Michael Rank: This is the History in Five Minutes Podcast, the #1 podcast for learning about anything in history in no time at all! I’m your host, Michael Rank.

Today’s topic is Dark Ages in History, Part 1: 1177 BC and the Late Bronze Age Collapse.

We’ll be doing a three-part series on Dark Ages in history on this podcast. This is different from the series we had a few podcasts ago about the disappearance of civilizations. Instead, what we’ll be talking about today is about a more extended gradual decline of a superpower.

Let’s set the stage right now for a collapse? If you look around your room or your car or wherever you are, you probably have a computer, smart phone, iPad, Playstation 4 and you’re living a life rocking the suburbs in your Subaru. You realize that the technology you have now is better than 30 years ago. Back then, your PS4 was a Nintendo, your iPhone 5 was a Motorola Brick Phone, and your hair was much bigger in the form of crimped or rattail depending on your gender. When you extrapolate that level of progress back into the future, you might imagine that civilization goes in a straight line upward. It started at zero somewhere with cavemen in the Neolithic period but it’s more or less gone to where you are today.

However, history does not work like that. Yes, its long-term trajectory is upward, but it’s a very jagged line like a seismographic reading that goes up but has severe dips along the way. Sometimes, terrible disasters fall on civilizations and its level of progress falls far, far below what it was for centuries at a time. This disaster could be the invasion of a foreign army, natural disasters that destroy crops or anything like that. If you watch a Dystopian movie like the Book of Eli where civilizations wiped out, electronics don’t work, most people are illiterate, but they realize that there was a much better level of progress in the past. This type of thing actually happened to people in history and we’re going to look at that today.

The first such recorded Dark Age in human civilization happened in 1177 BC. This is known as the Bronze Age Collapse, but also called The Year Civilization Collapsed. Before this time, from 1500 to 1200 BC, the Mediterranean was a site of a wonderfully complex society – Egyptians, Minoans, Hittites, Syrians, Babylonians, Cypriotes, and Canaanites all traded together, build temples, exchanged languages, constructed ships, and wrote epic poetry. Around this time, the standard version of the Epic of Gilgamesh was written in Akkadian and I have friends who do Hittite archeology here in Turkey and they excavate Hittite cities. The things they find are amazing – the pottery, the style of dress, and the amount of writing that took place on cuneiform tablets are really astounding based on how much they find. But then something terrible happened. All those years of cultural and technological progress suddenly came to a crashing halt. The Mediterranean trade networks collapsed. Empires in Greece, Italy, Palestine, and Mesopotamia collapsed and these all culminated into the first Dark Ages in civilization.

The collapse is recorded in literature that was written centuries later. Homer’s, The Iliad, which is written in 800 BC describes the battle between the Mycenaeans and the Trojans that took place right before this collapse. Of course, the work is fiction, but a lot of scholars
think that they are real events woven into this where Homer is trying to conceptualize what Greek society was like before this collapse took place and imagine in all these larger than life figures like Agamemnon, Achilles, Hector, and Priam that were part of this grand civilization that has disappeared but they’re trying to understand what it means for them as Greek people today.

There are theories for how this collapse happened. The people most commonly blamed are known as the Sea Peoples. They were sea-faring raiders who came from Anatolia or Southern Europe or the Aegean Region – we really don’t know, who sailed around the Eastern Mediterranean. They invaded Cyprus, the Levant, the Hittite capital of Hatti, and Egypt in 1177. We know from the records of Pharaohs Merneptah and Ramesses III that the pharaoh’s army and navy managed to defeat them, but the victory so weakened Egypt that it slid into a decline as did most of the surrounding civilizations.

But it wasn’t just a group of foreigners that wrecked civilization. One foreign invasion can’t take down a thriving culture. If the culture is vibrant enough, usually it can absorb and assimilate the outsiders. Instead, the Sea Peoples were only one part of the series of disasters that wrecked havoc on the ancient world. It was a domino effect or a perfect storm of events or take whatever metaphor you want, a Jenga that collapsed, of events that brought the late Bronze Age to an end.

One issue is that scientists believed climate change occurred at this time. With the change in global temperature, it could have led to multiple years of crop failures or it would have likely resulted because hungry people had to invade their neighbors as a last ditch effort to survive. Warfare was also more brutal at this time. Iron-making spread making iron weaponry more common simplifying invasion. One reason that the global climate changed was because of volcanoes. The Hekla Volcano of Iceland erupted during this time which would have thrown tons of volcanic rock into the atmosphere causing worldwide temperatures to drop in the Northern part of the globe.

Another natural disaster is a series of earthquakes that wrecked havoc on the ancient world. This happened from Mediterranean civilizations all the way out to China. The reason so many occurred in this time is that earthquakes tend to occur in sequences or storms. If a major earthquake above 6.5 on the Richter scale happens, it can move pressure along tectonic lines and in later months or years set of second or subsequent earthquakes.

All these foreign invasions and natural disasters destroyed the one thing that was the linchpin of Mediterranean society at this time which was trade. These cultures around the Mediterranean were interconnected and depended on other cultures for their goods. Food stuff such as crops from Egypt to the fertile Nile basin fed surrounding civilizations. Bronze produced elsewhere provided the weaponry, chariots, and swords for other places. But these goods couldn’t move around after 1177 due to the weakening of empires and the increase in piracy in the Mediterranean. We saw two podcast episodes ago that if you don’t have a strong navy around, piracy is what naturally inhabits that sea.

As a result of a collapse in trade, large cities and settlements shrank, education collapsed, and illiteracy skyrocketed. This period is called the Greek Dark Ages amongst the Greek people and it lasted more than 400 years up to the time of Homer. Speaking of which, the
blind poet gives us a glimpse into what this collapse looked like. In 1178, a solar eclipse occurred which may have marked Odysseus’ return to Ithaca after the Trojan War. The text describes the eclipse as follows which is a good description of the collapse of the 1170’s, ‘The sun has been obliterated from the sky and an unlucky darkness invades the world.’

Before we wrap up, I have a recommended in regard to the topic of today’s podcast. An archeologist from George Washington University, Eric Cline, has a new book coming out about this topic which inspired this episode. It’s called *1177: The Year Civilization Collapsed*. You can get that book on Amazon in March 2014. I’ll put in a link to that book on my website, and you can find a post that relates to this if you go to [www.michaelrank.net/collapse](http://www.michaelrank.net/collapse).

For more history like this that is offbeat, obscure, but most of all not boring, come check out my website at [www.michaelrank.net](http://www.michaelrank.net). There, you can find podcasts and blog posts like this. I’ll even throw in a free history Ebook that you can grab right now at [www.michaelrank.net/freebook](http://www.michaelrank.net/freebook). Have a good day!