



Review Article

Getting closer to the Late Bronze Age collapse in the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean, c. 1200 BC

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JESSE MILLEK. 2023. *Destruction and its impact on ancient societies at the end of the Bronze Age*. Columbus (GA): Lockwood Press; 978-1-948488-83-9 hardback \$89.95.

REINHARD JUNG & ELEFThERIA KARDAMAKI (ed.). 2022. *Synchronizing the destructions of the Mycenaean palaces* (Mykenische Studien 36). Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften; 978-3-7001-8877-3 hardback €128 Open Access.

‘The collapse c. 1200 BC’ in the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean—which saw the end of the Mycenaean kingdoms, the Hittite state and its empire and the kingdom of Ugarit—has intrigued archaeologists for decades. As Jesse Millek points out in *Destruction and its impact*, the idea of a swathe of near-synchronous destructions across the eastern Mediterranean is central to the narrative of the Late Bronze Age collapse: “destruction stands as the physical manifestation of the end of the Bronze Age” (p.6). Yet whether there was a single collapse marked by a widespread destruction horizon is up for debate. The two books reviewed here successfully reassess the simplistic and catastrophist characterisation of the end of the Late Bronze Age in the eastern Mediterranean and help provide a more nuanced picture.

Destruction and its impact has a simple but important aim, which is to look again at the evidence for the destructions that are taken to mark the collapse. The book has a straightforward structure. Chapter 2 discusses the archaeology of destruction, questioning what is meant by ‘a destruction’ and how the causes of a destruction are assigned. This is a useful preamble that sets up a critical approach to the destructions being examined throughout the book. Chapter 3, ‘The destruction that wasn’t’, is the longest chapter, at 76 pages, and contains a major part of the detail. It prefaces the region-specific discussions in Chapters 4 to 7. There is also a helpful Appendix that tabulates the information about each site discussed under the headings of scale and cause with an accompanying description.

The conclusion of Chapter 3 is that, of the 153 proposed destructions c. 1200 BC, 94 (61%) are ‘false’ destructions. These are grouped into three categories: 1) destructions that have been misdated, 2) assumed or 3) that have appeared in the secondary literature, termed ‘false citations’. Each category is discussed region by region and site by site in discussions of varying lengths, depending on the site and its evidence. In the first category, 33 misdated destructions are identified. Here, Millek accepts those within a generous five-decade range of 1225–1175 BC, but rejects destructions beyond that range as part of the collapse. Sites

such as Knossos, where destructions were earlier, and Koukounaries on Paros, destroyed in the mid-twelfth century, therefore, he argues, should be excluded from the list of destructions *c.* 1200 BC.

Thirty-five destructions are identified as assumed rather than real. Millek shows, for example, that there is a lack of evidence for a destruction of the possible palace site of Orchomenos, *c.* 1200 BC—it might have been destroyed or it may have been abandoned. The discussion of Athens is particularly instructive, reminding us that we do not even know whether there was a Mycenaean palace there in the first place. The reminder is that circularity should be avoided—in the absence of evidence, a destruction *c.* 1200 BC should not be assumed because it conveniently fits a ready-made narrative. Twenty-six cases of destruction are rejected based on ‘false citations’, where destructions have appeared in the literature but are not supported by the excavation reports.

Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 of *Destruction and its impact* address the destructions that can be assigned to *c.* 1200 BC, dealing with Mycenaean Greece and the Aegean, Anatolia and the Hittite Empire, Cyprus and the Levant in turn. In each chapter, sites are discussed individually and a cause of destruction suggested, where possible, building on the analysis of destruction in Chapter 2. Of the 12 sites in mainland Greece, Millek proposes that Midea and Pylos may have been destroyed in warfare, Tiryns by warfare or arson and Gla and Dimini by arson. At Midea, Pylos and Tiryns weapons were found in the destruction layers, while at Tiryns, Gla and Dimini, only particular buildings were targeted. The seven other destructions are classified as ‘unknown’.

Destruction and its impact throws up an important point for the study of any collapse, which is the necessity of first identifying and describing what we are seeking to explain; this in itself is not straightforward. While Millek does agree that there were some destructions in the 50 years around 1200 BC, his picture is much less catastrophic than the one we have grown used to. It casts further doubt on whether we are seeing a single destruction horizon with a single ultimate cause. By going back to original reports and tracing citation chains back from claimed destructions, the book clearly shows that the dominant narrative of ‘the collapse *c.* 1200 BC’ is at least in part a modern myth and an artefact of scholarship. This view must be addressed by those who propose sweeping explanations of collapse.

The end of the palace states of Late Bronze Age Greece is not a myth, however, and *Synchronizing the destructions of the Mycenaean palaces*—the result of a November 2018 conference at the Institute for Oriental and European Archaeology (OREA, Austrian Academy of Sciences)—attempts to pin down a number of these destructions and to synchronise them between sites and regions. To achieve this, the contributors focus on the careful analysis of pottery and architecture, using data generated by excavations carried out in recent years. Less accessible than *Destruction and its impact*, this is perhaps a read best suited to specialists.

The editors’ introduction is helpful; it outlines the problems addressed by the volume, its scope and aims, including a list of questions each chapter tries to answer and provides summaries of each chapter. In terms of scope, the book is demanding in its criteria for Mycenaean palaces; there are dedicated chapters only on Mycenae, Tiryns, Thebes, Pylos, Iklaina, two on Ayios Vasileios and one on Crete and Chania (a dedicated chapter on Chania was planned, but not submitted), where there is evidence for both monumentality and Linear B use; excluded are Athens, Gla, Iolkos (Dimini and Kastro-Palia), Knossos, Midea and

Orchomenos. However, some of the latter appear in Table 1, which details some destructions at different times, and which was compiled jointly by all participants in the original conference. The choice is understandable to some extent, but the exclusion of Knossos is puzzling (it is discussed briefly on pp.12–13).

Two chapters look at the Argolid sites of Mycenae and Tiryns. Kim Shelton focuses on the Petsas House, north-west of the citadel at Mycenae. The building, which was a centre of pottery production and storage, was destroyed in late LH IIIA2 (1390/60–1340/30 BC) possibly by an earthquake that caused fierce fires. Though partly cleared, it was then abandoned. Shelton identifies a destruction horizon across Mycenae at this time, which was followed by widespread new buildings. For discussion of the LH IIIB (c. 1340/30–1190/80 BC) destruction of the palace at Mycenae, the one associated with the collapse c. 1200 BC, the reader must turn back to the Introduction where the editors comment on the lack of direct evidence owing to the early excavations (see also *Destruction and its impact* pp.146–47). Soňa Wirghová's chapter on Tiryns discusses in detail the pottery sequence from palatial through post-palatial times, as revealed by material from the north end of the Lower Citadel.

Eleni Andronikou presents a discussion of pottery from a storeroom on the Kadmeia Hill, Thebes, which she places in the context of deposits from three other parts of the palace or wider complex on the hill. These locations all have a destruction layer with fire at the end of LH IIIB, c. 1200 BC, when the palace at Thebes was destroyed. She suggests that the destruction was probably slightly later than that of Mycenae and Tiryns and around the same time as Pylos. At Thebes, there was also at least one, maybe more, earlier destruction (s), possibly due to earthquake, followed by recovery.

Cynthia Shelmerdine's chapter focuses on Iklaina, near Pylos in Messenia. It describes this major site with a long history, which she divides into four phases. In Phase 3, the site was expanded with the addition of a massive terrace on which was built the Cyclopean Terrace Building, with some ashlar architecture and fresco decoration. At the end of this phase, a destruction affected most of the site, in mid-LH IIIB. In putting Iklaina in context, Shelmerdine argues that it must have been a second-order centre of Pylos already in Phase 2, whereas Michael Cosmopoulos, the director of the Iklaina project, argues that this happened late at the end of Phase 3, making earlier Iklaina a rival centre in Messenia. Thus, the significance of the mid-LH IIIB destruction is unclear.

Two chapters look at Ayios Vasileios in Lakonia, which was only recently identified as a palace centre (a Linear B tablet was found by accident in 2008). Adamantia Vasilogamvrou, Eleftheria Kardamaki and Nektarios Karadimas examine the palace while Vasco Hachtmann and Sofia Voutsaki study the North Cemetery. The palace had a large court that owed something to Minoan architecture; it also had impressive stoas (covered walkways). The palace appears to have been destroyed by fire in mid-LH IIIB, after which it ceased to function as a palace as the stoas were not repaired and there are no more examples of Linear B writing.

With the possible annexation or destruction of Iklaina, and the destruction of Ayios Vasileios, Pylos may have become the only palace centre in the southern Peloponnese, as Salvatore Vitale, Sharon Stocker and Jack Davis point out. In their chapter on the Palace of Nestor, they describe two destruction horizons, A and B. The destruction of an early palace is placed in LH IIIA2 and the final palace in LH IIIC Early (1190/80–1150 BC), possibly around the same time as Dimini, and after the Argolid centres, Thebes and Gla.

Jeremy Rutter's chapter turns to the situation on Crete and ceramic regionalism in Minoan and Mycenaean pottery. In particular, the chapter discusses the Late Minoan IIIB (c. 1340/30–1190/80 BC) pottery from Chania and synchronises it with post-palatial Mycenaean and Handmade Burnished Ware. Rutter suggests that movement of mainlanders and people from Italy into Crete, in particular to Chania, may be important. Reinhard Jung's ambitious chapter extends the discussion out of the Aegean to sites in the eastern Mediterranean, including Ugarit, Tell Tweini, Tell Kazel in the Levant, and Enkomi and Alassa on Cyprus.

The exception to the strict focus on ceramics and stylistic phases in *Synchronizing the destructions* is Joseph Maran's more interpretive chapter in which he argues for the need for a deeper and more contextualised understanding of the longer-term processes of Mycenaean state collapse. Maran favours internal factors of change, including conflicts within elites, the impact of big construction projects and changes in the military make-up of the Mycenaean states, which happened over middling to longer periods, rather than any sudden single 'silver bullet' cause.

What comes through clearly in *Synchronizing the destructions* is that destructions at Mycenaean centres were not limited to 'the collapse' at the end of LH IIIB, c. 1200 BC, and that even those were not simultaneous. Earlier destructions, some already known, others discovered at the new sites Iklaina and Ayios Vasileios, confirm that there is a dynamic history of events to be taken into account throughout the palatial period of Mycenaean Greece rather than a uniform rise and fall of the palaces sandwiching a period of stability. Maran's chapter emphasises this and makes it clear how simplistic explanations of collapse are unsatisfying. *Destruction and its impact* also shows that there was not a single catastrophic destruction horizon across the eastern Mediterranean c. 1200 BC—and that there were destructions both before and after.

These two books are important contributions to the ongoing discussions of the end of the Late Bronze Age in Greece and the eastern Mediterranean: Millek's will force researchers to look again at just what it is they are describing and explaining as 'the collapse c. 1200 BC'; and Jung and Kardamaki's offers depth and focus in terms of the reality and timing of various destructions in the Mycenaean world. Both move the discussion about collapse c. 1200 BC forward in constructive ways and researchers seeking to explain 'the collapse' will have to take them into account.