

THE WORLD ORDER THAT COLLAPSED BEFORE

We often think that new weapons change the balance of power. Chariots in old Egypt. Nuclear bombs in World War II. And now, nuclear weapons in North Korea.

It is tempting to believe that the great collapse of the late Bronze Age civilizations, around 1,200 B.C. in the Mediterranean, was due to the development of iron. It was not. Although weapons made of iron would soon enough change the face of their wars.

Let's set the stage.

Copper began to be commonly smelted around 3,500 B.C. in the Eastern Mediterranean. The famous "Iceman" mummy "Otzi," found in the Alps, had a small axe-head made of copper. I have a replica that I use in teaching. It is sharp now, but would have been blunt after use.

This was a time before the pyramids, even before Stonehenge. Surely some Middle Eastern potter discovered the coppery colored metal when it melted out of the rocks she used to support her pottery while it was being "fired." Those kilns reached the temperatures necessary to smelt copper out of its ore. Probably from the rock, chalcopyrite, a combination of copper, iron, and sulfide.

The Copper Age dominated Eastern Mediterranean culture for almost 1,000 years. But if there is iron in chalcopyrite, why was its use not also discovered then? Because it takes much higher temperatures to smelt out iron, and you are not going to reach them in pottery kilns!

Copper becomes tougher when alloyed with tin. And tin smelts out of it at even lower temperatures than copper. So why, then, did it take so long to discover its use as an alloy with copper to form the harder metal, bronze?

Well, tin is relatively rare. Much more so than copper. If you wanted to make lots of bronze tools, armor, and weapons, you had to import the tin ore. Probably from the large mines in Badakhshan in Afghanistan. Right across the lands of the trading, warring empires of the Fertile Crescent! This wealth of bronze led to the fabulous palace states of the Great Mycenaean Era in Greece and the Middle East. Let us say 1,600 B.C. for convenience, although some states had started using bronze much earlier.

1,600 B.C. is also an important date in the development of warfare technology. For that is when the Mitanni introduced the chariot into the northern region of Syria, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The Mitanni were an empire for only about 200 years, but were involved in a cascading series of capabilities and crises that would form the basis of western civilization and society today.

Using Mitanni technology, the Hyksos People caught the Egyptians by surprise. Isolated by deserts and disorganized northern neighbors, the Pharaohs had rested in relative peace. Then the Hyksos attacked on their chariots and Mitanni trained horses. The Hyksos were probably Canaanites or Syrians and brought to warfare not only chariots and horses, but the composite bow, helmets, and a new style of socketed bronze axe that could penetrate bronze armor.

The Hyksos ruled Lower Egypt for little more than 100 years. Egyptian Pharaoh Kamose and his brother, Ahmose, based in Thebes, finally chased the Hyksos out around 1,550 B.C. by adapting their own weapons and tactics to Egyptian use. The Age of Chariot warfare was on! But not for long. Just long enough to make great film footage ("The Ten Commandments") of the Pharaoh Ahmose I (maybe) chasing the Israelites (possibly) across the parting Red Sea (unlikely).

For 400 years, chariot warfare ruled the land. Egyptian victories established the famous 18th Dynasty in Egypt. Hatshepsut, Thutmose III, Akhenaten and Tut. No longer content to wait on defense to be attacked, the Pharaohs sent out their chariot forces into the lands of Canaan

and Syria, creating buffers of land and vassal states. Famous battles were fought that are well described on Egyptian temples and monuments.

One such battle involved the warrior Pharaoh Thutmose III, battling Canaanite and Syrian forces at Megiddo, now in Israel, in 1,457 B.C. Each side may have fielded more than 2,500 chariots. As was the kingly tradition of Egypt, Thutmose led his forces into battle on a chariot covered in electrum, an alloy of gold and silver. Megiddo is a pretty place. Pivotal, too, in terms of trade. We know of 34 battles that have been fought there in the last 4,000 years. And maybe one more yet to happen!

Another great chariot battle took place in 1274 B.C. at Kadesh in modern Syria on the Orontes River. It was the largest chariot battle in history, with as many as 6,000 chariots engaged. It pitted Ramses II (Ramses the Great) against the forces of the Anatolian Kingdom of the Hittites, led by King Muwatalli. Ramses led an army of four divisions, each named after a god: Amon, Ptah, Re, and Seth. Again, we have good Egyptian records of Ramses claiming victory, but it is unlikely that he prevailed. For even though the Hittite army did eventually withdraw, Kadesh was never taken.

Fifteen years later, Egypt and the Hittite Kingdom executed an "Eternal Treaty." We have copies in both Hittite and Egyptian, and you can see it today inscribed on the walls of the United Nations Building in New York City.

Relative peace existed between the two lands until the Hittite Empire was destroyed by a "horde" of "sea peoples" fifty years later. And then those destructive armies set their sights on Syria, Canaan, and Egypt.

The great collapse of the late Bronze Age had begun!