

# Hittite Empire

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The Hittites were an Indo-European people settled in Anatolia during the second millennium BCE. The designation “Hittite” is a modern exonym derived from the German word *Hethiter*, used by Martin Luther in order to translate the name given to the Neo-Hittite peoples of Northern Syria and Southern Anatolia in the Bible. The Hittites themselves gave their own kingdom the name *Hatti*, probably mutated from the Hattian peoples that occupied the valley of the Kızılırmak before the advent of the Indo-Europeans, and to their language the name *Nesili* (or *Nesumnili*), literally meaning “(in) the language of Nesa,” the city of Nesa being one of the first important political centers of the history of Anatolia.

The exact date of the Indo-European migration in Anatolia is unknown (Bryce 2005: 11–14), as unknown as their provenance: the Kurgan hypothesis assumes that the origin of the Indo-Europeans is in the Pontic Steppe and in the Caucasus, while other scholars have suggested that the Hittites were indigenous and did not migrate at all. Apart from the speculations linguists and archaeologists can make, the modern historian can only definitely register the presence of the Hittites (and other Indo-European peoples speaking related languages such as Luwian and Palaic) in the region starting from the first centuries of the second millennium BCE. Lacking reliable taxonomies for the “ethnic” attribution of ceramic styles in the early phases of Anatolian pre-history and proto-history, the *terminus post quem* for the

identification of a Hittite presence is the reference to the land of Hattu and the occurrence of Anatolian anthroponyms in the Old Assyrian documents from the 20th–19th centuries BCE.

While other Anatolian peoples were settled in northern and southwestern Anatolia (the people of Pala and the Luwians respectively), the core of the area occupied by Hittite-speaking people seems to coincide with the central region of the valley of the Kızılırmak River (often designated with the ancient Greek name of Halys even in the modern literature). However, during the centuries, the Hittites were able to develop a major political influence over the neighboring lands, and the boundaries of their kingdom reached, in the most successful phases, from the Aegean coast to the west, central Syria to the south.

## THE OLD ASSYRIAN PHASE AND THE HITTITE “PROTO-HISTORY”

The most ancient written sources found within the boundaries of modern Turkey were not written by the Hittites, nor by any other people that inhabited the region. In fact, the first cuneiform tablets of Anatolia were written in the Assyrian dialect of the Akkadian language, and were composed by the offices of Old Assyrian merchants that lived in the so called *kārū* (markets, literally “docks”) and who traded mostly textiles in exchange for copper, with the indigenous inhabitants of the Anatolian towns (Bryce 2005: 21–40). A *kārum* was a block added to a pre-existing city: it was a dwelling occupied by Assyrian traders either full-time or for several months every year. Some of them had family in Anatolia, and among them there

were scribes; however, due to significant differences in the paleography of the Assyrian texts and the later Hittite ones, it is unclear whether the Indo-European peoples who co-existed with the Assyrians learned to write from them and then adapted the cuneiform script to their own language in this early stage.

The phase of the Old Assyrian traders in Anatolia has often been referred to as the age of the “Old Assyrian colonies”; however, no political colonization took place. The traders acted both as officials (they worked for the palace of the king and traded as “public” agents) and as private entrepreneurs, investing their own capital. The cities that hosted an Assyrian *kārum* remained independent, governed by local authorities that did not recognize the political power of Assyria.

The Assyrian markets in Anatolia were quite numerous, but the most important one was located in Nesa (or Kanesh, the modern Kültepe), but there was one also in Hattusha (the future capital city of the Hittite kingdom, not far from the modern village of Boğazköy). With the decline of the Old Assyrian kingdom in the 18th century BCE, the letters and commercial records from the markets in Anatolia are no longer written, leaving a gap of about one century before the emergence of the first documents that can be ascribed to the Hittite culture itself.

## BEFORE HATTI

A significant gap of at least one century exists between the last Old Assyrian documents testifying to the existence of a net of trading gateways in Anatolia and the reigns of the first rulers of the Hittite capital city of Hattusha. It is possible to reconstruct some of the main events that took place during this phase based on a few later sources found in Hattusha.

One must imagine that Central Anatolia was, during the late 18th and 17th centuries

BCE, characterized by a fragmented political situation, with the rulers of several city-states being independent of each other: some of them were, of course, the ones that had hosted, and possibly still hosted, Assyrian markets. In the early 17th century, the so called Anitta-text records that the ruler of the city of Kushshara, Anitta, son of Pithana, started a series of successful military campaigns and conquered the kingdom of the city of Nesa, defeating the local rulers (Bryce 2005: 35–40). The text is written in Hittite, and it survives in copies that were found in Hattusha and was probably composed during the reign of the first rulers of the kingdom of Hatti.

Although the exact relationship between Anitta and the first rulers of the kingdom of the Hittites remains obscure, the genealogy of the early Hittite kings and the text of the Proclamation of Telipinu (see below) inform us that kings of Hattusha descended from the rulers of Kushshara and Nesa; however, whether this genealogy was real, or simply assumed in order to legitimate the origins of the Hittite dynasty of Hattusha, remains unclear.

## THE OLD HITTITE KINGDOM

The first ruler of the Hittite kingdom who certainly resided in the city of Hattusha, and whose court had texts composed that survived and have been found and published, was named Hattusili, first king of his name (Bryce 2005: 61–120).

According to the sources, Hattusili I was in fact the third member of the Old Hittite dynasty, being probably the nephew-in-law of his predecessor, Labarna, the son of a Papahdilmah who never ascended to the throne, and the grandson of Labarna’s predecessor, a ruler named PU-Sharruma whose reign is still disputed. Modern scholars have very few sources referring to the reigns of

the two kings who preceded Hattusili (most of the data that survive come from the historical prologue of an edict issued by a later king, the so-called Proclamation of Telipinu), but Labarna must have been a rather significant figure in the representation of history and power among the Hittites, and his personal name became, in later texts, a royal title that accompanied the designation of King and Great King, a phenomenon that also took place in the Roman Empire with the name of Caesar.

As far as Hattusili's reign is concerned, since his personal name means "of Hattusha," it is safe to assume that either he personally transferred the court to the new capital city of the kingdom, or he was the first one who ascended to the throne in that city after Labarna moved there. Hattusili was probably active as a military leader, since the power of the city of Hattusha was still weak and not all the other centers of Anatolia recognized its authority. A victorious campaign against the rulers of Zalpa on the Black Sea certainly took place, but the sources provide no conclusive information about its date and the name of the Hittite king who fought there. Certainly, it was Hattusili who campaigned twice in Syria, reaching the city of Aleppo, and in Western Anatolia, against the Luwian kingdom of Arzawa.

However, although the military campaigns and the political expansion certainly represented a major problem, it needs to be stressed that the biggest concern for the first rulers of the Old Hittite kingdom was the preservation of internal stability against the constant threat of intra-dynastic turmoil. Hattusili was not the son of his own predecessor, and very likely other branches of the family still existed and were ready to claim power at any time; moreover, the king's son, Huzziya, was involved in an attempted revolt and usurpation, which forced Hattusili to rid himself of his legitimate heir and to designate a different successor.

Hattusili did so after returning from his last campaign in Syria: he was probably wounded, and he designated his adopted son Mursili (I) as his successor.

Mursili's military activity was once again directed towards Syria, where he was able to defeat Aleppo and to proceed towards Mesopotamia. Here he besieged and sacked the city of Babylon, defeating the last member of the glorious Old Babylonian dynasty started by Hammurapi in the 18th century BCE. His succession, however, was no simpler than his accession: he was murdered by his successor, Hantili I, who was later murdered by the usurper, Zidanta I. Zidanta was killed by his own son Ammuna, who died by the hand of another usurper, Huzziya I. Huzziya's successor was also a usurper, the husband of the king's sister, and he was named Telipinu. By this time, it must have become evident that the dynasty lacked a system for regulating the succession. Telipinu, who had killed his brother-in-law, decided to dictate a proclamation containing a series of instructions that could be defined as a law of succession, with a well-defined order of priority in case of multiple candidates, and with a historical prologue that contains most of the information we know about the history of the Old Hittite dynasties that has been presented so far.

## THE MIDDLE HITTITE KINGDOM

Telipinu's intensive military activity was not sufficient to guarantee the safety of the territories of the Hittite kingdom that were threatened to the west by the kings of the Luwian states, and to the southeast by the expansive momentum of the Hurrian kingdom of Mitanni. In the modern periodization of Hittite history, Telipinu's death marks the end of the so called Old Hittite phase, and the beginning of the Middle Hittite period (Bryce 2005: 121–153).

The identity of Telipinu's immediate successor is uncertain. It may have been his son Alluwamna, but the sources are poor; certainly, his grandson Hantili II ruled in the central decades of the 15th century BCE. The succession of kings was rather peaceful for a few generations, but the exact order and the relationship between the rulers of the kingdom is obscure due to the small number of sources and their poor state of conservation. Around 1400 BCE, however, the sources refer to a successful *coup d'état* by the chief of the royal bodyguards, Muwatalli (I), who became king and was then murdered by two officers, and succeeded by his own son Tudhaliya I (also referred to as Tudhaliya I/II or Tudhaliya II, as the numbering of the first Hittite kings bearing this name is still disputed).

During Tudhaliya's reign, the efforts of the Hittite army directed towards the western regions of Anatolia became more and more intensive, and after a century of stability and retreat, the boundaries of the Hittite kingdom began to expand. Tudhaliya successfully campaigned against the Kingdom of Assuwa, and reached the north-western regions of Wilusa and Taruisa, which some scholars identify with the city and land of Homeric Troy. The exact sequence of his successors is unclear, and those who inherited the throne (the first one being Arnuwanda I) had a difficult time preserving and controlling the territories conquered by their predecessor, and during the last years of the Middle Hittite phase, the kingdom was absorbed by constant conflicts.

#### THE EARLY EMPIRE

The end of the so-called Middle Hittite phase is conventionally marked by the death of Tudhaliya III and by the beginning of the

reign of his son and successor Suppiluliuma I. Suppiluliuma was a strong and resourceful ruler who started his political and military career at his father's side, and when he eventually became king undertook massive military activity against neighboring countries, succeeding in obliterating the Hurrian threat, conquering large areas of northern Syria and giving political stability to an extensive portion of western Anatolia.

The early steps of his expansionist policy are obscure, because the first portion of the annalistic text that describes his *res gestae* (redacted by his son Mursili after his death) is damaged, but what is left clearly shows that Suppiluliuma was able to combine the skills of a brilliant military leader with those of a clever strategist and diplomat. Aware of the potential instability of the Syrian territories, threatened to the south by the influence of the Egypt of the Amarna age and to the east by the Mesopotamian superpower of Assyria, he successfully enthroned two of his sons, Piyassili and Teilipinu, in the cities of Kargamish and Aleppo respectively (Bryce 2005: 178–180).

#### THE LATE EMPIRE

After the death of Suppiluliuma and the short ill-fated reign of his direct successor Arnuwanda II, the Hittite Empire found itself in a rather difficult situation (Bryce 2005: 190–220). Although its territories were now extremely large (and destined to grow even larger in the following decades), the new king Arnuwanda's younger brother, Mursili II, who was still a boy (although probably not a child), assumed power and was forced to face the threats of the Kaskaens in the north as well as the rebellion of Luwian kings in western Anatolia, most notably of Uhhazitis, the king of Arzawa, who was a capable diplomat and a great strategist. Mursili fought the

Arzawean coalition, created by Uhhazitis himself and the king of the Land of the Seha River, during the 10th year of his own reign: a solar omen, probably an eclipse, has been used by Hittitologists to date the event, but there are many plausible eclipses and therefore no definitive consensus can be reached.

Mursili's successor, Muwatalli II, remained in conflict with the empire's western Anatolian foes, and he was forced to move the capital from Hattusha to the southern city of Tarhuntassa, in order to escape the new invasion of the Kaskaean. He was also active in a long war against Egypt (Bryce 2005: 221–245), culminating with the Battle of Qadesh, in Syria, in 1274 BCE. At Muwatalli's death, a *coup d'état* occurred and his son and successor Urhi-Teshshup (Mursili III) was dethroned by Muwatalli's brother Hattusili III, while another son of Muwatalli was made king in Tarhuntassa after the court moved back to Hattusha. During Hattusili's reign, a peace treaty was agreed between the Hittites and Egyptians which caused the hostilities between the two kingdoms to cease around 1259 BCE.

Hattusili's dynasty comprised himself, his son Tudhaliya IV, Arnuwandas III, and eventually Suppiluliuma II. Of their reigns, Tudhaliya's was the most significant due to intense friction with the Mesopotamian Kingdom of Assyria and because of the intense religious and cultural activity that his court undertook.

As far as the reign of Suppiluliuma II is concerned, historical information becomes vague: references are made to a campaign against Cyprus, but sometime during the life of the king Hattusha was probably abandoned again, and shortly thereafter the Kingdom of the Hittites collapsed, either before the death of Suppiluliuma or during the reign of a successor. The rapid decline of the empire is indicated by the fact that one of the first post-Hittite kings of the vice-royalty of Kargamish, Kuzi-Teshshup, started using the former

imperial title of Great King, which implied that a superior authority no longer existed.

## THE NEO-HITTITE STATES

After the fall of the Hittite Empire, a few kingdoms ruled by Luwian-speaking dynasties of rulers that may have been related, at least in earlier times, to the family of the former Hittite Great Kings, existed in cities like Kargamish and Aleppo in Syria, as well as in the Anatolian region the Assyrians called Tabal. In the literature they have been referred to as "Neo-Hittite" or "Syro-Hittite" kingdoms. Their history was strictly connected to that of the Aramaean states and of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and they were eventually defeated by the Assyrian Empire: the last independent ones were conquered at the end of the 8th century BCE by the Assyrian emperor Sargon II, and became part of Assyrian provinces.

## THE LITERATURE OF THE HITTITE EMPIRE

During the excavations of the city of Hattusha and of a few peripheral sites, the archeologists unearthed several clay tablets with cuneiform inscriptions, dated between the 16th and the end of the 13th century BCE.

Although quite a few sources exist concerning the historical events of the earlier phases of Hittite history, little is known about literacy during the Hittite Old Kingdom. It is currently unclear at what stage of their history the Hittites started writing their own documents in the Hittite language, as they are likely to have learned the cuneiform writing system from the Akkadian cultures of Mesopotamia and Syria. Accordingly, most of the earlier texts have been composed in Akkadian, and some scholars have recently argued that during the Old Hittite phase no

text was written in Hittite (the fact that most of the sources actually survive in later copies makes the problem particularly difficult to investigate).

Throughout Hittite history, however, several texts were composed that belong to different categories, based on content (Laroche 1971). Conventionally, they are divided into: historical texts (including annals and diplomatic letters and treaties); administrative texts (land donations, lists and protocols); legal texts (laws, acts of processes); scholarly texts (lexical lists, translations of texts from other languages); myths, hymns, prayers, rituals, and descriptions of festivals; oracles; vows; and a few texts in foreign languages.

## THE RELIGION OF THE HITTITE EMPIRE

The Hittite pantheon and religious praxis mutated several times during the long history of the Kingdom and Empire of Hatti. The religious texts can be divided into: myths, prayers, rituals and festivals; indirectly related to the Hittite religion is also the oracular praxis, including the description of dreams.

Myths are texts that contain some of the most ancient data: they reflect, however, the syncretism between an indigenous pre-Hittite Hattian mythology and proper Hittite religion, which in some cases makes the ethnic components very hard to tell apart. However, the Hittites tended to include new gods into their cult rather than identifying them with their own deities. The pantheon itself therefore features a large polytheistic set of divinities that the Hittites called “the thousand gods.” Some of the most prominent figures, among many others, were the sun-god (with several names and male and female hypostases connected with specific cults and cities) and the weather-god

(named Tarhuntas), but there were also protective figures or divinities who had a specific sphere of action, such as Ishara, the goddess of the oaths.

During the so-called Middle Hittite kingdom, the increasing contacts of the Hittites with the Hurrians and the Luwians had a strong influence on the Hittite official religion. The so-called *Hittite Theogony*, narrating the deeds of the God Kumarbi, as well as many other mythological texts, derive from the Hurrian pantheon of Syria and have been integrated into the Hittite one. Prominent figures of the Hurrian pantheon worshipped in Hattusha include Teshshup, the goddess Hebat, and their son, the prince Sharruma.

Gods were worshipped in rituals and prayers, both by the court and by individuals, and magic was performed as a way to interact with the divine sphere: professionals of witchcraft, both male and female, existed in order to allow such interaction.

## THE ART OF THE HITTITE EMPIRE

While the features and chronological seriation of the Hittite potteries and ceramic culture still require further scholarly investigation, and little is known about painting, the plinths of monuments, architecture, and reliefs (such as the ones from Alacahöyük shown in Figure 1, dating to the 14th century BCE) provide us with precious insights in the iconography of the Hittite Empire. Parts of buildings as well as small objects and pieces of material culture survive from the oldest phases, but it is with the expansion of the southern “upper-city” of Hattusha (although some of the southern buildings existed already, most of the monuments date to the imperial age) that the production of the most significant buildings, stelae, and decorated objects took place.



**Figure 1** Relief from Alaca, 14th–13th centuries BCE. Source: De Agostini/Getty Images.

Like many other aspects of the Hittite culture, the art of the empire was strongly influenced by several neighboring peoples. In particular, Syrian, Hurrian, and Assyrian motifs emerge in the representation of human, divine, and animal figures both in glyptic and in stone reliefs. The reasons for the development of local and international styles lie in the syncretistic circulation of cultural traits and religions. In the last centuries of the imperial age, the so-called Syro-Hittite style had a significant flourishing due to the increasing political relevance of peripheral kingdoms such as Aleppo and Kargamish. The art and iconographies of the later Neo-Hittite states derived most of its features from the Syro-Hittite ones.

SEE ALSO: Assyrian Empire; Egypt: 1. Ancient (New Kingdom); Hurrian Kingdom of Urkesh; Old Babylonian period

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