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## THE ROLE OF AN UNMANAGED REFUGEE CRISIS IN THE LATE BRONZE AGE COLLAPSE

**Abstract.** Around 1177 BCE, in the Late Bronze Age, a multitude of factors contributed to a collapse of society in and around the Mediterranean. One of those factors was the arrival of an enigmatic coalition called the “Sea Peoples.” This paper identifies theories regarding the origins and identities of the various groups that are associated with the Sea Peoples, discusses their impact on the Bronze Age Collapse, and considers implications for managing the refugee crisis today.

**Keywords:** Late Bronze Age, refugee crisis, Sea Peoples, Philistines, climate change, ancient Mediterranean.

Refugee crises and climate change are both issues that, left unchecked, can have devastating and widespread consequences. Both are capable of affecting the food supply of a nation, eventually leading to a collapse of society if nothing is done about it. This is exactly what happened at the end of the Bronze Age, where powerful and prosperous civilizations descended into chaos and violence. This collapse was brought about by a massive disruption to society, caused by a variety of factors including the arrival of a mysterious coalition of what were known as “Sea Peoples,” who swept across the Mediterranean, burning and ransacking cities along the way.

“Sea Peoples” is the umbrella term used to refer to the various groups of people who arrived in the Mediterranean area in constant waves in the decades leading up to the Bronze Age collapse, which occurred at around 1177 BCE [1, xviii]. There has been much debate over whether they were directly responsible for the collapse, why and how they came, and who they even were. It is certain, though, that they were composed of a variety of peoples, each with their own cultural identity: distinct styles of pottery and designs for armor, weapons, and other crafts have been found and are used to trace their origins [2; 1]. The migration was very drawn out, with

individuals and sometimes entire families migrating to the Mediterranean – both by land and by sea – over a long period of time. According to the inscriptions at Medinet Habu, “The foreign countries made a conspiracy in their islands... no land could stand before their arms, from Khatte, Qode, Carchemish, Arzawa, and Alashiya on, being cut off...” These are locations along the Mediterranean coast, ordered from north to south, approaching Egypt, and although it has been established that the inscriptions are somewhat embellished, they show that a multitude of foreign groups were involved, and at least some among them had violent tendencies [1, 2–3].

Various subgroups under the Sea Peoples umbrella were called the Peleset, the Danuna, the Shardana, the Shekelesh, the Tjekker, and the Weshesh, names deciphered from Egyptian inscriptions at Medinet Habu, the mortuary temple of Ramesses III, and other sites. Though uncertainty still surrounds their origins, the inscriptions contain astoundingly detailed depictions of battles, and the various armor and weapon designs of the different groups appear in Egyptian paintings and wall reliefs. In some cases, these depictions have allowed connections to be drawn through archaeology [1; 4]. The Peleset are generally accepted as the Philistines from

Crete, through clear linguistic similarities suggested by Jean-François Champollion, the decipherer of Egyptian hieroglyphics. This hypothesis is further supported by similarity in the ceramic repertoires from the Philistia coast of the Levant and Mycenaean cities [3; 9].

The origin of several other Sea Peoples' groups is less certain. The Danuna have long been associated with the Danaans from Homer's *Iliad*, believed to have settled in Cyprus. Rameses referred to both the Shardana and the Shekelesh as foreign countries who made a conspiracy "in their islands," which caused scholars to hypothesize that they originated from Sardinia and Sicily respectively. The Amarna Letters, Egyptian diplomatic tablets, also refer to the Shardana as warriors, which brings up an issue with the hypothesis: there is next to no sign of weapons and armor in Sardinia dating to the middle and late Bronze Age [4, 319]. This has led many to argue that the Shardana only moved to Sardinia from the Eastern Mediterranean after being defeated by the Egyptians [1, 3–4]. The Amarna Letters, Egyptian diplomatic tablets, referred to the Shardana as warriors, implying that they were service of Egypt, though this is challenged by the lack of weapons and armor found in Sardinia dating to the middle and late Bronze Age [4, 319]. There is little information on the Tjekker: they were mentioned in the *Tale of Wenamun*, an ancient Egyptian literary text discovered in 1890, in which a town named Dor near the Levantine coast was referred to as a Tjekker town, but this doesn't tell us where they came from, rather where they ended up. Finally, the Weshesh may be the most mysterious, only ever being mentioned twice. All that is known is that they were "of the sea," and that, like the other tribes, they attacked Ramses III [5, 71–77].

There are many potential reasons for the migration, and how it may have contributed to the ultimate collapse. During this time, the Mediterranean was subject to a 50-year-long series of potentially connected earthquakes called an "earthquake storm" [6, 43]. Caused by a gradual release of pressure in a tectonic

fault line, these earthquakes inflicted significant structural damage, though most likely not enough to bring about the collapse of society on its own [1140–142]. However, in the Aegean, there is also evidence of a massive agricultural failure. To spur a mass-migration, the disaster must have been massive enough to affect the entire region, but no further than that: if it were smaller, the consequences could be alleviated through trade, and if it were larger, people would not believe migration to be a solution [2, 299–300]. A multitude of scientific investigations have yielded evidence supporting the possibility of changes in climate at the time, most likely a drought. An example is the study of trees-rings in the Gordion region, near central Anatolia. Trees grow one ring every year, reflecting the changing seasons, but a disturbance of climate also leaves a measurable imprint on the rings, and a noticeable fluctuation was found during the mid-12th century BCE. Another project was the Greenland Ice Core Project, a multinational undertaking where scientists drilled an ice core down 3029 meters through the ice sheet at Central Greenland. Concentrations of elements within the ice, most notably greenhouse gases, were used to calculate the climate at certain time period. Samples from ice at around 1190 BCE suggest increased volcanic activity, which would have contributed to erratic climate. At the right time in the growing cycle, this could have a severe consequences, leading to crop failure and famine [2, 300]. This is a plausible explanation for the migrations: a massive shortage of food could definitely lead to an economic collapse, resulting in mass-migrations and warfare.

These crises were not limited to the Aegean, though: for example, a missive sent from the Hittite king to the king of Ugarit requesting a shipment of grain called it "a matter of life or death". Initially, Ugarit was able to provide other cities, including Emar in Syria, with grain to circumvent disaster. Eventually, however, the famine spread to Ugarit as well. The spreading crisis is document in the Amarna Letters, with the Ugaritic king's exclamation to the pharaoh: "As for me, plenty has become lack!" [1, 144–145].

Egypt initially attempted to mitigate the effects of famine through trade. For example, in another letter, the king of Tyre informed the Ugaritic king of a disaster at sea: an Egyptian vessel carrying grain along the Mediterranean seaboard was wrecked in a storm.

The spread of the international famine is also documented in an archaeobotanical analysis. A group of international scholars including David Kaniewski studied pollen found at Tell Tweini in Northern Syria, finding that the environmental changes affecting the Aegean likely spread to the Levant as well [1, 144–146]. It's very possible that the massive influx of potentially violent refugees combined with the already unstable climate further strained the resources of the Eastern Mediterranean and weakened their resistance to the invaders.

Though the Sea Peoples were not all violent, some towns like Ugarit were definitely attacked,— arrowheads were found, as well as evidence of burning — and many regions had already been deserted. Before then, the civilizations were very similar to today, with a thriving network of trade connecting the nations. The Uluburun Ship, containing valuable trade goods from 7 different countries at once, is evidence of the importance of trade [1, 74–75]. However, the town of Ugarit was never rebuilt after being attacked, meaning that either the population was completely annihilated, or the survivors did not have the resources to do so. This suggests a collapse of trade in the area, whether it was a direct result of the famine or caused by the Sea Peoples' invasion [1, 152].

Whether it was caused by famine, earthquakes or other factors, there are records of social unrest during this time even beyond the Sea Peoples invasion. For example, documents have been found that suggest internal conflict within the Hittite Empire, potentially a civil war between Kurunta and Tudhaliya, the rulers of Hittite city-states Tarhuntassa and Hatti respectively. Cities were being fortified, and the son of Tudhaliya, Suppiluliuma, launched a direct attack on Tarhuntassa, ending in, at best, a pyrrhic victory. By this time, towns in Ugarit were already being at-

tacked by Sea Peoples, and it is estimated that both Tarhuntassa and Hatti collapsed at the turn of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century BCE [7, 27–28]. It is uncertain if this collapse was a result of invasion, but his conflict would have divided the Hittite Empire, weakening its ability to repel foreign invaders.

Overall, the Bronze Age Collapse was caused by a combination of environmental factors, such as earthquakes and a change in climate and the chain of events that it set into motion. The natural disasters, especially the climate-change-induced drought, gave the Sea Peoples no choice but to migrate. Some of the resettlement wasn't violent, while some most definitely was. Either way, as the expanding drought put strain on the supply of food, many cities were unable to feed even the locals, much less the waves of newcomers. The resulting disruption most likely caused a collapse of the economy and a lessening of central authority, spurring the civil unrest that ultimately lead to the collapse.

The most important question this raises, however, is whether or not it could happen again. Our society may seem fixed and secure, but it very possibly seemed the same way to the inhabitants of Ugarit, a century before their city was burned to the ground, never to be rebuilt. After all, many problems we face today, such as climate change and the refugee crisis, are very reminiscent of the ones that brought about the collapse over 3 thousand years ago. For instance, millions of people are currently being displaced from places such as Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan, and central America. Though considerable effort has been put into resettling refugees in Europe and the Middle East, the United States of America currently lacks a proactive policy for refugee acceptance and resettlement. In addition, the growing threat of climate change is likely to have a profound impact on global migration. Moving forward, it is critical that these challenges and more importantly, the underlying factors that cause them, are faced proactively. Ignoring them will only worsen the consequences, and we may run the risk of allowing history to repeat itself.

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