The Hittites and Ancient Anatolia

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Most of modern day Turkey used to be called Anatolia. The Hittites who formed an empire there were pretty high tech for 1600-1180 BCE, and were able to create a formidable economy and military.

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Introduction

Around 1600 BCE, the ancient Indo-European[1] group known as the Hittites formed an empire at Hattusa in Anatolia (the western peninsula of Asia, which is mostly modern-day Turkey). The Hittite Empire peaked in the mid-1300s BCE, when it spread across Asia Minor, into the northern Levant[2] and Upper Mesopotamia (northern Middle East). Like many Indo-Europeans, the Hittites could travel long distances thanks to a type of transportation that was pretty high-tech at the time: domesticated horses. The spread of technologies like the wheel and wagon, which were also used in ancient Mesopotamia and other early societies in the region, boosted the success of both pastoralists (animal farmers) and agrarian (farming) states.

After about 1180 BCE, the empire ended and splintered into several independent city-states, some of which survived until the eighth century BCE. These were Neo-Hittites, and of course *neo* means "new."

A map of the Hittite empire at its greatest extent in the mid-1300s. The Hittite empire is colored in green and is bordered by the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. Image courtesy of Boundless World History.

1 Indo-Europeans are people speaking any of the family of languages spread across Europe, the Middle East, and northern India.
2 The Levant refers to the eastern Mediterranean, including what are now Israel, Lebanon, part of Syria, and western Jordan.

Culture

The Hittite language was part of the Indo-European family of related languages. Today these languages are widely spoken in the Americas, Europe, and Western and Southern Asia.

Although their society thrived during the Bronze Age, starting around 3000 BCE, the Hittites were trend-setters of the Iron Age. They began manufacturing iron artifacts around 1400 BCE. Tools and weapons using iron were much more efficient than those made of bronze, so iron became the hot new thing. Literally, as it turns out, since iron melts at a higher temperature than copper or tin. Some scholars believe they had been experimenting with metalworking for years, and eventually discovered a smelting process hot enough to melt iron. Or maybe they learned some of this technology from communities in the Zagros Mountains in western Iran. However they figured it out, the Hittites now had a gold mine—in iron production, that is. As they profited from the high demand of iron, they established new trade networks.

Bronze Hittite figures of animals. By Klaus-Peter Simon, CC BY-SA 3.0.

After 1180 BCE, a community of unknown origin known as the Sea Peoples caused unrest in the Levant. They had enough ships to raid Mediterranean and Egyptian cities. The raids caused the Hittite kingdom to scatter into several independent Neo-Hittite city-states. What we know of Hittite history and society comes mostly from cuneiform[3] texts found in the area of their former kingdom. We have also learned about them from diplomatic and commercial mail found in Egypt and the Middle East. The cuneiform writing suggests that the Hittites had some connection with the city-states of Mesopotamia. Perhaps this was due to established networks with Mesopotamia.

3 Cuneiform—literally meaning "wedge shape"—is a writing system invented by the Sumerians. The symbols are wedge-shaped and usually carved into clay tablets.

The Hittite state

Now for some politics. The head of the Hittite state was the king, followed by the heir-apparent, usually the king's son. But some other officials did have independent authority over various branches of the government. That means the king didn't really control all aspects of the kingdom. For example, there was a Chief of the Royal Bodyguards, a Chief of the Scribes,[4] and even a Chief of the Wine Stewards.

Not much is known about the actual day-to-day life and culture of the Hittites. The written documents that survived are mostly about kings and their campaigns. It is known that the Hittites wrote using Akkadian script (cuneiform) but in their own Indo-European language. They used cylinder seals to sign documents and mark property, just as people did throughout Mesopotamia. That suggests a link or network between Hittite and Mesopotamian cultures. Then again, it's possible the Hittites learned those Mesopotamian customs from other groups they had conquered, like the Hattians. Some scholars have suggested this connection because the details of Hittite life and culture seem to be slight variations on those of the Hattian people. Even the name "Hittite" is derived from the word Hattie. But we don't know the exact nature of the relationship between the Hittites and the Mesopotamians because so few primary sources survived.

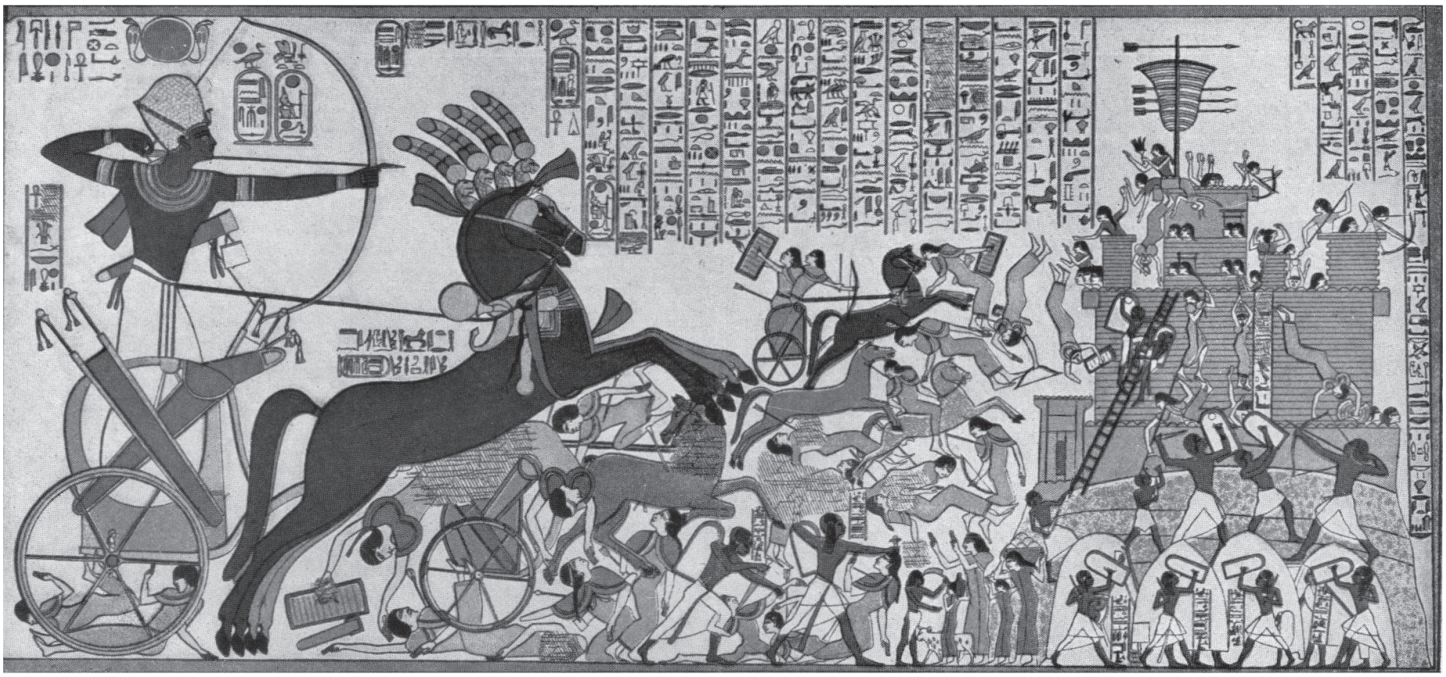
Some of the writings and artifacts we have from the Hittites tell us about their belief system, which was similar to the Hatti's. Storm gods were important in the Hittite pantheon— that is, the group of gods in a religion that worships many. The storm god known as Tarhunt was called the Conqueror, the King of Kummiya, King of Heaven, and Lord of the land of Hatti. He was the god of battle and victory, especially against foreign powers. This suggests the Hittites cared much about military might.

Neo-Hittite storm god. By Verity Cridland, CC BY 2.0.

Military technology

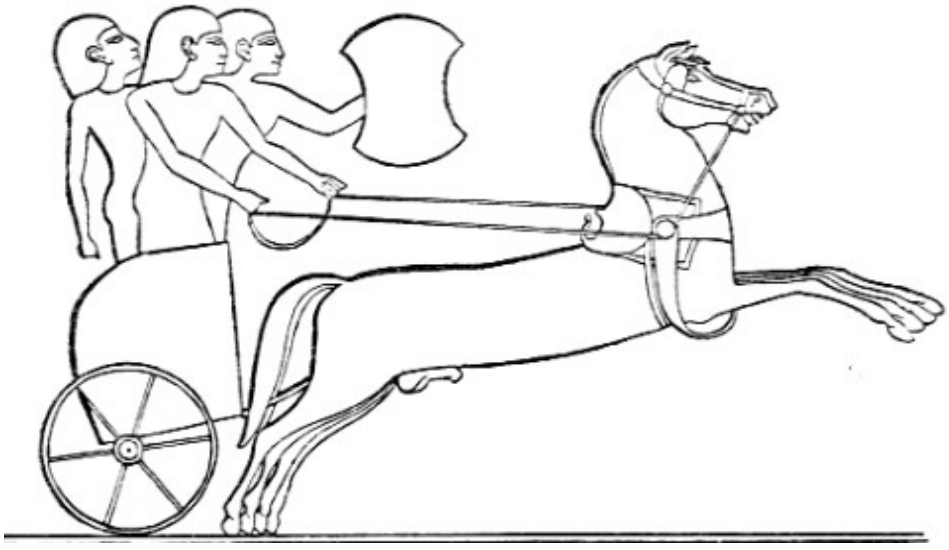
One military engagement the Hittites are famous for is the Battle of Kadesh in 1274 BCE. They faced the army of the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II. This battle is especially important because both sides claimed victory, and that led to the first known peace treaty in the history of the world, in 1258 BCE.

4 Scribes created and maintained written records for the government.



Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II storming the Hittite fortress of Dapur. By Nordisk familjebok, public domain.

The Hittites had been pushing into Egyptian territory for centuries before Pharaoh Ramesses II resolved to drive the Hittites from his borders in 1274 BCE. He hoped to gain an advantage by capturing of the city of Kadesh, a center of commerce, which the Hittites held. Ramesses marched from Egypt leading over 20,000 soldiers to fight. Their opponents' troops were being led by the king of the Hittites, named Muwatalli.



Hittite chariot, from an Egyptian relief. By Paul Volz, public domain.

The Egyptian and Hittite armies were pretty evenly matched. In fact, the fight was too close to call, and both sides claimed victory. The Egyptian chariots were faster because they only had two people aboard them. But since the Hittite chariots had an extra person, they could throw more spears. The combination of chariots and iron tools,

which were stronger than bronze ones, meant that the Egyptian and Hittite military technology was some of the most sophisticated of its time. Each side had a military powerful enough to send troops to war as they fought to maintain control over their respective empires.

From Ramesses' point of view, he had defeated his enemy in battle, so he claimed victory for Egypt. But Muwatalli noticed he still had control over Kadesh, which was what Ramesses was after, so he claimed victory as well. Muwatalli's brother, and successor who participated in the battle, was the one who arranged a truce with Ramesses II. The Treaty of Kadesh—the first peace treaty—written about 15 years after the Battle of Kadesh, was an important document because it represented how rulers negotiated to maintain control of their empires.

Egypto-Hittite Peace Treaty (c. 1258 BCE) between Hattusili III and Ramesses II. By locanus, CC BY 3.0.

Sources

Boundless World History. "Ancient Societies on the Mediterranean: The Hittites." *Lumen Learning*. Retrieved from https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-worldhistory/chapter/ancient-societies-on-the-mediterranean/

Image credits

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