

The Etymology of Uriah the Hittite based on the Comparison of Hieroglyphic Luwian and the Indo-European Languages

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Before Bedřich Hrozný's (1917) decipherment of Hittite and its interpretation as an Indo-European language the Hittites were only known as one of the more or less obscure tribes mentioned in the Bible.

Perhaps the most famous biblical Hittite is mentioned in the Second Book of Samuel: Ūrîyāh ha-Hittî (Hebr. אֲוִרְיָהּ הַחִתִּי) from the land of Canaan, whose wife Bathsheba was seduced by king David. After she became pregnant as a result of the relationship, king David, unable to conceal his adultery, commanded that Uriah the Hittite be put on the front line and deserted by his comrades, as a result of which he was killed in battle.¹

Based on modern knowledge the biblical Hittites were from the late Neo-Hittite empire centered on Kizzuwatna, and were thus properly speaking Luwians rather than Hittites.² I will therefore investigate whether an Anatolian origin for the name Uriah can be demonstrated on the basis of the linguistic material, and in particular the (Hieroglyphic) Luwian corpus.³

A perfect match for Hebr. Ūrîyāh – except for the final -h, which can derivationally be explained in Hebrew⁴ – is indeed preserved in Hieroglyphic Luwian both in a noun as well as a related verbal stem

HLu. *urija-* (c.) 'commander, chief' (CHLu. 2.27.14, MAGNUS+ra/i-ia-zi)

HLu. *urija-* (vb.) 'be mighty' (CHLu. 10.14.16, MAGNUS+ra/i-ia-ri+i).⁵

¹For Uriah the Hittite in Bible, see especially 2 Samuel 11:3–4, 12:9–10, 23:8–39.

²For the Luwians, see Melchert 2003.

³For non-Anatolian etymological suggestions, see <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/uriah>.

⁴In the Hebrew name the letter he is used to indicate the vowel a (mater lectionis), see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mater_lectionis.

⁵pauci pro multis, cf. Hluwlex p. 176f.

In addition the Hieroglyphic Luwian name, defining the meaning of Uriah as approximately ‘lord, commander, chief’, reappears in the name of a king of nearby Cilicia at the time of Tiglatpileser III, Cil. *urija-ik-* (^{LÚ}c.) ‘Uriaik’ (NOMS. 1444, in Ass. *ur-ri-ia-ik*).

Finally, the derivative in **-ni-*, ostensibly the commonplace Luwian diminutive ending, is preserved in Hitt. *urija-ni-* (^{LÚ}c.) ‘Aufseher(?) : supervisor(?)’ (Tischler HEG U:96, *u-ri-an-ni-iš*, *u-ri-ia-an-ni-in*), a professional title clearly related to the Luwian base HLu. *urija-*, which confirms the broader Anatolian root.

The Indo-European origin of the name Uriah is suggested by a cognate preserved in Indo-Iranian, namely the Rig-Vedic neuter noun

RV. *vṛayas-* (n.) ‘Übermacht, erdrückende Gewalt’ (WbRV. 1363).

As Vedic defines a neuter PIE **uréios-* (n.) ‘superiority, supremacy, overwhelming might’ with a single **i̯*, we may infer the HLu. *i* in HLu. *urija-* stands for an etymological PIE **e* (or **ē*), and as the initial was vocalized on the basis of Hebrew, it was probably accented, that is HLu. *urija-* continues PIE **úrējo-* ‘ruler, lord, commander, chief(tain)’, a function confirmed for Uriah in Chronicles.⁶

Abbreviations

c.	– genus commune
Cil.	– Cilician
CHLu.	– Hawkins 2000
Hebr.	– Hebrew
HEG	– Tischler 1977-2016
Hitt.	– Hittite
HLu.	– Hieroglyphic Luwian
Hluwlex	– Raster 2017
n.	– neuter
NOMS.	– Laroche 1966
PIE	– Proto-Indo-European
WbRV.	– Grassmann 1996

References

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⁶Compare 1 Chronicles 11:10-11:41: “These also are the chief of the mighty men whom David had (...) 41: Uriah the Hittite, Zabab the son of Ahlai”.

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