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Homer's Iliad and the Hurro-Hittite Song of Release: Evidence for the Transmission and Translation of Mediterranean Epic in the Late Bronze Age

In 1983 in Bogô azköy (Hittite Hattusa), the first pieces of the bilingual Hurro-Hittite *Song of Release*, were found. The *Song of Release* belongs to the same genre (SÌR) in Hattusa as *Gilgamesh* and *Kumarbi*, a precursor of Hesiod's *Theogony*. Dated to the 1400's BC, it tells of the destruction of Ebla, which was conquered in approx. 1600 BC by an Old Hittite king. The poet blames this on the wrath of the Hurrian Stormgod Tessub, angered when the Eblaites refused to release certain captives from the town Ikinkalis. With the publication of Erich Neu's *Das hurritische Epos der Freilassung I: Untersuchungen zu einem hurritisch-hethitischen Textensemble aus Hattusôa* (1996), and the English translation of all the coherent pieces included by Harry A. Hoffner Jr., in his 2nd edition of *Hittite Myths* (1998, pp. 65-77), this text can now be compared to other epic poetry of the ancient Mediterranean. The plot of the 'assembly' scenes (KBo XXXII.15, 16, 19) can be compared to the opening scenes of the *Iliad*, in which two speakers argue over freeing captives and compensation. The very Greek motif of two humans arguing before an assembly of other humans, although built up out of stock Near Eastern motifs, does not appear with all its parts in any other Near Eastern narrative poem. (Also compare the *proemium* (11), hospitality sequences (13, 46, 65, 72, 209), and awakening for a message (37) to the *Iliad*.) Martin West, in *The East Face of Helicon* (1997), has presented the latest synthesis of all we know about the ancient Greeks' debt to Near Eastern poetry; however, West couldn't fully include this text in his masterly study. The bilingual *Song of Release* in fact sheds new light on how the themes, plot lines, motifs and formulae of courtly epic could have been translated and transmitted from the larger Near East to Greek speakers.

In the Late Bronze Age, Hittites were having the right kind of contact to allow the spread of songs and religious customs back and forth between Greeks, Trojans and Hittites, and the *Song of Release* shows us how a bilingual poet could actually transfer a poem from one linguistic group to another. Homeric characters, such as Aleksandu of Wilusa (=Ilium), interacted with the Hittite court and came into conflict with Ahhiyawans (=Achaean) (CTH 76). The *incipit* of a Luvian song concerning 'steep Wilusa' (CTH 772,1.46) shows the importation of songs about Troy with Homeric formulae along with a cult. An oracular inquiry (KUB V 6 ii 57', 60') asking how the king should welcome the gods of Lazpa (=Lesbos) and Ahhiyawa, shows transfer of Greek cult to Hittites, while mention of a *Potniya Aswiya* ('lady of the [Anatolian] land of Assuwa') in Linear B could be evidence of transmission of Anatolian cult to Mycenaeans (p. 203, with earlier refs., Calvert Watkins, 'Homer and Hittite Revisited', pp. 202-11 in *Style and Tradition: Studies in honor of Wendell Clausen*, edd. P. Knox, C. Foss, 1998). The *Song of Release* too could have been imported to Hattusa along with the Hurrian cult of Tessub, and only translated when Hurrian was no longer viable there. Besides the correspondences between the SÌR genre and Homeric poetry, Hittite funerary customs (CTH 450) are remarkably Homeric and the *Hittite Ritual for the Infernal Deities* (CTH 446) is very like the necromantic episode from *Odyssey XI*. The evidence thus justifies taking a closer look at contact originating within 'Mycenaean' Anatolia as a likely mechanism of

transfer of several sets of Homeric names and motifs to Greeks from the Near Eastern tradition.