

Backward glances

by Rich Carriero

The Kadesh Peace Treaty

The Istanbul Archaeology Museum, at 5YTL per ticket, is one of the best buys in the city. Rich Carriero tells the story of one of its most important and fascinating pieces, The Kadesh Peace Treaty.

The Istanbul Archaeology Museum, a quiet and dusty suite of buildings near Topkapı Palace, is an under-visited storehouse of treasures. The startling marble relief panels of its signature exhibit, the Alexander Sarcophagus, depict İskender and his cadre of Macedonians routing the dumbfounded Persians at the Battle of Issus. The Old Eastern Works building is home to massive statues of Assyrian kings, whose flowing beards, stoic expressions and swords on their hips evoke all the menace of the world's first multinational empire. Perhaps the Archaeology Museum's most significant piece, however, was unearthed in 1906 outside modern Bogazkoy in central Anatolia: an unassuming lump of clay, broken and reassembled, marked by lines and wedges of cuneiform script. The tablet is a copy of a silver original, which, sadly, did not survive the 32 centuries since it was inscribed in 1258 BC. Written in Akkadian, the diplomatic lingua franca of its day, the text represents a pact of nonaggression and mutual assistance between Pharaoh Ramses II and Hittite King Hattusili III and is arguably the oldest peace treaty in existence. Its story is a fascinating glimpse of ancient warfare and diplomacy.

The Hittites established an empire that stretched over most of central Turkey, modern Syria and parts of Iraq. Though of the Bronze Age, they were among the first to work with iron and commanded the trade routes between Mesopotamia and the Greek world. To our age they have left their art, squat figures of god and beast, striking in the ferocity imbued into their crude faces. The Istanbul Archaeology Museum houses many fine Hittite sculptures, distinguishable by the large blank almond eyes with which they stare back at the world.

By the 12th Century BC the Egyptians were also on the rise. After a brief period of foreign occupation by the mysterious Hyksos, the Pharaohs began to encroach upon the Levant,

capturing towns in modern Israel, Lebanon and Syria. By 1274 BC Egyptian ambitions conflicted with those of the Hittites. War came when Ramses II, an ambitious young Pharaoh, seized Amurru, an important Hittite trading post that once belonged to the pharaoh's ancestors.

King Muttawali II was not pleased. He summoned all vassals and allies in Asia Minor to counter the Egyptian menace. Among those who answered the call were the Phrygians, Lycians and Trojans. His army of 50,000 assembled, the Great King marched south. Ramses II, meanwhile, brought his own troops to the Levant but the Pharaoh was rash and Egyptian forces advanced too rapidly to gather proper intelligence. His men captured two Hittite soldiers who misled the Egyptians into believing that their army was several days' march further north. In reality Muttawali was waiting on the far side of the Orontes River, just northeast of Kadesh, a Syrian border town.

Ramses was crossing the river with one of his chariot divisions when the Hittites struck. Though the Pharaoh kept his head and was able to hastily organize what troops he had, the Hittites crashed through the Egyptian lines like wet tissue paper, slaughtering the Egyptian charioteers en masse and completely surrounding the pharaoh and his bodyguards. Ramses, however, wouldn't die.

According to admittedly fantastic Egyptian accounts, in a rage the pharaoh picked off every enemy in sight with his bow and rallied as many Egyptian survivors as he could find. The Hittites, meanwhile, assuming that the battle was won, had proceeded directly to looting and pillaging and were easy targets for the reforming Egyptian chariot-archers. As Egyptian reinforcements crossed the river, the counterattack gained strength and pushed the Hittites back. Muttawali sent in his reserves, but, unable to drive off the Egyptians, these 1000 men eventually had to abandon their chariots and swim back across the Orontes River. Hundreds of Hittites, many of them noblemen, drowned in the process.

Kadesh was not a conclusive battle. Ramses II had acted foolishly and the cream of his chariot corps was destroyed. The pharaoh had, however, recovered the situation, saving his army through courage, intelligence and luck. The Hittites, meanwhile, had failed to capitalize on their stunning surprise attack and were repulsed with heavy casualties but did stem the Egyptian advance into Syria. With no one able to really sort out what had happened, both sides declared victory. Ramses had every temple and monument he could find emblazoned with propagandized accounts of his 'triumph.'

The situation remained hostile, yet stable, for another 16 years; neither side



wanted to renounce its claim on the Levant but simultaneously neither wanted another Kadesh. Finally outside influences forced an end to the impasse. The Assyrians, growing beyond the boundaries of their Mesopotamian homeland, threatened the Hittites whose new king, Hattusili, needed a free hand to deal with them. While Ramses boasted that his enemies came 'craving peace' on their knees, the Egyptian situation wasn't much better. Libyan marauders threatened Egypt's western borders and the pharaoh was anxious for a deal. Thus, cemented by each power's self interest, proclaimed in vainglorious terms and viewed as a sign of weakness by both parties, the two kings declared peace.

That pact resonates at the United Nations where, 3000 years later, a reproduction of the Kadesh Peace Treaty currently hangs. Last September Prime Minister Erdoğan acknowledged the tablet in a speech before the general assembly, "The replica of the world's oldest known peace treaty, the Kadesh Treaty, donated to the United Nations by Turkey and on permanent display at the entrance of the Security Council, reminds us on a daily basis that the quest for lasting peace is as old as humankind itself." The Kadesh Peace Treaty is a fragment of a world that, while ancient, was as complex and essentially human as our own. Once two kings put down the sword not for noble ideals of freedom or the sanctity of human life but simply because they couldn't vanquish one another and had other priorities. Nonetheless, a war ended without further bloodshed and for a brief moment, recorded in wet clay, powerful men acted rationally.

