

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

What the Hittites' Tablets Tell Us? A Short Historical View of Deafness on the Basis of Genetics

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History is a discipline that studies processes. One of the methods it uses is collecting data on a line that goes to the past beginning from the present or "right now". As in paleoanthropology or developmental psychology, the branch of genetics can be said to benefit from the use of similar methods. No doubt, to trace the fingerprints of any disease in any society needs a comprehensive and interdisciplinary study.

Tracing the fingerprints of a series of genes backwards may mean regenerating a complete way of life for a comprehensive study and a good classification, it is also necessary for all the possible variables in effect to be taken into consideration. A disease, and its causes at the same time, should be studied by paying attention to the dynamics facilitating its spread and to its direct or indirect effects. Such a study requires the illumination of the different aspects of an issue that stems from many variables. When determining the processes related to how a genetically rooted disease spreads and its origins, the disease should be studied on a historical and social basis. A similar deduction can be made for deafness, which shows a genetic basis. The spread of deafness, for example, in Turkish society may be related to how the lifestyles of individuals within this society might have been subjected to various cultural and economic changes or transformations because of the disease. The approach of medical history could help in the detection of some viewpoints neglected through a purely medical approach.

At this stage, we should briefly talk about the Hittites within the context of our subject. The Hittites created an enormous civilization that was dominant in Anatolia

between approximately 1650 and 1200 B.C. The tablets in cuneiform script found in the Royal Archive or Bookstore in the Hittite capital in Çorum Boğazkale (Hattusa) during excavations that have been going on since 1906 have given us some information about the lifestyle of this civilization. As we have learned from these tablets, which number about 26,000 pieces, the Hittite civilization had been founded on the basic principle of tolerance instead of violence, not an eye for an eye but "the compensation approach for the punishment" instead and only with this characteristic, it became a distinguished civilization of its age. Today, we can still see the magnificent traces of the Hittites with the gigantic statues and sphinxes in Hattusa, who had a social structure that respected women, and it is noteworthy that they had a belief system open to the gods of foreign societies and that was, at the same time, a unifying one (1,2.). What kinds of data are present in such a society about how the deafness phenomenon was perceived?

In the Hittite documents, there is quite limited information related to physical disabilities. The data about the social status of the blind and deaf people are also quite limited (3,4). These data, indicate that deaf people were not given administrative posts, but they played roles within different aspects of the social life; for example, in some religious rituals. It has been understood from the detailed descriptions of various rituals that deaf people were generally given posts in places referred to as "the inner house", and that they performed various duties near the noblemen in the Royal household. Statements such as "head of the deaf people" and "the deaf man's

tumulus” are written on the social tablets. These expressions give some idea about the deaf people in Hittite society: they lived an isolated life and perhaps held marriages among themselves. However, in order to think more reasonably in detail, it is clear that we also need more information about the way of life of the deaf people, for example, under the Seljuk and Ottoman civilizations, which lived in Anatolia after the Hittites.

Certainly, we, as humans, will go on to produce assumptions and questions related to our past. As we go forward in this way, no doubt the history of medicine will

help us to explain the relations that perhaps we will never prove within real life and to fill in some gaps in the puzzle, also about deafness.

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