

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

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Society of Biblical Literature



Writings from the Ancient World Supplements

Billie Jean Collins
Editor

Number 1

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

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SELECTED WRITINGS OF ITAMAR SINGER
ON THE LATE BRONZE AGE
IN ANATOLIA AND THE LEVANT

Society of Biblical Literature

Atlanta

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Singer, Itamar.

The calm before the storm : selected writings of Itamar Singer on the late Bronze Age in Anatolia and the Levant / by Itamar Singer.

p. cm. — (Writings from the ancient world supplements / Society of Biblical Literature ; no. 1)

ISBN 978-1-58983-558-0 (paper binding : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-58983-559-7 (electronic format)

1. Hittites—Politics and government—Sources. 2. Hittites—Commerce—History—Sources. 3. Bronze age—Turkey—Sources. 4. Bronze age—Middle East—Sources. 5. Turkey—Foreign relations—Sources. 6. Middle East—Foreign relations—Sources. 7. Turkey—Commerce—History—Sources. 8. Middle East—Commerce—History—Sources. 9. Syria—History—To 333 B.C.—Sources. 10. Ugarit (Extinct city)—Politics and government—Sources. I. Title.

DS66.S46 2011

939'.2—dc23

2011032403

Printed on acid-free, recycled paper conforming to ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R1997)
and ISO 9706:1994
standards for paper permanence.



CONTENTS

Introduction	vii
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ḪATTI AND ITS NEIGHBORS

Hittite Domination in Syria

Syria after the Battle of Qadesh	3
----------------------------------	---

Ugarit

A Political History of Ugarit	19
-------------------------------	----

Takuḫlinu and Ḫaya: Two Governors in the Ugarit Letter from Tel Aphek	147
--	-----

Ships Bound for Lukka: A New Interpretation of the Companion Letters RS 94.2530 and RS 94.2523	173
---	-----

Amurru

A Concise History of Amurru	197
-----------------------------	-----

The ‘Land of Amurru’ and the ‘Lands of Amurru’ in the Šaušgamuwa Treaty	243
--	-----

Hittite Cultural Influence in the Kingdom of Amurru	253
---	-----

The Title “Great Princess” in the Hittite Empire	259
--	-----

The Treaties between Ḫatti and Amurru	273
---------------------------------------	-----

Maḫḫaza, King of Amurru	287
-------------------------	-----

Emar

A New Hittite Letter from Emar	295
--------------------------------	-----

Borrowing Seals at Emar	307
-------------------------	-----

A Late Synchronism between Ugarit and Emar (with Y. Cohen)	315
--	-----

Karkamiš

The Treaties between Karkamiš and Ḫatti	331
---	-----

The Great Scribe Taki-Šarruma	339
-------------------------------	-----

A Lost Seal of Talmi-Tešub	347
----------------------------	-----

Ḫatti and Mesopotamia

The Battle of Niḫriya and the End of the Hittite Empire	353
A Hittite-Assyrian Diplomatic Exchange in the Late-Thirteenth Century B.C.E.	375
KBo 28.61–64 and the Struggle over the Throne of Babylon at the Turn of the Thirteenth Century B.C.E.	385

Ḫatti and the West

Western Anatolia in the Thirteenth Century B.C. according to the Hittite Sources	407
Purple-Dyers in Lazpa	425
Aḫḫiyawans Bearing Gifts	459

Ḫatti and Egypt

The Kuruštama Treaty Revisited	469
The Urḫi-Tešub Affair in the Hittite-Egyptian Correspondence	485
Hittite Gods in Egyptian Attire: A Case Study in Cultural Transmission	499

Ḫatti and Canaan

The Hittites and the Bible Revisited	525
A Hittite Hieroglyphic Seal Impression from Tel Aphek	561
Megiddo Mentioned in a Letter from Boğazköy	573
A Hittite Seal from Megiddo	579
A Hittite Signet Ring from Tel Nami	585
Two Hittite Ring Seals from Southern Canaan	589

FROM ZENITH TO NADIR: THE LAST CENTURY OF THE HITTITE KINGDOM

The Failed Reforms of Akhenaten and Muwatalli	595
From Ḫattuša to Tarḫuntašša: Some Thoughts on Muwatalli's Reign	609
The Toponyms Tiwa and Tawa	617
The Fate of Ḫattuša during the Period of Tarḫuntašša's Supremacy	623
Danuḫepa and Kurunta	635
Great Kings of Tarḫuntašša	647
Dating the End of the Hittite Empire	655
New Evidence on the End of the Hittite Empire	661
In Ḫattuša the Royal House Declined	679

CONTENTS

vii

On Luwians and Hittites

703

EPILOGUE

Between Scepticism and Credulity: In Defence of Hittite Historiography

731

INTRODUCTION
THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY B.C.E.,
THE AGE OF COMPLACENCY

There are no dull periods in history but people usually find some periods and some topics more exciting than the others. Like most boys, I suppose, I was first fascinated by heroic figures such as Alexander the Great and Napoleon, but soon my interest turned to periods of turmoil and disaster, influenced perhaps by the fate of my own family. What intrigued me most was the question how could a relatively calm and prosperous period transform, often promptly, into a time of precariousness and disaster. Were the signs really written on the wall, as it is often claimed in retrospect, and if so, what could have been done to prevent the fateful events to come? I spent hours daydreaming what would I have done in such and such situation and the answers became less and less evident the older I grew.

As a student of archaeology my initial attraction to periods of crisis naturally steered me into the world of the “Sea Peoples.” One of my first seminar papers attempted to take stock of the various theories concerning their origins and destinations, a topic that has continued to captivate me since. However, various circumstances during my post-graduate studies drew me into the orbit of another fascinating discipline, Hittitology, which would become the main focus of my scholarly pursuits for the decades to come. In due time I came to realize how intimately the two subjects are interconnected; in fact, I believe that only an integrated study of the two domains, ancient Anatolia and the “Sea Peoples,” can provide satisfactory answers to some of the pressing questions.

Despite my strong historical inclination, as the topic for my doctoral dissertation I chose, following the advice of my supervisor Professor Heinrich Otten, the philological study of a large festival text, the KILAM. Anatolian religion indeed proved to have a strong appeal for me, but soon after my return from Marburg to Israel, the muse Clio lured me back to her discipline in a most persuasive way: a remarkable Hittite seal impression was found at Tel Aphek, near Tel Aviv, and the excavator asked me to publish it. This required me to plunge into the intricacies of Hittite glyptics and thirteenth-century international relations in order to explain how this princely bulla turned up in an Egyptian governor’s residency in

Canaan. This investigation paved the way for my major scholarly pursuit during the next thirty years—the political history of the late Hittite Empire, its means of domination in the Syrian and Anatolian provinces, and its intricate connections with the other contemporary members of the Club of Great Powers—Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria and Ahhiyawa.

The thirteenth century B.C.E. was truly an international age of grandeur and opulence, whose epistolary network extended for the first time also to the Aegean realm, known as Ahhiyawa. To a certain extent the thirteenth century is the natural continuation of the Amarna Age, but now, after the fall of Mittani, the fragile borderlines between the great powers were stabilized and consolidated. This does not mean of course that the new “world order” was readily accepted by all competing hegemonies. On the contrary, some of the fiercest battles in antiquity were fought in this era—between Egypt and Hatti, Hatti and Assyria, Assyria and Babylonia, and Hatti and Ahhiyawa. Yet, these confrontations did not lead to a fundamental change of the geo-political map of the ancient Near East, as the relatively short episodes of enmity and warfare were followed by extended periods of détente and cooperation. With or without official peace treaties, diplomatic contacts between the royal courts flourished, with an opulent exchange of luxury goods, mutual visits of royalty and experts, and marriage alliances tying together the great royal houses. The overall image of the thirteenth-century ancient Near East always reminded me of pre-World War I Europe, with its delicate balance between half a dozen dominating powers, intricately tied together by marriage alliances between their royal houses. The analogy extends into the aftermath of the Great War, when some of the multi-national empires disintegrated into a myriad of nation states.

I have designated this period as “The Age of Complacency” because underneath the façade of splendor and stability lurked strong destabilizing forces that were either ignored or unsuitably fended off by the self-confident emperors and their advisers. Each great power had its own set of inner problems, but, upon closer examination, they all shared similar difficulties: internecine rifts within the royal houses, schisms within the ruling elites, regional attempts to secede from central rule, overextended supply lines, and restless ethnic groups operating on the fringes of the states, increasingly undermining the authority of the central powers: Arameans on the fringes of Assyria and Babylonia, nomadic Shasu groups in Egyptian Canaan, and “Sea Peoples” subverting both Hittite and Ahhiyawan control in western Anatolia. These unconventional forces proved to be the hardest to deal with. The great powers knew how to recruit enormous armies and resources in order to fight each other, but when it came to dealing with these elusive rebels on the fringes of the kingdom they were at a loss. Repeated campaigns to quell the insurrections turned increasingly ineffective.

The boastful great kings had fatally underestimated the detrimental forces of disintegration, which intensified towards the end of the century because of an increasing shortage in basic food supplies. Instead, they poured immense resources into extravagant building projects and cult reforms: grandiose new capitals were built at Piramesse, Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta and Tarhuntassa, and numerous new temples were erected throughout the kingdoms while others were lavishly renovated. Especially in Hatti self-aggrandizement and accreditation of divine status to the Great King seem to have increased in inverse proportion to the actual political clout of the central power. It is hard for us to understand whether such frivolous excesses resulted from obliviousness to the gravity of the situation, or, on the contrary, through such lavish means the troubled rulers tried to camouflage their military and economic failures and to call the attention and the support of their gods. Extreme piety is typical for times of dire straits. The costly cult reforms undertaken by the last kings of Hatti also concealed a deep sense of malaise and remorse caused by Hattusili's usurpation of the throne and the ensuing schism between two branches of the royal house.

The forty-two articles assembled in this volume were written over a period of thirty-five years and, understandably, they exhibit different levels of updating. Yet, I believe that by and large they can still provide a coherent picture of this fascinating era. There have not been any major archival discoveries pertaining to this period, on a par with the Boğazköy or the Ras Shamra archives, though several smaller and less spectacular thirteenth-century tablet collections were found at sites such as Meskene/Emar, Tell Sheikh Hamad/Dur-Katlimmu, and Tell Chuera/Harbe in Syria, and at Tel Aphek/Antipatris in Israel.¹ The integration of the new textual data is steadily expanding our understanding of the period, but quantum leaps in the interpretation of the evidence are quite few.

More abundant are the latest archaeological discoveries throughout the ancient Near East and the Aegean, in particular those pertaining to the end of the period, that is, the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. Despite the paradigmatic shifts in the interpretation of the evidence propagated by some "processual archaeologists" ("indigenist" or "anti-migrationist" theories), I still conceive of this period as one characterized by large-scale upheavals, some of them bearing a cataclysmic character. In addition to the internal breakdown of the imperial systems and the palace economies of the Late Bronze Age, the ultimate collapse of the delicate thirteenth century equilibrium, in particular of the Hittite Empire, was accelerated by a severe famine, probably affected by natural causes such as prolonged periods of drought. These drastic circumstances, which find

1. Regrettably, two important archives of the thirteenth century B.C.E., each with some 400 tablets, still remain unpublished: the bulk of the so-called Urtenu archive at Ugarit (found in 1994) and the Middle Assyrian texts from Tell Sabi Abyad (found in 1997–1998).

growing support also in climatological studies,² in addition to the explicit textual evidence, set off a cascade of population movements across large parts of the central and the eastern Mediterranean Basin. The “Sea Peoples” in general, and the Philistines in particular, remained a second focus of my scholarly interests over the past thirty years,³ but this enthralling subject is only marginally touched upon in this volume, the focus of which is the thirteenth century B.C.E., “the calm before the storm.”

I wish to thank Billie Jean Collins for her dedication, time and effort invested in editing this volume, and to the SBL for accepting it in the Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series.

2. See, e.g., B. Weiss, “The decline of Late Bronze Age civilization as a possible response to climatic change,” *Climatic Change* 4/2 (1982), 173–98; see further the references cited by S. Riehl in *Tell Atchana, Ancient Alalakh. The 2003–2004 Excavations Seasons* (ed. K. A. Yener; Istanbul: Koç University Press, 2010), 124–25.

3. For my latest articles on the subject see: “‘Old Country’ ethnonyms in ‘New Countries’ of the Sea Peoples’ diaspora”, in *AMIAA: The Quest for Excellence. Studies in Honor of Günter Kopcke on the occasion of his 75th Birthday*. (ed. R. B. Koehl; Philadelphia: INSTAP Academic Press, 2011); “The Philistines in the North and the Kingdom of Taita,” *The Ancient Near East in the 12th–10th Centuries B.C.E.. Proceedings of the International Conference Held in the University of Haifa, 2–5 May 2010* (ed. G. Galil et al.; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011).