

The Hittites—second time round

David Down

The Hittites were a forgotten kingdom. Only the Bible preserved a record of their greatness until Archibald Sayce identified them in AD 1880. Now they are recognized as a once great empire. The problem is that they have been linked to Egyptian chronology, which dates their demise to about 1200 BC; however, Assyrian records tell of major battles between the Assyrians and the Hittites in the 9th and 8th centuries BC. The Bible also gives them a predominant role in the 9th century BC. The solution must be found in a reduction of dates of the 19th dynasty of Egypt by about 500 years to bring both the Egyptians and the Hittites into harmony with the Assyrian and Bible chronologies.

The forgotten kingdom

At one point in history the Hittites were the most powerful nation in the Middle East, successfully challenging the great Egyptian empire under Rameses the Great in dynasty 19.

The King James Version of the Bible mentions them 46 times and lists them at the top of the seven nations in Canaan at the time of Israel's conquest of the Promised Land. Moses wrote, 'When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you' (Deuteronomy 7:1—NKJV).

In his popular book called *Lost Cities*, in the chapter entitled 'A forgotten empire', Leonard Cottrell says, 'Such is the picture we now possess of a people who, 3000 years ago, rivalled Egypt as the greatest power on earth.'¹

Yet they disappeared from the pages of history. The 1861 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, under the subject 'Hittites', contains just eight-and-a-half lines and if you read these carefully, you will notice that they are only a brief summary of what is found in the Bible.

'HITTITES, the children or descendants of Heth, formed one of the tribes of Canaanites which occupied Palestine before the Israelites. They lived in the mountains of Judea round Hebron, and retained their nationality even after the return of the Israelites from exile. The "kings of the Hittites" are often mentioned in connection with the kings of Syria; and in the days of Joram their alliance with the Egyptians was an object of dread to the besieged inhabitants of Samaria.'²

John Burkhardt, the Swiss discoverer of Petra, was the first to record a Hittite inscription. In 1810 he visited Hamath, a city north of Damascus in Syria, and there he noticed some slabs of stone built into the wall of a building. In his book *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land*, he wrote, 'a stone with a number of small figures and signs which appears to be a kind of hieroglyphic writing, though it

does not resemble that of Egypt.'³ These Hamath Stones (figure 1) are today in the Hittite Museum in Istanbul, Turkey.

The scholars should have pursued the matter, but it rang no bells so it went unnoticed. However, over the following years more inscriptions and monuments of unknown origin were discovered in Turkey, and the public was beginning to ask the scholars who were responsible for these strange objects. Finally, in 1880, the quaint clerical scholar Archibald Henry Sayce announced to an incredulous group of scholars that all these artefacts should be attributed to the biblical Hittites.

Time was to prove him right, and now, with the accumulation of knowledge, the Hittites are recognized as a once great civilization and empire stretching 1,000 kilometres from the Dardanelles to eastern Anatolia, and to the south into Syria. They seem to have been the first to break in horses and ride them, and the first to build and use light iron chariots. A cuneiform tablet in the Istanbul Museum constitutes the earliest known horse-training manual ever written.



Figure 1. Hamath Stone. These stones with hieroglyphic writing on them were found at Hamath in Syria. They are now in the Istanbul Museum.



Figure 2. Relief of Hittite gods at Yazilikia. Tudhaliyas IV was the last great king of the Hittites. He was a pious man and left these reliefs of Hittite gods on the face of the rocks at Yazilikiya.

Now the hieroglyphic and cuneiform inscriptions found from the Hittite period can be translated and the history of this great nation is fairly well understood. In 1998 Oxford University press published a fascinating book called *The Kingdom of the Hittites* by Trevor Bryce, which presents their history for all to read.⁴

Hittite origins and chronology

There is still a cloud over their origins. It is claimed that a migration from Europe occurred about 1900 BC that imposed a European language on the local people but absorbed the local culture and name. Anittas destroyed the city now known as Boghazkale and imposed a curse on anyone who rebuilt it. ‘Among the kingdoms that he conquered was Hattus, which had a karum. He sowed weeds on the site and cursed any who would rebuild it.’⁵ The curse did not work very well and Hattusilas rebuilt it and made it his capital city.

The dates attributed to early Hittite history are based on a military campaign against Babylon by Mursilis I. He is supposed to have brought the era of Hammurabi to an end. This claimed synchronism is based on a recorded astronomical event. No doubt this event occurred, but there could have been many such events centuries later.

Ronald Gorny wrote in the June 1989 edition of *Biblical Archaeologist*,

‘The historical linchpin of early Hittite chronology has always been the sack of Babylon by Mursili I. The date of this event has traditionally been established on the basis of astronomical observations from the so-called Venus tablets, records referring to the sixth year of the king Ammisaduqa, which we know from the Babylonian king lists to have been 46 years before the Hittite raid and collapse of the dynasty of Hammurabi. In the tablets detailing observations of that year the scribe

notes the occurrence of a conjunction between the moon and Venus which can theoretically be fixed in time by modern calculations. The fact that this is a relatively frequent occurrence, however, combined with the knowledge of certain textual difficulties, leaves the actual date of this conjunction open to various interpretations Based on these calculations scholars arrive at three different dates for the sack of Babylon: 1651 BCE for the high chronology, 1595 BCE for the middle chronology, and 1531 BCE for the low chronology. The uncertainty surrounding the historical documentation means that the framework within which the absolute chronology of the Hittite state is to be understood remains a highly conjectural issue.’⁶

Supiluliumas was the greatest of the Hittite kings and he was followed by Muwatallis who fought Rameses the Great at the Battle of Kadesh. A peace treaty between the Egyptians and the Hittites was sealed by a marriage between Rameses II and the daughter of Hattusis III. The last great Hittite king was Tudhaliyas IV, a pious king who left a relief of himself in the hand of his god on the rock face of Yazilikiya near Hattusas (figure 2).

The traditional interpretation is that about 1200 BC the Hittites collapsed under the weight of the invasion by ‘The Peoples of the Sea’, a mysterious alliance which swept down from the north, invaded Egypt and were repulsed by Rameses III, and finally settled down on the Mediterranean coast where they became known as the Philistines.

This interpretation is very interesting and partially undeniable. There were kings by those names, and they did carve out an empire, and they did fight against the Egyptians under Seti I and Rameses II, but how and when they were dissolved as a nation is shrouded in mystery, largely because of the dates that have been attributed to their history.

There is no question about the names of these Hittite kings and their approximate lengths of reign, but there is no way of determining from the Hittite records alone when it all happened. That can only be deduced by synchronisms with Egypt. Supiluliumas sent a letter of congratulation to Pharaoh Akhenaten complimenting him on his accession to the throne of Egypt. Obviously they were contemporary.

Tutankhamen’s widow, Ankhesenamun, invited the Hittite king to send her his son to marry her. Muwatallis fought against Rameses II, and Hattusis III arranged a marriage of his daughter with Rameses II. All of this should give us a chronology for the history of the Hittites but there are problems, major problems.

The Sea Peoples

The first question is about the identity of ‘The Peoples of the Sea’. Most of what we know of them is from inscriptions on the walls of the temple of Rameses III at Medinet Habu,



Figure 3. Reliefs on the walls of the temple of Rameses III at Medinet Habu depict people called Peleset or Pereset. They are usually identified as Philistines but they rather bear resemblance to Persian soldiers, indicating a later date for Rameses III.

Luxor. These inscriptions describe at length Rameses III's battles against them.

But there has been much fantasizing about these Sea Peoples. In his book *The Sea Peoples*, N.K. Sandars wrote,

‘It was the Egyptians who invented the Peoples of the Sea. If it were not for certain Egyptian texts of the 13th and 12th centuries BC their existence might have been guessed at, but certainly never known by that name ... Again it is the Egyptian monuments- the 13th- and 12th- century inscriptions and carvings at Karnak and Luxor—that are the sources for our knowledge. The foreign countries ... made a conspiracy in their islands. All at once the lands were on the move, scattered in war. No country could stand before their arms ... Their league was Peleset, Tjeker, Shekelesh, Denyen, and Weshesh ... Something is known about where they went to later on, but the Egyptian texts give no sort of explanation for the centuries of recession, the long dark age of the Aegean and Anatolia that set in soon after 1200 ... There have been many guesses as to who these people were, but they are only guesses ... Whoever or whatever they were, the trouble-makers were not “a people”, and only to a limited extent were they “of the sea”.’⁷

A word about the ‘Dark Ages’. They are called Dark Ages, not because they were periods of ignorance and poverty, but because we are in the dark about them. We have few records that can be attributable to them for the simple reason that these ‘Dark Ages’ did not exist. These are the

centuries that should be deducted from Egyptian history. They did not exist elsewhere.

Sandars says this about them:

‘An epoch of prosperity and comparative stability throughout the East Mediterranean and the Near East had depended upon an equilibrium that held between the two major powers, Egypt and Hittite Anatolia; and it virtually ended with the death of Pharaoh Rameses II around 1224, and Tudhaliyas IV, the last really powerful king, a few years later. The years from around 1220 to 1150 saw the collapse of Egyptian influence in the Levant, the total ruin of the Hittite empire in Anatolia, and the abandonment of

their capital Hattusas (modern Bogazkale) and widespread destruction of cities in the Levant, Cyprus and mainland Greece. A long period of absolute decline and comparative isolation, whose ferocity is hard to explain, had set in. In the Aegean the Dark Age lasted till the end of the 9th century, and in Anatolia very nearly as long.’⁸

As for the leading group, the Peleset, ‘l’ in Egyptian hieroglyphs can also be understood as ‘r’. So to be consistent with the Persian people pictured on the wall of Medinet Habu, it should read Pereset, the Egyptian word for Persia. The relief on the wall of Medinet Habu certainly supports that idea (figure 3). They were obviously wearing Persian head-dress as depicted on the wall of Persepolis. That would place these ‘Sea Peoples’ centuries later than when the Hittites were supposed to have been brought to their end.

The theory that these Peleset (Philistines) then withdrew and settled down on the Mediterranean coast as the Philistines is also flawed. The Philistines were there long before that. In the 19th century BC ‘Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines’ (Genesis 21:34). His son Isaac ‘went to Abimelech king of the Philistines in Gerar’ (Genesis 26:1), and in the 15th century BC ‘God did not lead them (the Israelites in the Exodus) by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near’ (Exodus 13:17).

They were still there

Then there is the mystery of the survival of the Hittites after their supposed demise. On his black obelisk in the British Museum, Assyrian king Shalmaneser III, 859–824 BC,



Figure 4. The Shalmaneser Pillar in the British Museum. This pillar was made by Shalmaneser III and depicts Jehu bringing tribute to the Assyrian king. He records his wars against the Hittites in the 9th century BC though the Hittites were supposed to have been eliminated about 1200 BC.

records his wars against the Hittites, and these were not just trivial skirmishes against some surviving remnants of the Hittites (figure 4). It was all-out war against a major power.

His obelisk reads,

‘From the mountain Amanus I departed, crossed the Orontes river and approached Alimush, the fortress town of Sapalulme from Hattina. To save his life Sapalulme from Hattina (called for) Ahuni, man of Adini, Sangara from Carchemish ... During this battle I personally captured Bur-Anate from (Iasbuk). I conquered the great cities of Hattina ... I conquered the towns Taia, Hazazu, Nulia, (and) Butamu which belong to the country



Figure 5. The Sennacherib Prism. The Bible says that Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem but did not capture it. This prism of Sennacherib claims he shut up Hezekiah like a bird in a cage, but he did not claim he captured Jerusalem. Sennacherib in the 8th century BC records his wars against the Hittites.

Hattina. I killed 2,900 of (their) battle-experienced soldiers; 14,600 I brought away as prisoners of war.’⁹

Nobody questions that the Hattina were the Hittites, and incredibly the name of the king is given—Sapalulme, obviously a reference to the great Hittite king Suppiluliumas.

Later still Sennacherib, 705–681 BC, recorded his wars against the Hittites. In the British Museum is the Sennacherib Prism, a beautifully written cylinder that records Sennacherib’s major military accomplishments (figure 5). On it is written, ‘In my third campaign I marched against Hatti. Luli king of Sidon, whom the terror-inspiring glamour of my lordship had overwhelmed, fled far overseas and perished.’¹⁰ The Hatti were the Hittites, still a major fighting force in Sennacherib’s day.

In his book *The Hittites*, Ronald Gurney wrote, ‘In the south-eastern provinces of the Hittite Empire Hittite culture had a strange afterglow which lasted for no less than five centuries. Assyrian records continue to refer to Syria and the Taurus area as the “Land of Hatti” and speak of kings

bearing names like Sapalulme, Mutallu, Katuzili, and Labarna (cf. Suppiluliumas, Muwatallis, Hattusilis or Kantuzzilis, Labarnas).’¹¹

Gregory McMahon wrote, ‘Although the collapse of the capital at Hattusa signalled the end of the Hittite Empire, many cities throughout the empire retained their Hittite character for centuries after the imperial structure had vanished.’¹²

Then there is the extraordinary duplication of cultures. The Istanbul and Ankara museums are full of impressive Hittite monuments and statues. Some are from the early Hittite period but most are purported to be from the supposed later period. The style of monuments and statues is sure to change over the centuries but the style of *these* monuments does *not* change. The later period monuments have been

dated later, not because of a change in style, but because they were found in southern Turkey and Syria where they were related to Assyrian chronology, and therefore given later dates.

The same applies to pottery styles which are archaeological keys to eras of time.

Peter James says, ‘A similar continuity over the same period of time can be seen in the small finds and pottery from Neo-Hittite Malatya. As the latest excavators noted, “the general character of this material, especially of the pottery, does not differ fundamentally from the imperial Hittite production”.’¹³

Donavon Courville aptly observes, ‘Attempts to meet these anachronisms by supposing a Hittite empire without a culture, followed by a surviving culture without a militarily organized people, is but indicative of the lengths to which faulty human reasoning can go once the more secure bases for arriving at sound conclusions have been rejected.’¹⁴

The Dark Ages

Another problem for traditionalists is the apparent cessation of occupation in the Hittite cities after the collapse of the empire. Sometimes, cities like Jericho were abandoned for centuries after their destruction, but not likely everywhere.

Gurny wrote, ‘There seems to have been a discontinuation of civilization at the major sites on the plateau after the fall of the Hittite Empire ... Thus we are confronted with one of the more serious dilemmas facing Anatolian archaeologists:

how to explain the apparent cessation of urban settlements on the plateau after the fall of the Hittites ... It seems reasonable to assume that many inhabitants of the Hittite heartland simply returned to their pastoral roots.’¹⁵ Rather a lame way to explain absence of evidence.

Scholars are well aware of the problem and acknowledge that it exists. Cottrell wrote, ‘When King David married the widow of Uriah the Hittite in about 1000 BC, the Hittites had long been driven out of their mountain homeland by later invaders. The problem is a difficult one ... This migration of peoples occurred towards the latter part of the thirteenth century ... But for more than 500 years after this date, the Hittites continued to survive in Syria. Assyrian records of the eighth century BC still speak of The Land of Hatti and give the names of Hittite kings.’¹⁶

The June 1989 edition of the prestigious magazine *Biblical Archaeologist*, all 95 pages, was devoted to articles on the Hittites, written by five highly qualified Hittitologists. The dilemmas they face surface repeatedly. Here are some of the statements made.

‘The lack of accurate chronological or genealogical data for the Hittite kings precludes the possibility of accurate dating at this time.’¹⁷ ‘Our understanding of the late Old Hittite and Middle Hittite periods suffers from a scarcity of documentation.’¹⁸ ‘The actual end of the Hittite Empire can only be guessed at for the obvious reason that no one was left to chronicle the event after the capital was taken around 1200 BCE. See Singer 1985 and 1987 for problems dating the fall of the empire. With the sacking of Hattusa the centralized Hittite polity came to an end forever, as did the Hittite cuneiform scribal tradition. No Hittite cuneiform tablets that post-date the fall of Hattusa have been discovered in either Anatolia or Syria.’¹⁹

The Bible knew

The Bible also knew what it was talking about. The Syrians under Benhadad II, 870–842 BC, were besieging Samaria when they suddenly fled in terror because ‘The LORD had caused the army of the Syrians to hear the noise of chariots and the noise of horses, the noise of a great army, so they said to one another, “Look, the king of Israel has hired against us the kings of the Hittites, and the kings of the Egyptians to attack us”’ (2 Kings 7:6).



Figure 6. Ramses killing Hittites in the Battle of Kadesh. In this relief in the temple at Abu Simbel in Egypt Ramses II boasts of his wars against the Hittites, so these kingdoms must have been contemporary, however Ramses is usually dated to the 13th century BC whereas Assyrian inscriptions record their wars against the Hittites 500 years later.

So in the 9th century BC, the Hittites were still there, and significantly, they were listed ahead of the mighty Egyptian armies. They were a power to be reckoned with, not just a mysterious ‘afterglow’.

So the traditional interpretation is a shambles. It would be laughable if it were not so serious—same nation, same kings, same culture, but 500 years later. Obviously they are the same nation, kings and culture. It simply means that the Egyptian chronology for this period needs to be reduced by some 500 years. The reign of Rameses II should be dated to about 759–693 BC, and that would make the Hittites consistent with the Assyrian records, and would also synchronize with the Bible records, which are obviously more reliable than secular history (see figure 6).

But how can we tamper with the supposedly ‘fixed dates’ of Egyptian history? There is no question back to about 700 BC. Jeremiah 44:30 refers to Pharaoh Hophra, 588–569 BC. The Ethiopian Pharaoh Tirhakah, 690–664 BC is referred to in 2 Kings 19:9 at the time of King Hezekiah of Judah 715–686 BC. But earlier than that there are serious questions.

Dr Immanuel Velikovsky, Dr Donovan Courville, Professor Colin Renfrew, Peter James and David Rohl all challenged the independent existence of the Third Intermediate Period of Egypt. They claimed that the kings of dynasties 21 to 24 reigned at the same time as other dynasties and that would reduce the dates of Egyptian history by centuries.

Professor Colin Renfrew (now Lord Colin Renfrew) wrote an introduction to *Centuries of Darkness* by Peter James in which he said,

‘This disquieting book draws attention, in a penetrating and original way, to a crucial period in world history, and to the very shaky nature of the dating, the whole chronological framework, upon which our current interpretations rest ...

‘But could a chronological upset on so major a scale also be contemplated for the very much more recent time period considered here, within the time range 1100–700 BC? Is it not the case that the chronology for a phase significantly closer to our time, and to that of the scholarly historians of Greece and Rome, is much better established? The authors of this book show conclusively that it is not! They indicate that the Egyptian chronology for the time-period in question—the so-called ‘Third Intermediate Period’—is altogether shaky ...

‘The revolutionary suggestion is made here that the existing chronologies for that crucial phase in human history are in error by several centuries, and that, in consequence, history will have to be rewritten ... I feel that their critical analysis is right, and that a chronological revolution is on its way.’²⁰

This also has a bearing on the reliability of the biblical records. The traditional date for the first dynasty of Egypt is about 3100 BC, and the building of the pyramids about 2550 BC. This would place them before the Flood that deluged the world about 2300 BC. Obviously Egyptian history could not commence until after the Flood. So the Egyptian dates need to be reduced to match the Hittite and Assyrian records.

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