

An Archeology of Secrets

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“Some ancient Hittite words are very close to their modern English equivalents: for example, the Hittite word for water is watar and the word for daughter is dohter.”

– Shona Grimbley,
Encyclopedia of the Ancient World

When my father visited me during my two-year teaching stint in Turkey, we never traveled to the capital of the Hittite empire, Hattusas. I’d planned to visit the cool plains of Anatolia controlled by the Hittites in the second millennium BCE. We could’ve strolled through the Lion Gate with its rain-smoothed cat faces; we might’ve studied the fortress built from mountain. I thought my father, who had spent time in the army, would appreciate the city’s strategic place at the southern end of the Budaközü River valley. The steep mountain cliffs and rock masses protected the city along its northern and western borders. The walls surrounding Hattusas, so like a father’s arms, almost embraced the city completely.

The Hittites were known only from the Bible – a long dead, perhaps fictional people – until German Assyriologist Hugo Winckler began digging in 1905. By 1910, archeologists chipping away had uncovered over 10,000 tablet fragments. Experts reported they’d discovered another language, Arzawan, from a previously unknown civilization. They revised this theory when the cuneiform revealed the most archaic form of

Indo-European language we have – the language of the Hittites.

In dust-filled quadrants, men hoped for revelation. They recited stories of discovery before them, Troy and Ephesus, and they scraped away at clay-heavy soil with faith that centuries of compressed earth would reveal treasures to ground myth in history. Isn’t that why we dig? To find language that deciphers who we’ve been and to connect the pieces of who we may become? So much depends upon a steady hand, and the pressure of the pick. One mistake and a potsherd crumbles, its answers scattering.

Thirty-five hundred years have passed and two Hittite words remain the same. Not warrior, not lover. Not god or coin. Our lips and tongues shape the same sounds, the same *watar*, *dohter*.

The Connection Quadrant

The Hittites blended eastern and western cultures and spread ideas. They ruled over Troy, communicated with the Achaeans, and traded with the Mycenaeans. In Hittite archives scholars have found the first history of Greece – prototypes of Greek myths based on native Anatolian culture as well as some inspired from Hurrian and Mesopotamian models. In essence, the Hittites give us words to prove the historical truths contained within myths.

– Steve Thurston,
“Introduction to the Hittites”

On the first day of his visit my father and I walked, in the dry heat of April, four blocks from my on-campus apartment to a pastry shop. We sat at a circular table-for-two, my father's six-foot frame hunched over a dainty porcelain coffee cup. I noticed strands of gray in his otherwise sandy-brown hair. Sunlight streaming through the plate glass at his side and back illuminated his sea-colored eyes. On the other side, pedestrians blurred, flowing down the sidewalk. They lapped the intersection like a wave. Kitty-corner stood a kiosk where my friends bought cigarettes or the national alcohol, raki; depending on the season, I bought cherry or carrot juice.

"I have something to tell you," Dad said. His thick fingers grasped the tiny spoon as if it was a child's and we played afternoon tea. As he stirred sugar into the cup, I remembered he usually took his coffee black.

"Really? Is everything okay?" I moved forward in my chair. Was he ill? Was my mother? Did my younger brother get in some sort of trouble?

"I have another daughter." Each word hesitant, smuggled, as if his brain delivered the syllables to his lips, but his tongue refused to unwrap them.

I opened my mouth to speak. Nothing. The sounds of honking and gear-grinding cars battered us when the shop door opened. Customers pressed chatter around us. Dad stared at the bag hanging off my chair.

Two emotions coursed through my body. The first, betrayal. *An affair?* I caught my breath and remembered my mother coping with years of his heavy drinking and the death of my sister, Theresa. *That can't be it*, I thought. I couldn't quite comprehend it; this kind of secret bubbled up over Nescafé and baklava with friends, not fathers. The second, elation. *A flesh-and-blood sister?* I imagined shopping trips, manicures, makeovers.

"How old is she? Where does she live? Have you met her? What is her name?"

"Vicki. She's thirty-four. Wisconsin." I did the math and sat back in my chair, astonished. She's the same age as Theresa would be now. "I went up there a few weeks ago," Dad continued. "I knew she was my daughter the moment I saw her." His voice quavered, a slip of tone I recognized from the morning I woke up to sirens. Dad was standing on the porch, his flannel robe pulled around him. "They can't find her pulse, they can't find her pulse," he had whispered. Theresa was dead at twenty years old from carbon monoxide poisoning – ruled an accident because she was drunk.

But now, Vicki, this new sister sprung fully grown from his head as if Athena.

The Revelation Quadrant

In spite of their connections to us, the general public knows little about the Hittites. Studying Biblical archeology and ancient Egypt tends to have more appeal; furthermore, for centuries "history itself conspired to erase them." Much of the little information that is known is old, out of date, and wrong. Recent scholarship has sought to change that.

– Steve Thurston,
"Introduction to the Hittites"

One afternoon, the summer after my junior year of high school, my mother and I sat at my grandparents' kitchen table finishing lunch. The lights were off to keep the trailer cool. We sipped iced tea, drops of condensation sliding off the glasses and pooling on the plastic table cloth. The sentences between my mother and grandmother slowed, suspended in the sticky August air. I dozed until my grandmother mentioned almost leaving the Catholic Church. She sniffed, a sign the circumstances still bothered her. I spent the next hour wondering, too polite to press for details.

"What was so earth-shattering that Grandma and Grandpa almost left the Church?" I asked as soon as my mom and I were out the door.

Mom slid into the car and rolled down the windows. The "whole truth" had always been important to her. "A half-truth," she said once, "might as well be a lie." For a moment she considered her answer.

"Your father and I didn't get married until Theresa was six months old. Our parish priest tried to convince me to give her up for adoption even though I planned to keep her." She stared at the road as she pulled onto the street, her hand white-knuckled on the steering wheel. "My parents supported me and got angry about the priest's insistence, so they almost left."

I exhaled. Finally! My mother: a real human with a dramatic past. I was proud of her refusal to surrender to a bully. I couldn't imagine my grandparents fighting outright with the priest, but I could see tension rippling out from my grandparents' influence in the family and community.

Still, I had a question, not well-chosen but too important for my teenage mind to ignore.

"So do Theresa and I have the same dad?"

"Of course you do," Mom responded, her tone a blend of hurt and indignation. She stopped at a light and signaled left. She kept her eyes on the road.

“Cool,” I said, relieved I didn’t have to adjust to this other new truth. “You were really strong for what you did.” I continued after a pause, “Thanks for telling me.”

For years we never spoke of it again.

The Conflict Quadrant

The Hittites mastered the use of an innovative lightweight chariot, which contributed significantly to their rise to power in Anatolia and Syria even when threatened by Egypt. Pulled by two small horses, the chariot had three advantages: it was fast, mobile, and could be used as an archery, javelin, and spear platform.

– Steve Thurston,
“Introduction to the Hittites”

“How come you didn’t know about Vicki until recently?” I asked my father, forking a piece of baklava. He shifted in his seat.

“Her mother was married,” he finally answered.

Complicated possibilities thundered across the field of my father’s past and I could feel his heart – and mine – beat faster. Among the scenes taking flight in my imagination, one spiraled through the air and landed at my feet: my father, age twenty-one, flirting with the beauties who sat in his salon chair. Dad would compliment a woman’s thick tresses as he set her hair in rollers or teased her locks into a beehive. His hand lingered on her shoulder. Married or not, they’d always blush.

He’d been a star stylist. The salon owner was grooming him to manage a new store. Instead, around the time of his daughter’s birth, he got drafted. Mom said the anatomy classes Dad took in beauty school qualified him to train as a medic at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. In 1965 he helped set up an evacuation hospital in Vietnam. In six months, hands that had cut bangs for women in mini-skirts began to sew up soldiers’ wounds.

No photos of my father in-country exist, so I must imagine him sitting at a shoddy table amid flea market booths with thatched roofs. Behind him, women in wide hats sell fish. His right hand holds a gray rice bowl, the other grips a can of “tiger piss,” a word they used for beer. His medic shirt hugs his broad shoulders and the upturned cuff reveals the blue edge of a tattoo. An army jacket, thrown over the chair, matches the blanket he brought home – the camouflaged one with which I made forts. Mom threatened to hide that blanket if it became ripped or stained in my care.

His smile isn’t reserved like the one in his wedding photo, but his crewcut is the same. Buddies sit around him – two Aussies who joined the war to drink and a New Yorker with his arm around a Korean marine.

I imagine the top of a pen inside his jacket, its gold cap clipped over a pocket. It’s the pen he used to sign the letters Mom told me about. He wrote to dead guys’ wives and parents detailing the days he spent at their loved one’s side, he took dictation from a guy whose hand got blown off, and he penned a few love letters, too.

When he got home, he didn’t perm hair or clean scalpels again. On June 6, 1966 he started working on the line at a factory that makes airplane parts for fighter jets and commercial carriers. He’s been with that company ever since.

The Story Quadrant

Anatolian art between 1650 and 1200 BCE fails to reveal creative flair or technical accomplishment. Described as naturalistic, a Hittite artist seemed to strive to render an object’s essence. “The principal purpose of Hittite art is to evoke feeling rather than to portray fact.”

– J.G. Macqueen,
*The Hittites and Their
Contemporaries in Asia Minor*

The third day of our trip my father and I drove west along the Mediterranean Sea to the closest yellow-sanded beach. Asking more questions about Vicki, I fantasized about an Oprah-style reunion based on the few details I discovered: she was blonde and blue-eyed; her daughter was too. And my mom was okay with the news. She had always known it might be a possibility, but had never imagined a daughter surfacing after all this time.

With the water too cold to take more than a quick dip into the sea, Dad and I brought our paperbacks down to the beach and arranged towels on lounge chairs. Never before had I witnessed my father read a novel. I stared at the gentle way he turned the pages. When he lowered the book and gazed out at the blue, blue sea, I followed his eyes.

“Those ruins out there were built about a thousand years ago as part of a fortification plan for this area,” I said, pointing to the squat turrets and walls on an island a good swim’s distance from the beach. My friends and I made it out there once, but the swim exhausted me and there wasn’t

much on the island except hot, sharp rocks. “It’s called ‘Kiz Kalesi,’” I said. “Girl’s Castle.”

“Why’s that?” Dad asked. He studied the castle for a few minutes without speaking. Everything seemed simple – blank sky, light breeze, soft expression on my father’s face.

“According to legend, soon after the birth of a princess, a fortune teller told the king his daughter would die from a snakebite. To protect her, the king cloistered his daughter in the castle, but an asp snuck into a basket of grapes brought to feed the princess. She died from its bite.”

A shift. My father’s eyes narrowed, his jaw tightened.

“Interesting story.” He sat up and pointed to an outdoor café just beyond the sand. “Will those waiters serve beer on the beach?”

Sober since Theresa died, he had ordered a beer the evening he told me about Vicki. My colleagues had ordered beers at dinner, too, so I thought he did just to go along. The next day he ordered two. During our day soaking up heat on the beach, he drank all afternoon.

The Theorizing Quadrant

Hittite prayer reflects the culture’s straightforward philosophy of life and the interdependency of life and death: “Man is mortal, and man is sinful. Even if a man is himself innocent, the sins of his father fall upon him; he is afflicted by sickness and misery. But when a man cries to a god for mercy the god listens.”

– J.G. Macqueen,
*The Hittites and Their
Contemporaries in Asia Minor*

During my childhood, I feared the sound of a shot glass clinking on a countertop, the ensuing glaze of my father’s silence. How many nights had I stood outside the bathroom door while he puked up pork chops?

I was eight when I walked up the stairs, linoleum still shiny, and saw Dad at the kitchen table. His t-shirt was starched by sweat and a hammer hung from his mud-streaked jeans. In the light of the television, he forked roast beef left-handed, his right wrist swollen, immobile. His puffy face looked as if he’d been in a fist fight. Blood patched his skin from hand to elbow. I smelled beer on his breath; a couple cases had helped him re-shingle our roof. Theresa, dressed in her white nurse’s aide uniform, stood with her hands on her hips. She saw me and stomped out. Had they been fighting again? Did she say something was

broken? With my arms wrapped around my stomach, I shuffled closer. Rainbow-hued, his skin, the colors of my crayons: yellow-green, cornflower, violet. I reached out, wanting to touch him.

“Daddy,” I said. “What’s wrong?” Did I mean with his wrist? On the television show? Did I want an answer to why Theresa left? What words did I expect?

“Nothing.”

He tried to scoop up mashed potato with his left hand, working to keep pain off his face, then turned back to the ten o’clock news.

The Deciphering Quadrant

Bedřich Hrozný, a young Czech, “re-discovered” Hittite by deciphering rhymed lines: “NU NINDA-AN EZZATENI WATAR-MA EKUTENI.” He knew the Babylonian sign for bread, “ninda”, and deduced “ezza” to mean “eat.” Its potential as a cognate of the Greek “edein”, Latin “edere” and German “essen” followed. Other words leapt out— “nu”: now, “watar”: water: “Now you will eat bread and drink water.”

– Christian Falvey,
“Bedřich Hrozný – Re-Discoverer
of the Hittite Language”

Toward the end my father’s visit, we ate at a tourist restaurant in Cappadocia built inside a hollowed-out cave. To entertain diners, it featured dances associated with Turkish culture. I felt silly walking into a rock wearing heels and a dress, but once inside, the cement sidewalk turned into a plush red carpet. Clarinet, drum, and saz players performing traditional Turkish music greeted us.

The host seated us at a wide, circular table and continued to add other guests. Between plates of rice wrapped in grape leaves and stuffed peppers, we watched a Turkish wedding folk dance: a woman with red, transparent scarves swept over her face married a young farmer, the gold jewelry gifted to them jingling as they danced. After bread stuffed with cheese and creamy yogurt mixed with garlic and cucumbers, we watched six Sufi mystics whirl in the Dervish tradition. While the waiters replaced our empty plates with a tray of grilled lamb and chicken – and refilled my father’s empty wine glass, we watched belly-dancers shimmy and swirl.

I noticed, toward the end of the evening, my father’s

red-cheeked flush. When he reached to top off his glass of wine, I opened my mouth. *What are you doing?* I wanted to ask, thirsting for the reason he picked up the bottle again. He caught my eye and looked away. Suddenly I was exhausted.

My leg began to bounce under the table and I glanced at my watch.

“Let’s get going,” I said.

“I’m not done yet,” he replied.

When he was, we walked back to the hotel in silence. I was sitting on one of the twin beds in our room when I recognized his characteristic scowl. A wild card. It could mean he would skulk the rest of the evening and I could tiptoe around him to avoid provoking his anger. Or it could be a clue that he’s unhappy and that he’s sorting through his thoughts. Or that he’s simply drunk. Or, or, or.

I picked something to break the silence.

“Before we leave I’m going to buy one of those tables,” I said. “The kind with mother-of-pearl inlay on the collapsible legs. I like the table top I saw today. All are circular and metal, but not all are etched the same way.” I regretted my decision as soon as the sentences left my lips.

“How much will you pay for it?” he sneered. Spending money was too much pressure.

“About a hundred dollars,” I said, fishing for a toothbrush in a bag.

“Why spend so much on something like that?” He kept his body turned askew, yet he managed to look at me over his shoulder, his eyebrows pressed together.

“They’re over-priced here because this is a tourist area, but I can’t find them in Tarsus and I’ll be coming home in three months.”

His lips curved into a snarl I knew meant *You’re a fool*. He turned his back to me and pretended to sleep. I grabbed my calling card and headed out to find a phone.

I don’t know how long I wandered around empty streets. When I found a canary-yellow public telephone, I leaned into the privacy of its metal arms. The phone rang and rang.

“Mom,” I said when she finally picked up. “Dad’s drinking again.” I sobbed into the receiver. “It started out with a few beers. Now he’s drinking several glasses of wine at dinner, too.” Thirteen years of sobriety ruined by his trip to see me. I felt ready to vomit.

“Let’s not worry about it unless he keeps it up,” Mom said. “It’s not your fault, okay?” I calmed down. Perhaps this was only temporary. Perhaps, if he never saw me drink, he wouldn’t drink again. Perhaps if I never brought it up, I could squeeze out the beer and wine from my sun-baked shell of memory.

The Hope Quadrant

The Hittites, who may have invented the treaty, used them to secure their empire and justify their political domination. “When the Hittites wanted war, the Near East was at war, and when the Hittites wanted peace, the Near East was at peace. When they collapsed, it marked the end of The Bronze Age.”

– Steve Thurston,
“Introduction to the Hittites”

My dad and I drove three hours east of Tarsus to Urfa to see the Sacred Carp Pool. Children stood around its edges and sprinkled pellets into the water. The food drew carp through the pond’s surface like silver ribbons. Sacred, the fish are wood-turned-flesh by Jehovah, a miracle that saved Abraham from death at the stake while preaching to the unconverted Mesopotamians. The fire turned to water.

The peaceful beauty of the site impressed me. Pilgrims wearing embroidered velvet dresses and decorated headscarves filled the stone-cut courtyard and the women whispered to each other as they drew water from a sacred well. I wanted to believe in the miracle of water, fish, and fire – the power of immediate and lasting transformation – just as I had believed Theresa’s death was powerful enough to cause my father to quit drinking.

A secret, at the beginning, starts out as an inconsistency in the architecture of a life. Today, when my mother calls to tell me that my inebriated father has fallen down on the sidewalk – scraping his face, spraining his wrist, losing his glasses – I will imagine the elaborate defenses he constructs to conceal his drinking – the oddly timed errands, the thermos filled with vodka. I, too, build a fortress of diversions to protect the shadow-sides of my life. But the secret is always revealed. Someone digs around and uncovers it. Or the façade is simply too exhausting to maintain. Walls crumble under the pressure of time. Modern archeologists leave some quadrants in a dig untouched; someday, tools will calibrate the right amount of pressure, and nothing will be lost. Until then, we work with fragments of history and piece together what we can.

Watar, dohter. Language decoded; gaps, slips, silences recognized. How much work did it take to decipher two simple words? I grasp at hope: I want to be the daughter that didn’t die young, the daughter that didn’t disappoint by only wanting money after all those years of silence, the daughter whose existence inspires a reconciliation between stories currently unfolding and the fragments of the past.