



The years around 1200 BC were disastrous for the great civilizations around the Eastern Mediterranean – the Hittite empire fell, the Mycenaean palaces were destroyed, Ugarit was razed to the ground and never rebuilt, cities and settlements were burned in Cyprus and the Levant. The New Kingdom of Egypt survived attack until it in turn collapsed into the Third Intermediate Period (1077 – 732 BC). The period following is often known as the 'Dark Ages'. And yet this time also marks 'the coming of iron' – in the simple Three Age System, the Bronze Age/Iron Age transition occurs at around this time or shortly afterwards – certainly during these 'centuries of darkness'. Many scholars have linked these events – either through the collapse of the trade routes bringing copper and, even more critically, tin, forcing metalworkers to turn to iron, or by the translocation of metalsmiths from the Hittite capital at Hattusa to the Mediterranean in response to foreign 'invaders'. The Indus Valley civilization is said to have collapsed around 1300 BC, which may also have limited the supply of tin from Afghanistan. The Hittites were thought to have control over iron production during the second millennium BC, and it has been noted that Cypriote ironworking takes off after the Hittite collapse. The context of the BA/IA transition, at least in the eastern Mediterranean, is certainly therefore one of major societal collapse, at least for the centers of power.

Archaeometallurgically speaking, however, the simple explanation for the rise of iron has been one of technological determinism – iron is technically 'better' than bronze, ergo it eventually replaces it. This is clearly not the case. Iron is present as a rare prestige item during the second and perhaps even the third millennia BC, and the use of bronze continues through the Iron Age. The Iron Age cannot (or should not) simply be defined by the increased availability and use of iron, although perhaps the contextual changes (whatever they were) must have been the driving force behind the development of this new technology, which requires a whole suite of new skills. Its prime character, however, is one of major cultural changes, from the collapse of the powerful empires of Mycenae, the Hittites, and Egypt, into a plethora of small independent kingdoms around 10th C., and the formation of the Greek Proto-Geometric, the Neo-Hittite and Neo-Assyrian Empires, and eventually the rise of Classical Greece and the Imperial power of Rome in the west. What caused these changes? Explanations have ranged from 'invasion from the north', or the arrival of the 'Sea Peoples', to climate change causing drought, crop failure and famine, or a series of natural disasters such as earthquakes. Was the coming of iron instrumental in any of this, or only an irrelevant sub-plot?

The overall aim of the session is to better understand the social context for the decline of bronze as a strategic metal, the rise of iron use, and the role(s) of iron. However, the purpose is to bring together the many scientific disciplines, which have looked at different aspects of this cataclysmic period, but often in isolation. Of course, the transition from the use of bronze to that of iron is important, but possibly not central to the historical story. How did funerary behavior (often a proxy for social order, or migration, or acculturation) change? How did trade routes change – not just for metals, but also for amber, semi-precious stones, ceramics, luxury goods such as ivory, and consumables such as wine and grain? Did human diet change as a result of the intensification of agriculture following the invention of the deep plough? Can we use bioarchaeological isotopic techniques on human remains to look for 'invaders'? What can linguistics and genetics tell us? Above all, perhaps, can we create a chronology for the Late Bronze Age World from the Mediterranean to Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, Afghanistan and Central Asia, of sufficient resolution to look at the synchronicity or otherwise of these events in a meaningful way?

The geographical focus of this session is equally broad – papers are welcome on the eastern Mediterranean, but also on the 'periphery' or 'fringe' areas, from north and west Europe through to the Indian sub-continent and Central Asia. It is clear that questions on this scale cannot be answered by a purely 'internalist' approach.