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The Sea Peoples, the Victorians, and Us

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THE SEA PEOPLES, THE VICTORIANS, AND US: MODERN SOCIAL IDEOLOGY AND CHANGING ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE LATE BRONZE AGE COLLAPSE

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This paper will attempt to demonstrate a close connection between changing archaeological interpretations of the role of the "Peoples of the Sea" in the disintegration of Bronze Age Mediterranean civilization and evolving social perceptions of colonial migration and imperial expansion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After describing early attempts at interpretation of the reliefs of the Temple of Medinet Habu and other relevant Egyptian texts by de Rougé, Chabas, and Maspero, the paper will offer a brief history of the very different, archaeologically-based theories of Petrie, Evans, and Mackenzie regarding the identity and character of the Peoples of the Sea. It will be argued that the positive reconstructions of the Sea Peoples' movements in the early- to mid-19th century were often informed by Eurocentric, imperialist assumptions about the "vigor" of northern peoples, while later theories were heavily influenced by the specter of social dislocation and international competition experienced in the industrial centers of Europe at the turn of the century. It will be further argued that evolving interpretations of Late Bronze Age collapse continue to be deeply–if often unconsciously–affected by modern social and economic trends.

The history of archaeology is nothing if it is not the record of a continual struggle by scholars to rise above the biases, preconceptions, and delusions of previous generations (as masterfully shown by Trigger 1989). It is also, I would insist, the story of the ongoing evolution of a distinctive mode of social behavior, in which the participants cannot help but be deeply affected by the hopes, fears, and power relationships of their own societies (Patterson 1995; Silberman 1995). The extent to which these two dimensions, the intellectual *and* the ideological, are inseparably intertwined is a question that is only occasionally and usually polemically addressed (cf. the essays in Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990). In order to address it more irenically, I intend to take what may at first seem to be a rather restricted example: the changing archaeological interpretations about the ancient groups known as the "Sea Peoples," whose variously traced paths of invasion and migration have, as we have so abundantly heard throughout this conference, occupied the attention of Egyptologists, Aegeanists, and Near Eastern archaeologists for the last century (Sandars 1985; Dothan and Dothan 1992; Drews 1993). In this paper I intend to describe some possible social and political contexts for the first historical generalizations that were made about the Sea Peoples during the 75 years that English-speakers might call the "long" Victorian period, stretching from the mid-19th century to the outbreak of World War I. And I hope to show that at least some of those musty Victorian archaeological narratives remain surprisingly persistent as explanatory frameworks–even today.

When I speak of archaeological interpretation as a form of narrative, I suppose that by now, in these days of deconstruction, postmodernism, and Critical Theory, the use of literary criticism

and textual analysis to study modern archaeological "stories" should be familiar, even commonplace (Leone, Potter, and Shackel 1987; Pinsky and Wylie 1989). The pioneering work of the paleoanthropologist Misia Landau (1991), in recognizing that rival theories have the precise structure of folk tales–with differing "heroes," "villains," plot lines, and endings–has demonstrated that at a certain point of generalization, even the most scrupulous prehistorian must make the crucial imaginative leap from fragmentary data to coherent reconstruction. And the general scholarly acceptance of any particular reconstruction, Landau argues, is often dependent not only on the quality of the data, but also on the skill of the storyteller and the implicit social meaning and unspoken political assumptions of the tale.

Aegean archaeology has certainly not had its lack of either storytellers or critics (Wood 1985; Bernal 1987; McDonald and Thomas 1990; Morris 1991). Some critics now stress the role played by Heinrich Schliemann's life experiences (some would say his pathological lying) in his reconstructions of Trojan and Mycenaean history (Calder and Trail 1986; Turner 1990). Others identify Arthur Evans' romantic longings for an innocent, anti-modern utopia as the basis for his reconstruction of Minoan society (Horowitz 1981; Bintliff 1984). In the case of the Sea Peoples, the mix of past and present, of personal projection and contemporary ideology, is certainly no less complex. In this paper, I will argue that the archaeological interpretations first crystallized about them in the Victorian period express both the period's dominant political fantasies and its looming social nightmares, costumed in horned helmets and feathered crests.

Without going into the story of the discovery of the Medinet Habu reliefs by Vivant Denon in 1798 in the course of the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt and his misidentification of Ramesses III as the legendary Sesostris massacring Indian "Hindoos" (Denon 1803; Dothan and Dothan 1992: 15, 19) the evidence about the Sea Peoples that excited Homeric traditionalists came with the work in the 1850s and 1860s by Champollion's successor at the College de France, Em-

manuel de Rougé (Dawson and Uphill 1972: 84; Dothan and Dothan 1992: 23-25; Drews 1993: 54). Translating the text of Ramesses III's Year Eight inscription (Rougé 1855) and linking it to earlier attacks by various Mediterranean peoples during the time of Merneptah, de Rougé suggested that the hostile movements of groups he collectively called "the Peoples of Mediterranean Sea" and identified as the Achaeans, Danaans, Etruscans, Lycians, Sardinians, Sicilians, Dardanians, and others were the result of widespread upheavals and dislocations in the aftermath of the Trojan War (Rougé 1867).

It was not long, however, before the reported movements of the Sea Peoples were transformed from mere evidence of Homeric reliability into illustrations of a particular historical exodus. In 1872, one of de Rougé's students, a middle-aged wine merchant and accomplished amateur Egyptologist, François Chabas, saw great significance in the four oxcarts carrying women and children in the midst of the Great Land Battle (Dawson and Uphill 1972: 57; Dothan and Dothan 1992: 25-26; Drews 1993: 55). He suggested that the *Peleset* were not merely Levantine Philistines joining demobilized Trojan War veterans but were Pelasgians *en route* from their original homes in the Aegean (as could be seen, Chabas contended, by the European "look" of their dress and physical features) to their own Promised Land (Chabas 1872).

Of course the idea of the migration of the Philistines from Caphtor to Canaan was as old as the prophets Amos and Jeremiah (cf. Macalister 1914: 5). Yet it was another of de Rougé's students, Gaston Maspero, who first linked that migration with a powerful modern idea (Dothan and Dothan 1992: 26-28; Drews 1993: 55-59). As recent studies of 19th-century ideology have shown, the concept of mass migration as a *permanent* factor in human history emerged only in the 1870s–as a radical departure from earlier romantic notions of unchanging ethnic connections to territorially contiguous homelands (Hudson 1977; Smith 1974, 1991). In response to intensifying economic competition and territorial expansion between rival European empires, the geographical and historical concept

of *Lebensraum*, later canonized in the work of Friedrich Ratzel and diffused into ethnology and archaeology, rationalized modern power struggles by suggesting that human groups had always sought to improve their territorial base (Smith 1980; Bassin 1987). In the jungle of human civilization, national, often genetically differentiated "cultures" now became the chief actors and–so the theory went–only the fittest, the most energetic, or the most talented would expand and thus survive.

Maspero, himself an Italian-born, French-educated philologist, who was transferred to Cairo in 1880 and served for nearly twenty years in the British administration of Egypt (Dawson and Uphill 1972: 197–198) was thus merely expressing a modern way of thinking about migration when he posited a rolling wave of ancient territorial conquest and displacement, beginning with a southward movement of Indo-European "Illyrians" exerting pressure on the Dorians and the Phrygians in the Balkans, who in turn displaced the Sea Peoples of the coasts of Greece and Asia Minor, who in turn swept over Cyprus and attacked Egypt, ultimately finding new lands for themselves (Maspero 1873, 1886). The English translation of Maspero's résumé of ethnic movement entitled *The Struggle of the Nations* (Maspero 1896) must surely have evoked meaningful associations at a time when competition for territory and economic advantage among European powers was at a fever pitch (Hobsbawm 1987).

So far I have been describing the Egyptological approaches to the problem of the Sea Peoples, but from the 1870s, the study of archaeological finds added a new illustration to what might be called the "chain-reaction migration" hypothesis of Sea Peoples' history. After Schliemann, Flinders Petrie's work in Egypt was essential to this elaboration (Drower 1985, Silberman 1993). First recruited by the father of all eugenicists, Sir Francis Galton, to make casts of various racial types pictured on the Egyptian reliefs (Petrie 1888), Petrie went on to use the Aegean pottery he discovered in the tombs of Gurob as substantiation for what now became in his mind "that great wave of Graeco-Libyan

conquest, which swept almost over Egypt time after time" (1890: 274). To his mind, this population movement was not merely an illustration of an abstract principle of human behavior but an essential and unchanging historical reality (as later expressed in Petrie 1906, 1911).

The interlocking Victorian ideologies of Social Darwinism, High Imperialism, and Diffusionist Ethnology all sanctified the neat assumption that "superior" races, when motivated by disaster, overpopulation, or simple competition would necessarily displace "inferior" ones (cf. Lorimer 1987; Stocking 1987; Trigger 1989: chap. 4). And in this great struggle of nations, there was little question on which side of the great divide the Europeans' lot fell. Thus the identification of Mycenaean and then Philistine pottery at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi and Gezer (Welch 1900; Thiersch 1908: 378–382; Macalister 1914: 121–122) was seen by some scholars as a clear sign of racial conquest, so much so that R.A.S. Macalister, the excavator of Gezer, saw in the Philistines' arrival a unique turning point in the long history of Canaan, describing this contingent of Sea Peoples as "the only cultured or artistic race who ever occupied the soil of Palestine" (Macalister 1921: 33).

Yet while the Sea Peoples were seen by some Victorian scholars as inherently creative, civilizing forces, others began to regard them in a far less heroic way. In the years immediately before World War I, they were no longer universally seen as Indo-European civilizers but more often now as violent, semi-barbaric destroyers whose main contributions to history were to attack and devastate the decadent, tottering kingdoms of both Greece and the Orient (already seen in Hall 1901). This was, of course, the viewpoint of Ramesses III and Merneptah, though their claims of total victory over the seaborne invaders rang somewhat hollow, in light of subsequent Egyptian history. New archaeological finds also complicated the picture, chief among them, Arthur Evans' discovery of the Minoan civilization, which, in its idealized elegance and opulence, diverged sharply from the earlier Aryan ideal (Horowitz 1981; McDonald and Thomas 1990).

Though Evans himself initially believed that the Philistines were gentle Minoan refugees driven eastward by an Achaean invasion (Evans 1921), his assistant D. Mackenzie who dug at the Philistine site of Beth Shemesh from 1911–1912, saw a more ominous vision lurking there among the potsherds and tumbled stones (Mackenzie 1911, 1912–1913). Identifying the metope decoration on Philistine kraters as a hallmark of a "northern" cultural complex (which also included the use of iron, megara, greaves, long swords, and the habit of cremation), Mackenzie came to the conclusion that Bronze Age Canaan (like Bronze Age Crete, cf. Mackenzie 1904–1905) had been devastated by non-civilized invaders whose calling card he believed he recognized in the thick ash layer extending along the eroded sea-side face of the mound of ancient Ashkelon, which was, to Mackenzie's mind the sign "of some general catastrophe" (1913: 21).

Where did this image of dangerous invaders come from? Though the widespread extent of destruction at other sites throughout the Mediterranean would be discovered in subsequent decades, ash layers, in and of themselves, do not often reveal how or by whom the destruction was done. Yet I would suggest that the logic of perceiving a region-wide wave of invaders who apparently destroyed what they could otherwise have conquered was drawn not so much from the highly localized archaeological evidence as at least partly from the effects of a late 19th-century nightmare. As the literary historians Cecil Eby (1987) and I.F. Clarke (1992) have pointed out so persuasively, by the turn of the century, the reading public in virtually every European nation was transfixed by a certain genre of popular fiction that is now so generally forgotten that it is easy to overlook. For the generations living through the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, vivid, detailed invasion fantasies gave voice to the shared fears of imperial competition, a wildly escalating arms race, and massive migrations gone completely out of control. According to Eby's count (1987: 11), between 1870 and 1914 in England alone more than 60 book-length versions of the classic invasion story were published, providing frightening accounts of 41 fictional invasions from Germany, 18 from France, eight from Russia, and one each from China, Japan, America, and–thanks to H.G. Wells (1897)–one even from the planet Mars.

These invasion stories reached their most hysterical levels while Evans was still digging at Knossos (Eby 1987: 20) and uncannily shared the same plot line that he would utilize to describe the final destruction of the Minoan thalassocracy (McDonald and Thomas 1990: 163): namely, that a soft and decadent society, weakened and overburdened by a top-heavy bureaucracy and losing its control of the sea lanes (or airways) would be easy prey for bands of barbaric and highly regimented warriors equipped with the latest in military technology (Clarke 1992: chap. 3). As pulp fiction, this genre was enormously successful; as a self-fulfilling prophecy it helped fan the flames of international tension that ultimately ignited World War I. The "technologically precocious barbarian devastation" model can also be seen as a relic of a turn-of-the-century consciousness that has retained its power–rightly or wrongly–to make sense of such disparate archaeological fragments as ash layers, Egyptian reliefs, and the deadly Naue Type IIa swords (Sandars 1985: 91–95; Drews 1993).

It would of course be possible to trace the twists and turns of the image of the Sea Peoples as it evolved in succeeding decades, through the work of Garstang and Phythian-Adams at Ashkelon who characterized the Philistines as proto-Hellenic Balkan invaders (Phythian-Adams 1923), to the work of the Swedish Cyprus Expedition in the late 1920s (Sjöqvist 1940), to the excavations of Sinda and Enkomi, where Furumark and Dikaios first made a clear stratigraphic distinction between the two stories, neatly separating the level of the Sea Peoples as invaders from that of the more productive Achaean refugees (critically reviewed in Muhly 1984: 49–50 and Karageorghis 1992: 82). The point I want to make is that the two basic Victorian stories–of the quest for *Lebensraum* by a displaced nation and the devastating barbarian invasion–have survived, if not in modern social

science, then at least in archaeological narratives. I do not mean to suggest that peoples now or in ancient times never successfully transplanted their cultures or that overburdened, over-specialized societies are not vulnerable to physical attack. I leave that judgment and its logical elaboration to the excavators and specialists working on the problem of the Bronze-to-Iron-Age transition in the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean, for it is they who have the ultimate responsibility of analyzing such important and evocative themes as ethnicity, colonization, resource exploitation, economic change, and social decay with the same sophistication and methodological complexity as they use in analyzing patterns of potsherds, fallen walls, trace evidence, and pollen grains.

Like the Victorian period, ours is an era in which issues of population transfer (both voluntary and involuntary), urbanization, ethnicity, and the collapse of empires are all immediate and pressing. Today, however, social scientists use quite different models to understand these phenomena (as reviewed in Anthony 1990 and Knapp 1992). Demographers and sociologists now characterize most patterns of migration–both industrial and preindustrial–as continuous adaptive behavior between regions with long-standing familiarity, characterized by considerable back-and-forth movement, not a permanent exodus (for example, Gmelch 1980; Kearney 1986). They now speak of systems theory and the forging of new economic connections through the informed, strategic decisions of individuals, not uni-directional migration of families, nations, or tribes (for example, Lewis 1982; Ogden 1984).

One might legitimately ask if these are not merely the fantasies of a world which is itself in the midst of dramatic economic transformation, with the heavy industry and mass labor migration of the Victorian period giving way to transnational venture capitalism and the silicon chip. A recent archaeological reconstruction characterized the Mycenaean palace economy as "a heavy hand holding down private enterprise and blocking entrepreneurial initiative"

and the mobile peoples of the 12th century BCE as "enterprising merchants and traders, exploiting new economic opportunities, new markets, and new sources of raw materials" (Muhly 1992: 19). I would suggest that the probability that such an image will outlive the current political vogue for supply-side economics will probably depend more on the continued public acceptance of those modern freemarket policies than on additional archaeological evidence.

I close by suggesting that the key to understanding the link between archaeological interpretation and modern ideology might be found in one of the ancient sources where the story all began. As E.S. Sherratt has pointed out in an enlightening study of the interplay of ideology and literary strata in the formation of the Homeric epics (1990), phases of active narrative or descriptive invention closely correspond to periods of rapid social and political change. Sherratt notes that one of the characteristic manifestations of this process–in which emerging elites seek to legitimate their power–is "the transformation of an existing oral epic tradition in order to dress it in more recognizably modern garb" (1990: 821). Can we not see in the history of the archaeology of the Sea Peoples a similar process of literary reformulation, in which old components are reinterpreted and reassembled to tell a new tale? Narrative presupposes that both storyteller and audience share a single perspective, and therein may lie the connection between the intellectual and ideological dimensions of archaeology. To generalize beyond specific, highly localized data, archaeologists must utilize familiar conceptual frameworks and it is from the political and social ideologies of *every* generation that larger speculations about the historical role of the Sea Peoples have always been drawn. As many papers in this conference have suggested, traditional interpretive structures are in the process of reconsideration and renovation. That is why I believe it essential that we reflect on our *current* Sea Peoples stories–and see if we cannot detect the subtle, yet lingering impact upon them of some timeworn Victorian narratives.

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