**History between Egypt and the Hittites**

In 2nd millennia BC, the area of present day Syria would become contested by two large powers of the Near East, New Kingdom Egypt and the Hittites. As this is a course about Ancient Egypt, a brief introduction of the Hittites is required before progressing further. The Hittites of central Anatolia were largely forgotten in history until the early 20th century. Early information of or concept of the Hittites is referenced in the Bible as a small Canaanite tribe living in Palestine as scholars would mistake Hittite reliefs, script, and ruins as Egyptian, Greek, or Roman. It would take till late 19th century for scholars to realize that Hittites were not a biblical tribe but a powerful kingdom of the Near East. During its height from 1680BC - 1180 BC, the Hittite kingdom compromised of central Anatolia, which they called it the land of Hatti, and northern Syria. History of the Hittites in placed into two phases in the Late Bronze age, the Old Kingdom from around 1700 BC-1400 BC and New Kingdom from around 1400 BC-1200 BC which is known as the empire phase. They spoke an Indo-European language called Nesite and their ancestors may have entered in the third millennium or earlier.[[1]](#footnote-1) After years of research, the biblical Hittites had little or nothing with the Hittites Empire, or possibly referencing the Neo-Hittite or Syro-kingdoms that survived after the fall of Hatti which continued to existed from 1200 BC-700 BC. From their occupation from Old Kingdom age, holdings in Syria would be important for the Hittites for control of trade in the Near East.[[2]](#footnote-2) Hittite holdings in Syria would cause tensions and war against another two Near East powers, Mitanni and New Kingdom Egypt.

Beginning in 16th century BC, New Kingdom Egypt under Thutmose I and later his grandson, Thutmose III, would campaign and annex parts of southern parts Syria along with Palestine while also conquering south into Nubia, turning Egypt into an international power.[[3]](#footnote-3) After the Thutmose III campaigns, the Eastern kingdom Mitanni under Saushtatar conquered Assyria and challenged Hittite northern Syria holdings. Based on little evidence available, the Hittites were able to remove Mitanni from Syria after defeating them in military campaigns.[[4]](#footnote-4) After the loss of their Syrian holdings, the Saushatar’s successor and possible son, Artatama sought to regain their Syrian claims by allying with another enemy and rival in Syria, Egypt. By establishing a marriage alliance, a frontier boarder was established as Mitanni controlled northern Syrian holdings as Egypt controlled a region called Kadesh, a future site of contest between Egypt and Hittites.[[5]](#footnote-5) While this treaty may had put Hittite incursions in Syria on hold, the Kaskan invasions from the north and incursions by the kingdom of Arzawa from eastern Anatolia would fragment the Hittites for a time being.[[6]](#footnote-6)

As the Hittites recovered from fragmentation and successor infighting, the new Hittite king Suppiluliuma assumed the throne in 1344 BC and challenged the Mitanni as they were now suffering from internal fighting among successors to the crown. Despite Egypt’s weaken power over Syria under Akhenaten, they still were a threat to Suppiluliuma as they controlled the southern Syria and Palestine. Suppiluliuma’s objective while fighting the Mitanni was to keep Egypt from aiding their ally as evidence of correspondence between Suppiluliuma and Akhenaten consists of Suppiluliuma trying to convince Akhenaten not to intervene.[[7]](#footnote-7) As Suppiluliuma was conquering Mitanni holdings west of the Euphrates, they ended up conquering the Egyptian vassal of Kadesh. The Hittite occupation of the previous Egyptian vassal would lead to future hostilities and violence as Egypt failed to take the city militarily and marriage proposal between Egyptian queen Ankhesenamun, Tutankhamun’s widow, and Suppilumiluma’s son fell through as the Hatti prince was murder on route to Egypt.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is believed that Egyptians that Hittites captured and transported to Hatti carried disease that plagued the Hittite homeland which killed Suppiluliuma and his successor, putting Mursili on the throne in 1321 BC.[[9]](#footnote-9) As stated before, Egypt itself was going through its decline of Akhenaten and political instability of his and his son’s, Tutankhamen, rule. Thus both powers were under too much internal unrest for a major confrontation.

When Muwattalli assumed rule of the Hittites after his father’s, Mursili, death in 1295 BC, his biggest threat he faced was the reemergence of Egypt as a rival. The instability of post Amarna period allowed Hittites to remain uncontested in Syria until the late 18th dynasty ruler, Horemheb, organized an expeditionary force to support a rebellion against Hittite rule in Nuhashsi. However, Horemheb was more focused on reunifying Egypt and strengthening central power than giving support to the rebellion. Despite the rebellion being a failure, it marked renew Egyptian interest in Syria to Muwattalli’s dismay as Kaskan groups threaten Hattusa from the north.[[10]](#footnote-10) As Horemheb was childless, his vizier, Pramesse became his successor after Horemheb death in 1295 BC and ascended the throne as Ramesses I, the beginning the 19th or the Ramesside period. After a year of rule, Ramesse I died and his son Seti I assumed the throne. Seti, influenced by Tuthmosis III, believed Egypt needed to gain authority in Syria to renew its political and military power. [[11]](#footnote-11) According to battles scenes at the Hypostyle Hall at Karnak, after Seti I restored Egyptian authority in Canaan and Palestine, he prepared for the reconquest of the kingdoms and former vassals of Kadesh and Amurru that were under Hittite rule. As Seti conquered the two kingdoms, Hatti took it as declaration of war that challenged Hittite authority in Syria. As Muwattalli was preoccupied with internal tensions within his kingdom, he could not swiftly mount a counterattack, allowing Seti I to turn around and conduct a campaign against the Libyans. As Seti I returned to Syria and Muwattalli was ready to fight, it is believed that the Egyptians and Hittites fought in the region of Kadesh which Seti I was victor due to amount of Hittite prisoners obtained according to ancient texts.[[12]](#footnote-12) If Muwattalli and Seti settled for a treaty or not, both sides had a period of peace as Muwattalli reorganized his kingdom, transferring the capital from Hattusa to southern Tarhuntassa in the Cilica region. Despite it being unpopular among the Hittities as Hattusa was the most historical and spirit city for Hittites, it is possible that Muwattalli’s idea was to launch campaigns to fight the Egyptians in order restore total control of Syria while not having to worry about the Kaskan threat as he partition the northern part of the Hittite to his brother Hattusili, who would play a larger part in Egyptian and Hittite relations later on.

As Seti I died in 1279 BC, his son, Ramesses II, ascended the throne and renewed campaigns in Syria. With both sides armed and prepared in 1274 BC, the contest took place in the same region of Kadesh. From records on temples walls of the Ramesseum, Karnak, Luxor, Abydo, and Abu Simbel, we have Egyptian account and bias of the battle, but not a detailed Hittite account. According to the Egyptian records, as the Egyptian army proceeded along the Levant coast, two Shosuu Bedouins came, wishing to defect to Egyptian forces, but actually were two spies to scout Ramesses’ position. Failing to verify the spies, Ramesses II let them go, only to find out the next day from two captured Hatti scouts that revealed Muwattalli’s army about to attack Ramesses’ division that was ahead of the rest of the army; an error that Ramesses made wanting to quickly prepare for the siege of Kadesh. Defeat seemed real as the Egyptian forces were overwhelmed by the Hittite surprise attack; but Ramesses rallied his troops for a victorious counter attack. As the Ramesses account is questionable, both sides claim victory in that battle which is mostly likely ended in a stalemate, but mostly likely the Hittites seemed to be the victors. As Ramesses was forced to retreat, Muwattalli was able to chase him and his army far to the region of Damascus and conquered that Egyptian held region along with Amurru. With evidence of uprisings in Canaan and Palestinian after the battle of Kadesh, Ramesses authority was damaged by the failed Syrian campaign, contradicting his represented victory. As tensions between the two powers were still hostile, neither of them could not recover from the cost of the battle and weaken both of them militarily.[[13]](#footnote-13)

After the Battle of Kadesh, Muwattalli died around 1272 BC and his son Urhi-Teshub, throne name Mursili III, was placed shortly in power before his uncle and ruler of the Upper Land, Hattusili, defeated him in a civil war and placed him into exile. After failed attempts to escape exile, Urhi-Teshub managed to escape to Ramesses II court. Fearing that Urhi-Teshub might acquire Egyptian support in restoring his place at Hittite throne, Hattusili organized an alliance treaty with Egypt and for Urhi-Teshub to be extradited.[[14]](#footnote-14) Except for the eradiation clause as Ramesses II wanted to use Urhi-Teshub as leverage, Ramesses accepted the treaty as both Egyptian and Hatti copies exists. Mutual interactions between the powers is evident as Hatti sent a princess for the elderly Ramesses II and Egyptian medical knowledge and physicians were sent to Hatti, as a statue of the Egyptian god, Khons the Provider, was sent to cure Hattusili’s daughter and succeeded.[[15]](#footnote-15) As Hatti suffered famine, they relied heavily on Egyptian wheat imports.[[16]](#footnote-16) Peace, trade, and cooperation between the two powers would continue until the internal collapse of the Hittites in the late 13th century BC from internal strife, famine, and Sea People invasions which would also weaken New Kingdom Egypt and lead to its demise centuries later. [[17]](#footnote-17)

The conflict between New Kingdom Egypt and Hittites are one of the earliest international disputes in history as they wish to further their foreign holdings and the battles took place in contested vassal areas instead of actual Egyptian and Hatti territories. As both kingdoms fought bitterly, they could not defeat each other yet managed to tolerate each other and have peaceful relations until their demise. Hittites proved not to be a typical group disorganized wretches that Egyptians depicted for foreigners as but a kingdom worthy of being a rival of Egypt’s great age of the New Kingdom.

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1. Bryce, Trevor. *Life and Society in the Hittite World*. Oxford University Press. Oxford, New York. 2002.Pg 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Collins, Billie Jean. *Hittites and Their World.* Society of Biblical Literature. Atlanta, Georgia. 2007. Pgs 37-39 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ikram, Salima. *Ancient Egypt: An Introduction.* Cambridge University Press. New York, New York. 2010. Pg 98 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bryce, Trevor. *The Kingdom of the Hittites.* Oxford University Press. Oxford, NewYork. 2005 Pgs 140, 141 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bryce. *Kingdom.* Pgs 144,145 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bryce. *Kingdom Hittites* Pgs 148-151 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Collins Pgs 48,49 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Collins Pg 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bryce. *Kingdom* Pg 222 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bryce. *Kingdom.* Pg 228 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bryce. *Kingdom* Pg 229 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bryce. *Kingdom.* Pg 241 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Collins Pg 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ikarm. Pg 243 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Lackenbacher, Sylvie. “Between Egypt and Hatti.” *Near Eastern Archaeology.* Vol 64, no 4. 2000. Pg 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Collins Pgs 76, 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)