HITTITE POETRY

The great bulk of the lit. recovered from Hatrussa (Boğazköy/Boğazkale, located about 62 miles northeast of Ankara), capital of the Hittites from the 17th to the early 12th c. BCE, was written in prose. A metrical analysis of those texts definitely composed in bound lang., such as the mythological compositions known as "Songs," is difficult because of a number of technical characteristics of the script in which they are written: as a syllabary, cuneiform is unable to render precisely the phonology of an IE lang., such as Hittite, since it cannot express consonant clusters adequately, esp. at the beginning or end of words. Furthermore, the Hittite scribes often used ideograms for many common lexemes, thus concealing their phonological shape from the uninstructed reader. Finally, breaks in poetic lines are quite often not indicated either by line breaks or by punctuation, which was not a feature of cuneiform texts in any event.

The earliest scrap of Hittite poetry we possess, a soldier's lament, is included in an historical text composed in the 16th c. BCE:

Nesas waspasu1 Nesas waspasu2 // tiya-mu4 tiya4 nu-mu annama4 katta armu2 // tiya-mu4 tiya4 nu-mu uwasma4 katta armu2 // tiya-mu4 tiya4

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1. Old Hittite
2. Modern Hittite

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(Close of a Bring Bring...)

The book of correspondences stresses the rules governing e.g., enclitic and preposition, and has been a well-traveled subject by historians, philosophers, and literary theorists. The "Song of Songs," perhaps the most famous of the "Songs," is also the title of a modern work of literature. Despite its formal utterance, this exercise in the ancient idiom of poetry seems to be antihistorical by definition. Pound was one of the writers who believed that the history of literature and that of poetry were dosed from the past by Benedetto Croce, arrached the positivist definition of history in the sense of historical science, free of speculative metaphysics, and of poetic ornament (Brait, Breitsach). Even for Ranke, the distinction between mere recording and actual history, lay in the ability of the latter to "recreate" and to do so in a way "related to poetry" ("On the Character of Historical Science").

Nonetheless, the 20th c. began with positivist hist. posed starkly against a poetic tr. for which the "lyric was the paradigmatic form. J. B. Bury's 1903 address, "The Science of History," forthrightly declared the claims of historical science, free of speculative metaphysics and of poetic ornament (Breitsach), while Ezra Pound's disdain for the "germanic" system of grammar (Breitsach), while many historians, led chronologically if not intellectually by Benedetto Croce, attacked the positivist definition of hist. as a science, while many mod. poets, Pound foremost among them, were inspired methodologically by historical research into the past. Pound particularly revered Lorenzo Valla, who gave humanist hist. its illustrious beginning by exposing the demonization of Constantine as a forgery. Though "modernism may seem to be anathistorical by definition, Pound was hardly the only modernist who aspired to write "a poem including history." Mod. poets such as Pound, W. B. Yeats, and T. S. Eliot shared with their Victorian predecessors a desire to make the past speak, one so strong that it strained against the constraints of lyric form and brought forth time-traveling works like The Cantos and The Waste Land.

In recent times, the notion that the writing of hist. is inevitably a rhetorical task has been presented by Hayden White as if it also meant that the writing of hist. is essentially rhetorical. This position has attracted much opposition from historians for whom an admission of the rhetorical, the figurative, and the poetic into their work seems to mean the abandonment of truth. Still, historians continue to call upon some form of literary distinction to differentiate their work from mere chronicle. And it remains difficult to distinguish hist., as a pattern of events and a form of knowledge, from the group of writings called hist. without some recourse to figurative understanding of a kind difficult to distinguish from that of the poets.


M. North
(Clothes of Nesa, clothes of Nesa—approach me, approach!
Bring me to my mother—approach me, approach!
Bring me to my aunt—approach me, approach!)

The basic principle underlying this Hittite versification is phrasal stress, namely, regular lines of four stresses each, falling into two cola (see colon). The rules governing the presence or absence of stress (on, e.g., enclitics, noun phrases, and adverbs)—whose details still remain somewhat obscure to modern scholars—have been shown to be applicable in Hittite prose as well. Therefore, this type of poetry is a native Anatolian ling. phenomenon and not, as had been suggested previously, the result of a translation of poems originally composed in the Hurrian or Akkadian languages. It seems that “assonance,” “alliteration,” “rhyme,” and synonymous “parallelism” also played some role in Hurrian poetry, but none of these techniques was structural to it.

Many of the “incantations and short hymns featured in Hittite ritual and cult employ at least some elements of poetic lang., but it is the “Songs” adapted from Hurrian-lang. forerunners that best illustrate Hittite poetry. These include the constituents of the Kurkû Cycle: the “Song of Emergence” and “Song of Ullikunnu,” the “Song of Hedammu,” the “Song of Ullikunnu,” the “Song of Silver,” the “Song of the Protective Deity,” as well as the “Song of the Sea” and the Hurro-Hittite bilingual “Song of Release.”

Despite the seeming aberrance of the final line, this quatrain from the “Song of Ullikunnu” provides a good impression of the style of Hittite “epic” poetry:

Kumurbiṣ̣-a2 harattar2 // istanzar3 pîran daskizzi2
nu idalu3 i3 swtarran4 // hwa4pm4 paddal4 sallanuski5
nu-za Turhuni-7 menahanda4 // idalawa6
sanbasik5
nu Turhuni7 // tarpanadd7 sallanuski5

([The god] Kumurbi seeks wisdom into his mind.
He rears a bad day as Evil.
He seeks evil for the Storm-god.
He rears a rival for the Storm-god.)

See sumerian poetry.

H. Th. Bossert, “Gedicht und Reim im vor­