



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

The Hittites were an Indo-European group.¹ They once ruled over much of what we know today as the country Turkey. Around 1600 BCE they formed an empire at Hattusa, in the area called Anatolia. It sits on the western peninsula of Asia. The Hittite Empire peaked in the mid-1300s BCE. It spread across Asia Minor, into the northern Levant² and Upper Mesopotamia, in the northern Middle East. Like many Indo-Europeans, the Hittites could travel long distances to other lands. They had trained horses, a pretty new technology at the time. Other technologies like the wheel and wagon were spreading too. These boosted the success of both pastoralist (animal farming) and agrarian (plant farming) states. Such new technologies were also used in ancient Mesopotamia and other early societies in the region.

After about 1180 BCE, the empire ended. It split into several independent city-states. Some of these survived until the eighth century BCE. These were Neo-Hittites. *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.

The Hittite society thrived during the Bronze Age. It began around 3000 BCE. However, they were pioneers of the Iron Age. Around 1400 BCE, they began manufacturing iron artifacts. Tools and weapons using iron were much more effective than bronze ones. Iron also melts at a higher temperature than copper or tin. Soon, iron became the hot new thing. Some scholars believe the Hittites had been experimenting with metalworking for years. However they figured it out, the Hittites profited greatly. Iron was in high demand. Soon they established new trade networks.



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

After 1180 BCE, a new community arrived. They were called the Sea Peoples. No one knew where they came from. However, they had enough ships to raid Mediterranean and Egyptian cities. Unrest began in the Levant. The Hittite kingdom had to scatter into several independent Neo-Hittite city-states. What we know of Hittite history comes mostly from cuneiform³ writing found in the area. We have also learned about them from 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. He was followed by the heir-apparent, usually the king's son. But there were some other officials. They had independent power over various branches of the government. That means the king didn't really control every part 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 everyday Hittite way of life. Few written documents survived. Most are 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. People throughout Mesopotamia did that too. It suggests a link between Hittite and Mesopotamian cultures. Or possibly the Hittites learned those Mesopotamian customs from other groups they had conquered, like the Hattians. Some scholars note the details of Hittite life and culture seem to be only slightly different from those of the Hattian people. Even the name "Hittite" comes from the word Hattie. But we don't know the exact relationship between the Hittites and the Mesopotamians.

Some of the writings and artifacts we have from the Hittites tell us about their beliefs. It was similar to the Hatti's. Storm gods were important to the Hittites. The storm god was known as Tarhunt. He 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 very much about military power.

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. That led to the first known peace treaty in world history, in 1258 BCE.



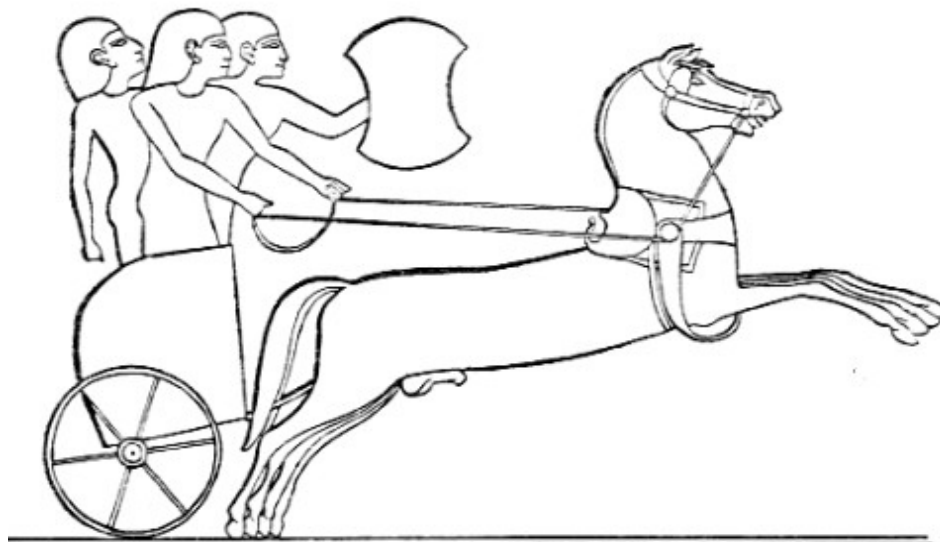
Neo-Hittite storm god. By Verity Cridland, CC BY 2.0.

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 land for centuries. Then Pharaoh Ramesses II resolved to drive the Hittites from his borders in 1274 BCE. He aimed to capture the city of Kadesh, a center of trade, which the Hittites held. Ramesses marched from Egypt. Over 20,000 of soldiers were led to battle. 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. The fight was basically a tie. 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. Egyptian and Hittite military technology was some of

the most sophisticated of its time. Both had chariots and strong iron tools. Each side had a military powerful enough to send troops to war. They used them to fight to keep control over their 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 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. 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/>

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Cover: Stunning architecture and big carving of Pharaoh Ramesses II fighting with Hittites at Abu Simbel temple near Aswan Egypt © skaman306 / Moment / Getty Images

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