need for further corroborative study. Vasiliki Kassianidou (Chapter 14) offers an excellent synthesis of evidence for copper production, consumption, and trade, from the rise of large-scale industry in the fifteenth century BCE to its apparent peak in the thirteenth and subsequent early twelfth century. Stages of the chaîne opératoire of copper production, distinguishing between metallurgical and metalworking activities (principally through the copper slags), could provide a framework for future research into the geographical contours of political economy since it takes structures of collective order and labour into account and, in turn, may contribute to clarifying the much-debated political configuration of Cyprus during the Late Bronze Age. On this subject, readers should also examine the more recent study on Enkomi published in 2024.⁴

The six interrelated chapters focussing on Hala Sultan Tekke approach the site from multiple, complementary perspectives that range from technological and typological analyses to archaeometric and environmental data. Teresa Bürge outlines ceramic changes in terms of local production and technology, overseas imports, and use of pottery principally dated to LC IIC–IIIA (Chapter 11), followed by Johannes H. Sterba (Chapter 12) who presents the results of neutron activation analysis on 334 ceramic samples, but here it remains somewhat unclear what proportion of the sample directly pertains to the chronological framework at the centre of the inquiry. Archaeologists and readers primarily interested in the socio-political dimensions of the Bronze Age decline may find it more fruitful to consult the remarks given by Bürge ('Relations with Egypt, the Levant and Anatolia' and 'Summary and Conclusions', p.252–55) before engaging with the technical discussion in full; even though this would mean to overlook the detailed and methodologically rigorous treatment of the material of Sterba. Paula Waiman-Barak, Teresa Bürge, and Peter M. Fischer (Chapter 13) carry out a fabric analysis of 254 vessels,

⁴ Ioannides *et al.* 2024.

resulting in the identification of seven distinct ceramic groups, plus a separate group of imports. Of particular interest is their conclusion that, despite noticeable changes in technology and typology, the use of clay sources and production recipes appears to have remained relatively consistent throughout the LC II–IIIA phases. Mathias Mehofer (Chapter 15) shifts the focus to metallurgy, and examines the chemical composition, the microstructural and phase, and lead isotopes of more than a ton of slags recovered from City Quarters 1 and 2 during the 2010–2019 excavations. These finds are dated to LC IIC–IIIA. Upon the absence of roasting beds or beneficiation tools, he argues that Hala Sultan Tekke likely received the product of a first smelt that took place at the ore-source site in the Troodos Mountains, which was then reworked, possibly refined, and cast into finished objects; although a spatial separation (e.g., roasting at another area of the site) could not be entirely dismissed. An updated radiocarbon chronology based on fifty determinations is presented by Eva Maria Wild, Peter Steier, Teresa Bürge and Peter M. Fischer (Chapter 17) complemented in Chapter 18 by David Kaniewski, Nick Marriner, Rachid Cheddadi, Peter M. Fischer, Teresa Bürge, Theiry Otto, Frédéric Luce, and Elise Van Campo who provide evidence from the pollen curves of 6,000 years of climatic fluctuations based on the identification of shifts in vegetation frequencies, which highlight somewhat drier and cooler climate condition around 1250 BCE.

Amidst this, Laerke Recht (Chapter 16) stands out within the volume for her distinctive focus on the important and currently en-vogue use of zooarchaeology to explore human–animal relationships not only for questions of human subsistence, but for a better understanding of specialisation, socioeconomic status, and trade. She specifically studies the nature and extent of equids (donkeys and horses) exploitation through faunal assemblages and imagery (including equid-derived equipment, such as chariots, and equid-shaped vessels and figurines). Since neither donkeys nor horses are indigenous to Cyprus, their presence is significant. They appear to have been introduced during two principal phases: first in the Philia phase (mid third millennium BCE), and again during Late Cypriot I–II, likely reflecting patterns of contact and trade with the Near East. The LC II–IIIA evidence is particularly interesting in that a shift in representational imagery – from mounted riders to chariots – alongside an increase in Aegean-style iconography could illustrate ideological change, possibly in connection with evolving trade relations and external cultural influences.

The volume then simply concludes with a final contribution (Chapter 19) co-authored by Sorin Hermon, Marina Faka, Svetlana Gasanova, Martina Polig, Valentina Vassallo, Jan Driessen, Athanasia Kanta, and Joachim Bretschneider. This chapter presents the application of digital technologies to the investigation of architectural and material remains at Pyla-Kokkinokremos. The methods discussed include notably aerial photogrammetry, ground-penetrating radar, 3D documentation of architectural features, spatial analysis of fragmented pottery vessels, the visual reconstruction of a Sardinian vessel, and other case studies, offering a compelling illustration of how advanced digital tools can improve archaeological interpretation and site documentation.

The present reviewer wholeheartedly endorses this well-presented and intellectually rewarding volume, which adds to our understanding of the critical decades around the end of the 13th and the early 12th centuries BCE, and more generally of the scribal, administrative, social, and political life of the societies, kingdoms, empires at the time. It offers a rich foundation for future research and vividly demonstrates the depth and breadth of data now available for the continuing of Late Bronze Age studies.

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