

## CHAPTER 16

# THE SURPRISE ENDING OF THE BABYLONIAN EMPIRE

## HITTITE VICTORIES AND INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

“ A BABYLONIAN CHRONICLE, A PROCLAMATION, AND HITTITE ANNALS

The king of Babylon Samsu-ditana must have felt pretty smug and secure. Though the empire had shrunk during the 140 years since Great-Great-Great Grandfather Hammurabi sat on the throne, Babylon was still *the* major power in the ancient Near East. By the beginning of the 16th century BCE, the city of Babylon had not been attacked for centuries.

Then, in 1595 BCE, the scribal records suddenly stop and, for generations, there's no news of Babylon or its king. Hammurabi's descendants never again ruled Babylon. Something terrible must have happened. But what?

In most situations, archaeologists could dig up some answers by excavating the site, but that's impossible for Babylon. The water in the soil has risen, completely soaking the earth at the level where the ancient city lies buried. The answer turned to mud!

Whatever happened in Babylon was sudden and a complete surprise. The city was demolished, though many people survived. Some of them told the story to their descendants. Many years later, a Mesopotamian writer mentioned the disaster of 1595 BCE: "In the time of Samsu-ditana, the Man of Hatti marched against Akkad." Finally, a clue!

Akkad was the old name for the kingdom of Babylon, but who was this "Man of Hatti"? Archaeologists found the answer, not in Babylon itself but hundreds of miles north,



*Storage rooms and workrooms surrounded this temple, set in the hilly countryside of Anatolia. In the center was a courtyard. Excavations at Hattusa have uncovered many temples and palaces built of stone.*

“ Babylonian Chronicle, Iraq, 1st millennium BCE

when they excavated Hattusa in central Anatolia (modern Turkey). In Hattusa, an ancient city with grand stone palaces and temples built high on a rocky plateau, they found more than 25,000 cuneiform tablets that tell about a people called the Hittites, who lived in the land of Hatti. So the “Man of Hatti” who marched against Akkad and brought an end to the Babylonian dynasty must have been a Hittite.

In 1595, Hatti wasn’t yet a great power, though it became one later. It controlled only a small part of what is now central Turkey. Yet somehow this small kingdom, led by King Mursili, conquered the capital of the ancient Mesopotamian empire, Babylon. A later Hittite leader described Mursili’s victories: “He went to [the city of] Aleppo and . . . destroyed Aleppo and brought captives . . . to Hattusa. . . . Later he marched to Babylon and destroyed Babylon, and . . . brought captives and possessions of Babylon to Hattusa.”

After Mursili’s troops destroyed Aleppo, in northern Syria, they followed the path of the Euphrates River and marched all the way down to Babylon. Did the Hittites have to fight their way to Babylon or did the native peoples just let them pass through their land? And *why* did the Hittites want to conquer Babylon in the first place? They didn’t have an empire yet. In fact, after their surprise attack, they turned around and went home again. They didn’t even leave a Hittite leader in charge of Babylon when they left. Did they raid the city for its wealth? Or did Mursili just want to prove what a great warrior-king he was?

These are murky questions. It’s clear, though, that the Babylonians suffered a terrible fate. Their Hittite enemies took their city god Marduk and his goddess wife from the temple.

(Gods, like humans, were believed to have wives. These goddesses sometimes had their own temples right next to those of their husbands.) This would have terrified the Babylonians who believed that the spirit of the gods lived in

64 Telipinu, Telipinu Proclamation, 16th century BCE



At the end of the third millennium BCE, expert metalworkers from Anatolia created this bronze rein ring for a wagon or chariot pulled by donkeys or horses.

the statues themselves. With their “statue-bodies” gone, the gods could no longer protect the city and its people.

Although no one wrote about the disaster at the time, we can imagine the fear, sadness, and confusion that the Babylonians suffered. They had lived in comfort, with security and power. Then, without warning, people who spoke a strange language and wore strange clothing stormed their city, looted their gold and silver, and destroyed their buildings. Many people must have died fighting to protect their homes and families. Men, women, and children were taken captive. With ropes tied around their wrists, they were driven from their homes and forced to abandon their possessions. After marching for weeks to the foreign land of their captors, they became slaves.

The very gods whom the Babylonians depended upon to watch over them now belonged to their enemies (though they were eventually returned to their home city). For the Babylonians who had been taken hostage as well as for those who had been left behind in the ruined city, it was the end of the world they had known.

Mursili and the kings who followed him on the Hittite throne saw military conquests as a basic part of their royal job and carefully recorded their accomplishments on clay tablets. These year-by-year accounts almost look like history writing except they are one-sided. They mention only the kings’ accomplishments, ignoring their mistakes or military defeats. Mursili’s father, Hattusili, for example, boasted, “No one had crossed the river Euphrates, but I the Great King . . . crossed it on foot, and my army crossed it after me on foot. Sargon also crossed it [long ago].”

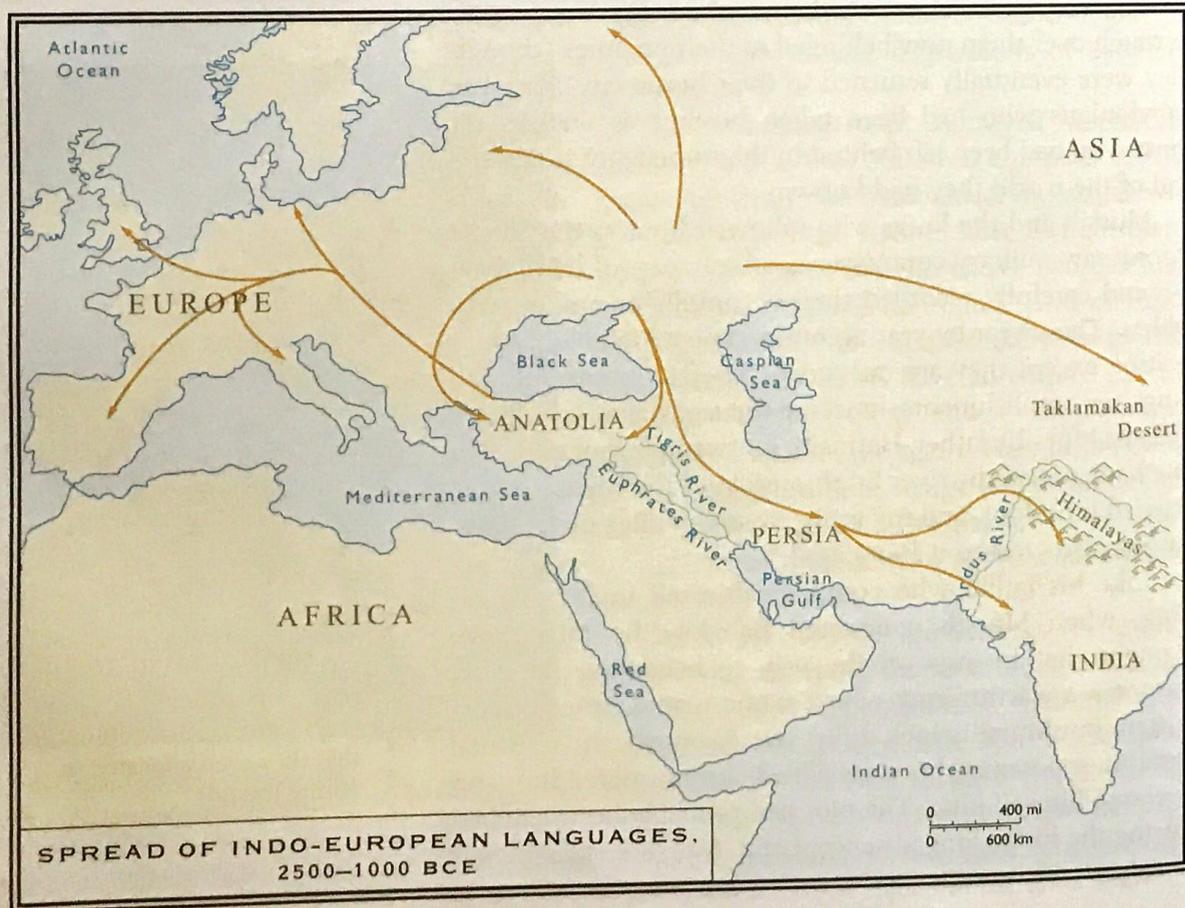
Like his father who compared himself to the ancient king, when Mursili conquered Babylon, he must have thought that he was on the way to becoming the next **Sargon**—a warrior-king whose name would never be forgotten. But Mursili’s luck didn’t last. Soon after he returned from Mesopotamia, his sister’s husband murdered him and declared himself king. The plot had probably been hatched during the king’s long absence. Later, Mursili’s assassin was murdered by another wanna-be king. Assassinations of

64 Hattusili, Annals of Hattusili, 17th century BCE

King Sargon ruled Mesopotamia 700 years before Mursili’s reign in Hatti, but his adventures were so entertaining that they even appeared in Hittite legends.

Hittite kings became common after this and weakened the country for almost two hundred years.

The century from 1595 to around 1500 BCE was a troubled time throughout the Near East. The Hittites had left no one in charge in Babylon, so Mesopotamia drifted, leaderless, until a mysterious group called the Kassites took control. (They came from a land they didn't identify and spoke a language they never wrote down.) After their victory, the days of Mesopotamia's greatness appeared to be over. But by 1400 BCE, the picture had changed again. The Kassites had completely merged into Mesopotamian society, adopting the local dress, gods, language, and customs. Mesopotamia had regained its strength under its Kassite kings. Mean-



while, the Hittites had gained control over a large empire. Their powerful kings were considered to be the equals of the rulers of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

What's really interesting about the Hittites is the fact that their language teaches us a lot about the origin of many modern languages, including English. Hittite is distantly related to English—like a 13th cousin, 10 times removed. It belongs in the family of languages that includes Greek, Latin, English, Spanish, German, French, Italian, Farsi (the language spoken in modern Iran), and several modern South Asian languages, to name a few. Of these languages, known as Indo-European languages, Hittite was the first to be written down. It was written on clay tablets in the cuneiform script that began in Mesopotamia.

Scholars have shown that the Indo-Europeans' ancestors—those who spoke Indo-European languages—all spoke the same language at first, because certain words in the various Indo-European languages are almost the same. For example, our English word *daughter* was *duatra* in Hittite, almost the same word. And many other modern languages have similar words that mean “daughter,” such as *tochter* in German, *dukte* in Lithuanian, and *dokhtar* in Farsi.

Where the Indo-Europeans actually came from originally

#### INDO-EUROPEAN COUSINS

deity	Hittite <i>diu</i> , French <i>dieu</i> , Greek <i>dios</i> , Latin <i>dues</i> , Spanish <i>dio</i>
eat	Hittite <i>ed</i> , German <i>essen</i> , Greek <i>edo</i> (I eat), Latin <i>edere</i>
is	Hittite <i>es</i> , French <i>est</i> , German <i>ist</i> , Latin <i>est</i> , Spanish <i>esta</i>
new	Hittite <i>newa</i> , French <i>nouveau</i> , Latin <i>novos</i> , Sanskrit <i>navas</i> , Spanish <i>nuevo</i>
water	Hittite <i>watar</i> , German <i>wasser</i> , Russian <i>woda</i>
we	Hittite <i>wes</i> , Czech <i>ve</i> , German <i>wir</i>

#### A FAMILY OF LANGUAGES

A family of languages is much like a family of people who come from the same ancestor. This means that thousands of years ago, the people who spoke the ancestor language, known to us as proto-Indo-European, were related to each other—a huge family with thousands of cousins. Before these peoples began to write their words, the family groups began to spread out. Some traveled far from their homeland, immigrating across Europe, the Near East, South Asia, and as far as western China.

Greek, Latin, Hittite, Sanskrit, and Tocharian all developed from this same ancestor.

Many Indo-European languages, such as Hittite and English, include words that are similar to each other—words that are descended from ancient Indo-European words.

**T H E O L D  
B A B Y L O N I A N  
E M P I R E**

**1900 BCE**

Amorite dynasty  
founded; Old  
Babylonian period  
begins

**1792–1750 BCE**

Hammurabi creates  
Old Babylonian  
Empire

**1775–1761 BCE**

Zimri-Lim of Mari,  
Syria reigns

**1749–1712 BCE**

Samsu-iluna  
of Babylon reigns

**1650 BCE**

Foreign invaders  
destroy Sippar

**1625–1595 BCE**

Samsu-ditana  
of Babylon reigns

**1595 BCE**

Mursili of Hatti  
attacks Babylon;  
Old Babylonian  
Empire ends



*This bearded young man wears a peaceful smile. We don't know who he was—only that he was a prominent Kassite. Only gods and important mortals were depicted in Mesopotamian works of art.*

is not known for certain. Historians, archaeologists, and language experts have argued about it for decades. Many of them now think that the original homeland of the Indo-Europeans was near the Caspian Sea in what is now Russia. The people in this region knew how to use the wheel. Perhaps they had learned this skill from the Mesopotamians. They also had tamed wild horses for use on their farms and in battle. These skills gave them an advantage over less advanced peoples whom they met as they migrated to new places.

As the Indo-Europeans spread out, beginning around 2500 BCE, they took their horses and wagons with them. They settled in new areas, farmed, and intermarried with the local people. Gradually, their languages changed—influenced by the local languages where the people now lived. No longer was there a single Indo-European language.

The descendants of those original Indo-European speakers now speak dozens of different languages. All languages, including English, change constantly. Some words disappear—whatever happened to “corset” and “persnickety?” Some words change—in the 17th century, “painful” meant “careful.” And look what happened to “cool.” Still other words appear in the language, brand-new, such as “television,” “surfboard,” and “antibiotic.”