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Hittite Empire

Type of Government

Based in Anatolia (modern Turkey) and Syria, the Hittite state was a far-flung empire centered on its ruler, who was called the Great King, to distinguish him from the vast array of lesser leaders bound to him in alliance or outright dependence. The Great King served as chief executive, supreme judge, supreme military commander, and chief priest of the storm god. His primary assistants in these duties were his sons, one of whom often served as *tuhkanti* (second in command). The security of the empire largely depended on the client states, which were used as buffers on its frontiers.

Background

The origins of the Hittite people remain obscure. Following their arrival in Anatolia from the north around 1900 BC, they found the region divided between a number of small, independent states. Several of these, notably a tribal people called the Kashka, continued to assert their autonomy even at the height of the Hittite empire. After establishing a capital in the town of Hattushash (modern-day Bogazköy), east of modern Ankara, the Hittites began their expansion. King Labarnas I (d. c. 1650 BC) is believed to have made the first push southward to the Mediterranean. By the end of the seventeenth century BC his successors had extended Hittite power throughout most of Anatolia and into Syria. This was the beginning of the so-called Old Kingdom.



Sculpture of a Hittite archer. (c) Charles & Josette Lenars/CORBIS

Historians generally date the end of the Old Kingdom and the beginning of the New Kingdom to about 1380 BC, when a palace coup put King Suppiluliumas I (d. 1335 BC) on the throne in place of his murdered brother. He then defeated an old enemy, the Mitanni, in Syria and pushed beyond them to challenge the Egyptians. Later kings tried to hold on to Suppiluliumas's gains, with mixed success.

Government Structure

The discovery of the royal archives at Hattushash in 1906 reveals many details of day-to-day Hittite rule. Thousands of inscribed clay tablets record treaty negotiations; letters to other rulers, notably the Egyptian pharaohs; instructions to military commanders, local governors, and client states; and religious texts. The picture that emerges is of an imbalanced administration and an overburdened king. Early kings may have been able to shift some duties to an assembly called the *pankus*, but its composition and function remain unclear, and it soon disappeared. An elaborate administration evolved in its place that relied heavily on provincial governors within the empire and dependent allies beyond. Though it often proved a flexible and adaptable system, there was one serious flaw: the Great King had few reliable advisers and assistants within the palace itself. Those he did have, from the *tuhkanti* to the chief of the Royal Bodyguards, were generally family members with their own eyes on the throne.

Political Parties and Factions

Most factions within the Hittite palace centered around members of the king's family. As prominent as the king's brothers and sons was his mother. When a queen mother outlived her son, the Hittites considered her the successor's coruler. Other factions at court represented the agendas of particular cities, regions, or ethnic groups within the empire; some were allied, loosely or perhaps covertly, with Egypt and other rival powers. Priests seem to have been slightly less prominent than in other Near Eastern states, perhaps because the king retained the most important religious functions for himself.

Major Events

Around 1300 BC the Hittite army battled the Egyptian army at Kadesh in Syria. Both sides claimed victory in what proved to be one of the largest battles of antiquity. More remarkable than the battle itself, perhaps, is the peace treaty signed less than twenty years later. The two great empires were still at peace when the Hittites collapsed around 1200 BC.

Aftermath

When a mysterious group called the Sea Peoples descended suddenly on the eastern Mediterranean at the end of the thirteenth century BC, the Hittites, among others, were caught unprepared. In the chaos and mass migrations that followed, they lost their empire, and new groups, notably the Greeks and the Phrygians, soon dominated Anatolia. Only in the southwest corner of their former territory did there remain any trace of Hittite administration. There, in what is today northern Syria, a loosely affiliated group known as the Neo-Hittite city-states preserved several Hittite innovations, including a law system that was remarkably nonviolent for its time.

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