

REFLECTIONS

THE LAST HITTITE

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General John Vessey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Reagan presidency, was born in Minnesota, and, like many Minnesotans, liked to tell Swedish jokes, the Minnesotan equivalent of Polish jokes. Vessey, who died in the summer of 2016, lived on into the era of political correctness, when any sort of joke was likely to give offense to someone, and jokes aimed at any specific ethnic or political group became inappropriate, improper, and certain to stir up a fuss not only among those who were directly targeted by the joke but among the people whose self-appointed task it is to protest against any form of political incorrectness.

General Vessey, therefore, began to convert his Swedish jokes into Hittite jokes, on the grounds that the Hittites have been gone for thousands of years and therefore the chances that outraged Hittite defenders would rise up against him were slim. A revised Vessey joke might begin, “These two Hittites went out in a rowboat together, and Ole said to Sven—”

You get the idea. But General Vessey’s politically correct workaround started me thinking. What must it have been like to be the very last Hittite—the only person in the world who had a Hittite name, who spoke the Hittite language, who could read Hittite hieroglyphics? *Someone* had to have been the last of the Hittites, and a lonely business it surely was.

The Hittites—I thought you would never ask—lived in Asia Minor before it belonged to the Turks, and to the Byzantines before them, and to the Assyrians before the Byzantines arrived. They had an empire of considerable power and might from about 1900 B.C. until the Assyrians wiped it out twelve centuries later. The remnants of the Hittites drifted off into what is now Syria, where within a few hundred years they were absorbed into the largely Phoenician population around them, disappearing entirely from the world stage and thus becoming fair game for General Vessey in the twenty-first century. They do crop up here and there in the Old Testament, mentioned as one of the many minor peoples living in the vicinity of Palestine. (“Amalek dwelleth in the land of the south,” the Book of Numbers tells us, “and the Hittite, and the Jebusite, and the Amorite dwell in the mountains. . . .”) But no one knew what had become of them, or, probably, much cared, until the great nineteenth-century eruption of interest in the archaeology of the Biblical lands.

The first step in the revival of knowledge of the Hittites came in 1812, when a Swiss traveler named Jacob Burckhardt discovered a curious stone in the Syrian town of Hamath inscribed with “a number of small figures and signs which appears to be a kind of hieroglyphic writing, though it does not resemble that of Egypt.” Other “Hamath stones” began to turn up elsewhere in Syria, and then more inscriptions of the same sort near a vast ruin of unknown origin in central Asia Minor. Finally, in 1879, after studying these inscriptions for three years, the British scholar Archibald Henry Sayce published a pioneering paper, “The Hittites in Asia Minor,” identifying the mysterious Hamath stones as the work of a great lost empire, the Hittites of the Bible.

And a great empire it was. The records of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I, who had lived about 1100 B.C., told of war he had waged against them in Syria. Egyptian annals recorded years of strife with a people called the “Kheta,” culminating in the victory of the Pharaoh Rameses II against them in 1290 B.C. and the signing of a treaty of peace between Rameses and a king of the “Kheta” named Hattusilis III in 1269. Then, in 1887, clay tablets began to come to light near the Egyptian town of Tell el-Amarna inscribed in cuneiform, the wedge-shaped writing of Assyria and Babylonia and written in Akkadian, the international language of diplomacy then, which archaeologists had

begun to decipher a generation earlier. They mentioned Hittite invasions of Syria, making it clear that their home territory was Asia Minor. A couple of the Tell el-Amarna letters were indecipherable, though—inscribed in cuneiform but written in some unknown language. Eventually archaeologists were able to translate these, too, and saw that they were in Hittite.

By 1920 it was clear that a powerful Hittite empire had existed in central Asia Minor for at least a thousand years, going back to 2000 B.C. or even earlier. The cuneiform Hittite annals could be read, the names of their kings were known, the details of their legal code and the story of their military victories against Egypt and Babylonia emerged from the darkness of the forgotten past. By 1190 B.C., though, their time of greatness had ended. The Egyptians under Rameses II defeated them, their outlying provinces revolted, barbarian invaders appeared out of the Mediterranean, and swiftly the empire crumbled. The last Hittites of Asia Minor fled into Syria, where they established a minor empire that we refer to as Neo-Hittite. The Neo-Hittites, abandoning the old cuneiform script for the hieroglyphic one first seen on the “Hamath stones,” straggled on in Syria for another five hundred years, until the ferocious Assyrians conquered them in 717 B.C. And that was the last that history heard of the Hittites, so thoroughly obliterated that General Vessey felt it was safe to make politically incorrect jokes about them in our own day.

When I first began learning about vanished ancient empires as a boy, I assumed that not only the empires but their inhabitants had vanished as well—the Maya, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Carthaginians, the Etruscans, the Khmer of Cambodia, and so on, all swallowed up by voracious time. Well, not so, I would discover, as I looked deeper into the history of the lands that had produced these vanished realms. The Mayan Empire was gone, yes, but Mexico’s Yucatan peninsula is still full of Maya, who regard themselves as ethnically different from the other people of Mexico. The Khmer rulers who built mighty Angkor Wat are gone as well, but the people of Cambodia still think of themselves as Khmer. Egypt is full of Egyptians to this day, though only a handful of them, the Copts, are descended from the ancient Pharaonic population. There are still Assyrians in Syria and Iraq, too, though they are Christians now and stopped writing in cuneiform several thousand years ago.

But the Etruscans of central Italy are well and truly gone, so much so that we can barely understand the inscriptions they left behind. Very likely their DNA still can be found in inhabitants of Tuscany and Umbria, but nobody calls himself an Etruscan today. The same with the Carthaginians, though, again, their genetic traces probably still persist in Lebanon, where they originated, and Tunisia. Perhaps there are some Hittite genes among the Turks of Asia Minor, too, but the bloodline surely has been all but engulfed by the genes of the many invaders who have conquered that land in the last thirty centuries. I do think sadly of the last Hittite, then, living somewhere in Syria under the new Assyrian rulers, and looking back, perhaps, on the potent kings of his past, men with the resonant names of Hattusilis and Suppiluliumas and Mursilis. The whole ancient world trembled before those names once, and now they mean nothing except to archaeologists. Did that last Hittite remember his nation’s former greatness? Or was it already a thing of the forgotten past, even there in his own day?

Great empires still can vanish. The British Empire came apart when I was in my teens and the Soviet Empire disappeared almost overnight in 1989. I was reminded once again of the transience of historical grandeur this week when I heard of General Vessey’s little Hittite joke, converted from a now inappropriate Swedish joke, and when at just about the same time I stumbled across an obscure short novel by one John Ames Mitchell, first published in 1889 and entitled . . . yes . . . *The Last American*.

Mitchell was trained as an architect, but after practicing that profession for a few

years gave it up for the vocation of a satirist, writing eight or nine novels and founding the comic weekly *Life*, a kind of nineteenth-century equivalent of today's *New Yorker*. (It is unrelated to the twentieth-century magazine of the same name.) *The Last American*, the first of Mitchell's two science fiction novels (the other, *Drowsy*, appeared in 1917) announces itself to be the journal of Khan-Li, "Prince of Dimph-you-chur and the Admiral in the Persian Navy," who in the year 2951 led a party of Persian explorers to the bleak and almost depopulated land of "Mehrika." Quickly one catches on to Mitchell's style of nomenclature, which is, well, satiric in intent: "Mehrika" is not hard to decode, and it takes very little effort to turn "Dimph-you-chur" into "Dim Future." Soon we encounter historians named "Nofuhl" and "Noz-yt-ahl," and we see that the author's method is a bit short on subtlety. Nonetheless the little book is an amusing artifact—in fact a very clever one, worthy of the three or four reprintings it has had in our own era.

The Persian expeditionary force—the first to visit the New World in many centuries—finds Mehrika a desolate place indeed. The first thing that greets them is a gigantic statue in the harbor—the ruined Statue of Liberty, only three years old when Mitchell's book appeared. Behind it lie the deserted towers of an enormous city, "the pavements covered with weeds, grass, and flowers, all crowding together in wild neglect." Fragmentary inscriptions identify what had been the New York Stock Exchange and several of the great hotels. But of the city's population, which the historian Nofuhl declares to have been four million, no one is to be seen.

What has happened here? "For eleven centuries the cities of this sleeping hemisphere have decayed in solitude," Nofuhl explains. "Their very existence has been forgotten. The people who built them have so long passed away, and their civilization is but a shadowy tradition. Historians are astounded that a nation of more than seventy millions should vanish from the earth like mist, and leave so little behind." It was climatic change, he says, that did the Mehrikans in, a change "the like of which no other land ever experienced. . . . The temperature would skip in a single day from burning heat to winter's cold. No constitution could withstand it, and this vast continent became once more an empty continent." Between 1925 and 1940, the last year a census was taken, the population dwindled from ninety million to less than twelve million; and by 1990 the Mehrikans were completely extinct.

Or almost so. But eventually—it's the Fourth of July, no less—the Persians find a tall, bony man clad in skins, who addresses them in the ancient Mehrikan language, which they can barely understand. He and his wife and one old man are the last survivors of the Mehrikans. He shows them through the vast hall in which he lives—it appears to be an abandoned museum, full of ancient artifacts—and serves them some sort of liquor to celebrate the national holiday. Which is a mistake; a drunken fracas breaks out when one of the Persians attempts to kiss the Mehrikan's wife. Both the young woman and the older Mehrikan man are killed, and some of the Persians, and by the time Prince Khan-Li can restore order, the last of the Mehrikans is dead as well. On July 7, the prince's journal notes, the expedition is "again upon the sea. This time for Persia, bearing our wounded and the ashes of the dead. . . . The skull of the last Mehrikan I shall present to the museum in Teheran."

Will it be our turn soon to become a nation known only to archaeologists? And what is that like for the last few survivors? Ask the Hittites, if you can find any. The Soviets are but a memory now. The Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires are gone. Perhaps in thirtieth-century Persia they'll tell jokes about the ancient Mehrikans. "These two Mehrikans went out in a rowboat together, and Jorj said to Zho. . . ."

Perhaps.