

Hooked on History

Two Book Reviews by Dr. George Simons at diversophy.com

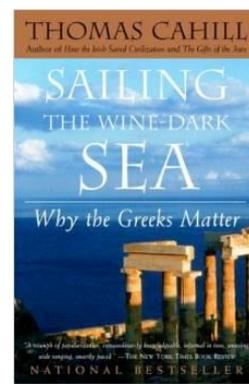
A touch of summer leisure leads me to do the reading I love rather than the reading I have to do. So, to parody Alfred Lord Tennyson's young man in springtime, this old man's summer time fancy turns to history. Here is my shorter than usual discussion of two books that I read back-to-back, topics chronologically related to each other culturally and historically but quite different in topic and approach, as you will see from my short reviews.

Review 1

Cahill, Thomas, *Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea: Why the Greeks Matter*

Anchor Books. Reprint edition 2004. SBN-10: 0385495544, ISBN-13: 978-0385495547

Thomas Cahill is always a pleasant companion to dig out of my beach bag. This fourth book in his "Hinges of History" series of inquiries, though profound in so many places, reads more like solid journalism rather than dry research findings and analysis. Nonetheless, his insights into history are connected well to the background and context of the story being told, as well as related in terms of their influence throughout subsequent history and the roles that Cahill believes that they play to this day in our thinking and behavior. This is made explicit in the subtitle of this volume, "Why the Greeks Matter."



Why? In a very real sense, the Greeks of ancient times set the borders of Europe in terms of political invention, philosophical thought, literary and artistic expression. The author makes it clear how subsequent European civilizations both depended on and deviated from the original and continuing cultures of Greece. We only need to reflect on how ongoingly our political ideals of democracy repeatedly attempt to ground themselves, for example, in the Athenian experience. It was the language of Greek philosophers informed the shape of Christianity both in its expansion throughout the Greco-Roman world, and its revival via Arab scholars and libraries of Western thinking in the medieval universities and finally blossoming again in the Renaissance and classical periods of our literature.

A lot of ink has been spilled and pixels poured in recent years in the attempts to delineate "the European identity", discussions in which long-dead Greeks are very vocal participants. Cahill's explanations are thus extremely useful for us as we try to understand a good deal of why and how Europeans are the way they are and European bias has colonized a great deal of the world seen as barbarian (*βαρβαροι*). See, even I had a couple years of Classical Greek in my high school studies and the best of Sappho still echoes in my memory:

Δέδυκε μὲν ἄσελάννα καὶ Πληιάδες...

There is almost a score of pages of illustrations of Greek architecture and art at the center of the book, a good part of it having to do with the vicissitudes of love and war, of

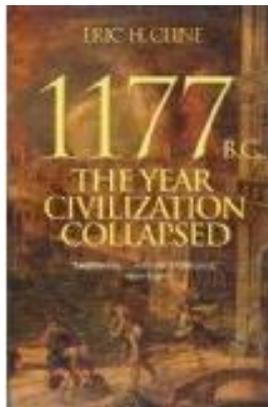
sexuality, sexual identity and gender politics from earlier periods through the Periclean Golden age.

As an interculturalist, I particularly appreciate the wide range of Cahill's approach where everything from archaeology to politics to social structure to arts and science round out the picture.

Review 2

Cline, Eric H., *1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed (Turning Points in Ancient History)*

Princeton University Press. Second Impression edition 1210. ASIN: B00M0MHFJ0



Unlike Cahill, Cline approaches his topic as the critical anthropologist/archaeologist rather than as a journalistic raconteur. While the topic of the development and demise of cultures fascinates me no end – a lifelong passion first kindled in me by John Tierney's high school ancient history course – the methodology that the story is presented with is very much an often-repetitive reflection on the data provided by of ancient remains. It calls upon the literary, architectural, and commercial diggings and findings, but it also documents the conjectures of generations of archaeological detectives struggling to interpret what they have discovered as well as the evidence they need to search for in order to fill out the story – sadly, many elements that will perhaps never be known.

The book is essentially an attempt to explain why a thriving Eastern Mediterranean Basin civilization floundered and failed, largely in the last third of the second millennium BCE. On one hand, there is too much missing information; on the other hand, I was surprised at the amount of actual correspondence found among various archaeological troves that involved not just the archives of heads of state in large empires like that of the Hittites and the Egyptians. There were also the smaller cultures, Mycenaeans, Minoans, Canaanites, Cypriots, engaged in an intense network of commercial and political exchange with each other.

To add to the fascination, researchers have uncovered even the personal names of merchants significant in the sea trade. Add the fact that products from around the region were frequently found side-by-side in the ruins of cities, testimony to the intense trade that plied the Mediterranean at this time. While history easily makes us aware of past empires and city-states, it often pays less attention to their connections in their exchanges, except where it is a matter of invasion or conquest.

The great and unanswered mystery lies in the identity the of those who are called "The Sea Peoples" who appeared on the scene apparently coming from the West, impelled by an some need, perhaps famine, perhaps environmental shift, perhaps conquest, and seem to have had a significant role to play, or at least a helping hand in the decline of what had become a complex, in a sense, "global" political and trading environment.

The literature that we have about the era that has come down to us in culture, such as Homer's Iliad and the Hebrew Bible seem to have been woven from a variety of strands that do not give us conclusive and historically reliable identities for many peoples and places of the period. And, of course, clay tablets and memorial hieroglyphs reflect, as so much history does, the point of view of the writers, as has often been remarked, written by the "winners."

Inevitably those who wish to interpret the available evidence are forced by its scarcity to theorize about the elements that brought this era to an end and ushered in a sort of "dark ages" for several centuries. In sum, there is probably not a simple answer, but an accumulation of potential agents creating the "perfect storm," such factors as climate change, famine, invasion, popular revolution, and, yes, the mysterious Sea People. Even complexity theory is called upon as an element in this civilization's demise and is brought forth as a warning for the potential outcome of the complexification involved in our own age of global enterprise. No culture or civilization has lasted forever, so this history serves as a caveat to our contemporary strivings. Culture can implode as well as be destroyed from without...

The names of the characters found in this era of history are neither an easy read, nor do they stick in the memory, so this reader is grateful for the *dramatis personae* that the author provides at the start of the reference section.

Fascinated as I was by the topic, I persisted to the very end, mercifully spared some of the book's size by the extensive notes and bibliography found between the last pages of the story and the cover. Yet, the inconclusiveness of it all left me wanting more. If you don't share my addiction, it's probably not a good beachbag read for you, so it is probably enough to explore a couple more reviews for a start, if in fact I've stoked your curiosity.