VISIBLE LANGUAGE

Ornamental peg with trilingual text (Old Persian, Babylonian, Elamite). Persepolis, Iran. Achaemenid period. OIM A29808b (Catalog No. 61)

VISIBLE LANGUAGE

INVENTIONS OF WRITING
IN THE ANCIENT MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND

edited by

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with the assistance of

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The Oriental Institute, Chicago

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Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond.

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No. 72) on an Early Dynastic Lexical List (Catalog No. 56) and Cippus (Healing Statue) (Catalog No. 82);
Back Cover: Arrowhead Inscribed in Proto-Caananite (Catalog No. 91)

Cover Design by Diane Hanau-Strain

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4. THE RISE AND FALL OF CUNEIFORM SCRIPT IN HITTITE ANATOLIA

THEO VAN DEN HOUT

Why, when, and how does a society start to write? And when they do, from where do they get their script? In many cases these early steps toward literacy are shrouded in darkness, because when our earliest sources begin to flow, writing is already there and usually societies were not interested in recording for us the why, where, and how. The interesting thing about Anatolia is that we may be able to answer some of the above questions.

ANATOLIA: THE EARLY YEARS

When written sources begin to flow in Anatolia early in the second millennium BC, at first its society becomes visible only indirectly through the lens of a network of merchants from Assur. This commercial network consisted of several trading posts and hubs spread throughout central Anatolia and extended along some major routes all the way to their hometown in Assyria. With few interruptions this network lasted from about 2000 into the 1730s. The most important center was the city of Kanes (also known as Nesa). In their dealings with the local population and in contacts with their firms back home, these traders used their own Assyrian language written in a simple form of cuneiform script. It used few word-signs and comprised just over 100 signs with a syllabic value (e.g., *a, i, ku, id, tup*). The tablets have a very characteristic look with their rulings and the right slant of the signs (fig. 4.1). Over twenty thousand records have been found thus far.

The Assyrians lived in close proximity with the local Anatolians, they mingled and married, and there is even evidence for some level of bilingualism in the local population. Certain mistakes made in the Assyrian documents betray how sometimes local Anatolians would use the Semitic language and its script. They themselves mostly spoke the Indo-European languages Hittite and Luwian, others the non-Indo-European and non-Semitic Hattian. Yet when the network came to an end and the merchants returned home for good, they took the language and the script with them, never to return. There is no evidence that the Anatolians ever felt the urge to use the script systematically for their own purposes, let alone to record their own languages.

One of the reasons the Anatolians do not seem to have been ready for a script of their own may be that in this period Anatolia formed no political unity. The area was a conglomeration of small independent and probably largely self-sufficient city-states in a mountainous landscape that favored
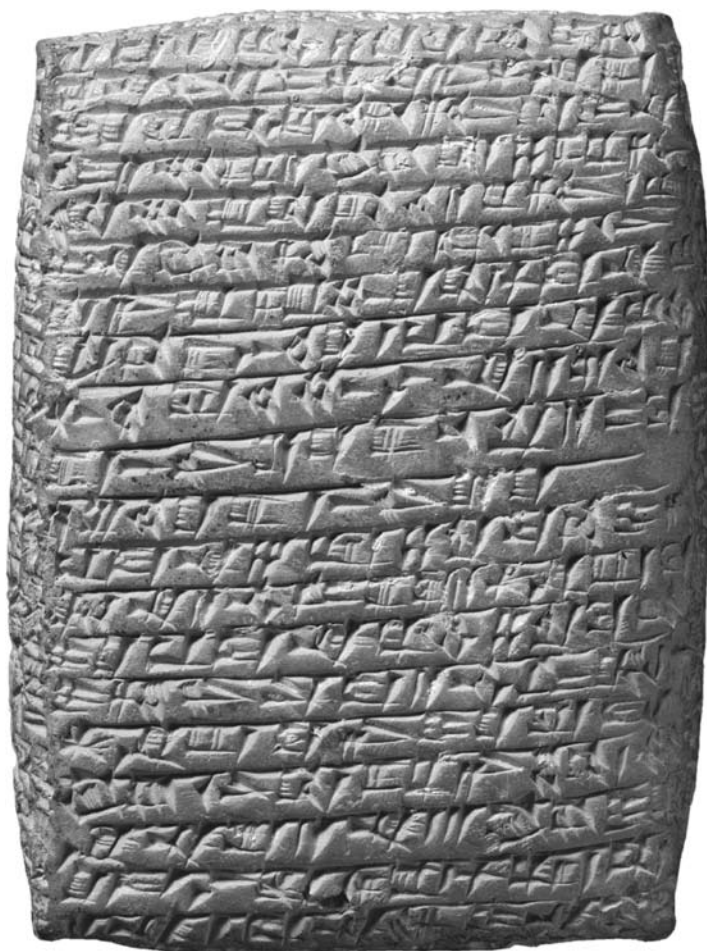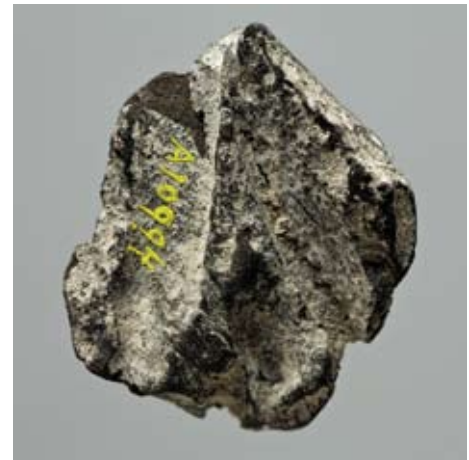
FIGURE 4.1. Old Assyrian clay tablet. Kanes, Turkey. 19th–18th century BC. OIM A2531

FIGURE 4.2. (*a*) Bulla with abstract shapes and (*b*) reverse suggesting it was used to seal a leather(?) bag. Clay. Alishar Höyük. 4.0 x 3.0 x 1.5 cm OIM A10994

a

b

geographical isolation. With small local economies and no international relations to speak of, there was little need for long lines of communication. For their local administration they had developed a system of symbols that did not represent speech, but which could be used for surprisingly detailed and efficient bookkeeping. In this system a symbol, that is, an animal or a piece of vegetation, a ceramic shape, a geometric pattern, or other abstract looking design (fig. 4.2), probably stood for a person or a group of individuals, just as we might recognize an elephant or a donkey symbolizing a political party or just as we immediately associate an illegible scribble as the signature of a person we know.

The impression of that symbol on a lump of clay attached to a container with goods showed who had been responsible for filling the container or for taking goods out and closing it again most recently. This is best illustrated by the seal impressions found at the fourth-millennium BC site of Arslantepe near Malatya. It shows how all withdrawals from a storeroom over what may have been the equivalent of a fiscal year or period could be followed in great detail, including who made them. Clay lumps or *bullae* with such symbols impressed in them have been found in many places in Anatolia, among them in Kanes and the later Hittite capital Hattusa. The later hieroglyphic script used in Anatolia stands in the same tradition in that it draws on the same material surroundings for the inspiration of its symbols (see *13. Anatolian Hieroglyphic Writing,* this volume). Such systems probably sufficed for the internal administration of most of the cities and towns in Anatolia.

The first-known effort to unite many of the hitherto independent settlements into a kingdom of sorts was made by Anitta, king of Kanes around 1750, just before the end of the Assyrian presence in Anatolia. It may be no surprise then that he is the first local ruler we know of, who put up an inscription. Although the original has not been preserved, we have later copies in Hittite, but there is uncertainty as to whether it was originally written in that language or in Assyrian. Doubt is in order, because of a spearhead with the Assyrian inscription "Palace of Anitta, Great Prince." Was this a first step toward some form of internal administration, using Assyrian cuneiform and language? A small clay document, likewise in Assyrian, with his name points in the same direction (fig. 4.3). It lists a number of dignitaries, the first among whom is "Anita, Prince," who have appended their seal to some unnamed object.

This makes it likely that the publicly displayed inscription just mentioned likewise used the same medium. If this was indeed the beginning of using the Old Assyrian cuneiform by the local Anatolian government for internal purposes, it was nipped in
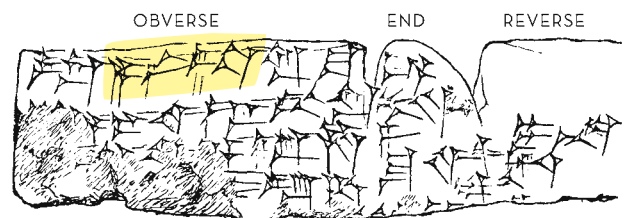
FIGURE 4.3. Anitta's name (yellow) on a small tablet from Alishar Höyük. Field no. b1600. Scale 1:1

the bud: in the time of Anitta the Assyrian network was already on the wane and when it came to its end, Anitta's short-lived kingdom and Anatolia reverted to their illiterate and oral ways. We have to assume that all those centuries since the Assyrians had started their trading the Anatolians observed them using the cuneiform script but felt little to no need to adopt it systematically for themselves. Their own administrative system fully satisfied their needs and the collapse of Anitta's kingdom put an end to what may have been a first attempt at implementing the script.
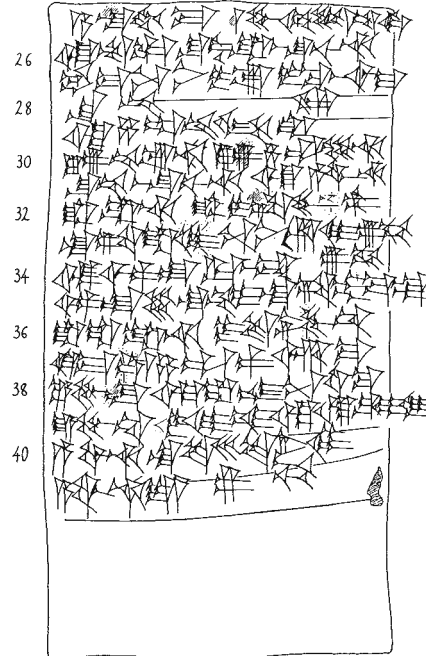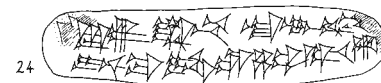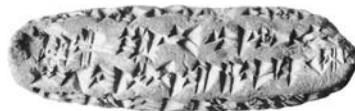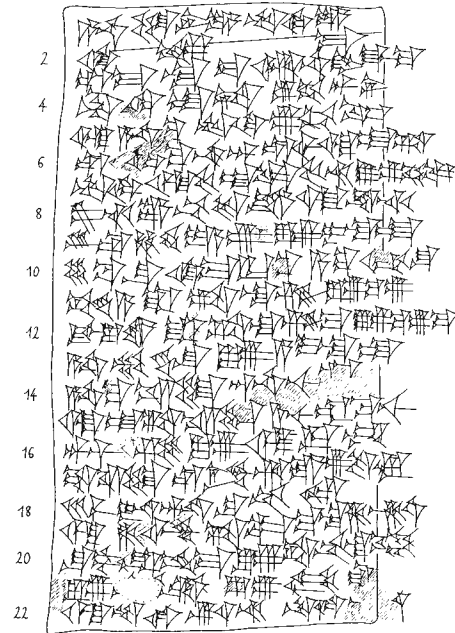
FIGURE 4.4. Letter in Syrian cuneiform script from the Hittite ruler Hattusili I to the Syrian ruler Tunip-tessub. Scale 1:1

THE BEGINNINGS OF A HITTITE STATE

Less than a century later the political landscape of Anatolia had thoroughly changed. Around 1650 Hattusa had become the capital of the young Hittite state under Hattusili I. With central Anatolia already in his power he focused his attention on northern Syria. Here lay the powerful kingdom of Yamhad with its capital Aleppo. A variant of (Semitic) Akkadian was spoken there and a different kind of cuneiform writing than the Old Assyrian one was used for state business. Upon entering the world of international diplomacy, Hattusili had to rely on foreign scribes if he wanted to correspond with his peers in Syria: a letter sent by him to a local Syrian ruler by the name of Tunip-tessub uses the local Syrian variant of Old Babylonian cuneiform *and* language and has come to down to us in almost pristine condition (fig. 4.4).

We also know he erected in Hattusa a gold statue — probably of himself — inscribed with his "manly deeds" over a period of five years. The statue has not been preserved but we do have a late copy of the text in both an Akkadian and a Hittite version. The entry for his second year runs as follows:
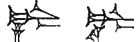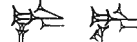
> In the following year I went to (the city of) Alalakh and destroyed it. Thereafter I went to (the city of) Warsuwa, and from Warsuwa I went to (the city of) Ikakali. From Ikakali I went to (the city of) Tashiniya. I destroyed these lands, but I took their goods and filled my palace with goods. (Güterbock and Otten 1960, no. 2 i 15–21)

It so happens that the site of Alalakh, that is, the archaeological level (Level VII) that Hattusili claims to have destroyed, has yielded over 300 tablets. Hattusili's statement about his campaign and the proven use by him of the Syrian script and dialect supports the traditional view that it was he who re-introduced cuneiform in Anatolia. But it may not have been one campaign of a single king that achieved this. Not only Hattusili but also his grandson and immediate successor Mursili I extensively campaigned there. Likewise, it may also have been Aleppo or some other site in the Syrian area that formed the inspiration for the later typical Hittite variant of cuneiform. However, Alalakh is practically the only site where cuneiform tablets from this area and period have come to light and its script is very similar to the later Hittite one.

The Syrian cuneiform for which Alalakh is representative ultimately came from Babylon and shows the typical traits of a peripheral area that is no longer subject to the standardizing pressures of the center. Syrian scribes developed certain variant sign forms that were distinctly non-Babylonian. As table 4.1 below shows, the new shapes even became the most popular: the newer variants appear on average in 75 percent of the cases.

Judging by the extant evidence, cuneiform writing in the days of Hattusili I and Mursili I was a relatively rare phenomenon, perhaps reserved for special occasions. We already saw Hattusili's diplomatic correspondence with a local Syrian king and the propagandistic inscription on his own statue. Besides these we have in a late thirteenth century

TABLE 4.1. Comparison of Babylonian standard and Syrian (Alalakh) less and most frequent sign forms

Sign Value	Babylonian Standard	Alalakh	
		Babylonian Standard Forms (ca. 25%)	New Syrian Sign Forms (ca. 75%)
AL	𒀠	𒀠	𒀠
AZ/UK	𒄴	𒄴	𒄴
IK	𒅅	𒅅	𒅅
LI	𒇷	𒇷	𒇷
QA	�	𒆠	𒆠
SAR	𒊬	𒊬	𒊬

copy his so-called Testament in both Akkadian and Hittite. In it he instructed his entourage to obey and support his grandson Mursili and toward the end of the text he stipulated:

> My words, too, I have given you and let them read this [tabl]et out loud to you every month so that you will instill my [wor]ds and my wisdom in (your) heart! (Weber 1921, no. 16 iii 56–58)

This shows how he was already aware of the long-term use of script: by having his advice written down, his words were sure to outlast him and his wisdom would be preserved for ever. As said, only the letter to Tunip-tessub (in Akkadian) is a contemporary document, the inscription on the statue and the Testament we have only in late copies in both Akkadian and Hittite. Some rare instances of writing from their successors are also preserved in late copies only. Why do we see so much Akkadian in these early sources?

Comparisons with societies that adopt scripts from others with a different language show that writing initially is done in the language of the other society. This is due to the fact that the "imported" scribes usually are not versed in the language of their host society and teach the first local generation in their own language. Only gradually do they start experimenting to write in the local language and the transition can last one or more generations. One of the oldest contemporary documents from the days of Hattusili or Mursili written in the Syrian script and in the Akkadian language already contains a sentence in Hittite and a few isolated Hittite words inserted in the text.

The difficulty of adapting a foreign script used to write a foreign language to one's own is not to be underestimated. Some of the oldest texts in Hittite betray through uncommon and irregular spellings of words the struggle of early scribes to express the sounds of their mother tongue by means of the foreign script. Where the two languages, Akkadian and Hittite, sounded alike, there was no problem: the same cuneiform signs could be used. But where there were real differences, creative solutions had to be found. Akkadian, for instance, distinguished between voiced and voiceless consonants, like the difference between (voiced) *b* and (voiceless) *p* in English *bet* vs. *pet*. Hittite, on the other hand, did not: most probably it had within a word an opposition between so-called "short" and "long"

consonants. A long *t*, for instance, is a *t* where the tongue is held against the upper teeth just a little longer before it is released than in a short one. English does not have this, but one can hear such a long *t* in Italian *otto* "eight." Using the Syrian cuneiform, Hittite scribes eventually decided to simply ignore the voiced/voiceless contrast that came with the script, but spelled short consonants single and long ones double: compare *p* vs. *pp* in Hittite *apa-* "that one" vs. *appa* "back, behind."

Despite its relatively modest volume, the writing activity in the century between Hattusili and Mursili (ca. 1650/1600 BC) and king Telipinu (late sixteenth century) was enough to sustain a

FIGURE 4.5. Bronze ax bearing a graffito of King Ammuna. The inscription is in Akkadian using Hittite sign forms. Scale of photograph 1:2

development from the originally Syrian variant of the cuneiform script known from Alalakh to what eventually became the typical Hittite cuneiform variant. In this new Hittite script, the 75 percent to 25 percent ratio between the new peripheral Syrian variants vis-à-vis the traditional Old Babylonian shapes (see above table 4.1) that we know from Alalakh became even more pronounced: the peripheral variants became the typical Hittite ones to the virtual extinction of the Babylonian forms, although they may never have been given up completely. This development is understandable from the point of view of the new local generations. Their Syrian teachers brought in the mix of standard and newly developed forms, but having to learn already a few hundred cuneiform signs, the local students were probably not keen to memorize more than one shape per sign.

The end of this development may already have been reached by around 1550 BC. We have a graffito on a bronze ax of king Ammuna from that period (fig. 4.5). It is still in Akkadian but the inscription already shows the familiar Hittite sign forms. The slightly later reign of king Telipinu toward the end of the sixteenth century probably served as a real catalyst. He issued an unprecedented range of official documents, from land grants, the first diplomatic treaty, a new "constitution" to a fiscal reform. It is very well possible that also the first codification of Hittite Laws into two series was written down at his behest. Again, most of these documents were still written in Akkadian, but the law collection was in the Hittite language only.

FROM AKKADIAN TO HITTITE

After this, Akkadian was used less and less and the fifteenth century was the last one to see internal records written in that language. By the time Tudhaliya I ascended the throne around 1420, Akkadian was restricted to international diplomatic documents and all internal record keeping was done in Hittite exclusively (fig. 4.6).

By this time, too, a professional chancellery must have emerged and the growing number of records both produced in the capital and received from the far corners of what had become the Hittite "Empire" prompted an efficient organization of
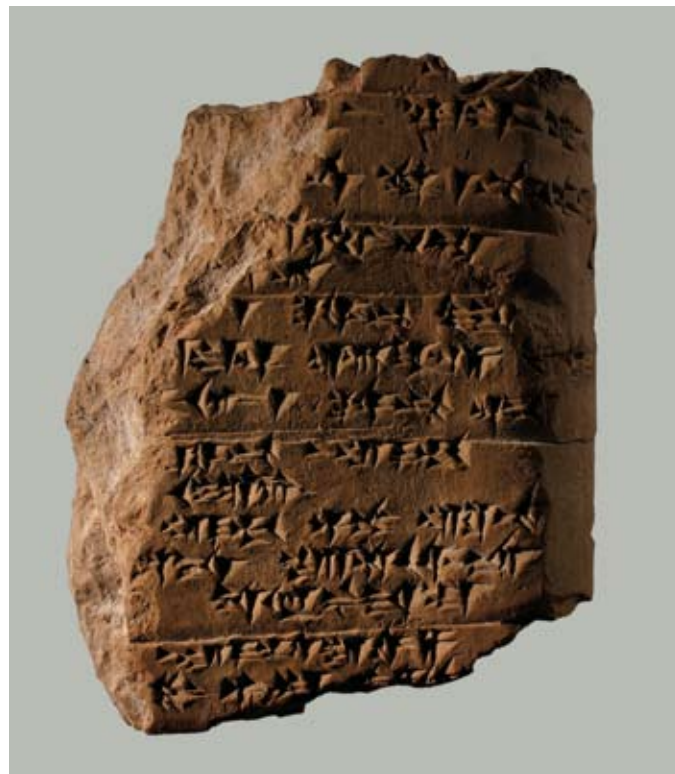
FIGURE 4.6. Fragment of a Hittite tablet. Hattusa. Scale 1:1. OIM A6004

those records. A lot of tablets concerning daily administration of incoming and outgoing goods and services to the state were discarded regularly and after a brief period. Others had a more long-term relevance and some, especially those of a legal nature, were stored indefinitely. Tablets that got damaged were copied as were certain compositions of which more than one copy was deemed necessary. Initially, in the time when writing was still something special, tablets may have been kept in temples and were stored alongside other "treasures" as was the practice in church treasuries in early medieval Western Europe. But with the increasing production of records a system developed with a so-called record center atop the royal acropolis (Turkish *Büyükkale*) for all documents considered of longer-term importance, and at least two scribal centers in the lower city near some of the gates and the endless storerooms where all goods received were packed in chests and baskets or poured into huge pithoi and underground silos (fig. 4.7).

The further development of the Hittite cuneiform scripts illustrates the vicissitudes of the empire that around 1400 had grown out of the former

FIGURE 4.7. Storage pithoi at Hattusa near Temple 1

By the late thirteenth century toward the end of the empire the "new" shapes all but eclipsed the "old" ones. Judged by the fact that, for instance, "old" LI was used in certain texts in a royal name only, shows how they could be felt as old fashioned, that is, hearkening back to older, long-established scribal traditions, and therefore also festive or solemn.

THE END

The Hittite language and the cuneiform script were the official medium of the empire's internal record keeping, but the Hittite language's dominant status did not necessarily match the linguistic make-up of the country. Because of its huge mountain ranges and rugged terrain, Anatolia was riddled with isolated areas, each with its own dialect or language. The most important of these was Luwian, a sister language of Hittite. Over the centuries the parts of the population that spoke Luwian probably increased, to the extent that by the thirteenth century most of the population spoke Luwian and Hittite may no longer even have been anybody's mother tongue. Anatolian Hieroglyphs had reached the full status of a script by 1400 BC and they became the preferred medium for the Luwian language. Hittite kings employed the hieroglyphic script and Luwian language for ever lengthier and mostly propagandistic inscriptions meant for the population at large. Meanwhile, the scribes in the empire's offices continued to compose annals, prayers, depositions, oracle reports, cultic scenarios, and the like in Hittite and cuneiform. This meant, however, that once the empire's power structure broke down around 1200, the support for both the Hittite language and its cuneiform script fell away and they disappeared without a trace.

kingdom. The script used in the fifteenth century had evolved in relative isolation and had weeded out most "unnecessary" variants of the Syrian cuneiform it had adopted. But now that the empire had taken its rightful place alongside the other major powers of Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, and Mittani, it became increasingly drawn into the international diplomatic world where the Babylonian language and script were the standard. It may have been through these increased contacts that the standard Babylonian forms gained new prominence in Hittite society. What had once been the "new" forms from the peripheral Syrian scribal milieu now became the "old" forms in the Hittite system, and the original old Babylonian standard shapes once again became fashionable (table 4.2).

TABLE 4.2. Sign values for "old" and "new" shapes in Hittite cuneiform

Sign Value	Hittite "Old" Shapes	Hittite "New" Shapes
AL		
AZ/UK		
IK		
LI		
QA		
SAR		

CONCLUSIONS

Coming back to the questions posed at the beginning, why, when, and how a society starts to write, we can say that the rise of the Hittite cuneiform script depended on the need the ruling class perceived and on the availability of a script. Initially, at least, there was little internal administrative need

and their "choice" of a script was not motivated by efficiency or pedagogical principles. For a period of about two centuries they lived in close proximity and daily interaction with the Assyrian merchants who used writing intensively. Even though some Anatolians mastered both their language and the script, when the Assyrians left, nothing happened. The Assyrian writing system, despite its relative simplicity, was not adopted. About a century later, around 1650 BC, the Hittites settled for the much more complex Syrian variant of cuneiform. It was the need that came with a state that grew too big for purely oral communication and for its eagerness for international prestige that compelled them to adopt a script of their own. In keeping with other societies the Hittites started writing in the language that came with the script they adopted and only gradually started experimenting with their own language.

The fall of the Hittite cuneiform script was a question of political sustainability. The cuneiform script and the Hittite language had become the official medium for all internal and external communication of the Hittite state and its ruling elite. The use of the Akkadian language was restricted to diplomatic purposes. However, due to political developments the linguistic make-up of Anatolia changed and Hittite became an increasingly artificial language that ultimately was nobody's mother tongue. The consequence of this was that when around 1200 BC the state disintegrated, the bottom fell out from under the system that had supported the Hittite language with its cuneiform script: with the language the cuneiform script vanished for ever from Anatolia.

* * * * *

For the symbols used at Arslantepe, see Frangipane 2007. For an extended version of the history of Hittite cuneiform, see van den Hout forthcoming. For further reading, see Bryce 2002 and 2005.

OBJECT DESCRIPTION: CATALOG NO. 63
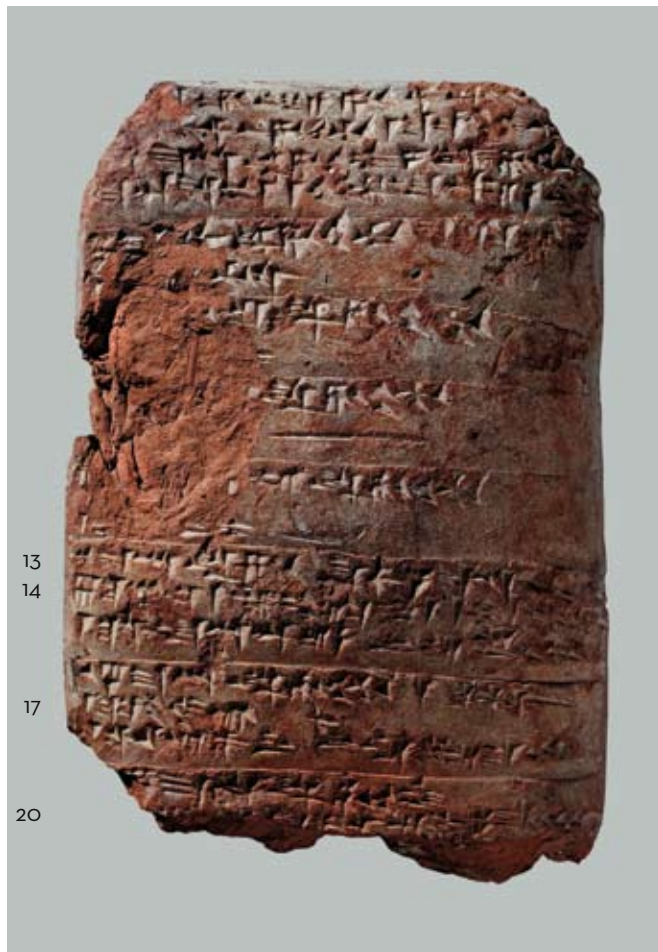
63, obverse
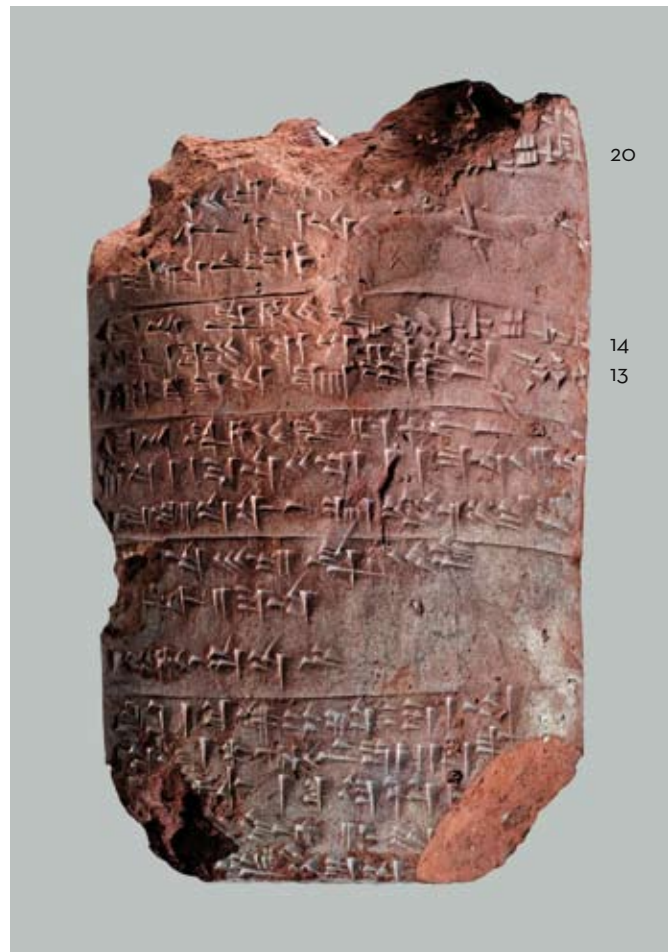
63, reverse

63. HITTITE INVENTORY OF WOOL AND WOOLEN GARMENTS

Clay
Thirteenth century BC
Turkey, Hattusa
11.0 x 7.0 x 3.2 cm
NBC 3842

This tablet contains a list of tax payments by twelve individuals to the Hittite state. The text dates to the thirteenth century BC. All payments are made in dyed wool and ready-made textiles. Divided into twelve sections or paragraphs by horizontal lines, each paragraph lists the specific payments of a single person. The last line of each paragraph gives the name of the taxpayer preceded by the vertical wedge ⟨ marking male names. Sometimes the name is followed by a city name for further identification.

On the obverse (compare lines 13–14, 20) the scribe sometimes uses the right edge to finish the last word of a line. In obverse line 14, however, although already on the right edge, he squeezes in an entire extra tax item and ends up writing on the reverse. It is unclear whether he was reluctant to devote a whole extra line to this one payment before the name of the tax payer or if he had forgotten it initially and was forced to add it afterwards. Since elsewhere in the text (compare

63, top

Obverse

13
14

63, side

obverse line 17, reverse line 13) he does give the last tax item its own line, the latter may be the case.

The final paragraph gives the total of all payments listed on the tablet and continues on to the lower edge of the reverse.   TvdH

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