

# Hittite Empire and Society

- Hittite Kingdom was located in the central Anatolian Plateau known as the *Land of Hatti*
- It began around 1700 BCE and lasted about 500 years, during the Late Bronze Age
- The Hittites conquered much of Anatolia as well as northern Syria and the western edge of Mesopotamia



# Hattusa

The capital was Hattusa (*Ḫattušas*),  
near the modern Turkish city of Boğazköy.



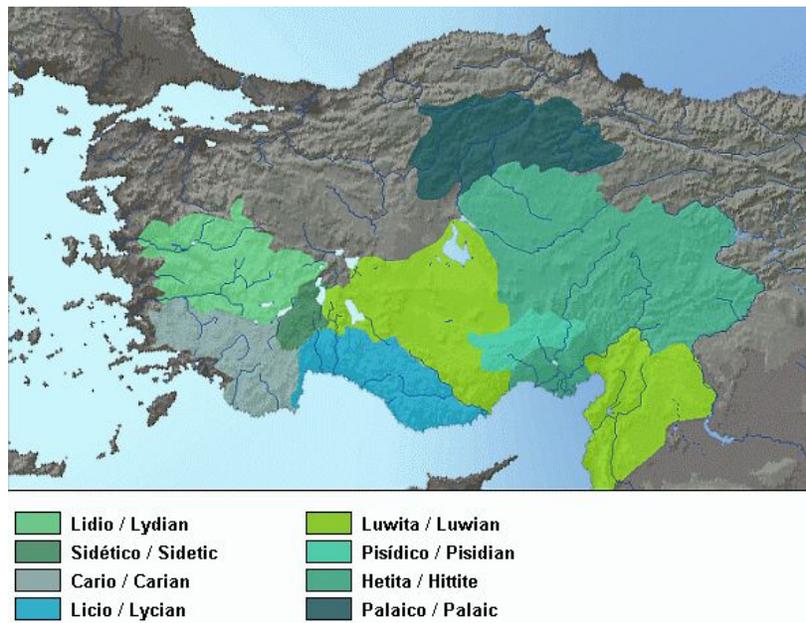
## Anatolian Prehistory

- The native people of central Anatolia were known as the *Hattians*
- Speakers of a dialect of Proto-Indo-European entered Anatolia, probably via the Balkans, around 4000 BCE
- The PIE language speakers mixed with the native population, and Hittite civilization is thus a mixture of PIE features with native Anatolian cultural elements.
- The Hittite Empire was quite large and at times very powerful. Through absorbing neighboring peoples the society that resulted was a multicultural one in many respects.

## Anatolian Languages

- Although Hittite is the best known of the Indo-European Anatolian languages, several others were in use, spoken in various regions of Anatolia.
- The best known among these is *Luvian*.
- The other Anatolian languages — *Lycian*, *Milyan*, *Carian*, *Pisidian*, *Palaic* and *Lydian*, are poorly attested
- Both non-Indo-European *Hattian* and Indo-European *Hittite* remained spoken languages of central Anatolia. Hittite itself may have originally been a *prestige language* spoken by the ruling class; ultimately it appears to have become a *formal language* of administration and law. It is now thought that *Luvian* was probably, or eventually became, the ordinary language of much of Hittite society

## Distribution of Anatolian Languages



# Periods of Hittite History: 1000 years

**Old Kingdom** c. 1700 – 1400

**New Kingdom** or 'Empire' c. 1400 – c. 1175

- Hittite Empire at its height
- Hittite Emperor rivalled the Egyptian Pharaoh and the rulers of Assyria, Mittani and Babylon

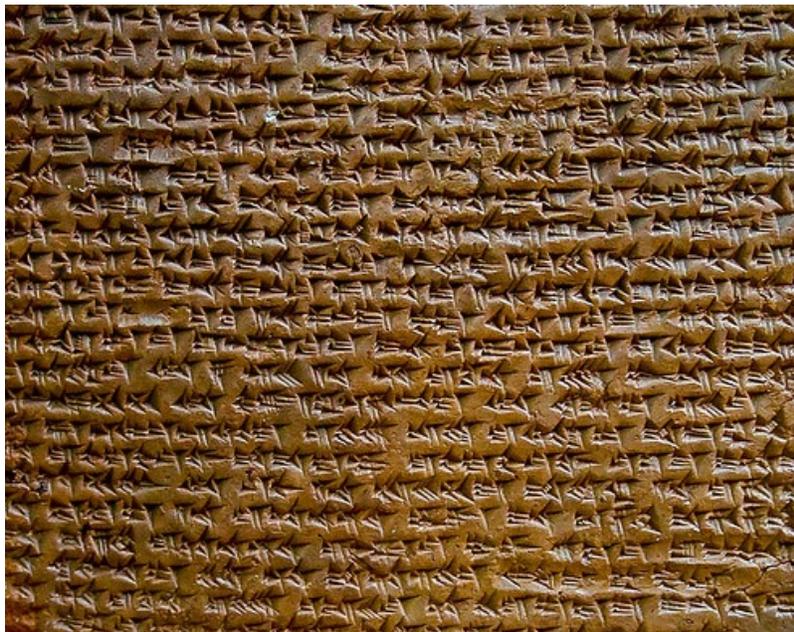
**Neo-Hittite Kingdoms of Syria** c. 1175 - 708

- After the fall of the Empire, the Hittite dynasty continued to rule some small kingdoms in northern Syria.
- Hittite culture continued in this context



## Hittite language

- Remains of the Hittite language were found in excavations of Hattusa, beginning in the late 19th century
- Hittite was written in *cuneiform writing*, borrowed from the Akkadians, who had borrowed it from the inventors of cuneiform, the Sumerians.
- Sumerian and Akkadian were the ‘learned’ languages of the ancient Near East, comparable to Latin in medieval Europe.
- Consequently, when Hittite was written in cuneiform, sometimes the symbols denote Hittite words and other times they denote Akkadian or Sumerian words.
- This is a bit like our use of ‘Roman numerals’ *xi*, *cl* in English text.





## Luvian

- The Luvian language is known from two sources: *cuneiform Luvian* and *hieroglyphic Luvian*.
- Cuneiform Luvian was written in the same way as Hittite
- Hieroglyphic Luvian used a special set of symbols unlike cuneiform.
- Inscriptions in Hieroglyphic Luvian are fairly plentiful and

many are from the (later) neo-Hittite period. For this reason it is thought that Luvian was probably the language of the neo-Hittite kingdoms.

## Luvian Hieroglyphic Inscription in Hattusa



## Hittite Law

- Our knowledge of Hittite law comes mostly from a collection of texts called *The Laws*, which were compiled and recopied over many centuries.
- Multiple copies of The Laws have been preserved, four of which are dated to the Old Kingdom.
- The oldest parts of The Laws appear to date from around 1600 BCE.
- They refer to the first king of the Hittites, Labarna.
- We also have
  - records of court proceedings kept in the royal archives
  - anecdotes from the historical Palace Chronicle
  - records of disputes between the king's vassals

## Retribution vs. Compensation

- Hittite Law is interesting from two perspectives
  - how did Hittite Law differ from other law in the ancient Near East?
  - how did Hittite Law differ from contemporary concepts of justice?
- Legal penalties can in general be divided into two types
  - *retribution*: the offender is punished for misdeeds
  - *compensation*: the victim is given something to compensate for the loss incurred
- Early law, e.g. the Laws of Hammurabi, was often *retributive*: ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’
- Hittite Law is remarkable for its focus instead on *compensation*.
- It is also unusual in that it is *not* said to be divinely inspired.
- The Hittite approach to law was exceptionally *pragmatic*.

## Punishment for Murder

- The murder victim's family — or specifically the heir — was entitled to decide the fate of the murderer.
- Proclamation of King Telipinu (Old Kingdom):

‘If he [the heir] says: “Let him die,” he shall die; if he says “Let him make compensation”, he shall make compensation.

- In later times the death penalty fell out of use, unless preserved by a specific local custom.
- The murder victim's family could then choose either material compensation or *lifetime enslavement* of the murderer.

## Collective Responsibility

- A concept quite alien to modern law is *collective responsibility*: the idea that a family or community is responsible for the actions of its members and so can suffer punishment on behalf of any member's actions
- For example, if a murder was committed on your property (but not by you), then if the victim was a man, you were obliged to give your property to the victim's family. If the victim was a woman you had to pay 120 shekels of silver.
- If the murder was in an uncultivated field, any people living in a village within a specified radius of the spot were held liable.
- In the case of the gravest offenses, such as disobeying the king's orders, the local official of the area where the offender lived might also be executed.

## Power Structure

- Ultimate authority rested with the king, the deputy of the Sun God, but with such a large empire local authority had to be delegated to vassals who swore allegiance to the king.
- This ‘feudalist’ system of allegiance and obligation resembled that of medieval Europe
- Most people lived in small, self-sustaining agricultural villages, separated by large tracts of uncultivated ‘no-man’s land’
- Cities were unusual and Hattusa was quite exceptional in its large size.
- Every town had a council of Elders, older male heads of households. These represented the lowest level of judicial bodies.
- The King also appointed judicial magistrates — <sup>LÚ</sup>DUGUD — who passed judgment in his name. The Queen could also judge cases.

## Sexual Offenses

- A fairly large portion of The Laws deals with sexual offenses, particularly bestiality and incest.
- Bestiality is subject to an odd set of strictures.
  - sex with a sheep was punished with death
  - sex with a horse or mule, however, was not punishable, but did pollute the person so he could not enter into the king’s palace or presence.
- Homosexuality is never mentioned in The Laws. Some have surmised that this was because the Hittites did not find it objectionable, but we do not know.