



# THE HITTITES

## *A Historical Perspective*

By Claude F. Mariottini

THE HITTITES WERE A people who established a vast empire in Anatolia in the second millennium B.C. The Bible also mentions them as one of the inhabitants of Canaan before Joshua and the people of Israel conquered the promised land. According to Deuteronomy 7:1, the original inhabitants of the land of Canaan were mightier and more numerous than Israel. These nations were the Hittites, the Gergashites, the Amorites,

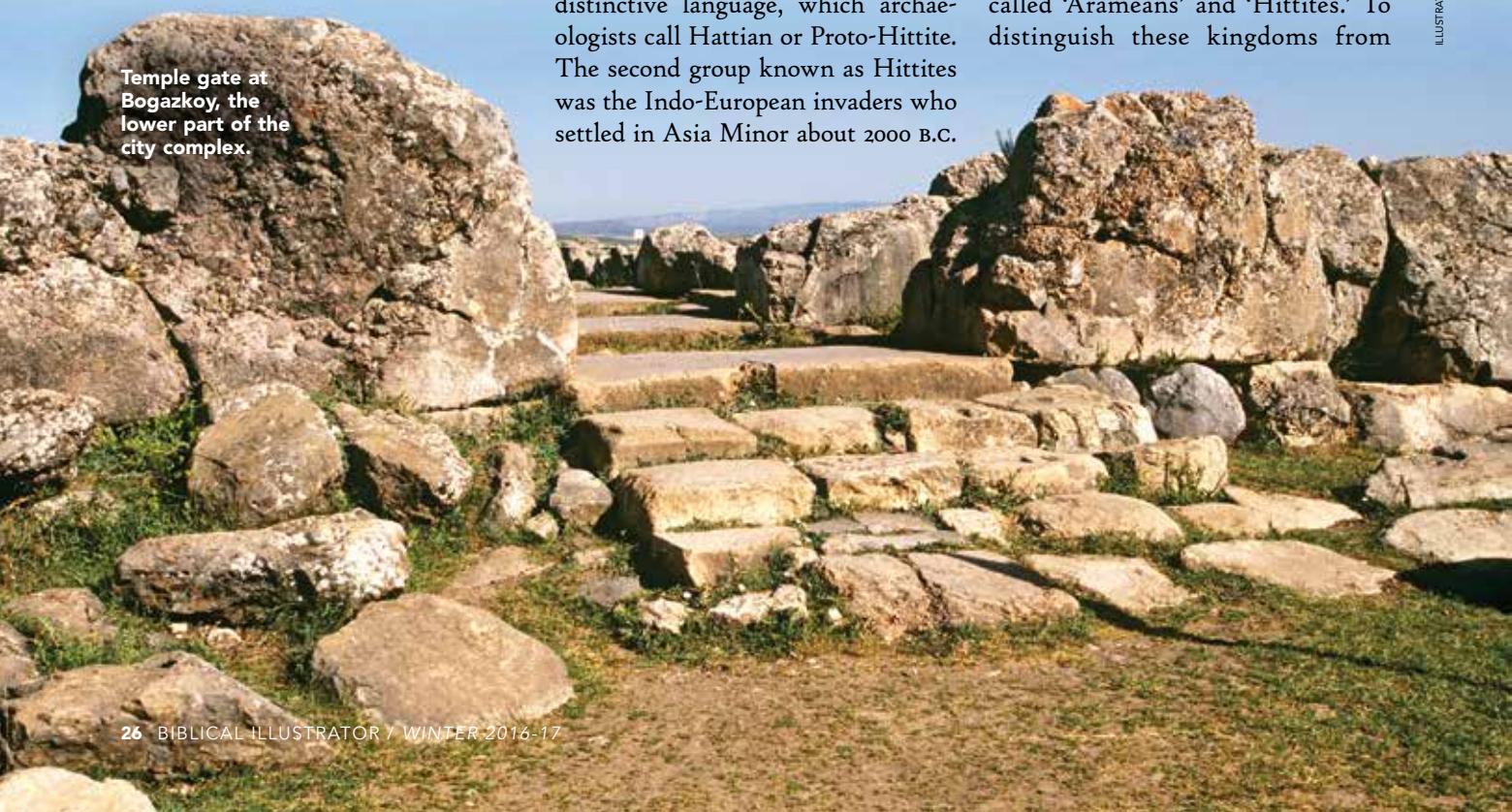
the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

### **In History**

Although the word "Hittites" appears over 50 times in the Old Testament to designate a people living in Canaan before Israel settled in the land, historical and archaeological evidence indicates at least four distinct ethnic groups were known as Hittites.<sup>1</sup> The first were called the Hattians. These people lived in Asia Minor in the third millennium B.C. Their capital city was Hattusa, and they spoke a distinctive language, which archaeologists call Hattian or Proto-Hittite. The second group known as Hittites was the Indo-European invaders who settled in Asia Minor about 2000 B.C.

and who conquered and assimilated the Hattians into their own culture. They called their kingdom Hatti and spoke a language called Nesian or Hittite. The third known group of Hittites were those who survived the collapse of the Hittite Empire around 1180 B.C. With the dissolution of the empire, some Hittite centers of power survived in the region of northern Syria, particularly at Carchemish, Hamath, and Que. "Syria during the first half of the first millennium B.C. was ruled by kings of two ethnic groups, called 'Arameans' and 'Hittites.' To distinguish these kingdoms from

Temple gate at Bogazkoy, the lower part of the city complex.





**Above:** Discovered among the remains of royal archives of Boyuk Kale at Bogazkoy; the Treaty of Kadesh (dated 1296 B.C.)

the second-millennium Anatolian kingdom most scholars today refer to them as 'Neo-Hittites.'<sup>2</sup> The fourth ethnic group of people known as Hittites is the Hittites of the Old Testament, the people who lived in the land of Canaan.

### In Anatolia

Until the end of the nineteenth century, history was relatively silent about the Anatolian Hittites. The oldest-known references to the Hittites were in Egyptian documents. One document refers to the Battle of Kadesh on the Orontes between Ramesses II, a pharaoh of the Nineteenth Dynasty of Egypt and Muwattalis, king of the Hittites.<sup>3</sup> Another reference to the Hittites appears in the Amarna Letters. A Hittite king sent this particular letter to Pharaoh Akhnaten on the occasion of Akhnaten's inauguration as the new king of Egypt. The letter is dated around 1380 B.C.<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, archaeologists began excavating at the ancient Anatolian village of Hattusa, modern Bogazkoy, Turkey. During excavations, archaeologists discovered thousands of cuneiform tablets written in an unknown language. When the language was deciphered, scholars concluded that the Hittite language was not similar to the spoken languages

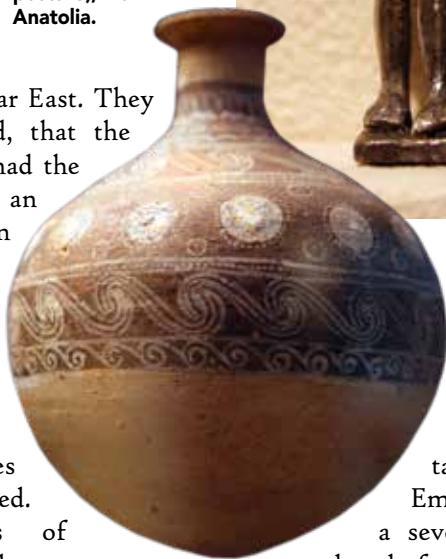
of the ancient Near East. They concluded instead, that the Hittite language had the characteristics of an Indo-European language, meaning those spoken in Europe and the areas in south and southwest Asia into which European peoples migrated and settled.

The Hittites of Anatolia probably came from the Caucasus region, located between the Black and the Caspian Seas, at the beginning of the third millennium B.C. After arriving, they mixed with the ancient Hattic inhabitants of Anatolia and eventually established an empire that included Anatolia, northern Mesopotamia, and Lebanon.

Several events contributed to bring the demise of the Hittite kingdom in Anatolia. The most important was the appearance of invaders, often identified with the Sea Peoples, about 1200 B.C. Hittite documents speak of a naval battle between the Hittites and the Sea Peoples and

is one of the oldest-known peace treaties between ancient countries. The treaty was an alliance between Hattusilis, king of the Hittites, and Egypt's Ramesses II.

**Right:** Pair of Hittite deities, silver, dated ca. 1400–1200 B.C. These figures combine Hittite-style features (squat body, large head and ears) with Syrian elements (headdress and posture); from Anatolia.

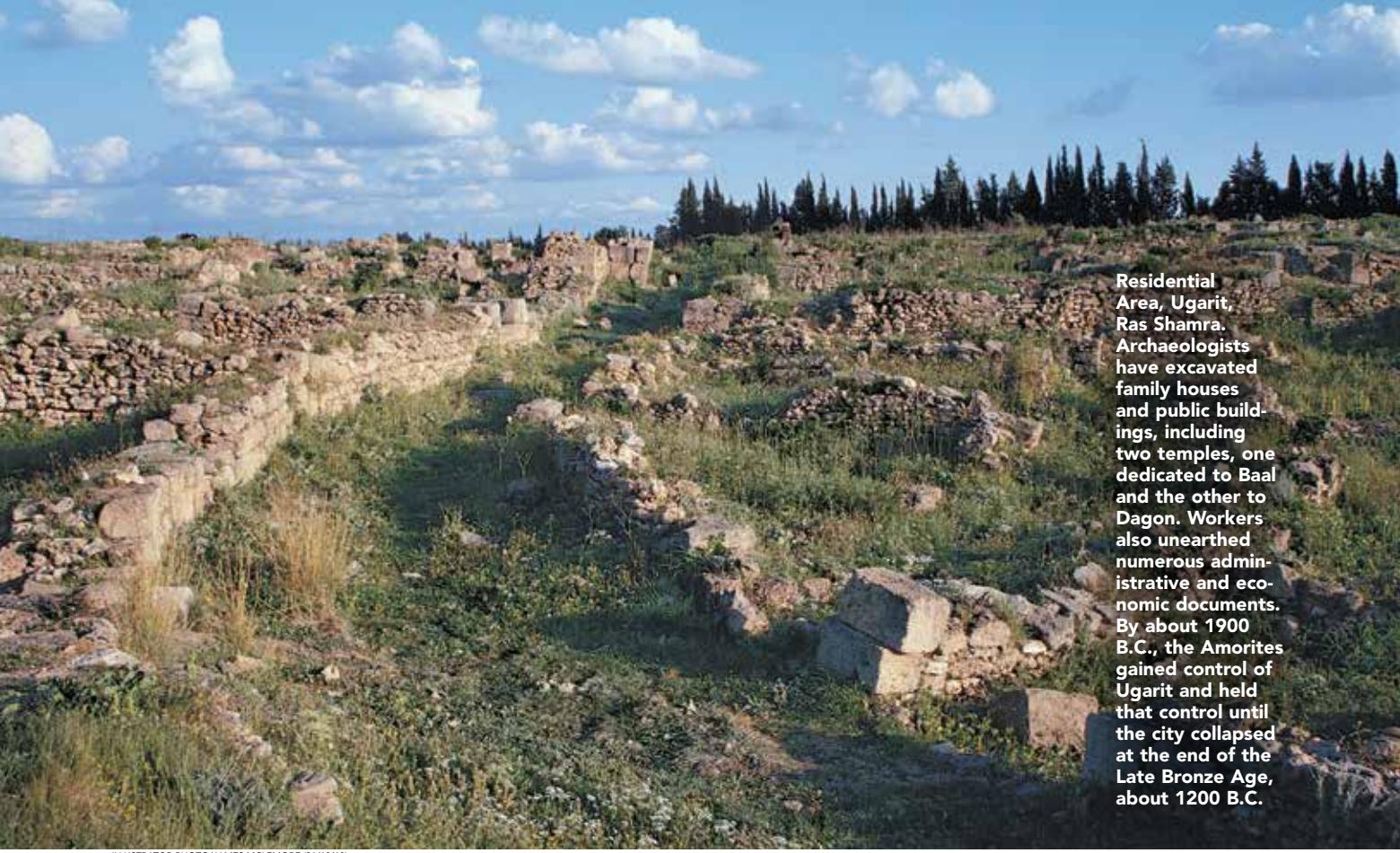


**Left:** Pottery jar from Alalakh, Syria; dated 1370–1270 B.C.

the burning of Hattusa, the capital of the Hittite Empire. In addition, a severe drought produced famine throughout the kingdom, forcing the Hittite king to ask Egypt for help.

### In Canaan

With the end of the Hittite Empire in Anatolia, a portion of the population moved into northern Syria where they continued and preserved Hittite culture. Archaeologists call this group Neo-Hittites. Uriah was likely a Neo-Hittite. The north Syria Hittites lived in several small city-states, which the Assyrians conquered and incorporated into their vast empire during the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. According to 1 Kings 10:29, Solomon exported horses and chariots to the "kings of



Residential Area, Ugarit, Ras Shamra. Archaeologists have excavated family houses and public buildings, including two temples, one dedicated to Baal and the other to Dagon. Workers also unearthed numerous administrative and economic documents. By about 1900 B.C., the Amorites gained control of Ugarit and held that control until the city collapsed at the end of the Late Bronze Age, about 1200 B.C.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/JAMES MCLEMORE (21/19/18)

the Hittites." These Hittite kings were the Neo-Hittite rulers of Carchemish, Hamath, and Kue (Cilicia).<sup>5</sup>

Scholars disagree about the identity of the Hittites of Canaan that the Old Testament mentions. Some scholars believe these belonged to the group of Hittites from the Anatolian regions. Others see the Canaanite Hittites as native Canaanites, with no connection to the Anatolian Hittites. Those who hold to this second view point to the fact that all Hittites the Old Testament mentions have Semitic names.<sup>6</sup>

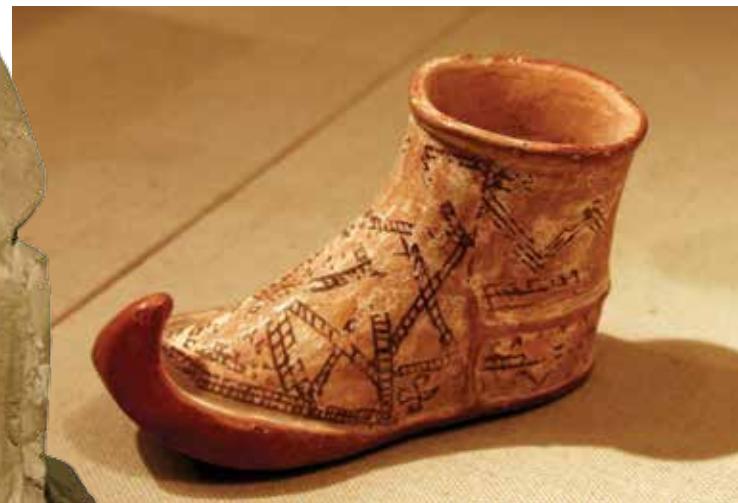
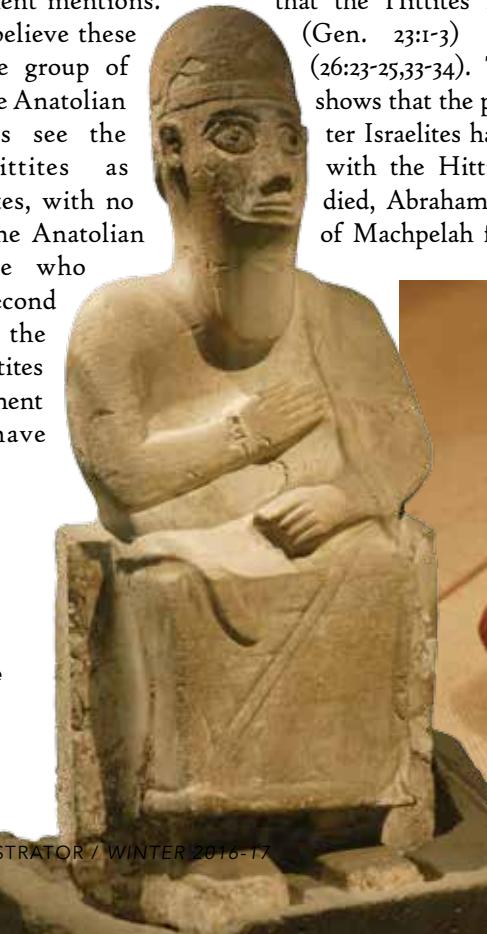
Right: Statue of King Idrimi of Alalakh; 1570-1500 B.C.

Far right: Terra-cotta vessel in the shape of a shoe, Alishar III type; Hittite; dated 1900-1600 B.C.

The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 lists Noah's grandson Canaan as the father of Heth, the person many consider to be the ancestor of the Hittites. The Old Testament indicates that the Hittites lived in Hebron (Gen. 23:1-3) and Beer-sheba (26:23-25,33-34). The biblical text shows that the patriarchs and latter Israelites had many contacts with the Hittites. After Sarah died, Abraham bought the cave of Machpelah from the Hittites

to bury his wife (23:3). The note on this verse in the HCSB says that the Hebrew literally reads "sons of Heth." The cave that Abraham bought was located in Hebron, a place also known as Kiriath-arba (v. 1), which is in southern Judah. Numbers 13:29, however, indicates the Hittites lived in the hill country of Canaan. Esau, Isaac's son, married two Hittite women (Gen. 26:34; Ezek. 16:3). Solomon also married Hittite women (1 Kings 11:1).

When Joshua was preparing to



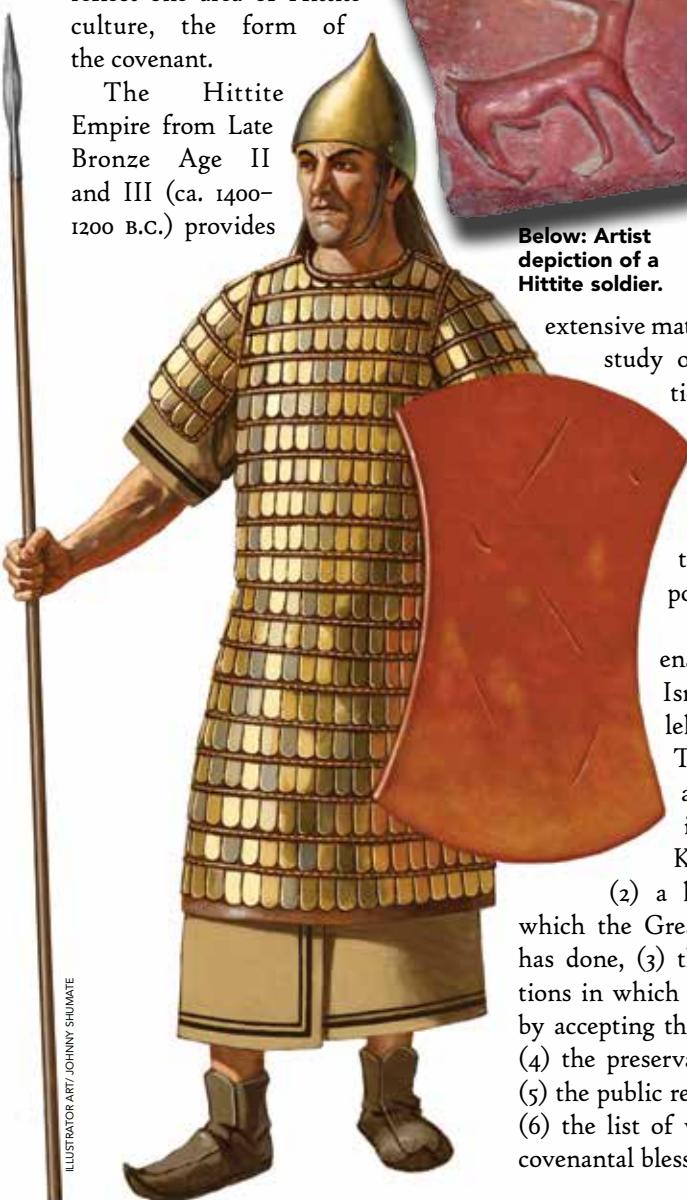
SHOE: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRENT BRUCE/ METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/ NEW YORK (60/7854)

STATUE: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/13/68)

enter the land of Canaan after Moses' death, the Lord promised Joshua that Israel's territory would include all the land of the Hittites (Josh. 1:4). Assyrian documents mention this land north of Canaan, referring to it as Hatti land, the land of the Hittites.

Scholars have debated whether Hittite culture influenced the people of Israel. While scholars have disagreed about the extent of legal, cultural, and religious influence the Hittites had on ancient Israel, they agree that the Old Testament does reflect one area of Hittite culture, the form of the covenant.

The Hittite Empire from Late Bronze Age II and III (ca. 1400–1200 B.C.) provides



Below: Artist depiction of a Hittite soldier.

extensive materials that aid us in the study of the covenant traditions of Israel. The most important covenants were international treaties that regulated relationships between two distinct social or political units.

The form of the covenant between God and Israel has many parallels with Hittite treaties. These include: (1) a preamble of the covenant in which the Great King identifies himself, (2) a historical prologue in which the Great King tells what he has done, (3) the covenantal stipulations in which the nation binds itself by accepting the covenant's demands, (4) the preservation of the covenant, (5) the public reading of the covenant, (6) the list of witnesses, and (7) the covenantal blessings and curses.



ILLUSTRATOR MAP/ LINDEN ARTISTS/ LONDON

## Conclusion

The Hittites established a great empire in the second millennium B.C. in Anatolia. Documents and monuments they left behind reveal that their empire extended as far as Mesopotamia and yet, people knew little of their history and culture until a century ago. In many ways, the Hittites as a people remain an enigma. Because they are not a single group, some issues regarding their exact identity and origins remain a mystery. Despite these uncertainties, one unquestionable fact remains—these people influenced the history and culture of Israel in many ways.

1. H.A. Hoffner, "The Hittites and the Hurrians," *People of Old Testament Times*, ed. D.J. Wiseman (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1973), 197.

2. *Ibid.*, 199.

3. John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 113.

4. Aharon Kempinski, "Hittites in the Bible: What Does Archaeology Say?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 5, no. 4 (September/October 1979), 23–24.

5. Kenneth A. Kitchen, "Hittites" in *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*, gen. ed. Edward M. Blaiklock and R.K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 241.

6. Hoffner, "The Hittites and the Hurrians," 214.

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