The Hittites

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Hittite civilization seldom features in coffee-table books on the ancient world. Explanations for that omission lie close at hand. The Hittites left behind them no monuments rivaling those of Karnak, Petra, Ajanta, the Sun Temple of Teotihuacan, or the Great Wall of China. The dun hilltops of the Anatolian Plateau do not provide an irresistibly photogenic frame to the remains of Hittite palaces, forts, and towns beneath them, such as is given Machu Picchu by its surrounding Andean peaks, or by the entwining tropical jungles to the ruined temples of Angkor and Tikal, Copán and Palenque. So far as we can ascertain, the Hittites produced no Gilgamesh, let alone an Iliad.

The few contemporary accounts of their society contain no tantalizing references to now-vanished glory--no hint of some Hittite equivalent to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, no evocations of the glittering streets and walled retreats of a Moorish Córdoba or the Baghdad of Harun al-Rashid's Arabian Nights, no images of a shimmering blue lake such as surrounded Moctezuma's palace or buoyed the gilded boats on route to the dazzling pleasure pavilions of medieval Hangzhou.

Nor, so far as we know, was Hittite civilization brought to an apocalyptic end, as may have been the case for the Minoans and the Mayans and assuredly was for the Assyrians and the Incas. Lacking these requisites for romantic or morbidly fascinated speculation, the civilization of the Hittites has accordingly remained the province of specialists. And nothing that contemporary archaeologists have so far discovered about the Hittites has insistently posed to lay observers the questions: "Who were these people?" "How did they achieve such prodigies of creation in so unpromising a setting?" and "What brought about their demise?"

Like the Sumerians and the urban dwellers of Mohenjo-Daro, the Hittites disappeared from human history several millennia ago. In his Lost Cities, Leonard Cottrell aptly titles his chapters on their civilization "A Forgotten Empire." As an ethnic name, the Hittites lingered on in human consciousness through scattered passages in the Bible--most famously, through the story of "Uriah the Hittite," whose Bathsheba attracted King David's lustful attention.

Such biblical references, however, contained no clear geographical or architectural referent. Physical proof of the Hittites' former reality as a people came only at the beginning of the 20th Century. Moreover, it came almost accidentally. In 1902, the Norwegian philologist J.A. Knudtzon announced to his peers that among some clay tablets of diplo-
matic correspondence from Egypt's Tell el Amarna that he was studying were two addressed to the Pharaoh Akhnaton in an unknown Indo-European language. His subsequent investigations, he said, had persuaded him that the language was that of the biblical Hittites.

Preliminary indications suggested, in turn, that the tablets emanated from a society that had been responsible for a number of rock carvings in south-east, central, and western Asia Minor centering on the ruins of Bogaz Köy, a recently opened archaeological site east of present-day Ankara. If so, then the mystery as to who the Hittites were and where they lived was solved.

The reaction to Knudtzon's announcement was hardly galvanizing. Most of his contemporaries expressed open skepticism that he had stumbled on a new civilization. Meanwhile, however, German investigators, for reasons of their own, were finding the possibility of discovering an ancient and hitherto-unrecognized Indo-European society in the Near East profoundly appealing. Soon after Knudtzon had published his speculations, his hypothesis was confirmed when a team led by Dr. Hugo Winckler of the Deutsche-Orient Gesellschaft uncovered an archive of thousands of tablets in the same language during their excavations at Bogaz Köy.

Further research, moreover, revealed that the archive included some tablets written in Akkadian, the international language of diplomacy in the region for much of the Second Millennium BC. When scholars established that the tablets chronicled exchanges among the ruling monarchs of the region concerning the various extensions of Hittite imperial power, the reality of Hittite civilization as a flourishing macro-culture of the 14th and 13th centuries BC was placed beyond dispute. The discovery, in 1947, of a long bilingual inscription in Hittite and Phoenician resolved many remaining issues concerning its nature while greatly accelerating reconstruction of the Hittite language itself.

Already in the 1930s Arnold Toynbee included the Hittites among the two dozen civilizations for further consideration in his A Study of History. But Toynbee did little more than place them on his list; thereafter, he never found occasion to invoke their name in relation to any of the extended analytic problems he took up in the twelve volumes of his treatise. The Hittites' relative obscurity has hardly altered since then.

To be sure, a small band of scholars have patiently assembled enough fragments from the Hittite past to permit a reasonably detailed insight into the organizing patterns of their life. But such scholars have for the most part remained content to report the fruits of their investi-
gations (often in untranslated German) in specialized archaeological journals. Meanwhile, school children since World War II have learned to credit the Hittites with the discovery and development of iron smelting, thus ushering in the "Iron Age." And William H. McNeill, after making much in his *Rise of the West* of the greater technological challenges entailed in that process than in forging of Bronze Age weapons, drew further attention to the Hittites' contribution to refining the arts of inter-state diplomacy. Yet even well-read historians of the Pre-Classical World would probably be hard pressed to cite much more about the leading attributes of this notably low-profile civilization.

J.G. Macqueen's *The Hittites* holds out the promise of enabling the general reader to remedy that deficiency. In a slender volume of some 170 pages Prof. Macqueen offers a multi-dimensional portrait of his subject. He locates the Hittites in both time and space among the jostling kingdoms of second-millennium BC Asia Minor. He addresses the issue of the possible southeast European origins of the Hittites; he explores the complexity of defining the reach of their civilization either through language or distinctive material artifacts. He offers accounts of their techniques of warfare and of their daily life; and he rounds out his narrative with extended chapters on the Hittites' religion and their arts and literature.

As befits a publication in the Thames and Hudson series, Macqueen's rather sober prose is complemented by a lavish array of elegant black and white photographs that he supplements with hand-drawn maps, sketches, ground-plans, and cross-sections of palaces, towns, and temples. At the conclusion of his text he appends a bibliography on the Hittites long enough to satisfy all but the most ardent civilizationists.

Macqueen is a former Scholar of the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara and a Reader until 1992 in Classics and Ancient Middle Eastern Studies at Bristol University. His works include a history of Babylonian civilization, and he writes as a field investigator who has thoroughly immersed himself in the intricacies of his subject. He not only discusses the Hittites in their own right, but takes up their complexly overlapping relations with surrounding kingdoms. For the present book, he has drawn on a broad and varied range of sources to produce a concise introduction for non-specialists, yet he demonstrates his mastery of his field with learned disquisitions on problems of dating, issues of interpretation, and conflicts among texts. The resultant publication probably encompasses as much as can currently be said—or as his readers would wish to have said—about the most salient aspects of
Hittite civilization.

In all these respects, Macqueen has performed a notable service for all who have undertaken the comparative study of civilizations. His concise yet comprehensive introduction to Hittite culture stands without competitors in its field. Yet a certain grayness pervades this treatise that not even its artistically composed illustrations can dispel. In the end his book does not make a compelling case for dispelling the obscurity in which Hittite civilization has languished. For this conclusion two factors appear operative: the character of the evidence currently available concerning the Hittites, and Macqueen's conception of his task.

We have already noted that the residue of Hittite artifacts is less than spellbinding. Environment has something to do with the matter. The favored building material of the Hittites, mud brick, has not fared well in the harsh climate of the Anatolian plateau. The Hittite rulers presumably became wealthy enough through their strategic position on the crossroads of Near Eastern trade. But unlike their Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Chinese, and Toltec counterparts, they lacked the benefit of the large surplus of labor that could be extracted from numberless peasants in a fertile river basin outside the growing season. They were therefore in no position to erect the towering structures to their gods that we admire today.

Moreover, the advantage of their strategic location was double-edged. If it enabled them to set terms of passage for itinerant merchants, it likewise exposed them to the envy and warlike propensities of their neighbors. Their own imperialist ventures only compounded their problems. Several Hittite monarchs died on the field of battle, and some of their most crushing defeats by the Egyptians and the Assyrians came as a backlash to such quests. Surviving chronicles from that era leave an impression of almost continuous warfare, of territory regained and lost, of cities razed and rebuilt.

If the Hittites became proficient in the arts of diplomacy and interstate negotiation, that skill was born of necessity. So frequent were the incursions into the Hittite heartland and subsequent displacements of ruling elites that Macqueen's narrative becomes clotted by references to Hurrians, Mitanni, Arzawans, et al., ad infinitum, to a point that begins to cloud the very concept of Hittite identity. Although, by definition, the cultural achievements of Hittite civilization succeeded in evolving considerably beyond Thomas Hobbes's stark characterization of "the life of man" when war or its imminent threat remains a permanent possibility, those same arts and artifacts were subject, almost from the outset, to
continuous attrition.

 Whatever the human suffering such unceasing warfare and destruction must have left in its wake, the corresponding loss to the world of art does not appear to have been beyond counting. "The immediate reaction of anyone who turns to the art of Anatolia between 1650 and 1200 BC and compares it with the art of neighboring lands may well be one of disappointment," Macqueen observes (137). His warning is well placed. At a time when the Egyptians were decorating for eternity the tombs of the earlier New Kingdom and the Minoans were giving exquisite expression to their love of dolphins, flowers, fruits, and maidens in their frescoes, the Hittites contented themselves with bare palace walls and chunky portals for temples.

Photographs of the surviving Hittite sculptures and friezes show an array of conventional renditions of conventional Near Eastern themes. The lion gates are handsome but lacking in supple feline ferocity; the general forms of bullheaded vases and statuettes have been made familiar by superior versions elsewhere; the carvings of squat human figures provide no novel perspective on the human condition. Hittite kings and emperors seem to have shared a common Middle Eastern love of having processionals and the chase depicted in stone, but these bas reliefs in no way match the magnificent Assyrian triumphal marches and hunting scenes, let alone those the Persians were later to produce at Persepolis.

As to literature, Macqueen suggests that what might be considered "literary" texts were probably composed to serve as a means of training scribes in the art of writing (149). Other documents--omen-lists, word-lists, and the like--do not stimulate a deeper curiosity about the culture that produced them. In constructing their religious pantheon and cultic rituals, the Hittites borrowed freely from the other peoples of Asia Minor--a practice that speaks more for their open-mindedness than for any notable creative impulses.

One can hardly criticize Macqueen for faithfully transcribing the contours and lineaments of a syncretic, somewhat stolid civilization. His tale is limited by its components, and he does not seek to tint these or to place a false gloss on them. However, he is sometimes rather quick to dismiss without discussion key hypotheses many others have seized on to give the Hittites a distinctive role within the story of humanity.

Thus he uses one short sentence to dispose of the very widespread belief that the Hittites owed their dominant position in Asia Minor to their well-kept secret knowledge of a new technology for producing
iron weaponry: "For this there is, as far as I know, no evidence at all" (52). (In a footnote he asserts that this "misconception" arises solely from an "unwarranted" interpretation of a Hittite document which mentions a foreign monarch's request for iron.). He makes nothing of the paradox that this most warlike of societies should yet (to all appearances) engage less in mutilation, flaying, and other tortures than its neighbors.

He does not allow himself to be drawn into speculation as to the demise of the great empire of the Hittites--so dominant throughout the Near East that at one point, only Egypt could stand up to it; nor why, although never utterly shattered and dismantled by vengeful foes, should they have nevertheless subsided so far below the minimal level of human memory as to remain undiscovered for over three millennia.

Yet he is willing to devote several pages to a close tracking of the diffusion of certain linguistic elements of Hittite across the Anatolian peninsula--an enterprise that culminates in the declaration that "Cilician EB III has sufficient connection with cultures further east and south to establish a fairly accurate date for it...and, since there are elements of Troy II, III and IV in Beycesultan XII-VIII, c. 2300 BC is a reasonable date for the introduction of the north-western culture to the southwest" (27). At such moments, one becomes uncertain which readership the writer is writing for.

A similar disproportion affects the length at which he treats the topics he does take up. A full quarter of the book is devoted to the rediscovery of the Hittites and to reviewing the vague and often conflicting evidence concerning their origins and interrelations with their neighbors on the Anatolian peninsula without any of the clarity and gift for narrative drama that Cottrell brings to a similar task. "Society and Administration", on the other hand (a chapter covering village life, societal structure, public administration, the role of the Hittite kings, and the impact of Hittite imperialism on the overall organization of Hittite society) is allotted five pages--that is to say, less than 1/30th of the text.

Admittedly, in the Ancient World the deeds of kings were more apt to be recorded than the motivational and informational networks determining royal decision-making--let alone the impact of kingly policies on the remainder of society. Social relations were likewise seldom written in stone, and their reconstruction is accordingly the more difficult. Nevertheless, other scholars have attempted to reconstruct the unrecorded, drawing on admittedly imperfect indicators, employing calculative extrapolations, tracing the evolution of key roles in the society
in relation to changing environmental pressures, and making use of insights that might be gained from the structure and processes of contemporary societies about which, for one reason or another, we know more.

Macqueen is too cautious a scholar to undertake such work. Analogous inhibitions appear to have prevented him from assessing explanations for the decline of the Hittite Empire in terms extending beyond the well-recorded fact that toward its end it lost several battles to its many enemies.

*The Hittites* is a solid, respectable book. Its pictures, diagrams, and sketches are a joy to study. It is almost surely the best available scholarly introduction in a readably compact format to a much-neglected civilization. But such enthusiasm as one can feel for so worthy a work is likely to be tempered. Quite deliberately, it would seem, its author broke the cardinal rule governing such studies.

A well-established convention regarding introductory treatises on ancient civilizations holds that the reader must be made to feel guilty for having hitherto remained uninformed or misinformed about the wonders of the society that forms its subject and therefore grateful to the expert who has pulled away the veil of ignorance.

Macqueen establishes, on the contrary, that the reader's previously limited stock of information concerning the Hittites is pardonable. In limiting his survey of what is known about the Hittites to less than 200 pages, he will therefore most probably win his readers' gratitude for having told them as much about that civilization as they will conclude they wish to know.

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