1200 BC

WAR,CLIMATE CHANGE & CULTURAL CATASTROPHE

A CONFERENCE ORGANISED BY THE SCHOOLS OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND CLASSICS AT UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

Speakers include:

M.J.BAILLIE,
R.BRIAN FERGUSON,
KRISTIAN KRISTIANSEN,
BARRY MOLLOY,
KRZYSZTOF NOWICKI,
JOHN ÒNÈILL,
MUIRIS O`SULLIVAN,
ALAN PEATFIELD,
GARETH ROBERTS,
IAN SHAW,
SHELLY WACHSMAN,
SHARON ZUCKERMAN

FRIDAY 7 MARCH-SUNDAY 9 MARCH
THEATRE R NEWMAN BUILDING

Conference fee 40 euro (students 10 euro)

Details from Dr Philip de Souza,
School of Classics,
University College Dublin,
Belfield,Dublin 4, Ireland
philip.desouza@ucd.ie
www.ucd.ie/archaeology

UCD DUBLIN

1200 BC – War, Climate Change, and Cultural Catastrophe

1200 BC stands as one of those symbolic dates in human civilisation. Its significance lies in its association with a period of momentous change, a period of catastrophic destruction and uncertainty for the people of the time. We, with the benefit of hindsight, can see it as a prelude to the archetypal Dark Age that separates the splendours of the Eastern Mediterranean Bronze Age from the glories of Classical Greece and Rome.

1200 BC is, of course, a generic rather than an absolute date, one that stands for the sweep of the history of the time, rather than a single event. If a single event is needed to justify the association, probably it should be the victory over the invading alliance of "peoples from the sea" that Pharaoh Ramesses III recorded at the mortuary temple of Medinet Habu, sometimes dated to 1190 BC. It is that vast movement of population, which current scholarship calls the "Land and Sea Peoples", that lies at the heart of the changes in this period. Egyptian, Ugaritic, and Hittite sources all record threats from large numbers of invaders at this time. The Egyptians in particular had recorded previous incursions by some of the ethnic groups they later included in the muster of the Sea Peoples, especially the Shardana, in the earlier reigns of Pharaohs Ramesses II and Merneptah. Indeed by 1175 BC, a more likely date for Ramesses III's victory, the empire of the other great power of the age, the Hittites, had been destroyed, as had the independent Canaanite kingdoms, exemplified by the great mercantile city of Ugarit. The kingdoms of Mycenaean Greece had already suffered a series of destructions in the 13th century, and the drawn-out end of the Mycenaean civilisation is characterised by the collapse of the centralised economy, radical changes in settlement patterns, including migration out of Greece, loss of literacy, and even linguistic changes. Later Greeks heroised this period with the myths and stories around the fall of Troy. In reality Troy was probably yet another of the the civilised cities of Asia Minor that fell prey to the military adventurers who thrived in the chaos of the period.

And chaos is a reasonably accurate description of the period. The events recorded in documentary archives and inscriptions, and those visible archaeologically, do not present a neat timeline, nor do they offer a clear explanatory narrative of what happened, let alone why it all happened. Military destructions caused cultural discontinuity and population shift decades before 1200 BC, and for more than a century afterwards. The resulting migrations, particularly of Greek-speakers to the Asia Minor coast and to Cyprus (the Greek colonies), or of mixed cultural groups to the Levantine coast (the Philistines), strongly influenced the cultural character and history of the region for centuries to come. Trying to establish some clarity for these events has exercised scholars since the Bronze Age was discovered.

Attracted by the apparent "historicity" of the Egyptian inscriptions, much scholarly energy has been devoted to the identity of the Land and Sea Peoples. The names of the various groups or tribes recorded by the inscriptions include: Sherden (or Shardana), Shekelesh, Teresh, Denyen, Peleset, Tjeker, Lukka. These names are tantalisingly reminiscent of names more familiar from Classical Greek and Roman myth and history: Sardinians, Sicilians, Etruscans, Danaans (Greeks), Philistines, Teucrians (Minoan Cretans), Lycians. Scholars have had much fun creating scenarios whereby

these names, and the events associated with them, can be used to explain the foundation and origin myths of later peoples.

Within all these narratives, which emphasise the Eastern Mediterranean focus of events, there has been little satisfactory explanation for just WHY it all happened. Localised sociopolitical stresses and regional economic or environmental factors all clearly contributed to the flow of events. They allow scholars to play with hypotheses that move in and out of fashion – hypotheses based on the Greeks, the Trojans, on Italic peoples, on Anatolian or Greek droughts and famines. But such factors are unlikely, by themselves, to have provided sufficient impetus for the causal processes that characterise the period. They should not be viewed in such an individualist fashion but seen as part of a larger picture, as the trees rather the wood itself. Part of the problem in understanding these processes has been the very spectacular nature of the Eastern Mediterrranean events. They attract the bulk of the attention. What has been relatively neglected by scholars of the Bronze Age Mediterranean is that there is evidence of similar disruptions elsewhere, particularly in central and northern Europe.

Interestingly, scholars of previous generations, notably Michael Grant and Moses Finley, and later Robert Drews, attempted to place the Mediterranean events within a much broader, even global perspective, citing large-scale migratory movements of peoples within Europe, and beyond. At the time when such interesting claims were made, the political realities of the contemporary world made it difficult to research the archaeology of eastern Europe and western Asia. Additionally the reaction against diffusionist theories of cultural change made archaeologists wary of global explanations, and encouraged regional and cultural specialisation, which in turn mitigated against dialogue between archaeologists who specialised in particular areas. Few Mediterranaen archaeologists knew what colleagues in Northern Europe were finding and vice versa. This is suprising, because just as Mediterranean archaeologists were struggling to understand the Sea Peoples' movements around 1200 BC, so too were Northern European, and especially Irish, archaeologists stuggling with the archaeology of another iconic event on the edge of history and legend, the Coming of the Celts, also attributed to the period around 1200 BC.

The recent political changes which have opened up the previously communist countries have yielded an archaeological dividend. Even though we do not have documentary sources for cultures north of the Danube, it is clear from the emerging archaeological evidence of warfare, weapon technology and usage, site destructions and changes in settlement patterns, that the 1200 BC period is indeed one of immense cultural disruption.

In keeping with the opening up of political frontiers, archaeologists are also increasingly engaged in dialogues outside their regional specialities. Kristian Kristiansen in particular has encouraged archaeologists of all areas of Europe and the Mediterranean to develop the perspective of multi-regional process and transformation.

Another factor which allows explanations to transcend the previous regional isolation of scholarship, has been the increasing sophistication of scientific methods, including dendrochronology and ice-core sampling, which examine the global climates of the past, just as archaeology examines the human cultures. The synthesis of these disciplines has often been

controversial, but although our modern world still struggles to come to terms with this point, it is clear that human cultures cannot be isolated from climate and climate change.

The agenda of this, the 1200 BC conference is thus quite explicit. From the Atlantic coast of North-west Europe to the shores of the South-east Mediterranean, from Ireland and Scandinavia to Egypt, archaeologists increasingly recognise that the 1200 BC period is one of dramatic cultural disruption giving way to profound cultural transformation. Even though there are regional differences in relation to the archaeological manifestations of this process of disruption and transformation, it is important for us to establish and explore the commonalities as well as the differences. We need to ask questions about the scale of these events. Are they linked? Are we witnessing a cascade of migrations of people throughout Europe? Is violence and warfare a common factor in these events? Does the multiple evidence for environmental factors point to global climate change? Are violence and migration the only solutions we witness to the crises?

Gathering together and offering our individual views on the phenomena of this period, we can collectively develop a global perspective. In 1200 BC we have an opportunity to examine the causes, pressures, and consequences of what seems to be one of the most disrupted and violent periods in the history of human civilisation. It is a truism that we live in a modern world that commentators increasingly characterise as driven by global cultural disruption, violence, and migration, all exacerbated by the crisis of climate change. It would be absurd to suggest that we as archaeologists can provide solutions for the world's contemporary problems. But as we bear witness to the events of 1200 BC, when the comfortable Bronze Age world was transformed by similar crises of war, climate change, and cultural catastrophe, there are some obvious lessons and warnings to be heeded.