

Summary of a paper delivered at The International Colloquium on “Sardinian Stratigraphy and Mediterranean Chronology: Towards the Discussion, Definition, and Resolution of Chronological Problems”, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, March 17-19, 1995. From the conference booklet (retyped with typographical corrections), together with the one of the handouts. A second paper given by the author at the conference was fully published – see James, P., Kokkinos, N., & Thorpe, I. J., 1998, “[Mediterranean Chronology in Crisis](#)”, in M. S. Balmuth & R. H. Tykot (eds), *Sardinian and Aegean Chronology: Proceedings* (Studies in Sardinian Archaeology V - Oxbow Books), pp. 29-43; plus [Corrigenda and Addendum to Postscript \(Dec. 1998\)](#) only online.

## **The “Land Peoples” and the Shardana**

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A plea is made to scrap the term “Sea Peoples” as it is presently used in discussion of Mediterranean archaeology. Traditionally it describes a whole host of people who, in various combinations, are known as aggressors from Egyptian records of the 13th to 12th centuries BC: the Peleset (Philistines), Tjekker, Denyen, Shekelesh, Weshesh, Teresh, Ekweh, Luka, and Shardana (or Sherden). Merging them all together as “the Sea Peoples” has caused enormous confusion, and encouraged unfounded theories that they were part of a great migration eastwards at the time of the Late Bronze Age/Iron Age transition. It is usually assumed that these “Sea Peoples” played a key role in the destruction of the LBA centres of the Aegean, Anatolia, Cyprus and Syria, before they were stopped at the borders of Egypt by Ramesses III of the 20th Dynasty (conventionally c. 1175 BC).

The theory of the “Sea Peoples invasion” was built on two main planks of evidence, or rather interpretation:

1. That the year 8 inscription of Ramesses III gives the itinerary of a coalition moving from the Aegean to the Levant. A more modest interpretation of the text suggests that the list of countries given by R III is merely an Egyptian description of the Hittite Empire, which Ramesses claimed was defeated by the coalition in Syria.
2. That the appearance of the so-called Philistine pottery in southern Palestine in the 12th century reflects invaders from the Aegean. Most Levantine archaeologists now agree that this ware developed locally, blending Mycenaean ceramic traditions with Egyptian and Canaanite, and does not reflect an influx of new peoples in the time of Ramesses III. Equally, the occurrence of the slightly earlier LHIIC pottery in Philistia (at the time of Ramesses III) cannot be held to prove the arrival of a new people.

In short, there is nothing to prove the traditional construct of a “Sea Peoples invasion”. It should be jettisoned from the historical and archaeological picture and study should instead be focused on what we actually know about the individual peoples

concerned. The term “Sea Peoples” is not an Egyptian one, but a 19th century coinage. With respect to the attack on Egypt under Ramesses III, it is implicit in the Egyptian records that the Philistines (and probably the Tjekker and Denyen) were already present in Palestine; the Egyptian tag “of the sea” is never applied to them. It is justifiable to reinterpret the “Sea Peoples invasion” in terms of an attack by the “Land Peoples” (principally the Philistines) in alliance with others who may have joined them from overseas. It should not be supposed that all the peoples listed/depicted in Ramesses III’s accounts had a common origin or even a common motive in attacking Egypt. The Shardana-type warriors (with horned helmets) depicted as allies of the Peleset-type in the sea-battle with Egypt may have been hired help. NB: the Shardana-type appear on the Egyptian side in the land-battle of Ramesses III against the Philistine coalition. In Levant the Shardana are known as mercenaries at Ugarit (early 13th century) and Byblos (mid-14th century).

A Levantine homeland suits the “Land Peoples” who invaded in the time of Ramesses III. The Shardana should be firmly distinguished from the Philistines, although they too had long-standing relations with the Levant. But they had far more wide-ranging connections, reaching Ugarit and North Africa, where they appear as allies of the Libyans in their war against Pharaoh Merenptah *c.* 1210 BC.

There is nothing exclusively Anatolian or Aegean about the invaders depicted in the reliefs of Ramesses III’s Year 8. With respect to the “Land Peoples”, everything in terms of their equipment, armour, transport, etc (excepting long swords) is best explained in Levantine terms. Though there are general similarities to the “Land Peoples” in dress and armament (kilts, cuirasses), the Shardana-type are distinguished by their horned helmets. The wide area of Shardana activity makes it particularly difficult to see whether we are dealing with one specific group, in terms of ethnicity or otherwise.

*Šrdn* appears to have been a Phoenician name for Sardinia (Nora Stone, *c.* 825 BC), while there is a striking similarity between the Shardana mercenaries as depicted on Egyptian reliefs (Ramesses II and III – *c.* 1250-1175 BC) and Sardinian figurines of warriors presently dated to the 9th-7th centuries. On the lower chronology argued in a previous session, the dates for the latest mention of the Shardana in Egyptian texts, *c.* 1070 BC, could come down to the mid-9th.

This does not, unfortunately, tell us where the Shardana came from. Did they take their name from the island or vice versa? Shardana may have been an Egyptian-Levantine term for maritime mercenaries from one, or a number of countries. While actually rejecting it, Albright long ago hit upon a perfectly good etymology for (the El-Amarna) Shardana in W. Semitic *šrdū*, meaning “servitor”. We have thus yet to exclude the awkward possibility that the name Shardana was not originally an ethnic or geographic term, but one for a class or type – and that this name was given by the Phoenicians to the island as it was frequented or inhabited by people of the Shardana-type. Further study of the terminology for the other erstwhile “Sea Peoples”, in Egyptian, Levantine and Hittite texts, may throw light on the problem.

	<i>Peleset</i>	<i>Tjekker</i>	<i>Denyen</i>	<i>Shekelesh</i>	<i>Weshesh</i>	<i>Teresh</i>	<i>Sherden</i>	<i>Ekwesh</i>	<i>Luka</i>
“feathered” helmet	•	•	•						
lands, towns near Egypt	•								
later settled in Palestine	•	•							
Ramesses III, Year 5	•	•							
Ramesses III, Year 8	•	•	•	•	•				
enemy in land battle reliefs	<i>Peleset-type</i>								
enemy in sea battle reliefs	<i>Peleset-type</i>						<i>Sherden-type</i>		
Ramesses III, other	•	•	•			•	•		
horned helmet							•		
turban						•			
Merenptah				•		•	•	•	•
pre-Mer. raiders or mercenaries							•		•
“-esh” name				•	•	•		•	
“of (the countries of) the sea”					•	•	•	•	

*Handout. Chart showing an analysis of the three groupings of the so-called “Sea Peoples”. They should not be lumped together and, while they may have acted in concert at times, there is little in common between the enemies of Ramesses III and those of Merenptah, who were allies of the Libyans.*

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