The End of Civilization (In the Bronze Age): Crash Course World History 211

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, I'm John Green; this is Crash Course World History., and today we're going to talk about the end of civilization.

(High School John) Mr Green, Mr Green! Everybody knows civilization is going to end with Y2K. We can't survive the year 2000.

Now, me from the past, turns out we get through that one alright. And we're not talking about monopolies among cable providers, or net neutrality. In fact, we're not talking about the end of *our* civilization, which everyone knows will be brought about giant, transforming robots that can become cars. If you want to learn about the end of our civilization in video form, might I recommend the major American film, Transformers: Dark of the Moon.

Instead today we are going to talk about the end of a civilization in the ancient Near East at the end of the Bronze Age

So in our first world history series, we talked about river valley civilizations, like the Indus Valley, and Egypt, and Mesopotamia, mainly because most textbooks split them up into separate civilizations. You know, teachers like textbooks, and we want teachers to like Crash Course, so... yeah.

But the thing is we're used to imagining the world as divided up into nation states, and so small and geographically-bound civilizations fit nicely into the way we think of the world. But that isn't the way the world was always imagined.

So there is an argument to be made that all of these communities in the eastern Mediterranean -- what historians sometimes call the Levant or the Ancient Near East, because it is closer to Britain than it is the Far East -- these days we often call it the Mid East. It's almost as though there is no actual "East" and "West" on the globe.

Anyway, you can make the argument that back in the Bronze Age, all of that was actually a unified coherent system. It was one civilization -- kinda.

Egypt, Mesopotamia, the states that grew up in the Levant, and the empires of Anatolia, all of them have quite a lot in common.

Let's begin with our old friend, Trade. So archaeologists have found goods manufactured in Crete in Egypt, and the names of Pharaohs written in hieroglyphics in the Cretan palace at Knossos. But even cooler discoveries have been made by underwater archaeologists.

(addressing off-camera) Wait a second, Stan - are there really underwater archaeologists? (Pause) There are? Where were those people on Career Day? Ah, they were probably underwater.

Underwater archaeologists excavate shipwrecks and one ship at Uluburun in Turkey from the thirteenth century BCE had products on it from at least seven different states. There was stuff like Egyptian jewelry, and copper and tin (which are the raw materials for bronze, you know it was the Bronze Age after all). And although the Egyptians were the central power in this Bronze Age trade network, the Hittites were no slouches. I mean, they ruled an empire that began in Anatolia and spread out to include much of Mesopotamia. In fact, it may have even gone to war with the Mycenaean Greeks in a pre-Homeric Trojan War. How do we know this? Well again, Archaeologists.

And this brings up another feature of the ancient Near East in the late Bronze Age: Warfare. There is a fair amount of it between Egyptian and Hittites and Assyrians and many other empires which rose and fell over many hundreds of years. Wars were pretty common in the period of 1500 to 1200 BCE. You know, rulers wanted to extended their power and prestige through military success and conquest. And also that military success and conquest was one of the main drivers of economic growth. Eh, we could increase agricultural yields, we could come up with more efficient mechanization, or we could go to war. They always went to war.

But there wasn't just war. There was also quite a bit of diplomacy. And when diplomats from these rival communities would talk to each other, they would often call each other by family names or imagine family relationships, even though they weren't actually family. But that sense that they felt like family. You know, families do sometimes have wars, indicates that it wasn't necessarily different civilizations. And sometimes the wars ended with diplomatic marriages, so rather than just pretending that they were family, rulers of the late Bronze Age states would actually become family. And then they could stop fighting and start trading, at least for a little while. By the way, this is also the history of Post-Roman Empire Europe. So we have a trade network, we have a lot of interconnected familial relationships (both real and imagined), but do we have a civilization? Well, I would argue "yes," even though it didn't have a single ruler, or one form of political structure, or even one language. But neither does "Western" civilization and lots of people think that's a thing.

When you think about it, what people often mean when we talk about civilizations today are systems. Like when we talk about Western civilization, we're not actually talking about Greece or Rome or England or France or the United States, we're talking about a set of structures, and religious and cultural traditions that are closely related enough that we see them as forming a coherent whole. And the same thing is true when we talk about Islamic civilization, which spans from like Sufi mystics in Turkey to Indonesia, the country with more Muslims than any other on earth. So at least according to that definition, the ancient Near East was a civilization. But this is an episode about the collapse of that civilization, so what happened to it?

Well there we have one of the great historical mysteries. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Archaeologists have discovered that some time around 1200 BCE, the number of the cities in the region suffered upheaval, disruption, and in many cases destruction. Among those cultures that bit the dust are the Mycenaeans, the Minoans of Crete, and our not particularly friendly friends the Hittites. Egypt didn't disappear but the political system there was rocked enough that Egyptologists say that this period marked the end of the new kingdom. Until recently the cause of this collapse was blamed on an invasion or perhaps a wave of invasions by the mysterious sea peoples. This idea comes from the Egyptian description from 1177 BCE that describes a confederation of invaders.
"...They were coming forward toward Egypt, while the flame was prepared before them. Their confederation was the Peleset, Tjekker, Shekelesh, Danuana, and Weshesh, lands united." By the way, mispronouncing things is my thing. "They laid their hands upon the lands as far as the circuit of the earth, their hearts confident and trusting"

The sea peoples, possibly because they were busy destroying cities or perhaps trying to come up with a better name for themselves, didn't leave any inscriptions of their own, so the idea of their invasion is kind of suspect, but we do know that cities were destroyed, mainly between 1210 and 1130 BCE, we just don't know by whom. The story of the sea peoples probably stuck around for so long because, you know, it's a good story, and one that provides a tidy explanation, but what if it's wrong?

Thanks, Thought Bubble. The other thing I wanna note here is that we like to imagine that history is the result of like, humans doing things. You know, humans are big fans of human agency, we like

to be in control of things. Historians have traditionally also been just a smidge obsessed with war, so if we're imagining why a civilization ended, we're gonna imagine that it probably involved humans and y'know, likely involved war. So what happened? Well, it could have been the sea people. Like, there's a letter from a town in northern Syria, which was burned sometime between 1190 and 1185 BCE, the town was burned, not the letter, obviously, that's how we found it. It read, in part: "My father, now the ships of the enemy have come, they have been setting fire to my cities and have done harm to the land." Now, that fits with what we know about the sea people: come from the sea, burn the land, but the dating of the letter is uncertain. And there's a different, very compelling, non-human possibility: earthquakes.

Now, I'm not an archaeologist, but archaeologists tell me that when an earthquake destroys a city, its walls fall down in a particular way, and you often find people crushed beneath them. When a city is sacked, the architectural remnants look very different: there are arrowheads stuck in walls or in the bones of skeletons. And we know there were earthquakes, thanks to archeo-seismologists, who are in competition with underwater archaeologists to have the best job ever. They've determined that between about 1225 BCE and 1175 BCE, the eastern Mediterranean experience "an earthquake storm." Wait, did I just say earthquake storms? Must be time for the open letter. But first, let's see what's in the globe today. Oh, that's a nice little village. Wait, why did you do that, Thought Bubble, that's very sad!

An Open Letter to Earthquake Storms:
Dear Earthquake Storms,
What a fantastic term. I would say that you're an example of historians naming something brilliantly for once, but in fact, you were, of course, named by an archeoseismologist. The idea here, originally proposed by a guy named Amos Nur is that one large earthquake can actually lead to a series of extremely large earthquakes. They just kind of go down the same plate boundary, going baaa-b'baa-b'baa-b'baa. That's the technical term for what earthquakes do. And earthquake storms, in addition to having an awesome name, you are terrible. You just keep happening down the fault line, like, for decades, it's not cool, earthquake storm, stop it!
Best wishes,
John Green

As you can imagine, this earthquake storm, pretty destabilizing to the region both physically and politically. You know, if I lose like, four hands of blackjack in a row, I start railing against the fates. An earthquake storm would really challenge my, like, political and religious worldviews.

And then there's the non-earthquake environmental calamity possibility. Again, contemporary science paints an interesting portrait here. So, fossilized pollen has demonstrated that the period between 1200 and 850 BCE was notably drier than earlier periods. And we also have records of famines from what I'll just call the Near East Civilization, actually, I should think of a better name for it. The Lovely Levant, the Bronze Age Brouhaha. You know, this is harder than it seems, actually. Anyway, as we've seen in other episodes, drought and famine are consistently devastating, but they don't usually lead to full-on meltdowns of a social order. And interestingly, that's especially true of the region that we're talking about today.

Then there's the theory that the region experienced peasant uprisings. And there's another that trade disruptions caused the economic system to collapse. And then there's a theory that emerged in the 1990s that shows us a lot about how present thinking can influence the way we imagine the past. This theory goes that the rise of private entrepreneurial traders undermined the palace based trading system and created a disruption, similar to the ones that Silicon Valley likes to create. This has become a very popular way of talking about the late Bronze Age, but it's also a bit problematic. For one thing, kings were not replaced by entrepreneurs. They were replaced, you know, by less powerful kings, this is the way the civilization ends, not with a bang, but with a whimper.

Alright, so you might be saying, this was a really long time ago, and the people involved didn't even leave pyramids for us to enjoy. And we don't even really know what happened. And that's not history, is it, and also, can anything that brought down a civilization 3000 years ago really be a threat to my way of life? Yes. The interconnected trade and diplomacy based systemic civilization of the ancient Near East is at least somewhat similar to the interconnected trade and diplomacy based systemic civilization that we live in today. It's just that, for us, that system extends around the entire planet. And some argue that it was, in fact, the very interconnected-ness of the late Bronze Age civilization that made it unstable. Sometimes, in extremely complex systems, the failure of one segment can disrupt the whole thing. Like, according to historian Eric Cline, "If Late Bronze Age civilizations were truly globalized and dependent upon each other for goods and services, even just to a certain extent, then change to any one of the relevant kingdoms such as the Mycenaeans or the Hittites would potentially affect and destabilize them all." 3000 years later, a credit crisis in the United States leads to 30% unemployment in Spain. An outbreak of bird flu in China dramatically increases the price of chicken in Canada. And in 1914, the assassination of an archduke leads to war in Japan.

In the end, whether you take meaningful lessons away from the story of the collapse of this particular civilization depends on how much you see it as an analogy to our own world. If you believe that the Mediterranean world between 1500 and 1200 was, as one historian put it, "A cosmopolitan and globalized system such as has only rarely been seen before the current day", then understanding what happened 3000 years ago can be pretty helpful. That said, it could have been global interdependence or entrepreneurial disruption, it also could have been sea people. It's certainly important for us to imagine the present in the context of the past. But insofar as possible, we don't want too much to imagine the past through the lens of the present. And that's why I think, in general, it's a good idea to be suspicious of any single cause imagining of why historical events happened. Could the sea people, whoever they were, really have been powerful enough to destroy this civilization? It's no coincidence that around the world, people are always talking about some version of barbarian invasions, and that is rarely the true straightforward explanation of what happened -- I mean, unless you're talking about the Mongols.

It's true, though, the Mongols were the only barbarian invasion that showed the ability to like, single-hoardedly collapse a civilization. Anyway, thanks for watching, I'll see you next week.

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