CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Anatolia and Literacy

Many biographies like to start at the end of their subject’s life. The final moments or days of their hero are presented as the climax of his or her life as if somehow summing it all up. Yet the reader does not know it yet. Her curiosity is piqued and, so the author hopes, she will be eager to read on. The author then turns around and starts at the very beginning, with the hero as a baby and child, with all the excitement still far away but with all the foreboding of the end just told. The hero of this book is literacy, writing and reading, in the Hittite kingdom in ancient Anatolia, or modern-day Turkey, from roughly 1650 to 1200 BC, give or take several years or perhaps even a decade or two. In this case, too, we could begin at the end, but the demise of the kingdom is still shrouded in mystery. Our hero just disappears unseen, it seems. Sometime around 1200 BC, the Hittite state literally vanished into thin air. We think the ruling elite abandoned its central Anatolian capital Hattusa and moved away somewhere south or southeast, but where to exactly? No obvious new capital has been identified as yet. And when did this all take place? Isolated outside references to a Hittite state might extend its life to 1190 or even into the 1180s BC, but nothing compels us to assume that it was still centered at Hattusa. As we will see, the number of written records dating to the very end of the kingdom suggests an earlier rather than later abandonment. After the “fall,” Hittite-style great kings pop up here and there, well outside central Anatolia, and may have claimed to carry on or believed they carried on the Hittite kingdom. Central Anatolia, on the other hand, the core of what was once the mighty kingdom, suddenly becomes a tabula rasa and stays so until the first Phrygian sources become available some four hundred years later in the eighth century BC.

Besides the inevitable human tragedy that must have accompanied the demise of the Hittite state, and that is invisible to us, another casualty was...
cuneiform literacy. Although Hittite as a spoken language may have been ailing already for some time, at least its written form and the cuneiform script continued to serve as the official administrative medium until the last king gave up the capital city. But at that fateful moment, both the Hittite language and its cuneiform script became officially extinct. The fate of the other script, the indigenous so-called Anatolian hieroglyphs used by the Hittite kings for inscriptions in Luwian, Hittite’s sister-language, was not much better. Although Luwian continued to be spoken and the hieroglyphs kept being written, most inscriptions dating to the early twelfth and eleventh century come from the northern Syro-Mesopotamian area, some 400 km away, and seem to continue a local, rather than formerly Hittite tradition. Also, the Late Bronze Age hieroglyphs’ most vital function to write names on seals never returned while former Hittite institutions and artistic expressions suddenly and completely disappear from the kingdom’s heartland. What do this sad end of Hittite, its cuneiform script in Central Anatolia, all that it represented, and the narrow survival there of Luwian and the Anatolian hieroglyphs in the Iron Age say about the prime of their lives? For this we need to go back to the very beginning.

Writing ranks among humankind’s most important and defining inventions. In history, writing systems were independently created from scratch, that is, without for us discernible outside inspiration from an already literate society, at least four times. The earliest inventions happened in the ancient Middle East, in the land of Sumer in modern-day southern Iraq, somewhere around 3500 BC, and in Egypt, probably around the same time or a little after. The two others were China (ca. 1500 BC) and Mesoamerica (ca. 500 BC). The scripts in these parts of the world arose out of pictograms inspired by their own material cultures, and the gradual evolution into real writing systems usually was a response to the growing administrative, political, and cultural needs of these early complex states. They enabled ruling classes to organize and control labor and trade, and over time writing came to be used also as a means of prestige and propaganda. As rare as these ex nihilo creations were, they inspired an endless string of derived scripts and writing systems that continues until the present day. The so-called primary or pristine writing systems of Sumer, Egypt, China, and Mesoamerica were responsible for all or most other scripts in the world. Spreading from its origins in southern Mesopotamia, the Sumerian cuneiform provided most of the Middle East from Iran to Turkey, from the Levantine coast to the Caucasus with

1 For a rather dark assessment of the aftermath of the Hittite kingdom see Summers 2017.
a script that stayed in use for well over three millennia. Chinese characters became the first script in much of East Asia and still forms part of the Japanese and Korean writing systems, and in the end the very roots of our own alphabet can be traced back to Egyptian hieroglyphs.

The population groups or states that decided to adopt an already existing foreign script for their own internal use went through a fundamentally different process than the four who invented writing. Where the pristine scripts had developed over centuries, either slow and gradual, or in leaps and bounds, dictated by the growing pains of political systems, adoptions could be the result of short-term deliberate decisions. Instead of a slow development one often sees the wholesale introduction of an entire system into a community that had hitherto been illiterate. This does not say that such processes always proceeded quickly, smoothly, and linearly. The development of the originally Phoenician alphabet in the early first millennium BC is a case in point. From about 800 BC onwards we see a sudden proliferation of local alphabetic variants in Asia Minor and further westwards. The two earliest adaptations can be seen right around the turn of the eighth century in Phrygia in Central Anatolia and in the Greek-speaking world with the so far oldest evidence coming from Sicily. Soon the alphabet spread to Lydia, Caria, and Lycia in Western Anatolia. Variants of the Greek alphabet emerged all around the Aegean. All of these Iron Age alphabets share the innovation of separate signs for vowels but none of these alphabets are identical. With our current evidence it is impossible to come up even with a stemma that neatly explains the neighboring Lydian, Carian, or Lycian alphabets as linear descendants from either the Phrygian or Greek model. Also, all of these alphabets fairly quickly disappeared again in the onslaught, half a millennium later, of Alexander the Great and his immediate successors. Only the Greek Attic-Ionian variant eventually became standardized as the Greek alphabet.

One community where we can observe a contained and straightforward development from script adoption and adaptation to continued use by one particular group and one only was that of the early Hittite kingdom. Here there was no spread or diffusion with local variants and hence no standardization of a preferred variant. Around 1650 its early kings imported the cuneiform writing system, as it was used at the time in northern Syria (see Chapter 3), one of the areas that cuneiform had spread to from its Sumerian origins late in the fourth millennium. But why did they wait so long? Even stranger is the fact that already in the period between 2000 and 1725 BC, the Anatolian population had been acquainted with another, simplified cuneiform writing system used by Assyrian merchants, but they
did not seem overly interested. When the merchants left the area for good nobody seems to have had the urge to start writing for themselves. Anatolia was politically fragmented and continued its illiterate ways, as it had for ages. Handshake deals and at best impressions of seals formed the backbone of economy and trade.²

Anatolia was a harsh country with an “extraordinarily complex” landscape.³ Not only did huge mountain ranges, rising up to 3000 m in the north, south, east, and west, seal it off from the Mediterranean and neighboring countries, they also created inland pockets where local population groups could develop their own societies with their own social traditions and customs in relative isolation.⁴ The Anatolian climate has been described as one “of extremes”⁵ with severely cold winters and hot, humid summers. With, moreover, its rivers being unsuited for long-distance transport, travel was difficult enough in the more clement seasons but “virtually impossible” in winter.⁶ The resulting social and political fragmentation proved a real challenge to any local chieftains who set their sights on regional domination. There may have been some larger local kingdoms but the first, albeit short-lived, historically attested unified kingdom covering most of Central Anatolia dates to around 1750 BC. But these were not yet complex states. Individual communities continued trading and bartering in small local subsistence economies, as they had done from time immemorial.⁷ In these circumstances there was little incentive to either invent or to acquire a writing system.

The second attempt at a Central Anatolian kingdom met with more success. Between 1650 and 1600 BC Labarna, Hattusili I, and Mursili I chose Hattusa as their new power base and soon turned their attention to Syria, gateway to the east as well as to the Mediterranean. It was international diplomacy, contacts with Syrian kings, that convinced them they needed a writing system. Although the Assyrian writing system might still have been remembered by the oldest in society the new kings decided to adopt the very different Syrian cuneiform and to start using it for their own purposes. Writing cuneiform and knowledge of Akkadian

² See, for instance, Susan Sherratt 2003: 230 (“people all over the world and throughout history have traded successfully with varying degrees of complexity and sophistication without the need for writing”).
⁵ Sagona & Zimansky 2009: 1, 5.
⁷ For the most recent and reliable attempt so far at gauging the population size in Central Anatolia in the Hittite period see Simon 2011a; on a total of 987 settlements he estimates 877 with a population of well under 100.
were prerequisites in the world of politics of the moment. Before long, they adapted the script to write their own language and cuneiform writing became the internal recording standard. But in spite of the Mesopotamian writing conventions that came with the script the Hittite state was selective in what it committed to writing and cuneiform never gained wide acceptance. Existing evidence suggests that writing was only practiced within the circles of the ruling elite and, compared to Mesopotamia, the total volume of written documents remained small. Telling in this respect may be the fact that proper verbs for “writing” or “reading” never developed. The normal Hittite terms are the very generic iye- and its derived synonym aniye- “to do, make.” For “reading” au(š)-/u- “to see” was used. The direct object of the “doing” is what one writes, a letter, a literary composition, a ritual etc., and one does so “on a tablet” or “with/using a tablet.” The latter two can overlap but the instrumental “with/using a tablet” is preferred when contrasting a written with an oral message.

In trying to come up with a term for “writing” the Hittites could have compared its characteristic motions to similar looking activities. As we will see (Chapter 6.3), the possibly earliest attested reference to the act of writing used in the Hittite language is hazziye- “to stab, pierce.” This is not an inappropriate way of describing writing if one observes someone applying a stylus to a clay tablet, repeatedly pressing the pointed stylus into the surface. Yet this is only attested twice, the second occurrence stemming from the other end of Hittite history, the late thirteenth century BC, in reference to an iron tablet where the cuneiform signs were probably punched in. Besides the ubiquitous “doing” the only other verb occasionally used is gul-š- or guls- (Chapter 10.5), originally meaning “to make a mark” with something. That “something” could be anything ranging from beer poured in a circle around an object to a sharp instrument to incise signs or figures in a hard surface like metal. These two verbs come close to other languages that often use technical terms for “scratching” or “carving” to express the notion of writing. But the default expression remained “to do/make (a text) on/with a tablet.” Like many societies that adopted cuneiform writing, the Hittites did, however, borrow the Mesopotamian word for “tablet,” Akkadian tuppum becoming Hittite tuppi.8

8 For the various constructions see van den Hout 2016a.
What made the Hittites suddenly decide to become literate around the middle of the seventeenth century BC? What was the impetus to start recording the oldest known Indo-European language? What did they use writing for and how did the technology and its use develop over the centuries? What are the reasons to think that writing never caught on in the population at large? Despite this seeming reluctance they developed early on a second script, this time one of their own design, and used it for public display. Why? And what happened to their writing systems when around 1200 BC their kingdom collapsed and vanished? These are the overarching questions I want to answer in this book. Using all available evidence, and only that, as I will explain in more detail below, I have tried to sketch as comprehensive and consistent a picture of writing and reading in Hittite Anatolia as possible. But before embarking on this let us see who these Hittites were.

1.2 Defining the Hittites

The records of the Hittite kingdom reflect the history of Anatolia (nowadays Turkey) from about the mid-eighteenth century BC up to its very end around 1200 BC. The presence of Hittite speakers in Central Anatolia can already be assumed for the turn of the third millennium. Hittite names and those of Luwians, speakers of a language closely related to Hittite, are attested in the records of Assyrian merchants who had settled in Anatolia around 2000 BC. Yet other names point to speakers of the Hattian language in the same area. Hattian is completely unrelated to Hittite and Luwian and remains a so-called linguistic isolate with no immediate connection to any other known language, ancient or modern. Following the sociolinguistic reconstruction by Petra Goedegebuure we can envision the Indo-European Hittites and Luwians settling in Central Anatolia in the course of the third millennium BC. The Luwians largely merged with the already present Hattian population within the bend of the Classical Halys or modern-day Kızıl İrmak River. A bilingual society resulted, in which the Hattian element was culturally dominant, still visible in the early historical period of the Hittite kingdom with its overwhelmingly Hattian pantheon and Hattian names of its kings. The Hittite speakers, meanwhile, inhabited the more eastern parts of Central Anatolia right towards the area where the Halys originates. Around 1750 BC a local king by the name of Anitta established here the center of the first unified Central Anatolian kingdom.

Goedegebuure 2008.
including the Luwian-Hattian population groups. Originally, he came with his father from Kussar, probably to be sought in the same general eastern area, and conquered Kanesh or Nesa (modern Kültepe), as it was also known, the center of the Assyrian commercial activities. This town he made his capital. One of his many acts of war was the conquest, subsequent destruction, and cursing of the town of Hattus, as it was called in Hattian, or Hattusa, as Luwian speakers knew it. A few other towns were raided, razed, and perhaps cursed but Anitta seems to have singled out Hattusa for special treatment, sowing cress on its fields in order to avoid immediate resettlement. Although Anitta may have harbored some personal grudge it is more likely that he already sensed the potential of the site as a future power base. Anitta’s kingdom was short lived but about a century later that same Hattusa re-emerged as the capital of choice of a new wave of Hittite invaders led by a certain Labarna. This was the beginning of the Hittite kingdom that was to dominate Anatolia for the next almost 500 years.

Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, Labarna and his successors assumed the name of the conquered population and called themselves “men of Hatti” or “men of the land of Hattusa.” In doing so they boldly asserted themselves as the new power in the region but at the same time declared their intention to maintain and perhaps even integrate into local conditions. They did not force their own name on the indigenous people. As we will see time and again, this practical attitude towards their new surroundings is perhaps the defining characteristic of the Hittite state. It has little to do with altruism and everything to do with a will to survive and cleverly improvising their way to the top. In taking the definitive step towards literacy, however, they chose neither Hattian nor Luwian but held on to their own Indo-European Hittite language, the one they came with, as the official medium of their administration. Even though from now on they wanted to be known as the “men of Hatti,” the name from which our modern term “Hittite” derives through the intermediary of the Biblical Hittim “Hittites,” they still called their own language “the language of Nesa (Kanesh).” This is one of the very few explicit holdovers from their roots going back to Anitta and the Hittite kings held on to it for the rest of their history. Since they used the “Nesite” language, that is, Hittite, for internal administrative eyes only, they could do so without political consequences. But, as we will see, they found other means to address the wider and largely Luwian-speaking population. All this was based on practical decisions and they cared little for feelings of nostalgia. For the historical Hittites history started with their rule from Hattusa and there was no “Golden Age” tradition associated with Nesa or
any other place or region.11 With “Hittite” and the “Hittites” I therefore refer to the Central Anatolian kingdom that between ca. 1650 and 1200 BC used the Hittite language as its main internal means of written communication while controlling a population that spoke several other (mostly related) languages and largely continued their own centuries-old customs and traditions. As a consequence, I will also often use the terms “Anatolian” and “Anatolians” for the same people.12

To this linguistic diversity of Hittite, Luwian, and Hattian we can add the Palaic language in Northeast Central Anatolia, another branch on the Anatolian branch of Indo-European languages. Also, it is not unlikely that forerunners of the first-millennium Anatolian languages related to Hittite, Luwian, and Palaic, although not yet written, were already spoken during the days of the Hittite kingdom in the western and southern coastal areas. These are the Lydian, Carian, and Lycian languages with inscriptions each in their own distinctive alphabetic scripts from the eighth through fourth century BC. By the beginning of the AD era the Anatolian branch, at least in its written forms, was ultimately extinct. This variety of languages and population groups is not surprising in view of the “extraordinarily complex” landscape with its huge mountain ranges and its climate “of extremes.” Anatolia’s geography and ecology encouraged social and political fragmentation with pockets of local languages and customs being able to exist in a kind of splendid isolation.13 Although early Hittite kings liked to boast that they “made the lands the borders of the seas”14 the truth is that probably only Central Anatolia was ever truly under their direct control. The further one gets away from the center towards the coastal regions in the west and to the mountains separating it from Mesopotamia in the east

12 Hittite culture and society are often described as a kind of melting pot adding a substantial Hurrian element to the mix. From a Central Anatolian standpoint, however, the latter never probably was a substantial ethnic component. The Hurrian wave that we see rising in Hittite history towards the end of the fifteenth century BC was in all likelihood mostly an elite affair that had little impact on the Anatolian population at large. In his article “Toward a Definition of the Term Hittite” Hans Güterbock (1957) drew attention to the various linguistic and cultural elements in the mostly religious Hittite texts and spoke of a “mixed civilization” (1957: 237: “It is the presence of foreign elements that makes us speak of a mixed civilization, and it is their subordination under the Hittite element that justifies the name Hittite for this mixed civilization.”). Definitions often amount to an adding up of all linguistic strands we find in the texts (cf. Beckman 2016: 320–1) but by doing so we may overestimate the impact of such cultural influences on the population as a whole. Anatolia may not have been more mixed than most other regions in the ancient Middle East. For a recent discussion of these questions see Gilan 2015: 195–201.
14 nebi aruna išri iši KUB 3.1 i 16–17 (also i 7, 26; CTH 19, NS), ed. by Hoffmann 1984: 16–17 (in her overall line count: i 8, 17–18, 27).
the more we have to think in terms of spheres of influence instead of domination and direct control. Economically, socially, and religiously these more remote parts were largely independent. The long arm of Hittite power rarely reached there in its full force and Hittite kings may not even have felt the urge to do so. They intervened when they considered their influence imperiled but otherwise contented themselves with control from afar allowing and condoning local conditions and traditions. This practical attitude is aptly illustrated by the Hittite concept of the proverbial “Thousand Gods.” Instead of imposing a single centralized pantheon and an accompanying cult, the Hittite kings preferred to induct local gods into an all-encompassing national hall of deities categorized according to a system of Stormgods, Sun deities, Tutelary deities, while at the same time allowing more unique numina to be worshiped.

1.3 A Note on the Hittite Economy

The two economic models usually mentioned for ancient Near Eastern societies are the staple finance and the wealth finance systems. In a staple economy it is the state that collects, stores, and controls “subsistence goods such as grains, livestock, and clothing,” and it uses them to remunerate people who work for the state. Given the inherent bulkiness of these staples, the efforts in storing them, and the transportation hurdles offered by the Anatolian landscape, a centralized system seems not to be the most obvious option in the Hittite situation. In a wealth economy, the state tries to control the procurement of and trade in raw, precious materials like gold and silver as well as the manufacture of finished products out of them by craftsmen, “provided as part of a labor obligation from the local communities.” The state can then use these goods to fund government activities, particularly political services. Because of their being lighter and smaller they are much easier to store and transport. An added bonus is that they are also much less perishable than the usual staple goods.

Although there may not always be an automatic correlation between an area’s ecology and its economic system, given the specific character of the Anatolian landscape the Hittite choice for an overall wealth finance model combined with local subsistence economies is exactly what recently scholars have argued for. Of course, wealth and staple finance are not mutually

exclusive. On the contrary, they support each other but the question is one of emphasis. The Hittite state clearly cared about and invested in the organization of staples, especially cereals. Agriculture was not without its challenges and cyclical droughts forced the ruling elite to keep a watchful eye on local situations in order to maintain a stable political system. The second part of King Telipinu’s proclamation of the late sixteenth century BC documents a network of over ninety storehouses for grain throughout Central Anatolia; the texts from the provincial site of Mașat Höyük attest to the worries in ruling circles about the plundering of grain fields by starving Kaskaeans; on the archaeological side, the silos in Hattusa and provincial centers are an eloquent testament to the Hittite state seeking to guarantee a regular and steady flow of foodstuffs. The recurrent droughts in Anatolia were a potential source of unrest and upheaval among the population. In order to avoid this, the state invested in mobilizing the staples and organizing them at a local level and thus tried to provide for the inevitable lean years. The storage facilities mentioned in the Telipinu text cover the core of Hatti-Land as well as the Upper and Lower Land and bespeak a fine-grained and therefore also highly localized or decentralized system of local networks that together form the Hittite kingdom.  

Within such a system it is possible to work without written records to a large extent. Also, we need to take into account the fact that the administrative texts from Mașat have so far not been matched by any similar records at other provincial sites. Finally, there is the near-total silence of the Hittite sources on trade.

What might require written administration, on the other hand, is the wealth finance part of the system. This is exactly what our so-called palace storeroom inventories (see Chapter 8.7) are about. Also, the passage from the Instruction of the Temple Personnel quoted extensively later on (see Chapter 10.2) offers the perfect example for the control the palace tried to exert on the distribution of wealth and possible related record keeping:

If by the palace silver, gold, textiles, (and/or) things of bronze are given to him (i.e., a member of the temple personnel) as a gift, it should be specified: “King so-and-so has given it to him” and it should likewise be recorded how much its weight is. Furthermore, the following should be recorded as well: “They gave it to him at such-and-such festival.” Witnesses, too, should be recorded after (it): “When they gave it to him, so-and-so, and so-and-so

19 It is interesting to note that the Mycenaean Linear B records are likewise silent on trade relations and trade organization; see Panagiotopoulos 2017: 27–9, for the Hittite situation see Hoffner 2001: 180.
20 For all this see in detail Burgin 2016.
were present.” Furthermore, he shall not leave it in his estate. He must sell it but when he sells it, he shall not sell it in secret! The authorities of Hattusa shall be present and watch. And whatever he sells, they must draw up a document of it and they must seal it in front. When the king comes up to Hattusa, he must show it to the palace, and they shall seal it for him.

Clearly, any gift once given to members of the retaining class was not unconditional. When the beneficiary left the service or died, the gift was not his or hers to do with as they pleased. The state sought to directly control where the object went, and the policy outlined in this passage may be seen as strongly discouraging to “monetize” it in any way. Instead the state itself may have bought it back in exchange for staple goods or with compensation in some other way and no further records were necessary.

1.4 Modern Hittite Scholarship and Our Sources

Whereas the civilizations of the Assyrians and Babylonians in Mesopotamia and that of Egypt never faded from memory, knowledge of the Hittites — at least in a modern western European point of view but not necessarily in that of later Anatolians21 — was almost fully erased after the collapse of their kingdom around 1200 BC. In the now more than one-hundred-year old “resurrection”22 of Hittite culture and society that followed the excavations of the early twentieth century AD and the decipherment of the Hittite language in 1915 they have now been restored to their rightful place in the history of the Late Bronze Age in ancient Western Asia or the Middle/Near East, as it is more commonly known. All our sources come from contemporary, that is, Late Bronze Age societies, mostly through archaeological excavations. Impressive material culture ranging from monumental gates and walls down to the tiniest miniature vases has come to light at the ruins of the former capital Hattusa, modern Boğazköy/Boğazkale. Since the early 1970s many provincial towns and centers have added invaluable information to a picture that until then tended to be one-sided coming from the capital only. This book focuses on that part of the material culture that has writing on it and seeks to distill from it something of an intellectual history.

The Hittites first and foremost wrote on clay tablets using the cuneiform script they imported from Syria in the second half of the seventeenth century BC.23 For special occasions metal tablets in gold, silver, bronze,

21 On this see Rojas 2019.
23 For a full and detailed overview of Hittite tablets and their use see Waal 2015. For a brief overview of the general written legacy of the Hittite Kingdom see van den Hout 2011.
and iron were made and there are references to (probably wax-covered) wooden tablets as well. Rarely is the cuneiform script found on objects other than tablets whether clay or metal. Besides Hittite, which was the language of choice for all internal administration, a variety of other languages were recorded in cuneiform on the clay tablets. We have compositions in Akkadian and Sumerian, the “classical” languages of Mesopotamian culture that accompanied the introduction of cuneiform into Anatolia, as well as in Hattian, Luwian and Paiaic, and finally Hurrian, the language of the Mittani kingdom of northern Mesopotamia. Had the Hittites only used the cuneiform script, ready-made and adopted wholesale from Mesopotamia, there would have been little need to define the term “script” or “writing system” here. Our common definition of spoken language recorded graphically (script proper) in a system agreed upon by the group using it would have sufficed. At the same time the Hittites imported cuneiform, however, Anatolia had its own indigenous and local pictographic repertoires of symbols (“hieroglyphs”) that by the later fifteenth century BC had developed into a real writing system (Chapter 7). The Hittite elite employed this second script when addressing the population at large. They did so on rock monuments erected in the public sphere as well as through graffiti and seals. Telling for the linguistic demographics of Anatolia at the time is the fact that inscriptions in these hieroglyphs exclusively use the Luwian language. The development of these symbols or pictograms into a writing system happened under the aegis of the Hittite kingdom building on already existing local uses of symbols, likely used for administrative purposes. The earliest hints at the existence of these signs go back to the Old Assyrian Period and perhaps even before that. These attestations usually concern individual pictograms on vases and similar objects and occasionally a couple or even three combined. This was not yet script in the sense of recorded speech, but they did communicate information that could be “read.” The symbols were in all likelihood associated with individuals or offices and they delineated their responsibilities. A container with a symbol impressed on it in clay could be identified as belonging to or being the responsibility of a person or office. So, in order to include also these “forms of graphic communication that do not represent language” (at least not necessarily spoken language) or semasiography I adopt here the wider definition of

25 For examples see Waal 2012: 299 Figs. 1–3.
1.5 The Nature of Our Evidence and How We Use It

To date, we have around 30,000 tablets and tablet fragments written in cuneiform and close to seventy hieroglyphic inscriptions from the period of the Hittite kingdom. To these we may add some 5000 seal impressions of kings, queens, and related royalty as well as officials, mostly in the Anatolian hieroglyphs. Along with the non-inscribed sources this material is rich enough to allow us a relatively well-documented and sometimes even surprisingly detailed look into Hittite society. We know the general historical development, the outline of state organization with its religious, judicial, military, and administrative levels.

Inevitably, of course, these sources leave even more unsaid. Most or all excavations have been done at larger sites with big structures highlighting the lives of elites. Besides some relatively isolated hints in our texts, the local population outside those elites remains almost completely invisible. One of the areas most sorely under-documented is that of trade and private enterprise. We do not even have records showing the state and private citizens as partners to an agreement. This absence is all the more surprising since there are so many legal and/or economic records known from neighboring Mesopotamia in the east and the Mycenaean kingdoms in the west. Comparisons with Mesopotamia and other societies prompt the question where such texts are, but they also justify entertaining the possibility that perhaps Hittite society was different in this respect and that such records never existed. I suggest we see these “silences and blanks of the written record”27 as due to the ancient Anatolians simply not considering such transactions as in need of being written down but the more common assumption in modern scholarship is that such records have not been preserved.

In our urge to round out our picture of Hittite society as much as possible, scholars often resort to the adage “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” The material was there, we just do not have it any longer. We know the Hittites themselves recycled records, they wrote on perishable materials like wood, and there is the “rude wasting of old time,”28 things simply turning into dust in the course of the more than

26 Hill Boone 2004: 313, cf. also Urton 2003: 26–9, and see further Chapter 8.
28 John Keats, Sonnet no. 4 “On first seeing the Elgin marbles.”
three millennia that separate us from the Hittite kingdom. But how far can one go? Writing about the single surviving wooden tablet from the Late Bronze Age, found in the Mediterranean waters just off the Lycian coast near Ulu Burun, Nicholas Postgate, Tao Wang, and Toby Wilkinson assert that it:

has, or should have, had a disproportionate influence on perceptions of the role of writing in the Eastern Mediterranean in the late 2nd millennium BC, but its discovery is equally significant in a methodological way; a unique survivor of a whole class, it counters the argument ‘surely if writing were so prevalent some evidence would have survived’: before its discovery there was no such evidence, but the great fortune which kept it waterlogged for 3200 years or more has changed this at a stroke.\footnote{Postgate et al. 1995: 478 (emphasis by the authors).}

Actually, there was evidence for wooden writing boards all along before the find of the Ulu Burun shipwreck in the form of references to such documents in the clay records. The point is, as we will see (Chapter 10), that the number of such references is very modest and, in my opinion, does not justify wide-ranging conclusions. It is undeniable that evidence has been lost but I think we should be careful not to attribute incidental finds too much influence without checking the total record.

Usually and understandably, we satisfy the urge to fill in the gaps in our view of Hittite history and society by assuming a situation comparable to contemporary neighboring cultures. Debt notes, contracts, adoption, and tax records, census lists, consignment documents, court records, disbursals, land sale documents, memoranda, and similar texts dominate the Mesopotamian written legacy and therefore we like to assume they existed in Hittite Anatolia as well. Mesopotamian scribes started their training with single sign sequences, moving on to so-called lexical lists, and ended with literary compositions in Sumerian and Akkadian and therefore we like to assume the same training sequence for Hittite Anatolia. But for neither case is there any compelling evidence. In this tendency to level out the various ancient Near Eastern societies we run the risk of denying societies the chance to be unique or simply themselves.\footnote{Besides the authors quoted here and in the following, cf. for a variety of opinions Diakonoff 1967: 351, Palaima 2001: 154, Houston 2004: 12, Waal 2012: 290, Postgate 2013: 328–30, 370–1.}

In his 2014 book on \textit{Writing and the Ancient State} Haicheng Wang discusses the problems in comparing ancient cultures with very different sets of evidence:
1.5 The Nature of Our Evidence and How We Use It

Cautious colleagues are understandably reluctant to make conjectures about missing evidence. A few regard it as a methodologically virtuous to proceed as though nothing were missing. . . . [But (12:)] many archaeologists have learned that lesson painfully from discoveries they did not anticipate made soon after the publication of their theories.\textsuperscript{31}

It is true that anything I say here on the basis of existing evidence may no longer be true tomorrow because of newly found evidence but should that give us carte blanche to conjure up any picture of Hittite society, as we think it should have been? This is not proceeding “as though nothing were missing” but refraining from excessive speculation without proper evidence. This approach is methodologically sounder, it seems to me, and there is no shame in standing corrected later on. Daring to be wrong is what often makes scholarship progress more than just daring to be right. Strangely enough, the option of not worrying too much about missing evidence that we just assume to have been there is considered the more “cautious” one. That way one cannot be blamed for overestimating one’s hard evidence or be accused of disciplinary chauvinism and hiding under the Mesopotamian umbrella is always a safe space.

In his book Ancient Kanesh Mogens Larsen warns us of such chauvinism. In the so-called Old Assyrian Period that he describes merchants from Assur set up a trading network in Central Anatolia with Kanesh as its nerve center. The over 23,000 records they left behind give us an unparalleled insight into private enterprise and conditions in Anatolia of the first two centuries of the second millennium BC. Larsen concedes how “the[se] texts . . . in many respects stand out as unique, a rich and dense record of a commercial society during a brief span of time.” He then continues:

The absence of similar material from other sites of the same period in the region could easily lead us to the conclusion that the Old Assyrians had created a new and different kind of socio-economic system. In other words, it is tempting to isolate the evidence from Kültepe from its contemporary world, simply because we know so little about it, but it would be foolish to assume that because we do not have such evidence, it did not ever exist. It is essential that we accept the utterly fortuitous nature of the material we have and that we avoid the delicious trap of believing that the texts and archaeology must offer us a coherent, typical and representative picture of the past.\textsuperscript{32}

The alternative view would hold that other groups or societies in this period had developed similar economic systems and left similar corpora

\textsuperscript{31} Wang 2014: 10, 12. \textsuperscript{32} Larsen 2015: 9.
of texts that despite all archaeological activity we have not found yet and that we therefore know nothing about. Why should we not consider the possibility that the confluence of Assyrians and Anatolians at this specific time and area indeed gave rise to a unique combination? It is unclear to me why trusting actually existing evidence means having fallen in a “delicious trap” while others who sometimes make far-reaching assumptions based on non-existing evidence are not held to explain the passing of yet another day that the missing evidence was not found.

We end up with a strange paradox. Where there is evidence available, we are willing to accept any differences with other cultures, as long as they are real and cannot be ignored. The Anatolian and Mesopotamian attitudes, for instance, towards celestial phenomena like eclipses and general adversities in life were fundamentally different as shown by the texts. But where there is little or no evidence, we automatically fill in the picture with what we know from elsewhere. It is like looking at an ancient statue without arms or legs or with a nose missing. When gazing at the face without the nose it is difficult to get around the mutilated face but as soon as you cover the nose from view or block the space where the arms should have been attached to the body they suddenly materialize before your mind’s eye and the statue becomes whole again. Our brains immediately restore the bronze or marble body to an assumed original state based on our knowledge of the world around us. Stopping the gaps in our evidence in this way we thus risk creating an Anatolia in the image of Mesopotamia, a kind of “Mesopotamia light,” instead of allowing the silence to speak for itself and allowing Hittite society to be its own.

Although the adage “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” may sometimes be true I hold on to the principle that if we have little or no evidence for something, we should seriously consider the possibility that it was not there in the first place or did not play a role of any importance. Of course, there is always the risk that something can be proven to be untrue by some archaeological find tomorrow but, as long as that is not the case, it is from a scholarly point of view methodologically sounder to try to imagine a world without it. In fact, it is an interesting and exciting challenge to do so: what does the Hittite world look like, if we take the consistent absence of certain categories of evidence seriously? By assuming activities and corresponding records, for which we have no evidence and thus may not have been there, we may not only create an incorrect picture of Hittite society, but we may also distort what we have. If we assume a world of bookkeeping and socio-economic and legal administration as well as of private records, we may reach a kind of false equilibrium where
the preserved documents with their almost exclusive focus on the king
seem counterbalanced by all these alleged secular records. But if the latter
were never there the remaining part of what we do have suddenly appears
in an altogether different light.\textsuperscript{33}

\section*{1.6 Doing Things with Tablets}

Following the principle outlined in the previous section my aim in this
book is to present as comprehensive an account as possible of writing,
reading, and literacy in Hittite Anatolia on the basis of existing evidence.
I deliberately use the indefinite article ("an account") because this
book presents \textit{my} view of the role and history of writing in the Hittite
kingdom in the Late Bronze Age, between roughly 1600 and 1200 BC.
Understandably, Hittite texts have been mined mostly for their contents
rather than considered as archaeological objects themselves. Only recently
has Willemijn Waal offered a detailed study of Hittite tablets, their shapes
and formats as well as a complete edition of all colophons and scribal
signatures thus far published and a discussion of the role they played in
Hittite scribal culture and management. Still to be answered are questions
about the status of records in Hittite society. For whom were the texts
written and why? How much, if anything, are we missing and what was
perhaps never written down? How widely was literacy spread and what was
the role of orality? Who were the people writing and composing the texts;
how were they trained and what was their social status? How and where
were the texts kept? How did the tablet collections function? Should we
describe them as archives, libraries, or a combination of the two? Or should
we reject such labels as too modern? From a diachronic point of view, one
can add questions concerning the origins of the script, why, how, and when
the Hittites adopted and adapted cuneiform, and, although this is by no
means a study in Hittite paleography, how it evolved over the centuries.
And also, with the cuneiform firmly established, why did they still develop
their own indigenous “hieroglyphic” writing system?

Many of these questions have been inspired by reading works on orality,
writing, and reading in other times and cultures. This comparative aspect
has been helpful in asking questions I had not thought of asking before,
and it has offered possible answers I had not imagined before. Reading

\textsuperscript{33} A similar argument is made by Josephine Quinn 2018: xxiii-iv in her book on Phoenician identity:
hers is “not . . . so much an argument from silence as an argument for silence: a silence that can open
up other spaces of investigation. . . . This book is not about the lack of evidence for Phoenician
identity; it is about what we can do with that fact” (xxiv, emphasis by Quinn).
around has taught me to keep an open mind and has countered automatic assumptions based on Anatolia as part of “cuneiform culture.”

These questions are all the more interesting since Hittite Anatolia has a lot to offer to the study of writing and reading. While we often take literacy for granted and assume that any society will jump at the opportunity to adopt it, the Hittites turn out to have been surprisingly reluctant at first to adopt a script for their own purposes. For probably close to three centuries (ca. 2000–1700 BC) they lived around foreigners using cuneiform regularly but only towards the end of that period did they start using the foreign script. It took almost another century and another source before they adapted another cuneiform variant in a sophisticated and innovative way. Yet going by the evidence we have, literacy seems to have been restricted to the ruling elite and the focus of the entire preserved corpus is squarely on the king and queen. Alongside the cuneiform script used for purely internal and mostly administrative purposes the Hittites developed over the centuries the hieroglyphic system used for seals and large, publicly displayed inscriptions. These inscriptions, however, were written in Luwian, a different but closely related language, suggesting that the majority of the Anatolian population in the kingdom spoke Luwian rather than Hittite. This also explains why Hittite and its cuneiform script disappeared when the kingdom broke down around 1200 BC, while Luwian and the hieroglyphs lived on for another five centuries. These and many other issues are of great interest, as the Hittites were quite different from contemporaneous societies in the ancient Near East.

Most chapters in this book begin with a brief historical setting, intended not only for the less specialized reader but also because the developments in literacy sketched here should be seen as part of the general historical context and development of the Hittite kingdom. The first eight chapters following this Introduction (Chapters 2–9) give a chronological account of the development of writing in Hittite Anatolia. Chapter 2 deals with the first attestations of writing in the Old Assyrian Period starting in the twentieth century BC, Chapters 3 and 4 with the transition from Kanesh, the base of an Assyrian merchant colony in Central Anatolia, to the capital of the Old Hittite kingdom in Hattusa. Between ca. 2000 and 1700 BC these Assyrian merchants set up a network of trading posts, using their own specific cuneiform script and their own Assyrian language for contracts and correspondence. The Assyrians lived among the Hittites with whom they traded and there is ample

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34 Since this book is not a general history of the Hittite kingdom very few bibliographical references are given in these historical summaries and I refer the reader to the excellent work of Bryce 2005.
evidence of intermarriage between the two populations – but despite almost three centuries of close contact the Hittites never seemed eager to use the script they saw the Assyrians using. And when they did, they used the Assyrian language; there is no evidence that the Hittites ever used Assyrian cuneiform to write their own language. When the trading network dissolved around 1720 BC darkness set in until we see the beginning of the Old Hittite kingdom around 1650 BC. By then an entirely new cuneiform variant appears that must have originated in northern Syria, borrowed in the course of military campaigns there by the first Hittite kings. Here too, as evidence suggests, the young kingdom first used Akkadian, the language of writing in Syria. Chapters 5 and 6 explore all evidence for literacy and orality pertaining to the Old Kingdom (ca. 1650–1400 BC): names of scribes, possible references to record management and the character of the earliest datable compositions. In the second half of the sixteenth century we see a shift towards writing in the Hittite language and the gradual abandonment of Akkadian as a medium for internal administration. This prompts a reflection on the steps taken to adapt the Syrian cuneiform variant in order to write in Hittite instead of Akkadian. The origins and development of Anatolia’s second script, the hieroglyphs, are discussed in Chapter 7. This chapter looks at the roots and early development of this script, elements of which can already be traced back to the glyptic of the Old Assyrian period. Chapters 8 and 9 then present an overview of Hittite literature in the widest sense (“everything written”) in the New Kingdom (ca. 1350–1200 BC) when the shift to writing in Hittite had long since been completed. With the above definition of Hittite in mind, Hittite literature has to be understood here as the administrative records generated by the Hittite state including tablets written in languages other than Hittite as well as the inscriptions in the Anatolian hieroglyphs on stone and on seals.

Chapter 10 forms the first of four more thematic chapters (Chapters 10–13). Because of their far-reaching implications concerning literacy in Anatolia, the first two (Chapters 10–11) focus on the theories surrounding the wooden tablets. These wooden tablets are often adduced as a kind of *deus ex machina* to explain the absence of sources that we would like to see (e.g., bookkeeping, contracts, and legal and socio-economic records in general) but that are not there. An added complication is that some scholars hypothesize that these writing boards were inscribed with hieroglyphs rather than with cuneiform. If this were all true, literacy would have been quite widespread in Anatolia. This chapter makes clear, however, that the evidence for the use of wood as a script carrier, although not denied, is overrated: not a single wooden board has ever been found in Anatolia and the textual references to them in the Hittite clay
tablets are decidedly poor. Moreover, the assertion that the hieroglyphic script was used on them is highly speculative and unlikely at that. Chapter 11 deals with the role that the close to 4000 seal impressions found at Hattusa play in this discussion and a new explanation for this fascinating find complex is proposed. After the descriptions of all inscribed material in the preceding chapters it is time in Chapters 12 and 13 to reflect on the workings of the Hittite administration in the royal chancellery (Chapter 11) and its employees, the scribes (Chapter 14). If in the Hittite language doing is writing and seeing is reading, as we saw above, the chancellery was the king’s hands and eyes. The scribes there composed and wrote, copied and edited, and maintained a tablet collection that sometimes reached back for two to three hundred years. The drawing up of scenarios for cultic celebrations centering around the king and queen turns out to have involved a painstaking editorial process. Scribes also read to the king and his officials and brought to life the voices of a world sometimes as far away as Babylon or Egypt. Among the anonymous people carrying the title “scribe” there were simple tablet writers, administrators, and keepers of the royal storehouses inside and outside the capital. Besides these we know the names of some seventy-five individuals who call or identify themselves as scribes and who are known from the colophons that we find at the end of many Hittite tablets. It is argued that those named scribes were members of the state’s elite. They may have shared basic scribal training with their lower ranking colleagues who may have been responsible for the bulk of anonymous Hittite records, but then went on to more learned tasks of dictating, editing, and collecting (foreign) materials. The book provides an Excursus (Chapter 14) on the Anatolian hieroglyph with the number 326, better known as the scriba-sign. In it I discuss and, in the end, dismiss the evidence for the interpretation of this very frequent sign as “scribe” which would otherwise substantially increase the number of such officials and literate individuals in the later Hittite kingdom. Finally, Chapter 15 tells of the demise of the kingdom around 1200 BC and its aftermath. The latter part of that chapter looks back and presents some final thoughts.

### 1.7 A Note on Chronology and Dating

In spite of modern dating techniques such as dendrochronology, radiocarbon dating, or dating through astronomical events such as solar and lunar eclipses the chronology of ancient Near Eastern history remains notoriously difficult. This is the reason why almost all dates used in this book are either round (e.g. 1600 BC) or are modified by “around” or “ca.” In general, I adhere to the so-called Middle Chronology, according to which
the Hittite king Mursili I conquered Babylon in 1595 BC.35 The list of Hittite kings (see Timeline and Hittite Kings) reflects this choice and all related uncertainties and contains only two more exact-looking dates. The accession for Urhitessub/Mursili III in 1274 is based on the date for the battle at Kadesh in Ramses II’s fifth year (1275 BC) and the assumption that his father Muwatalli II died soon afterwards. The accession of Hattusili III in 1267 goes back to the latter’s remark in his Apology that he complied with Urhitessub’s policies for seven years until he decided tooust him.

In the question of the number of kings named Tuthaliya between ca. 1420 and the middle of the fourteenth century BC I count the spouse of Queen Nikalmadi as Tuthaliya I (instead of the usual “I/II”) and the one of Queen Asmunikal as Tuthaliya II reserving III for the Tuthaliya who is often referred to as Tuthaliya “junior” or “the younger.” Since the grandees swore an oath of allegiance to him, he was regarded as king, however briefly, until he was murdered. This leaves IV for the Tuthaliya at the end of the thirteenth century BC.

Relative dating of Hittite texts used to be thought of as more reliable and a helpful complement in Hittite chronology. Especially if a fragment was identified as showing some form of “Old Script” or “Middle Script” that could be used as an important terminus ante quem for the events narrated in the text. The most optimistic views claimed a ca. 50-year precision in dating fragments.36 Over the past 15 years or so this method has come under increasing scrutiny and a complete overhaul of the system is necessary. Although I will sometimes use labels such as OS and MS (Old Script and Middle Script) this only reflects dates traditionally assigned to texts by other scholars. Until a better system has been designed and agreed upon, when dating cuneiform manuscripts in this book, I prefer to use only two general characterizations for the ductus (ie. the specific form in which a sign is written and the order of strokes that together constitute a sign) of Hittite texts: Old Script (OS) for the period ca. 1650–1400/1350 BC and New Script (NS) for the final century and a half between ca. 1350–1200 BC. Obviously, these dates are artificial and approximate, and the transition between the two was gradual.

### 1.8 Some Final Remarks

This book is not only intended for a Hittitological audience. It is accessible, I hope, also for a non-specialized readership interested in questions of

literacy and script use in the ancient world. No knowledge of Hittite, any of the other Anatolian or ancient Near Eastern languages, or cuneiform or hieroglyphic writing is presumed. Two Appendices following Chapters 3 and 7 offer brief introductions to both writing systems for those who would like to see in some more detail their principles, range and limitations. All quotes from Hittite and other texts will be given in translation with the original language and all necessary references in the footnotes; unless otherwise noted all translations of Hittite or any other language are my own. For Hittitologists, the references in the footnotes include the so-called CTH-numbers, a standard reference in our field. For a less specialized readership, I briefly characterize the kinds of Hittite texts quoted in terms of genre. The genres in question are all discussed in more detail in Chapter 8. In some cases – and here I have to ask for the indulgence of the non-specialized reader – more technical philological parts were inevitable but Appendices 1, 2, and 3 as well as the Excursus in Chapter 14 can be easily skipped.

All Hittite passages in the footnotes are given in *scriptio continua*, or bound transcription, following the system used in the Chicago Hittite Dictionary. This includes the conventional use of š and h (vs. simply s and h). In the main text, however, ancient personal and geographical names are given without any diacritics (e.g., Hattusa instead of Ḫattuša). An s can be pronounced as a regular English s. The only two specific rules are that the u is pronounced as in English put and ideally h like the German ch in Bach. In the English-speaking world, however, many people just pronounce h at the beginning or in the midle of a word as in English hat. We know little about word stress in the Hittite language, so some pronounce the name of the Hittite capital Hattusa as HAT-too-sah, others as hat-TOO-sah. Both are fine.

In his book on *Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East* Roger Bagnall sketches the evolution of the modern debate about literacy in later antiquity. From a maximalist high estimate of literate capacities the pendulum swung to the other extreme of literacy being confined to a small elite in an overwhelmingly oral society. This was followed by “a relatively recent wave of scholarship aiming at a more nuanced understanding of writing and the materials of writing in different contexts.”37 Hittite having been deciphered only in 1915 the discipline we call Hittitology is young compared to classical scholarship and we may still be in the first maximalist phase. Some speculate that writing may have started much earlier than our

37 Bagnall 2011: 2.
sources, strictly taken, allow for; scribes in general are sometimes credited with a wide knowledge of various languages; allegedly, most officials in the kingdom enjoyed a literate education; and writing in both cuneiform script and Anatolian hieroglyphs may have been much more widely spread both in time and social classes than our limited evidence suggests. Although some may consider the views expressed here on these issues as being on the minimalist end of the spectrum following the methodological principles outlined above, I hope they can be taken as riding a more nuanced wave.