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Indo-Iranian and Indo-European Studies  
in Honor of

**Stephanie W. Jamison**

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# The Role of Vassal Treaties in the Maintenance of the Hittite Empire\*

GARY BECKMAN

At its zenith in the late fourteenth century BCE the Hittite state, known to scholars as Ḫatti,<sup>1</sup> had expanded from its core within the bend of the Kızıl Irmak (Red River) in central Anatolia as far south as Damascus in Syria. For the most part, this empire had grown not through annexation but through agglomeration: direct rule of a newly subjugated region was usually returned to a member of the defeated local dynasty, who would henceforth govern as a sworn vassal of the Hittite Great King. However, an exception to this practice was made in the case of Carchemish, a city located at the most important crossing of the Euphrates River in northern Syria. Here the founder of the Hittite imperium, Šuppiluliuma I,<sup>2</sup> had installed a cadet line of his own royal family, whose members would serve loyally as viceroys of the Great King/Emperor (*T/Labarna*) in his southern territories until the collapse of the entire system at the end of the Bronze Age, after which, it seems, this lineage for a time claimed the imperial title for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

The establishment of a trustworthy deputy in the region was but one of the measures adopted by the Hittite crown to overcome the difficulties posed to its administration by the great distances that stretched between the capital Ḫattuša (modern Boğazköy/Boğazkale, about a three-hour drive east of Ankara) and the Syrian dependencies. The problem was indeed formidable: even a swift messenger would need several weeks to make the journey to Syria, and the deployment of a slow-moving military force from the motherland required months. Furthermore, heavy snows normally blocked the mountain passes in Anatolia from late autumn through early spring.

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\*It is my great pleasure to contribute this essay to a volume in honor of my good friend Stephanie Jamison, who has been a colleague since we two formed an “odd couple” as the sole students in a seminar on Indo-European phonology and morphology taught by the late lamented Warren Cowgill at Yale University in 1971–2.

<sup>1</sup>The natives seemingly referred to their polity as “(the Land of) Ḫattuša”; see Kammenhuber 1969:125 and Klengel 1999:192 n. 244.

<sup>2</sup>For a narrative of the conquests of this king, see Bryce 2005:154–89, and cf. now Richter 2008 for the new perspective on these events provided by the texts recently excavated at Qatna.

<sup>3</sup>See Hawkins 1988.

The king of Carchemish certainly had troops at his command,<sup>4</sup> but these would have been drawn largely from the regional vassal polities themselves. The Hittite garrisons posted in the chief cities of certain dependencies were little more than bodyguards for the local kings, who risked unpopularity with their subjects for doing the bidding of Ḫatti and collecting her tribute. Thus a Syrian ruler contemplating throwing off the Hittite yoke could reckon with a significant breathing space before he would face a realistic threat of significant physical coercion from his betrayed overlord.

Yet we know of only one major—and to be sure unsuccessful—rebellion against Hittite domination in Syria in this period, and this uprising took place very soon after the establishment of the empire, upon the accession to the throne of Ḫatti of an untested youth, Muršili II.<sup>5</sup> How did the Hittites manage to control their vassals so effectively? First and foremost they accomplished this through a system of diplomacy based upon relations codified by treaty. The regulation of the interaction of states by treaty was not particularly unusual in the ancient Near East. A couple of treaty documents are known already for the later third millennium: one drawn up between the city-state of Ebla and a Syrian neighbor in the twenty-fourth century and another concluded by Naram-Sin of Akkad with a ruler of Elam during the following century.<sup>6</sup>

Several texts of this genre dating to the early second millennium have been recovered from Mesopotamian and Syrian sites. The latest attested ancient Near Eastern treaties are those imposed by Assyrian kings on their Syrian and Iranian vassals in the eighth and seventh centuries. But it was the Hittites who composed well over half of the cuneiform treaties known to date.<sup>7</sup> We currently have the texts of approximately forty such documents from Ḫatti, and many more treaties whose texts have not been recovered are mentioned in Hittite records of other types, such as royal annals and international correspondence. Most of Ḫatti's treaties were composed in the contemporary diplomatic language of Akkadian, although the native Hittite tongue was also sometimes employed, particularly in agreements with vassals located in western Anatolia, where knowledge of Akkadian was probably absent.<sup>8</sup>

In both languages these documents were designated by a pair of terms which may be translated as 'binding and oaths' (Hitt. *išhiul* and *lengaiš*, Akk. *rikiltu* or *riksu* and *mamītu*). This expression refers to the two most important elements of these records:

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<sup>4</sup>For example, Šarri-Kušuh of Carchemish led forces from Syria in support of his brother Muršili II in confronting a revolt in Anatolia during the latter's third regnal year. See KUB 14.15 ii 7–10 (Laroche 1971: No. 61), ed. Goetze 1933:48–9.

<sup>5</sup>The great rebellion and its suppression are described in the "Ten-Year Annals of Muršili II" (Laroche 1971: No. 61.I), translated by Beal (2000).

<sup>6</sup>On the treaty tradition in the cuneiform world, see Beckman 2006.

<sup>7</sup>The better preserved of these texts are translated in Beckman 1999. Less satisfactory renderings can also be found in Kitchen and Lawrence 2012, on which see Beckman 2014.

<sup>8</sup>In the Hittite-language letter sent from Arzawa and found in the diplomatic archive of the pharaohs Amenophis III and Amenophis IV/Akhenaten at Tell el-Amarna, the Anatolian scribe instructs his Egyptian colleague: "The tablets which they will bring, always write in Hittite" (EA 32:24–5). See Hawkins 2009:77.

the stipulations (‘binding’) and the oaths by which the contracting parties invoked the gods as witnesses and guarantors of these provisions.

Under Muršili II, the Great King whose diplomatic activities are best attested, treaties were issued for Arzawa and several other states in western Anatolia, as well as for Kinza (Kadeš), Amurru, and Ugarit in Syria and probably for other subject areas as well. The vassal treaty was composed by the chancellery of the Hittite monarch and presented to the subordinate, who was obliged to swear in the presence of various deities that he would observe its provisions. Thus the text was simultaneously the ‘binding’ of the Great King and the ‘oaths’ of the vassal. One treaty includes the explicit statement: “These provisions are by no means reciprocal. They issue from Ḫatti.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore it is not surprising that in most instances the vassal alone—and not the overlord—swore the oaths.<sup>10</sup>

The text of the treaty was engraved in cuneiform upon a tablet of metal (sometimes of silver but more often of bronze) and delivered to the junior partner. As is the case with so many metal objects from antiquity, the great majority of these tablets have disappeared. In fact, with a single exception,<sup>11</sup> modern scholars must be content with ancient clay “file copies” from the diplomatic archives. Most of these documents follow a similar pattern:<sup>12</sup>

1. *Preamble*: Here we find the name, titles, and genealogy of the Hittite Great King. The vassal is not yet mentioned.

2. *Historical Prologue*: This section sets forth the previous course of relations between Ḫatti and the vassal state, and in particular between the individual Hittite king and the subordinate in question. Here it is demonstrated just why the latter should be loyal to Ḫatti: either because he had been favored by the Great King—receiving, say, military assistance—or because the Great King had not meted out the severe punishment the vassal had richly deserved. For example, note this excerpt from the prologue to the treaty of Muršili II with Kupanta-Kurunta of the land of Mira in western Anatolia: “And when your father Mašḫuiluwa offended against My Majesty, were not you, Kupanta-Kurunta, a son to Mašḫuiluwa? Although you were in no way an offender, <could you not have been punished?> I did not take the household of your father or the land away from you. I did not make someone else lord. I gave the

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<sup>9</sup>Treaty between Muwattalli II and Alakšandu of Wiluša (the Troad) (Laroche 1971: No. 76), §16, translated by Beckman (1999:91).

<sup>10</sup>For a different view, see Altman 2003, but in any case, Christiansen (2012:524–7) demonstrates that the very involvement of the gods in the procedure obliges the Hittite king as the instigator of the oath to keep up his side of the agreement.

<sup>11</sup>Published in Otten 1988.

<sup>12</sup>This schema was recognized already by Korošec (1931). Von Schuler (1965) considered a number of treaty documents to be aberrant in structure (*Sonderformen*), but it seems that the strong similarity in organization evidenced by the texts considered by Korošec is due primarily to their having been composed by a handful of scribes over a relatively short period, perhaps only one or two generations (reigns of Muršili II and Muwattalli II). Documents from before and after this time display a good deal of formal variation from Korošec’s “template.”

household of your father and the land back to *you*, and I installed *you* in power in the land. And as I, My Majesty, have not in the past mistreated you in any way, in the future, Kupanta-Kurunta, [protect] me, My Majesty, as overlord.”<sup>13</sup>

3. *Provisions*: These stipulations of course vary greatly from text to text, but the primary duties imposed upon a vassal are the payment of tribute (Hitt. *argamannu*, Akk. *mandattu*) in silver or other precious metals, foodstuffs, manufactured goods, etc. (interestingly, payments are to be made not only to the Great King and Great Queen but also to various high officials of the Hittite state and to the most important deities of the empire); the providing of military assistance when required, both in connection with imperial campaigns in the vassal’s neighborhood and in the extreme case when the Hittite ruler is himself faced with internal strife; the renouncing of all independent contact with foreign powers; the extradition of fugitives who had fled central Ḫatti, simple peasants as well as disgruntled members of the ruling class; and the guarantee of the succession of the Great King’s designated heir to the Hittite throne.

Furthermore, vassals are forbidden to engage in warfare among themselves but rather are required to present their differences for arbitration to the King of Carchemish or, if necessary, to the Great King of Ḫatti himself. Finally, a number of documents demand that the vassal ruler make a yearly visit to the Hittite court, where he will present his homage and tribute to the Great King in person.

4. *Deposition*: The metal treaty tablet is to be placed in the temple of the chief deity of the vassal, where it will be under the literal oversight of the gods. Its contents are to be recited to the subordinate at regular intervals. For instance, we read in the treaty of Muwattalli II with Alakšandu of Wiluša: “Furthermore, this tablet that I have made for you, Alakšandu, shall be read out before you three times yearly, and you, Alakšandu, shall (thus) be familiar with it.”<sup>14</sup>

5. *List of Divine Witnesses*: The deities of both partners are summoned to act as witnesses to the provisions and the oaths. Thus the gods of the subject people are also given the honor and responsibility of overseeing adherence to the agreement. The extensive lists of deities in Hittite treaties are of course very useful to scholars in the reconstruction of Hittite religious history.<sup>15</sup>

6. *Curses and Blessings*:<sup>16</sup> Here the vassal recites various self-imprecations before the divine guarantors of the treaty while the Great King pronounces a number of blessings upon his underling, conditional of course upon the latter observing his obligations. A particularly vivid example may be quoted from the agreement between Šuppiluliuma I and Šattiwaza of Mitanni: “May (the gods) stand and listen and be witnesses to these words of the treaty. If you, Šattiwaza, and you Hurrians do not ob-

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<sup>13</sup>Laroche 1971: No. 68, §11, translated by Beckman (1999:76).

<sup>14</sup>See n. 9.

<sup>15</sup>See Kestemont 1976.

<sup>16</sup>On these instruments of Hittite administration, see Christiansen 2012.



serve the words of this treaty, the gods, lords of the oath, shall destroy you [and] you Hurrians, together with your land, your wives, and your possessions. They will draw you out like malt from its husk. As one does not get a plant from stony ground(?)—if you, Šattiwaza, break the treaty—so you, together with any other wife whom you might take,<sup>17</sup> and you Hurrians, together with your wives, your sons, and your land, shall thus have no progeny. And these gods, who are lords of the oath, shall allot to you poverty and destitution. And you, Šattiwaza—they shall overthrow your throne!”<sup>18</sup>

Or consider this passage from the treaty concluded by Muršili II with Tuppi-Teššup of Amurru: “All the words of the treaty and the oath [that] are inscribed on this tablet—if Tuppi-Teššup [does not observe these words] of the treaty and of the oath, then these oath gods shall destroy Tuppi-Teššup, [together with his person], his [wife], his son, his grandsons, his household, his city, his land, and together with his possessions. But if Tuppi-Teššup [observes] these [words of the treaty and of the oath] that are inscribed on this tablet, [then] these oath gods [shall protect] Tuppi-Teššup, together with his person, his wife, his son, his grandsons, [his city, his land], his household, [and together with his possessions].”<sup>19</sup>

These diplomatic instruments, with their most explicit threats of divine retribution in case of violation, constituted the ideological adhesive that held together the Hittite empire. The oaths they contain are the active element in this bonding, for unlike the gods of Egypt, who in the view of their worshipers enjoyed world dominion, Hittite deities entered into the affairs of foreign lands only insofar as they enforced the imprecations that they had guaranteed. That the Hittites considered the breaking of an oath to entail quite serious consequences is clearly shown by the interpretation of an event given in the annals of Muršili II: the king Aitakama of Kinza had joined in the general revolt against the Hittite Great King Muršili II, only to be murdered by his own son Ari-Teššup, who then reaffirmed his land’s loyalty to Ḫatti. From this course of events the narrator draws the following conclusion: “The oath gods shall take [their revenge]. The son shall kill his father, brother shall kill brother, and they shall destroy their own [flesh and blood!]”<sup>20</sup>

I conclude with a look at further measures taken by the Great King to control his vassals. Some of these practices reached into the very heart of the family of the subordinate. As was Egyptian practice in connection with their Palestinian princes,<sup>21</sup> the Hittites carried off children of ruling dynasts to their capital, where they were indoctrinated with loyalty to their imperial masters, served as hostages for the compliant

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<sup>17</sup>That is, in addition to Šattiwaza’s first spouse, Šuppiluliuma’s daughter, whom he naturally did not wish to place under the threatened curse.

<sup>18</sup>Laroche 1971: No. 51, §15, translated by Beckman (1999:48).

<sup>19</sup>Laroche 1971: No. 62, §§21–2, translated by Beckman (1999:64).

<sup>20</sup>KBo 4.4 ii 10–2 (Laroche 1971: No. 61.II), edited by Goetze (1933:112–5).

<sup>21</sup>See Redford 1992:198–9.

behavior of their fathers, and were immediately at hand to replace the latter in the event of treason.

An even more intimate involvement of Ḫatti in the domestic affairs of her subordinates was the institution of diplomatic marriage.<sup>22</sup> Among Syrian vassals, the rulers of Mitanni, Amurru, and Ugarit all received daughters of the Hittite Great King as wives. (Here we note a contrast with Egyptian practice, for the pharaoh was most unwilling to send a daughter to marry a foreign ruler of whatever rank, deigning only to accept alien princesses into his own harem.) Since a Hittite princess invariably became the highest-ranking wife of the vassal—that is, the ruling queen—one of her male offspring would be the heir presumptive of his father. Once on the throne, a king of such a lineage, whose family ties bound him to his overlord as well as to his compatriots, could be expected to display exemplary loyalty to the empire. Such was indeed the case with Šaušgamuwa, grandson of both Ḫattušili III and Bentešina of Amurru, whose personal stamp seal even identifies him as a Hittite prince.<sup>23</sup>

In sum: ideological control in the form of divine sanctions and the indoctrination of junior members of the families of vassal kings, the infiltration of those families themselves through marriage, and the more overtly coercive practice of hostage-taking, combined with the minimal policing powers of the King of Carchemish, served to maintain Ḫatti's grip on northern Syria for almost 200 years. Although these measures were rather simple, they were both systematic and adequate for the conditions of the Late Bronze Age.

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<sup>22</sup>See Pintore 1978:69–87.

<sup>23</sup>The seal was impressed on two tablets recovered at Ugarit; see Schaeffer 1956:30–5, figs. 38–40, 43–4.

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