



Are Monuments History? (Neo-) Hittite Meditations on Two Memes

By Virginia R. Herrmann and Giuliana Paradiso

If you have spent any time on social media lately, you have probably seen some version of these two memes, taking sides in the “iconoclash” over the removal of certain monuments from public spaces in the U.S. and beyond.



These slogans express opposing ideas about the relationship between monuments and history. The first sees monuments as part of the historical record, documenting prominent people and events and thus of educational value for the public. US President Donald Trump's recent [executive order](#) to create a "National Garden of American Heroes" calls statues "silent teachers in solid form of stone and metal." The second meme sees monuments as propaganda, not history. They are not neutral, educational documents, but promote a particular moral viewpoint on the past that sometimes poses an intolerable contradiction with current values. This latter view is closer to the understanding of archaeologists and historians who study monuments.

Monuments are sites of power contestation, of [memory politics](#). The monument-maker has the resources and authority to impose on public spaces their view of who and what is to be celebrated or condemned. Impressive scale and enduring materials give this interpretation an air of permanence and validity that increases with the passage of time and the fading memory of the circumstances of the monument's production.

In the public arena, memes like this score an effective blow against the naïve equation of statues with the historical record. Perhaps we should not expect too much from a meme, but some archaeologist and historians would nonetheless prefer to make this point without denigrating the value of material culture for history. Monuments tell important stories that are not duplicated by texts, though they need not remain on display to do so. These stories, read against the grain of the monument's own narrative, are more about the makers and *un*makers of monuments than about the people and events they depict, however.

Near Eastern antiquity is full of stories of the rise and fall of monument regimes. The Hittite empire (ca. 1400-1180 BCE) and Neo-Hittite kingdoms (ca. 1180-700 BCE) of Anatolia and Syria provide particularly rich fodder for reflection on the meaning of monuments. The surviving traces of this monumental landscape tell a contradictory tale.

Monument creation is a demonstration of power over material, labor, and knowledge resources—an analogy has been drawn with biology's ["costly signaling theory,"](#) in which an animal spends precious energy to prove its reproductive fitness, putting its money where its mouth is. At the same time, such flamboyant demonstration only takes place in situations of fierce competition. Monument-makers show off because their power is contested and insecure, not yet—or no longer—on solid ground. Use of traditional forms and images papers over breaks with the past and legitimates new claims to authority.

From humble central Anatolian beginnings in the 17th century BCE, the Hittite kingdom reached its peak in the mid-14th century with the conquest of northern Syria and western Anatolia. These kings

installed junior members of the royal family to rule the conquered regions in their stead, unintentionally setting off a centrifugal dynamic in the empire. Shortly thereafter, sculpture in relief and in the round began to appear across Anatolia and Hittite north Syria, depicting gods, mythical beings, royalty, officials, and wild animals. The pious imagery of cultic processions, offerings, and ritual hunts and banquets manifested the gods' approval of the ruling power, including in [landscapes](#) already held sacred by ancient tradition, such as springs and mountains.



Yazılıkaya. ([Wikimedia Commons](#))



Great King Hattušili III and Queen Puduhepa pour libations to the Storm God and Sun Goddess at Fıraktın. ([Wikimedia Commons](#))

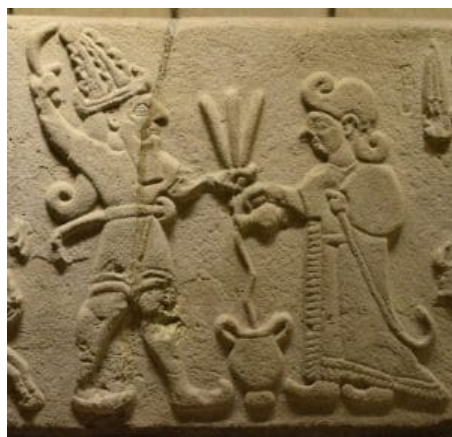
Hittite princes and officials began to sponsor rock monuments in the lands they ruled, projecting power over these landscapes that challenged the unique authority of the Great King in the capital. Monuments of the Great Kings themselves, shown in the guise of gods, were then created, not at the outer limits of

the empire, but on the borders between the central Hittite kingdom and the vassal lands ruled by the king's own cousins. In fact, texts of the 13th century BCE hint at endemic conflict within the royal family. The proliferation of Hittite monuments seems not to be a show of imperial strength, then, but rather a symptom of the weakening of the Great King's position in the period leading up to the fall of the empire.

Around 1180 BCE, the Hittite empire collapsed during the widespread crisis that ended the Late Bronze Age. Ironically, the progressive decentralization of Hittite power was crucial for political continuity through this crisis. A junior Hittite dynasty survived at Karkemish in north Syria and became the slender thread preserving Hittite imperial traditions into the Iron Age. Continued sponsorship of monuments with traditional Hittite iconography and royal titles in the hieroglyphic Luwian script by rulers of this dynasty at Karkemish and Malatya allowed them to appeal to collective memories of a more prestigious past and project legitimate authority through a period of uncertainty and change.

Around two centuries later, new cities branded with stone statues and reliefs bloomed again across north Syria and southeastern Anatolia, sponsored by rulers of a host of new kingdoms. Some of these rulers used hieroglyphic Luwian and had Anatolian names, while others used the Phoenician or Aramaic language and script. But they shared a common tradition of monument production. Once again, the surge of new monuments is symptomatic of an environment of intense political competition and a strong need for legitimation through traditional means.

Now, however, the new regimes had little to no direct connection with the Hittite empire—even at Karkemish a new dynasty supplanted the old line of kings after a long struggle. New scenes of soldiers and the royal entourage point to the new regimes' sources of power, but were blended with older Bronze Age religious imagery and a revived tradition of the public cult of dead kings. Celebratory public events accompanied the inauguration of the monuments, creating new civic identities and memories.

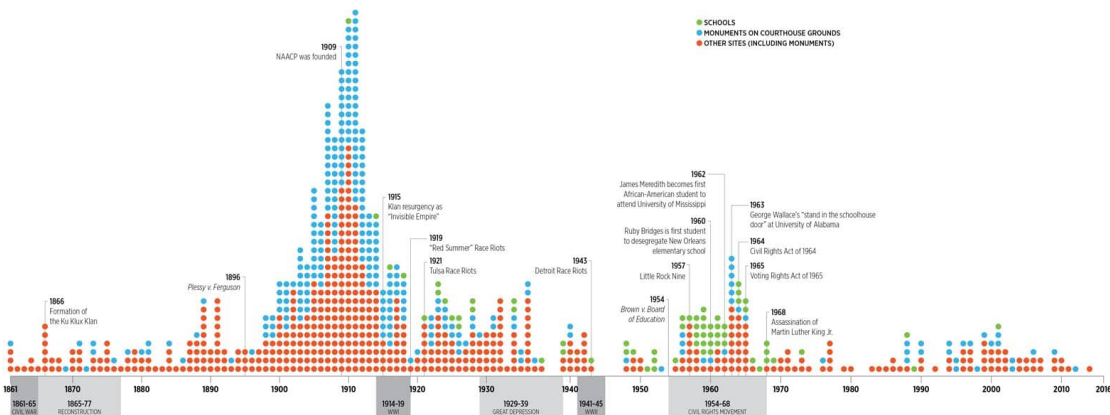


King PUGNUS-mili pours a libation to the Storm God, Lion Gate at Malatya. (photo by G. Paradiso)



A chariot tramples a naked enemy, Long Wall of Sculpture at Karkemish. (photo by G. Paradiso)

Compare the burst of monument production commemorating the Confederacy in the early 20th century, decades after the American Civil War.



Timeline of Confederate monument production. (Southern Poverty Law Center)

Reformulating the old social order through Jim Crow laws and extrajudicial violence after the defeat of Reconstruction also required reimagining the past by portraying in a heroic light those who had been defeated in their treasonous attempt to preserve an immoral institution. Just as the triumphant monument-makers of the post-Reconstruction South reacted against the threat to white supremacy brought by Black freedom and citizenship, we should probably also read behind (Neo-) Hittite monuments recent victories over severe challenges to their sponsors' authority. We can presume that these monuments were only the symbolic arm of more concrete measures aimed at quelling dissent, even if our textual sources only hint at the nature of these conflicts.

Another clue to the political contests that hide behind the production of (Neo-) Hittite monuments is their frequent destruction, burial or usurpation. Anthropologist Michael Taussig wrote that there is “something in the monumentality of the monument that cries out to be toppled.” The sponsors of Neo-Hittite monuments were well aware of this, as shown by inscribed curses (apparently ineffective) that threaten divine punishment for interfering with them.



Statue of the Neo-Hittite king Suppiluliuma found buried in a pit at Tell Tayinat. (Tayinat Archaeological Project)

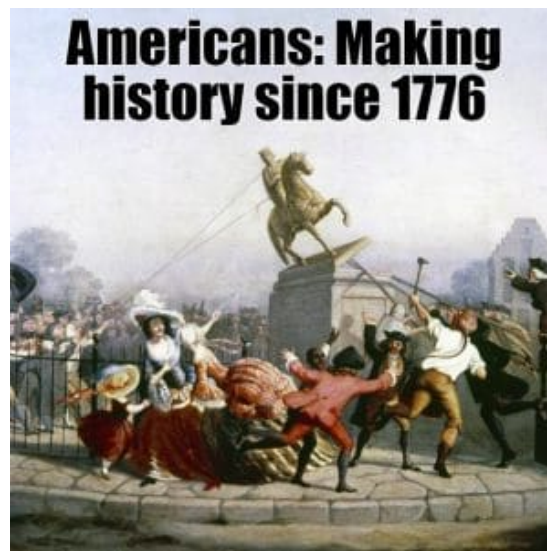


A king of Malatya found buried in a tomb before the city gate. (Delaporte, Fouilles de Malatya I, Pl. 26 (1940))

The treatment of deposited Neo-Hittite monuments gives us insight into the motivations of those responsible. There are symbolic differences between walling up a statue with bricks, burying it in a grave, cutting it in half and burying it face-down, or smashing it and using it as paving stones. These removals, whether by internal dissidents or external enemies like the Assyrians, were powerful symbols of regime change probably done in public with fanfare, similar to memorable recent cases. The

unmaking of a monument completes its [life history](#) and is itself of historical value, illuminating the memory politics of its time.

Both the power struggles betrayed by the sponsorship of public commemorative monuments and the subversive and destructive acts that depose them reveal untold aspects of the politics of their eras. They prevent us from taking a consensus view of these histories as just one damned thing after another. We need a better meme, but a Hittite-themed one might have trouble catching on. Fortunately, American history doesn't lack for toppled statues: an [equestrian statue](#) of King George III was put up in New York City in a defensive gesture following the uproar over the Stamp Act, only to be torn down six years later and turned into musket balls.



"Pulling Down the Statue of George III," William Walcutt, 1854. (Wikimedia Commons)

Virginia Herrmann is a Junior Research Group Leader and Giuliana Paradiso is a Ph.D. student in the Institute for Ancient Near Eastern Studies at the University of Tübingen. They are both members of Collaborative Research Center 1070, "Resource Cultures."