The Religion of the HITTITES

by Gary Beckman

The recovery of Hittite religion is difficult because the creators of the available textual sources did not intend to convey a coherent picture to outsiders. The knowledge we have depends chiefly on the thousands of cuneiform tablets discovered in the ruins of the royal city of Ḫattuša, modern-day Boğazköy. Among these tablets, however, there are no canonical scriptures, no theological disquisitions or discourses, no aids to private devotion (Laroche 1971, Bittel 1970: chapter 1). Rather, the scribes employed by the Hittite kings compiled their archives in the service of the royal administration. These records aided the bureaucracy in the organization and maintenance of all areas of royal responsibility, many of which the modern observer would consider to be religious.

The study of Hittite religion must therefore be based on various types of practical documents: temple regulations and records of cultic administration, prescriptions for the

In this relief from the main chamber of the rock sanctuary Yazılıkaya, located just outside the city walls of Ḫattuša, a procession of male gods (to the left) led by the Weather-God greets a procession of goddesses led by the Sun Goddess of Arinna, here given her Hurrian name Ḫēbat. This grand procession, which wraps itself around the contours of the rock, presumably represents the divine court attendant during the celebration of the new year's festival. The Weather-God wears a tall horned cap, characteristic of his divinity and rank. He stands on two bending Mountain-Gods and greets the Sun-Goddess, who wears a flattened, cone-shaped hat and stands on a lioness. Photo by Jeann Vorys Canby.
Hittite religion was concerned with the central preoccupation of peasant life: the fertility of crops, animals, and people. The proper performance of ceremonies, reports of diviners, religious compositions used in scribal education, and so on. Most of the tablets that we have date to the last 50 years or so of the Hittite Empire, although some earlier compositions are available, either as original tablets or in later copies.

To textual evidence may be added the testimony of other archaeological discoveries, including a few small divine images and other cult objects [Güterbock 1983], the iconography displayed on seals [Beran 1967; Mora 1987] and rock reliefs [Kohlmeier 1983; Alexander 1986], and ground plans of temples [Bittel 1970: 55–59; Neve 1987].

**General Character of Hittite Religion**

At its base, Hittite religion was concerned with the central preoccupation of peasant life on the central plateau: the fertility of crops, domestic animals, and people. This interest is clearly expressed in an excerpt from a prayer:

> To the king, queen, princes, and to [all] the land of Ḥatti give life, health, strength, long years, and joy [in] the future! And to them give future thriving of grain, vines, fruit, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, mules, asses—together with wild animals—and of human beings!

The world of the primitive farmer and herdsman is reflected throughout Hittite religion. The chief deity retained the clear features of a growth-sustaining Storm-God, even while presiding over the political structure of the Hittite Empire (Goetze 1957: 138–42; Deighton 1982). Geographic elements such as springs and mountains, both conceived as sources of fructifying water, played an important role, and the cultivation of grain and the increase of herds were each represented by a deity [Hoffner 1974: 82–85; Beckman 1983: 55–56]. The Hittites naturally endeavored to understand the numinous through imagery drawn from the daily experience of peasant life. Thus the character and majesty of many deities were made manifest through an association with some animal, wild or domestic. Gods were frequently depicted as standing on their associated beasts; some were even represented in animal form [Lebrun 1985].

**The Pantheon**

The most prominent figures in the state cult were a Storm-God, who was brought into Anatolia by the Indo-European newcomers, and a kind of Sun-Goddess borrowed from the indigenous Hattic people. In spite of her designation, the latter deity was chthonic, or infernal, in character and was a member of the long line of Anatolian fertility gods reaching from the so-called Mother-Goddess of Çatal Höyük in the sixth millennium all the way to Cybele and Diana of the Hellenistic period. This divine couple were presumably worshiped in the twin cellae of Ḥattiša's largest temple.

The number of individual deities mentioned in the Hittite texts is staggering [Laroche 1947; Gurney 1977: 4–23]. The Hittites themselves referred to their "thousand gods," but many of these figures are cited infrequently in the texts and remain little more than names to us today. This multiplicity is due in part to a resistance to syncretization. For example, many Hittite towns maintained individual storm-gods, declining to identify the local deities as manifestations of a single national figure.

As the Hittite state expanded from its core in central Anatolia, the range of gods mentioned in the royal archives came to include deities that were worshiped in the urban centers of Syria and Mesopotamia as well as those of Indo-European and Hattic origin. In the earliest period, the Hattic deities of cult centers such as Nerik [Haas 1970] and Ḥattiša predominated, later to be joined by increasing numbers of newcomers at home in regions to the south and east. The Luwian deities of Ḥupēština, Išamuwa, and Lallupiya, and particularly the Hurrian gods of Šamaḫa [Lebrun 1976], Kummanni, Karkamiš, and Aleppo should be mentioned here. Lists of divine witnesses to treaties present the imperial pantheon most clearly [Kesten 1976], although it is puzzling that these groupings omit several otherwise prominent deities.

In the thirteenth century B.C.E., some efforts were made at systematization, and many divinities were grouped into *kaltti*, or "circles" of males and females, as depicted visually in the bas-relief processions of Yazılıkaya. It is significant that, although their iconography makes most of these deities immediately recognizable as long-standing members of the Hittite pantheon, their hieroglyphic labels give their names in Hurrian [Laroche 1948, 1952]. That is, syncretization had finally been carried out. This process is also reflected by an invocation from a prayer of queen Puduliyepa:

*Sun-Goddess of Arinna, my lady, you are the queen of all lands! In the land of Ḥatti you have assumed the name Sun-Goddess of Arinna, but in respect to the land which you*
have made [the land] of cedars [that is, Syria], you have as-
sumed the name Ḥebat.²

This systematizing approach reflected the opinion of only a small group at the Hittite court, however, and at no time was a single unitary hierarchy of gods established.

The Place of the King

To the Hittites, the universe was a continuum. There was no strict separation between gods and humans.

The two classes of beings were inter-
dependent and existed alongside the world of plants and animals, from which both ultimately drew their sustenance. The gods were literally dependent on the offerings presented by humans, who, conversely, could thrive only when the deities who controlled the basic processes of nature were well disposed toward the agriculturists and stock-breeder.

This situation is well illustrated by a complaint of king Muršili II:

All of the land of Ḫatti is dying, so that no one prepares the sacrificial loaf and libation for you [the gods]. The plowmen who used to work the fields of the gods have died, so that no one works or reaps the fields of the gods any longer. The miller-

women who used to prepare

Above: The many-faceted Semitic goddess Ḫat, whose realm included sexuality and armed combat, appears frequently in texts dating to the Middle Kingdom as well as the Empire period of Hittite history. The goddess is shown here as part of the long procession of gods in the main chamber of Yazılıkaya. Photo by Ronald L. Gurry. Left: This modern impression of the seal of Ḫḫḫ Ḫuṣu illustrates the iconography of two important Hittite deities. On the left stands the Storm-God, holding his mace and the "w"-hieroglyph representing his name. The figure on the right wears the robes and skull-cap common to the Sun-God and the human king, but the sun-disc above his head assures us that it is the deity who is intended here. Photo courtesy of the Yale Babylonian Collection (16575).
At death, the king was said “to become a god” and began to receive cultic observances.

Sacrificial loaves of the gods have died, so that they no longer make the sacrificial loaves. As for the corral and sheepfold from which one used to cull the offerings of sheep and cattle—the cowherds and shepherds have died, and the corral and sheepfold are empty. So it happens that the sacrificial loaves, libation[s], and animal sacrifices are cut off. And you come to us, o gods, and hold us culpable in this matter!¹³

The monarch occupied a central position in Hittite ideology (Güterbock 1954; Gurney 1958). He was the linchpin of the universe, the point at which the sphere of the gods met that of human beings. As chief priest of the Sun-Goddess of Arinna, the king was responsible for the proper service of the gods by humankind and, in turn, represented human society before the awesome power of the gods. In a ritual dating to the Old Hittite period, the monarch speaks of his charge:

‘The gods, the Sun-God and the Storm-God, have entrusted to me, the king, the land and my household, so that I, the king, should protect my land and my household for myself.¹⁴

Although to a certain extent the king was identified with the male Sun-God, as shown by his costume and his title “My Sun” (Kellerman 1978), he was not deified until after his death, at which time he was said “to become a god” and began to receive cultic observances (Otten 1958). Indeed, it is believed that a section of Yazilikaya served as the mortuary temple of king Tuthaliya IV (Bittel 1970: chapter 4).

The queen, in turn, had a special relationship with the Sun-Goddess (Bin-Nun 1975: 197–202), and all

In Hittite ideology there was no strict separation between gods and humans. Gods depended on humans for offerings, and humans depended on gods for good harvests. The king occupied a central position in this interdependent relationship, representing the point at which the sphere of the gods met that of human beings. As chief priest, he was responsible for the proper service of the gods by humankind and, in turn, acted as the representative of human society before the awesome power of the gods. The relationship between a king and his personal god is seen in this rock relief, also from Yazilikaya, which shows Tuthaliya IV in the embrace of his personal god Sarruma. Notice the tall horned cap worn by Sarruma and the king’s cartouche in the upper righthand corner. Photo by Jeanne Voris Canty.
defunct members of the royal family received occasional offerings (Otten 1951). All households were responsible for the service of their ancestors (Archi 1979b), however, so the afterlife of Hittite royalty was probably just a grander version of that awaiting the ordinary person.

The State Cult

The needs and desires of the Hittite gods were conceived of as being similar to those of humans of high rank. The temple of a god was simply his house, and strict regulations governed the service and behavior of priests within its precincts (Korošec 1974). Temples housing the most important deities were large establishments containing many storerooms and workshops where products necessary for divine service were produced (Güterbock 1975). Outside the city extensive tracts of agricultural land were devoted to the support of these divine households, and, consequently, the temples were an important part of the Hittite economy (Klengel 1975).

The primary religious functions of the state were carried out in the numerous temples of the capital, but the king and his government were also ultimately responsible for the more modest shrines that served minor deities throughout Hatti. We are indebted to a census made of local cults during the late thirteenth century B.C.E. for information about the worship and iconography of many Hittite deities (von Brandenstein 1943; Carter 1962). The following report on the cult of a small village is typical:

The town Lapana, (chief deity) Iyaya: the divine image is a female statuette of wood, seated and veiled, one cubit (in height).

Her head is plated with gold, but the body and throne are plated with tin. Two wooden mountain sheep, plated with tin, sit beneath the deity to the right and left. One eagle plated with tin, two copper staves, and two bronze goblets are on hand as the deity’s cultic implements. She has a new temple. Her priest, a male, is a holdover. Regardless of whether his temple was large or small, within his cella the deity was cared for—fed and clothed—by his priesthood. Because these activities were performed routinely, they are rarely discussed in the texts, but the texts do give information about the special divine festivals or parties that were held in honor of these deities (Güterbock 1969–1970). The schedule of worship varied for each deity; some festivals were held monthly or yearly,
If the requisite worship was performed according to its stringent requirements, the deities were pleased and favored the king.

whereas others marked particular moments in the agricultural calendar, such as the reaping of a harvest or the cutting of grapes. In general, fall festivals featured the filling of storage vessels with the bounty of the harvest, while spring festivals centered around the opening of these vessels. It seems that a new year’s festival was performed in honor of the Storm-God of Hattuša in the main galleries of Yazılıkaya [Otten 1956], the divine court attendant upon this occasion is depicted in the reliefs executed there.

Because the celebration of important festivals for the most prominent deities throughout central Anatolia required the presence of the king, these festivals were organized into a spring and a fall series, known collectively [and respectively] as the festival of the crocus [Güterbock 1960] and the festival of haste [Košak 1976]. During the spring tour the king was required to travel for at least 38 days, although in some instances it was permitted for the queen, a prince, or even a symbolic animal hide to substitute for the monarch.

Hittite festivals generally consisted of food offerings, often in the form of a communal meal uniting god and worshipers [Archi 1979a], toasts to the deities [Kammenhuber 1971], and entertainment. The gods were amused in various ways: through athletic competitions, such as foot races, horse races, and the throwing of heavy stones, through mock battles, and through the antics of jesters. The gods were also treated to music performed by various types of musicians on a wide variety of instruments [Gurney 1977: 34–35]. Unfortunately we know very little about the character of Hittite music or the lyrics sung, for specific information was usually not recorded [Kümmel 1973].

If the requisite worship was performed on time and according to its stringent requirements, the deities were pleased with and favored the king, granting him personal longevity and numerous offspring and running before him in battle. In turn the Hittite state and its inhabitants prospered. Most important, Hittite armies were victorious, and Hittite farmers raised bumper crops. But if for any reason the gods were unhappy with how the worship was performed, they might invoke sanctions resulting in the most negative effects, from personal sickness to national calamity. Indeed, almost any ill was interpreted as a manifestation of divine anger. After much effort, for example, Muršili II learned that divine displeasure at a neglected festival and a broken treaty with Egypt was the cause of the plague afflicting Hatti.

Descriptions of Hittite festivals are monotonous to read because the largely repetitive ceremonies are described in minute detail. This passage should convey the flavor of these compositions:

The king and queen, seated, toast the War-God. The haliyari-men [play] the large INANNA-instruments and sing. The clapper-priest claps. The cup-bearer brings one snack-loaf from outside and gives [it] to the king. The king breaks [it] and takes a bite. The palace functionaries take the napkins from the king and queen. The crouching [cupbearer] enters. The king and queen, standing, toast the [divinized] Day. The jester speaks; the clapper claps; the kita-man cries “aha!”

Our knowledge of native Anatolian mythology is drawn largely from such texts, for tales of primordial activities by the gods were sometimes recited during a festival as a way of encouraging the gods to maintain the order of the world they had established long before. Thus, two versions of the struggle between the Storm-God and a cosmic serpent were told during the course of a spring festival [Beckman 1982].

Ritual

In contrast to the festivals, which were performed at regular intervals, another category of rite was intended for use only as the situation required. Such ceremonies are usually referred to as rituals. Texts describing these ceremonies give us our best view of popular religion because many were not composed in Hattuša but were collected by royal scribes throughout the Hittite realm. In most of the ancient Near East, rituals were recorded anonymously, but in Hatti such compositions were often named after the practitioner from whom they were elicited. Although the so-called author of a ritual is occasionally said to be a priest, more often female experts in magic bear the title “old woman,” and men are referred to as “seer.”

Many Hittite rituals were rites of passage intended to ease the transition of an individual from one stage or station in life to another. Thus we have many texts describing rituals for birth [Beckman 1983], one for puberty [Güterbock 1969], and several for death [Otten 1958]. Rituals for the enthronement of the monarch are alluded to [Kümmel 1967], but no actual text has survived. The purpose of the majority of rituals, how-
Clay vessels in the shape of animals were often used for ceremonial purposes. These bull-shaped rhytons and eagle-shaped rhytons were found at the site of the karum at Kaneş. Photos courtesy of Tahsin Ozcuc.

ever, was the restoration of a person to his or her proper functioning within a particular sphere of life. The cause of the impairment might be divine anger, but the problem might also be due to papratar, a kind of pollution. Whether this pollution was the result of a person's own misdeeds or had been sent by an enemy through black magic, it had to be removed and rendered harmless. This was often accomplished by means of analogic magic. A typical incantation reads:

As a ram mounts a ewe and she becomes pregnant, so let this city and house become a ram, and let it mount the dark earth in the steppe! And let the dark earth become pregnant with the blood, impurity and sin!

It is interesting to note that most of the analogies used in such magic were drawn from the daily experience of the Hittite peasant.

A wide range of difficulties could be countered by a ritual. There were ceremonies designed to alleviate such problems as family strife, sexual impotence, and insomnia, and we also know that rituals were performed to ward off plague, military defeat, or evil portended for the person of the king (see Laroche 1971: chapter 7).

Communication
The Hittites believed that communication had to be maintained between the gods and humankind for the world to operate efficiently. On the one hand, as the representative of humankind the king addressed the gods through a variety of types of prayers [Laroche 1964; Lebrun 1985], extracts of which have been quoted here. On the other hand, gods could make their wishes and displeasure known to humans through omens or oracles. Omens were messages from gods to humans, most frequently encountered through dreams [Oppenheim 1956: 254–55]. Much more important were the oracles, procedures through which humans solicited information from the gods. Countless records of augury, extispicy [divination through the reading of animal entrails], and a curious type of lot oracle [Kammenhuber 1976] have been preserved in the archives. These divination techniques were often used as checks on one another.

Pleas made by Mursili II in an effort to determine the cause of the plague afflicting Hatti underline the need for communication
between gods and humans:  
Or if people are dying for some other reason, let me see it in a dream, or let it be established through an oracle, or let a prophet speak it! Or in regard to whatever I communicate [as a possible cause of the epidemic] to all the priests, let them investigate it through incubation. 

Conclusion   
In this short presentation I have tried to show that the religious conceptions of the Hittites were congruent with their social system and ecological situation. Like the king and other members of the ruling class, the gods stood far above the ordinary Hittite, dispensing favors or punishments according to their pleasure. At the same time, all inhabitants of the Hittite world were mutually dependent, and the labors of the peasant agriculturalist and pastoralist were the basis upon which all else—human and divine—rested.

Notes

1 KUB 24.2 rev. 12’−16’ [see glossary listing for KUB].
2 KUB 21.27 i 3−6.
3 KUB 24.3 ii 4’−17’.
4 KUB 29.1 i 17−19.
5 KUB 38.1 iv 1−7.
6 KUB 25.6 iv 5−24.
7 KUB 41.8 iv 29−32.
8 KUB 14.8 rev. 41−44, as restored from duplicates.

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The Dorot Research Professorship 1990–1991
W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeology, Jerusalem

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