Introduction

Welcome to the world of the Late Bronze Age in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean seas, and to one of history’s greatest mysteries: what caused its sudden collapse more than three thousand years ago, just after 1200 BC?

I’m Glynnis Fawkes, cartoonist and archaeological illustrator, here with Eric Cline, archaeologist and author.

It is our pleasure to present to you a graphic version of a book I wrote, 1177 BC.

Guided by two friends from that time period, Pel and Shesha, we will explore the history of that intertwined period and meet a variety of different people along the way, including Mycenaeans, Hittites, Egyptians, and Canaanites.

The two of us will provide some modern expertise as well, as we travel with you to figure out what happened back then and how it is relevant to us today.
I’m Pel, one of the Sea Peoples! I’m here to find out what led to the Sea Peoples’ battles of 1177 BC and what brought the Late Bronze Age to an end.

I’m Shesha, a scribe from Egypt. Together with Pel, I’m following ancient texts and documentation to discover the story of the Late Bronze Age.

It all started one day when Pel finally got fed up with hearing his grandpa’s stories...
PROLOGUE

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Pel! Where are you going?

We’re about to eat and Grandpa is going to tell another tale!

Again about how he fought in the Sea Peoples’ battles?

Yes, tales of the heroic past—palaces, princesses, and royal gifts of imported gold!

That’s the problem, Little Sister! It’s the late 12th century BC, and the world Grandpa describes is gone!
Across the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean swept a wave of destructions! The great powers of the Late Bronze Age— the Hittites, Mycenaeans, Canaanites, Cypriots, and others— have all fallen and civilization as we knew it came to an end.
I can’t listen to Grandpa’s stories of the past and of the recent battles with the Egyptians without asking. What happened? What brought the Late Bronze Age to an end?

Was it because of us, the Sea Peoples? That’s what I aim to find out!

I’ll start with my friend Shesha. Her family works on the mortuary temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu in Luxor.

You’re friends with an Egyptian?

Shesha will know the Egyptian side of the story, and a lot more besides.

Don’t forget your Sea Peoples hat!

But maybe don’t wear it around the Egyptians!

Thanks, Auntie.
Hi Pe! You're just in time!
Hi Shesha! My dad and his team of sculptors are nearly finished.

They're carving the story of Ramses III's battles with the Sea Peoples on the north side of the temple.

My grandpa fought in those battles! Then you know all about it!

I know his version!

My job is to make sure they spell everything correctly. You can help.

You don't read hieroglyphics?

Or anything else! I don't write, either!

You know I can't.

No wonder you need me!

So tell me what's going on in this scene?

This is one of many battle scenes, and there were several groups of invaders.

I recognize these guys! They are the Peleset, Tjekker, Shekelesh, Danuma, and Woshesh!

Dad, we're coming up for a closer look.

Careful on the ladders!

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This kid seems to know an awful lot about the Sea Peoples!

Maybe he can tell us where they came from?

And why they went out of their way to attack!
I heard they could be from as far away as Sicily, Sardinia, the Aegean, Western Anatolia, and Cyprus—

But no one place has been identified as their home.

We do know WHEN they attacked. It was during the eighth year of Ramses III’s reign...
The year was 1177 BC.
So you can identify each group by their distinctive features?

Yes, they come from different cultures and places.

For example, this guy with the horned helmet is either Shekelesh or Shardana. I'm Peleset—you can tell by the hat.

Oh, so that's what Pel is short for?

Some Sea Peoples arrived in Egypt by ship, some came with families in wagons and ox carts. This was us a few years ago...

Dad, can I drive?

No! I need to concentrate!

Whatever you do, don’t take us into battle!

Although 1177 BC was a pivotal date, the Sea Peoples arrived in waves over several decades.

I was too young, so I don’t remember exactly why we came. Maybe my parents were motivated by spoils—or we were fleeing drought, famine, or population pressures.

We can look into all the possibilities!

Shesha, will you read what is carved here? What does Ramses III say about the battles in 1177 BC?

He says:
THE FOREIGN COUNTRIES MADE A CONSPIRACY IN THEIR ISLANDS...
NO LAND COULD STAND BEFORE THEIR ARMS,
FROM KHATTI, QODE, CARCHEMISH, ARZAWA, AND ALASHIYA ON, BEING CUTOFF AT ONE TIME.
A CAMP WAS SET UP AT AMURRU. THEY DESOLATED ITS PEOPLE, AND ITS LAND WAS LIKE THAT WHICH HAD NEVER COME INTO BEING.

THEY WERE COMING FORWARD TOWARDS EGYPT WHILE THE FLAME WAS BEING PREPARED FOR THEM.
THEIR CONFEDERATION WAS THE PELESET, NJERKER, SHEKELESH, DANUNA, AND WESHESH LANDS UNITED.
THEY LAID THEIR HANDS UPON THE LANDS AS FAR AS THE CIRCUIT OF THE EARTH, THEIR HEARTS CONFIDENT AND TRUSTING.

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The six groups who made up the Sea Peoples during the 1177 BC invasion— including the five mentioned in the Medinet Habu inscription and the Shardana who are mentioned in another inscription— are far more shadowy than the lands they overran.

They left no inscriptions of their own, and are therefore known almost entirely from Egyptian texts.

We didn’t write— all our stories, up in smoke!

Luckily, the Egyptians recorded battles in great detail.

And there is also archaeological evidence for destructions at this time.

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The archaeological record shows that outside of Egypt, almost all of the other powers thriving during the second millennium BC...

from the Aegean, Anatolia, Canaan, and Mesopotamia...

powerful civilizations of the Eastern Mediterranean...

either immediately, or within less than a century...

were devastated.
Eric, how do we know these Late Bronze Age sites were destroyed?

A layer of charcoal shows that this excavated building— or city— was burned.

Historically, evidence for destructions like this were attributed to the Sea Peoples... but most of the Sea Peoples groups are difficult to detect in the archaeological record...

though archaeologists and philologists have been attempting to discover them for the past century, first by playing linguistic games...

... and by looking at pottery and other archaeological remains.

For instance, the Danuna were identified with Homer’s Danaans.

The Shekeleesh are hypothesized to come from Sicily, and the Shardana from Sardinia, based on consonantal similarities.

The Shardana fought for and against Egypt long before the Sea Peoples’ battles.

The Shardana in particular are “of the sea.”

Don’t I know you from the Iliad?

Brother!

In each case, Ramses refers to them as “making conspiracy in their islands.”

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Hey! My hat is right where we left it!

OF all the Sea Peoples groups, only one has been firmly identified—MINE.

In the Bible the Peleset are known as the Philistines and are said to come from Caphtor, or Crete.

The identification of specific pottery styles, architecture, and other material remains as “Philistine”...

began as early as 1899 by biblical archaeologists working at Tell es-Safi, biblical Gath.

Jean François Champollion, the decipherer of Egyptian hieroglyphics, had already suggested the connection before 1836.

All of this material is Philistine! Including ME!

I’m Philistine, too!

I’m Philistine!

I’m a horned altar—very Philistine.

Philistine!

So Philistine!

Totally Philistine!

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Back to the relief's at Medinet Habu! Even though scholars do not know precisely the motivations of the invaders...

the scenes carved on the temple walls provide detailed information—the names and faces of the Sea Peoples.

This information was copied and studied by Egyptologists at the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures (ISAC), formerly the Oriental Institute, at the University of Chicago since the 1920s.
Epigraphic surveys conducted all over Egypt have recorded inscriptions left by pharaohs on their temples and palaces.

My colleagues and I are making painstaking copies of the hieroglyphics and complex battle scenes.

Who minds standing on a ladder all day in the sun? Not I!

Nor the Egyptians who carved all this to begin with!

ISAC published transcriptions of Medinet Habu in volumes from the 1930s to the 1950s— a valuable resource for scholars.

For example, in creating this book!

Without these transcriptions, the information of the temple would be lost to erosion and other damage, and would therefore be undecipherable to future generations.

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My grandpa told us about fighting on both land and sea.

The reliefs at Medinet Habu show these battles—they probably took place in the Nile delta or nearby.

Does Ramses mention a surprise attack?

He sure does! His inscription reports the results:

“THOSE WHO REACHED MY FRONTIER, THEIR SEED IS NOT, THEIR HEART AND SOUL ARE FINISHED FOREVER AND EVER.

THOSE WHO CAME FORWARD TOGETHER ON THE SEA, THE FULL FLAME WAS IN FRONT OF THEM AT THE RIVER-MOUTHS, WHILE A STOCKADE OF LANCES SURROUNDED THEM ON THE SHORE.

THEY WERE DRAGGED IN, ENCLOSED, AND PROSTRATED ON THE BEACH, KILLED, AND MADE INTOHEAPS, TAIL TO HEAD.

THEIR SHIPS AND GOODS WERE AS IF FALLEN INTO THE WATER.

I HAVE MADE THE LANDS TURN BACK FROM EVEN MENTIONING EGYPT:

FOR WHEN THEY PRONOUNCE MY NAME IN THEIR LAND, THEY ARE BURNED UP.”
Ramses continues, in a document known as the Papyrus Harris, again naming his defeated enemies:

"I overthrew those who invaded them from their lands. I slew the Danuna [who were] in their islands, the Tjekker and the Peleset were made ashes.

The Shardana and Weshesh of the sea, they were made as those that exist not, taken captive at one time, brought as captives to Egypt like the sand of the shore.

I settled them in strongholds bound in my name.

Numerous were their classes like hundred-thousands.

I taxed them all, in clothing and grain from storehouses and granaries each year."

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This was not the first time the Egyptians fought against a collective force of “Sea Peoples.” Thirty years earlier, in 1207, during Merneptah’s reign, a similar coalition of groups attacked Egypt.

Merneptah is best known as the Egyptian pharaoh who first uses the term “Israel” in an inscription dating to the same year, 1207 BC.

It’s the earliest occurrence of the name “Israel” outside of the Bible... and it’s written with the sign that indicates a people rather than a place.

Israelites were fighting Egyptians, too?

Yes, but the inscription is about Merneptah’s campaign in Canaan, where the people called Israel lived, and it’s concerned with ongoing battles with Libyans.

Merneptah was far more occupied with Libyans and Sea Peoples than with the Israelites.
In another example, in a text found at Heliopolis dated to Year 5 of Merneptah’s reign:

“The wretched chief of Libya has invaded [with Shekelesh] and every foreign country which is with him, to violate the borders of Egypt.”

A longer inscription found at Karnak (modern Luxor) provides details about this earlier wave of incursions:

“[Beginning of the victory that his majesty achieved in the land of Libya] Ewesh, Teresh, Lukka, Shardana, Shekelesh, Northerners coming from all lands... the third season, saying:

Shardana, Shekelesh, Lukka, Teresh, taking the best of every warrior and every man of war of his country...”

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The inscription from Karnak includes a list of captives carried off from Libya, and the other peoples he brought with him.

Not only names, but numbers.

**SHERDEN, SHEKELESH, EQWESH OF THE COUNTRIES OF THE SEA, WHO HAD NO FORESKINS,**

**SHEKELESH 222 MEN MAKING 250 HANDS**

**TERESH 742 MEN MAKING 790 HANDS.**

**SHARDANA-[MAKING]-**

**[EQ]WESH WHO HAD NO FORESKINS, SLAIN, WHOSE HANDS WERE CARRIED OFF...**

**SHEKELESH AND TERESH WHO CAME AS ENEMIES OF LIBYA—KEHEK AND LIBYANS, CARRIED OFF AS LIVING PRISONERS 219 MEN.”**

I hate to ask, but, why hands?

I’ll explain on the next page.

Five groups made up this earlier wave of Sea Peoples.

The Shardana (aka Shered) and Shekeleesh are there in both inscriptions.

Yes, and they and the Eqwesh are specifically identified as “countries of the Sea.”

Hey, Shardana, are you up for a sea invasion?

Count us in, Shekeleesh!

Us Eqwesh, too!

And so all five groups are together described as “NORTHERNERS FROM ALL LANDS.”

Because except for Nubia and Libya, every other country known to New Kingdom Egypt is to the north!
Some scholars have suggested that the Eqwesh are the same as Homer’s Achaeans, that is, Mycenaean from mainland Greece.

The Eqwesh may be identified with (or replaced by) the Danuna or Danaans in the later Sea Peoples’ battles in 1177 BC, as Ramses described at Medinet Habu.

Achilles, is that you?

I thought you’d never ask!

The Lukka are considered to come from southeast Turkey, known in Classical times as Lycia.

Lukka are also known from earlier inscriptions, such as those of Ramses II concerned with the Battle of Qadesh in 1274 BC, as well as Hittite inscriptions.

Fighting Egyptians since at least 1274 BC!

The origin of the Teresh is uncertain—but might be linked to the Etruscans.

Representing Italy!

We only have a general idea about where these battles in 1207 were fought. Merneptah reports that the victory was achieved in the land of Libya, “the country of Tehenu.”

Wherever it was, the Sea Peoples returned to fight again!
Remember the hands from the list of the killed and captured? The practice was to cut off the hand of a dead enemy as proof.

Grisly accounting!

Evidence of this practice has been found from the Hyksos period in Egypt, 400 years earlier.

Sixteen right hands were found buried in four pits at the Hyksos palace of Avaris in the Nile delta.

I've got a few more than that!

So the Sea Peoples attacked in 1207 BC, and again thirty years later.

We're back!

We'll finish the fight Grandpa started!

Revenge for Ole Lefty!

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In 1177 BC, as in 1207 BC, the Egyptians were victorious.

“THEIR HEARTS ARE TAKEN AWAY, THEIR SOUL IS FLOWN AWAY.”

The Sea Peoples did not return a third time.

Although Egypt under Ramses III was the only major power to successfully resist the Sea Peoples, New Kingdom Egypt never held the same power and influence again.

The entire region faced difficulties, as we will see.

It would not be until Pharaoh Shoshenq—aka biblical Shishak—ca. 945 BC that Egypt rose again to prominence.

Two dark centuries later.

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