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Empire as network: Spheres of material interaction in Late Bronze Age Anatolia

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ABSTRACT

Hegemonic dominance relationships and the limited intentional material expressions of imperial power they usually encompass pose an interesting and well-known problem for the archaeology of early empires. One way of approaching domination in the archaeological record is through the synthetic analysis of different modes of imperial-local interaction at overlapping socio-political levels and spheres of culture. In this paper, four material culture categories are considered with the aim of characterizing Hittite imperial relationships in Late Bronze Age Anatolia and northern Syria. They include pottery traditions and their degree of susceptibility for central influence, diachronic settlement developments, the distribution of imperial administrative technology, and an ideological discourse carried out through landscape monuments. From the spatial and chronological signatures of these overlapping networks of interaction, a more nuanced understanding of the process of empire is beginning to emerge.

Introduction

The evolution and manifestations of early empires have long fascinated historians and archaeologists (e.g. Larsen, 1979; Alcock et al., 2001). Political structure and particularly indirect or hegemonic rule, however, unlike for instance economic interaction, are perceived as hard to detect in the archaeological record due to the difficulty of distinguishing between external and local causes of culture change (Postgate, 1994, pp. 1–3; Smith and Monteil, 2001 for a general discussion). This, in addition to an abundant textual-historical record, may partly explain the reluctance of archaeologists working in Anatolia (Gorny, 1995, 2002) and the Near East (Adams, 1979; Postgate, 1992, 1994; Matthews, 2003, pp. 127–128 for an exception see Parker, 2003) to engage with this subject. The problem, however, is not the nature or inadequacy of the archaeological record, but the top–down manner in which indirect political dependency, but also states and empires in general (Smith, 2003), and their material manifestations are traditionally conceptualized. One way of approaching empire from an archaeological perspective is to conceptualize it in terms of what Michael Mann described as 'multiple overlapping and intersecting socio-spatial networks' (1986: 1). Empire is both a relationship and a process that underlie recurring episodes of individual and collective interaction on a multitude of socio-political and cultural levels. Material culture—from pottery to monumental architecture—is formed by, expresses and mediates these relationships and articulates the spectrum of possible modes of engagement. An archaeology of imperial relationships is, thus, the investigation of overlapping spatial and temporal patterns of material categories that are diagnostic of inter-regional interaction. Through the superimposition of the geographical and chronological patterns of change and continuity in these aspects of the archaeological record we can begin to gain an understanding of the different cultural, political, economic and ideological relationships that existed between a political and militarily central region and its surrounding societies. This approach provides a more nuanced and bottom–up perspective on the continuum of territorial and hegemonic domination that has come to structure research into early empires. It also allows us to compare the type and intensity of inter-regional interaction specified in the textual sources with those represented, or absent, in the archaeological record. In this paper, I explore inter-regional relationships in the Hittite empire through the comparative analysis of regional ceramic traditions, settlement organization, the spatial and chronological distribution of north-central Anatolian administrative technologies, and landscape monuments.

An archaeology of empire

An explicit archaeology of empire of this kind is still a relatively recent and underexplored concept in early Anatolia (Steadman and Gorny, 1995; Gorny, 1995). The Hittite empire in particular, is known to us primarily through its textual sources (Fig. 1). Hittite

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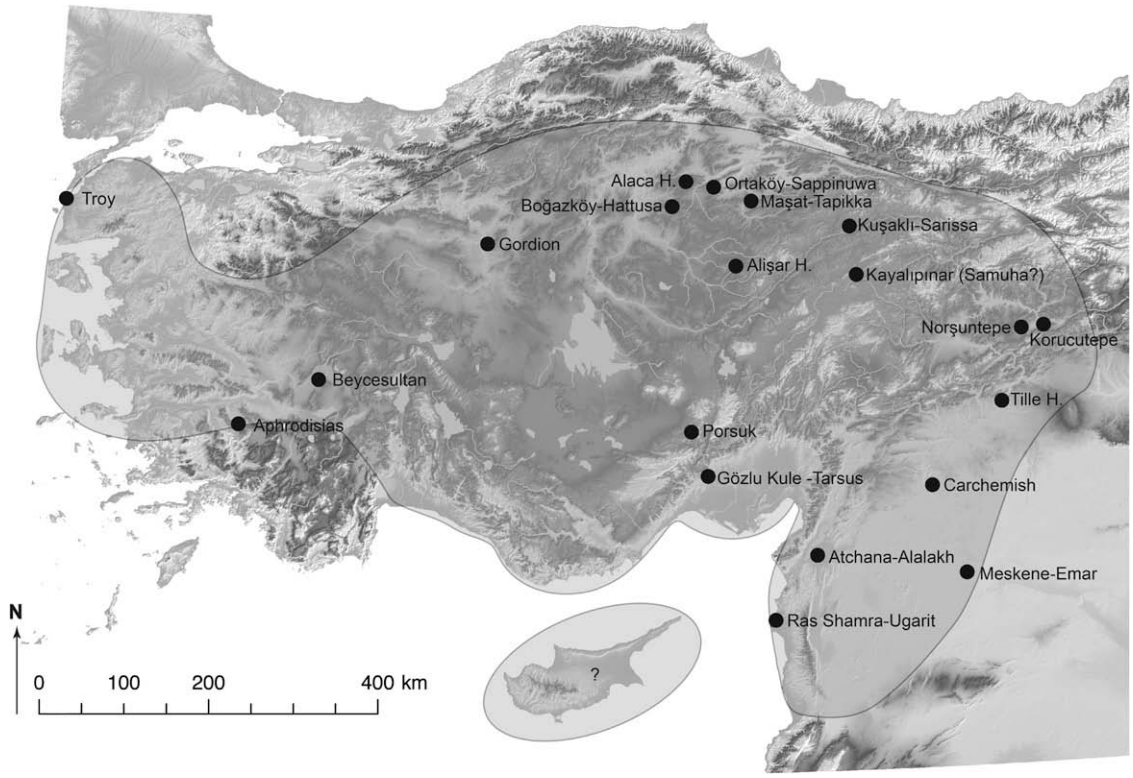

Fig. 1. Map of the Hittite empire at its maximum extent as suggested by the textual sources (14th and 13th century BC).

state formation and subsequent episodes of expansion and retraction from the central Anatolian plateau commencing around 1650 BC were the defining socio-political processes in Anatolia during the Late Bronze Age (LBA). From this highland region, early kings mounted military excursions into the south and west of Turkey, Syria and upper Mesopotamia. Efforts to integrate more effectively regions at some distance to the central Anatolian heartland are most evident in the 14th and 13th centuries BC. While expansion relied on military strength and its persuasive threat, measures of integration, as far as the textual record is concerned, concentrated on indirect strategies in the form of vassal treaties and their associated tribute demands, as well as on directly controlled strategic nodes.

Two issues are important with regard to the Hittite and other relevant LBA documentary sources. The first concerns the limitations of the Hittite records themselves in terms of the range of represented subject matters and their suitability for the analysis of imperial-local relationships. The majority of Hittite texts stem from archival contexts closely related to the state apparatus and fall within a limited set of categories consisting of political texts and diplomatic/administrative correspondence, historiographic works, documents relating to cult activities of various kinds and a legal code. Exceedingly rare are texts dealing explicitly with economic matters such as trade, the ownership, distribution and transfer of property, or with administrative hierarchies and procedures (e.g. van den Hout, 2006). As a consequence, the economic structure and processes of administration are understood in outlines only in the central region itself. The second concerns the geographical restriction of substantial LBA text-finds to the central Anatolian plateau (Boğazköy-Hattusa, Maşat-Tapikka, Ortaköy-Sapinuwa, and Kuşaklı-Sarissa). Additional LBA textual evidence comes from Syrian sites such as Ras Shamra-Ugarit, Atchana-Alalakh, and Meskene-Emar, and from outside the Hittite sphere of effective control. Whether through accidents of preservation or real absences, large parts of potentially Hittite controlled Anatolia have no textual voice of their own.

In this way, the selective perspective provided by the textual record of Hittite strategies of control and degrees of integration, although vital for an understanding of the overall structuring of domination in specific areas, cannot *a priori* be taken as representative of the totality of inter-polity relationships within and beyond the Hittite empire. Moreover, the high political and, at the same time, basic military level of interaction suggested in the most prominent documentary sources, forcibly leaves open a whole array of key questions concerning the practical intricacies and range of variation in imperial policies, their local mechanisms of implementation as well as their implications for the socio-economic organization and the cultural identities of surrounding societies. In short, we lack detailed information about the configuration of imperial relationships and their development over time.

Imperial relationships, by-and-large, are characterized by the degree and kind of domination the centre polity chose or was able to exert over surrounding regions. But imperialism, like all power-relationships, is a dialectical process. Subordinate societies have access to various means of resistance (Miller and Tilley, 1984, p. 7; Kohl, 1987, pp. 21–22; Glatz, 2009); imperial cores are neither entirely omnipotent, nor does the relationship have to be exclusively parasitic, as some have suggested (Ekholm and Friedman, 1979); and subordinate groups—or factions within them—are often willing at least to some degree (Weber, 1978, p. 212; Galtung, 1980, p. 437). As a collection of bi- and multi-lateral relationships (Doyle, 1986, p. 46) empire is always in the making, and therefore subject to continuous modification. Conventional, anachronistic views of empire—using maximum spatial extent, chronological apex of political power and the entirety of material remnants of the central polity in peripheral regions as evidence for imperial might—mask crucial processes of re-establishment, re-negotiation and re-definition of dominance relationships