

A HITTITOLOGIST SINCE SECONDARY SCHOOL: OĞUZ SOYSAL

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Dear Oğuz Soysal, we would like to thank you for accepting this interview. Although you are a very important author in your own scientific field, you are not known that much in Turkey. What is your area of expertise, would you like to explain this to us?

Thank you too for your offer of interview because you give us, as the representatives of a scientific field having difficulty in making ourselves heard by the public, an opportunity to speak. The topic you are referring to stems from Hittitology's being a very small, isolated and underrated discipline. It is under a category which is described as "orchid disciplines" in European languages: Its subject is difficult, the interested are few and its likability is low, but what is worse is that it does not have job guarantee. At the same time, when it is done as a labour of love, in my estimation it is one of the most beautiful professions. I can say it has more of a character of a hobby than an occupation. As a professional/academic Hittitologist, my field of expertise is the study of history and culture of Anatolia B.C. 2000. My main goal is to read and make inferences from extant cuneiform tablets from Hittites. I am also interested in Hittites and other Anatolian tribes (Hattians, Luwians, Hurrians, etc., the neighbouring civilizations (Ancient Egypt, Assyrian, Mitanni, etc.) as both a philologist and Historian.

We know that you decided to become a Hittitologist when you were just in secondary school. You started reading texts in Hittite language at a very young age. What was your source of motivation? Could you explain this mentioning also your family life?

History, and especially ancient history, have impressed me since my childhood. I can say that reading *Herodotus* when I was only around 10 was the first step into my professional life. The book "Gods, Graves and Scholars" by C. W. Ceram which I read in 1972 upon my father's suggestion certainly directed me towards the Ancient Near Eastern History. In 1973, when I was a second grader in secondary school, I started learning Hittite language off my own bat. There were times when I got caught in classes reading scientific books about Hittitology. At the time it was common to read comics. My father Prof. Özer Soysal's becoming an instructor at Ankara University Faculty of Language, History and Geography Librarianship Department gave me the chance to get to know and use the faculty's library including notably rich Hittitology periodicals at only child ages.

In the meantime, I had the opportunity to meet the academicians in Hittitology Department long before my university life. Prof. Hayri Ertem in particular helped my intellectual growth with the attention he showed; I remember him with respect here.

You enrolled in Ankara University Faculty of Language, History and Geography Hittitology Department after you had finished high school. Considering you started university in 1978, those were politically very dynamic years. Then the 12 September military coup took place. What would you like to say about your university years?

In 1978, when I started my studentship Hittitology Department which was my first choice in university entrance exams, I was able to read and understand Hittite Language, and even attempt to write scientific articles in my discipline though very simply. That is why my four-years university life passed like a house visit with the professors whom I have long been of acquaintance. Additionally, the first two years of my education is remembered with the anarchy & terror and economic devastation that our generation had to undergo. The interruption of student and street conflicts by the 1980 military coup gave us a chance to seemingly have a sigh of relief. At least we spent our last two years until our graduation a quiet and comfortable atmosphere. However, the interference of military government into the autonomy of universities and the forming of the Council of Higher Education in 1982, following that the abolition of Turkish Historical and Language Societies, which were founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in person, with the aim of the so called "Ataturkism" are other misfortunes that our generation witnessed. When I graduated in 1982, the Council of Higher Education was still in preparation phase and I cannot say I was too much affected by it. On the other hand, I believe that it played an important role in my decision for my career after graduation, no matter if it was subconsciously.

Then you completed your doctorate degree in Germany. Could you talk about your professors and your thesis there?

The most powerful and rooted research centers in our discipline Hittitology are located in Germany. Because Hittites were Indo-European and they were the oldest representative of this group, Germans has always paid

a special attention to the Hittitology Discipline. With the aim of both to break through in my discipline and to broaden my scientific horizon, I enrolled in University of Marburg as a doctorate student in January 1983. I continued my education until 1989, first with my family's financial support and then with the doctorate scholarship provided by the German institution Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst. When my doctorate advisor Prof. Hans Martin Kümmel in Marburg lost his life in a traffic accident in 1986, I transferred to University of Würzburg and proceeded with my doctorate degree under the supervision of Prof. Einar von Schuler there. He was one of the perfect people to combine being a scientist and humanist character in their personality, like Prof. Talat Sait Halman, whom I met later. I would like to mention both of their names with respect. My doctorate degree which I completed in July 1989 is a biography about the Hittite king Murshili I. The aforesaid king is famous for his success achieving the impossible by going to Babylon, which is then considered as the Paris of Mesopotamia and conquering the city. This geographic region is the most remote distance Hittites managed to reach throughout their history.

You long participated for a long time in the work of Hittite Dictionary and made great effort for it. What is this project and is it complete?

After my education in Germany, my route was then to the United States of America, for meeting a different scientific eole arbiter in our field. I had heard of the "Hittite Dictionary Project" conducted in the Oriental Institute in the University of Chicago during my university years in Ankara. Back then, working in such an important project had appeared as a dream and even an occupational objective for me. Of course, for this it was a requirement to complete the doctorate period to be documented with a diploma in Germany. Right after my visiting professorship in New York University in 1994, I was accepted as a research assistant in Chicago Hittite Dictionary Project in August 1995 and worked in the same project continuously for 23 years until July 2018. On this opportunity, I had the honor to work with the connoisseur of Hittitology, Prof. Hans Gustav Güterbock. To make it more clear for the readers, let me mention that the name "Güterbock" corresponds to "Einstein" in Hittitology. My duty in the project was to write the first try-ons of Hittite vocabulary items for the dictionary. The purpose of the dictionary prepared in English is to present to the reader the meanings, grammatical structures and the cited contexts of Hittite words which have been detected in Hittite cuneiforms up to now. The dictionary, whose first volume was published in 1980, is only at a level of progress and in my opinion it will be finished after a 10 to 15 years of work. In the 10 volumes published until today, the Hittite words starting with "L, M, N, S and T" have been covered. As can be understood from this information, dictionary work progresses very slowly as it requires a highly meticulous and detailed

effort. Works to present the Hittite Dictionary to a much wider audience on digital platform were started in 2000. I also worked to present readers the Turkish translations of Hittite words on digital platform during my study process in Chicago. I hope this will come to the benefit of Turkish users on the website of the university.



Picture 1. Prof. H. G. Güterbock & Dr. Oğuz Soysal, October 1996.

There is also a Hattian Dictionary written by you. Could you talk about the importance of this work?

Hattian is the oldest documented language in Anatolia and was spoken between 3000 to 2000 B.C. When Hittites came to Anatolia and started dominating the native population Hattians, Hittite language became the formal language whereas Hattian lost its importance. Hittites used this language which was accepted to be holy in their way as a worship language or as prayer passages in religious texts. This language which was transmitted to us only by Hittites using it in a faultily as there are no original written work that reached us from Hattis, our information is very limited about this language. In contrast to the Indo-European Hittite language, Hattian is accepted to be an isolated language and is compared to today's Caucasian Languages. However, the arguments put forward about this topic thus far are not satisfying at all. I started engaging with this mystique language, which had not taken my attention that much before, in the last periods of my doctorate education. This may be a result of the need to do something different from Hittite language that I had been dealing with for many years. It may also have caught my attention specifically due to its being an untouched subject, or in other words because there were very few works about it when compared to other Ancient Anatolian Languages. The love of Hattian continued by growing during my years in Oriental Institute and it formed my most serious field of occupation in addition to the Hittite Dictionary project. As a result of efforts for about 10 years, I published a comprehensive dictionary-grammar book about Hattian language in 2004. It attracted attention for it was a first in its field and it was even discussed in the news of some media outlets in Turkey. I am currently working on the second improved edition of the book. In the meantime, thanks to the bilingual texts in Hattian-Hittite languages discovered in Ortaköy Excavations, we achieved the happiness to determine

the meanings of unknown Hattian words. Some of these were of importance for cultural history. For instance, the word “kinafar” in Hattian means “copper” and lives in modern languages still in forms like “copper, Kupfer”, so it is a cultural word which has got into various languages. As you know, the name Cyprus goes back to the Latin translation of this word.



Picture 2. Oğuz Soysal, Hattian Dictionary.

Why is the Bronze Age of Anatolia that you are working on from a historical perspective is accepted as an important research field for today?

Not only the fact that people who started adopted a sedentary life used mines more consciously in Bronze Age, but also the developments they made in almost all areas of civilization are important. Anatolia is a geographic region where the Bronze Age is represented most powerfully in world history. The age’s most important feature is that with the invention of writing humankind started recording their lives, thoughts and emotions in written documents. The written documents illuminating Anatolian history emerges covering first Assyrian Trade Colonies in 18th century B.C. and onwards and following that the era of Hittites. Again in this period, Anatolia attracted the attention of Mesopotamian peoples with its natural riches and cities with high level of welfare, thus turning into a sort of international trade center. Originally Mesopotamian and especially Assyrian traders founded large and small marketplaces in various Anatolian cities and carried out trade activities by paying high taxes to local kings. This situation enabled the emergence of a strong import-export sector between Anatolia and Mesopotamia. It is also this period when Hittites, starting from 16th century B.C., became an empire after forming for the first time a political union and played a directing role as a super power in Ancient Near Eastern History. In sum, we can say that Anatolia spanned the richest and most splendid era in Bronze Age. The oldest document about Ancient Anatolian History is a literary essay about the expedition of King Sargon of Akkad (approximately 2340 B.C.) to the city of Purushanda. This city, which is known with its richness, is most probably Acemhöyük within the borders of Aksaray today. Sargon, venturing all geographic difficulties, did not listen to the complaints of his soldiers, came to inner Anatolia getting over thousands of

kilometers and subjugated Purushanda. He loved this city famous for fruit trees and taras so much that he did not returned to his country and resided here for 3 years. By the way, let’s remind that Sargon is the first emperor in the world and the architect of imperialist expansion. Another interesting detail in the text about the mentioned expedition is that the city of Purushanda was militarily extremely weak despite all its richness. The king of the city did not want to take Sargon’s expedition seriously trusting the length and difficulty of the road his enemy needed to travel over, and neglected the defensive precautions until the last minute. In fact, it is told mordaciously that the people of Purushanda realised Sargon armies only during the siege of their city and the city soldiers were too drunk to remain standing. In my opinion, there is a very important socio-economic message in this anecdote: The reality of military-political weakening and degeneration of a society which lived for centuries in welfare brought by international trade. This situation, as well known, later on became one of the reasons for many states, the Roman Empire being in the first place, to collapse.

In this issue of Journal of Matter, Dialectic and Society we include a thematic dossier focusing on Professor Halet Çambel’s life and work. Could you explain Mrs. Çambel’s contribution to Hittitology?

With my title as a historian-philologist belonging to a much younger generation than hers, I don’t think I have the right to pass a detailed remark about the archeologist Prof. Halet Çambel. Kendisinden çok daha genç bir kuşağa ait tarihçi-filolog sıfatıyla arkeolog Prof. Halet Çambel. I will only confine myself to repeating that Mrs. Çambel is internationally a highly valuable, respected scientist. Especially the excavations she leded in Karatepe and the results she found contributed incontrovertibly to understanding the Late Hittite Civilization. She is completely a young Republican Era female scientist.

Did you meet her? Is there an anecdote you would like to tell us?

I had the chance to meet her in person in her visit to Chicago Oriental Institute to attend the funeral of well-known archeologist Robert Braidwood in 2003. In the following years we also exchanged letters. She particularly carried me through about my lecturing Hittite language in Ankara Bilkent University in 2005. Also with her offer we had an article about Hittitology doyen Hans Gustav Güterbock whose name I mentioned above and one of the Republican Era educator-politicians Cevat Dursunoğlu, who was a senior member of my family. Cevat Dursunoğlu, also served as Erzurum deputy, is one of Atatürk’s friends and he served as General Directorate of Higher Education. He played an important role in founding and organizing Language, History and Geography Faculty, while conducting German scientists in-

cluding Hans Gustav Güterbock who escaped from Hitler Germany to be assigned in newly founded Turkish Universities. During the preparation of my article covering Dursunoğlu and Güterbock relationship I benefited from Prof. Halet Çambel's memoirs because she knew those two people very closely as a result of the generation to which she belonged. The article was published last year in the Gift Book after a long delay. As we lost her in 2014, unfortunately she did not have the chance to see this article. Mrs. Çambel has a sophisticated and intellectual life apart from her archeology interest. In 1936, she participated in Berlin Olympics as Turkish female epeeist. She is remembered to reject Adolf Hitler's offer to visit him in his office with other sports people.

Are you still in connection with archeological works in Turkey?

As my expertise is mainly on history and philology, my archeological works are limited. I am only able to serve in the archeological excavations to which I am invited as a philologist. I have participated in Sivas Kayalıpınar excavations as excavation philologist since 2015 and as vice-chairperson in 2019. By the way, although I do not take active part in another important Hittite center Çorum Ortaköy excavations, I am very happy to collaborate about evaluating and publishing epigraphic findings there. On the other hand, we have lately been having common work and exchange of views about Boğazköy and Acemhöyük excavators to reach certain results by combining archeological and philological data. At the moment, I am leading "Unpublished Boğazköy Cuneiforms Project" funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft in the University of Marburg. The aim of this research is to publish Boğazköy cuneiforms being kept in Museum of Anatolian Civilizations and brought back to Turkey from Museum of Berlin in German Democratic Republic of the time with great diplomatic efforts in 1987 and to present them to scientific world. On this opportunity I also have works like photographing cuneiforms, restoring them by combining broken pieces



Picture 3. Oğuz Soysal, Sivas/Kayalıpınar 2019.

in the mentioned museum. About this, I am very happy to be in a close and productive work environment with my other Hittitologist-Archeologist colleagues working in the museum. This project which started in Chicago years has so far gave two scientific publications and foresees four other books in the future within the framework of the current project.

Could you share your opinions about improving Hittitology in Turkey?

The first of the two serious problems in front of Hittitology which I witnessed during my studentship in Turkey is the inability to supply of foreign resources required for scientific study, and the other is the use of new positions in opening in universities based on the system of allegiance rather than merit (with a metaphor of the time, the model of "assistant carrying professor's bag"). Naturally, these are cases which affect scientific quality. I think the former problem is no longer a trouble thanks to the proliferation of digital platforms in the last quarter-century and thus easing the use of library-archive uses between countries. However, the later case is continuing by getting worse and this is a serious problem showing itself in all disciplines rather than Hittitology alone. I cannot say that I am very optimistic about the solution to this problem, considering the current socio-political trends in Turkey. In 1990s, we shared opinions about making Hittitology in Turkey more attractive with Prof. Talat Sait Halman working as dean in New York University at that time. The topic we agreed on was to conduct Hittitology research in an independent institute in addition to universities. As a matter of fact, there are such institutes in Europe and America. Mr. Halman first wrote about the issue in his corner in Milliyet Newspaper and then got the approval of Fikri Sağlar who was the Minister of Culture of the time and his counselor Prof. Emre Kongar about founding an independent "Hittite Research Insitute" by negotiating with them in person. However, when it came to the application step – as we feared at the beginning of our attempt – finance and bureaucracy obstacles emerged, and as the last solution it was sought to hang a symbolic hanging of "Hittite Research Institute" plate on the room belonging to Hittite Cuneiforms Section which had already been existent in Ankara Museum of Anatolian Civilizations. In the next term of political power, this plate was removed anyway. I am still sorry for Mr. Halman's intensely well-disposed efforts to be a victim of bureaucracy.

Lastly, is there a message you would like to give to our readers?

I want to say a few things about the notion "brain drain" which is frequently used for the last 50 years in science and especially media terminology because this notion appeared in the book "*Arkeolojinin Delikanlısı*" about Prof. Muhibbe Darga's life story, partly including me in name as "Turkish scientists who jumped on the band-

wagon of brain drain". Science is universal and it does not have a homeland, nor does it have a nationality. More importantly, the states who complain about brain drain should carry the obligation to hold onto their scientists in all aspects. That is why I think it is unethical for myself, and especially the scientists from Turkey who proved themselves in positive sciences to be included in such a category.