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**TUŠRATTA’S DEFENSIVE STRATEGY:
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, REASONS
AND CONSEQUENCES FOR THE MITANNI EMPIRE**

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The Mitanni Empire has generally been relegated to a secondary role in Ancient Near Eastern history compared to the Hittites and Egyptians. This study reevaluates the focus, particularly on the strategic choices made during the reign of King Tušratta. Our analysis focuses specifically on the disparity in strategic efficacy observed during the critical reign of King Tušratta. The study analyses why Mitanni’s successful indirect defence strategy – a Fabian-like attrition doctrine – proved potent in deterring Egypt but turned into a catastrophe when applied against the Hittite King Šuppiluliuma I. This doctrine aimed to exhaust the logistics of distant expeditionary forces by utilizing the principle of deep terrain and limited resources. However, Tušratta’s adherence to this static strategic paradigm accelerated Mitanni’s decline by failing to adapt to the fundamentally shifting conditions of warfare in the 14th century BC and the new approach of the Hittite King. In response to the preceding strategic stalemates, Šuppiluliuma I implemented a sophisticated, multi-layered operational approach targeting the totality of Mitanni’s political and defence mechanisms. He strategically neutralized the state by exploiting its internal political fragmentation, evidenced by the Artatama II rebellion, and systematically severing its external alliances. He eliminated

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Mitanni's strategic depth by co-opting its peripheral vassals, notably Ugarit and Amurru, through a calculated fusion of diplomatic treaties and military coercion. This complex "divide and rule" strategy effectively paved the way for a devastatingly swift military strike, rendering Tušratta's one-dimensional, passive defence plan entirely ineffective and obsolete. Consequently, this article positions the collapse of Mitanni not as a mere military capitulation, but rather as the consequence of profound strategic shortsightedness and an organizational inability to adapt to evolving conflict dynamics. It demonstrates that the ultimate fate of an empire is contingent not solely upon relative military power but upon the leadership's adaptive capacity for strategic innovation.

Keywords: Mitanni Empire, Tušratta, Šuppiluliuma I, Vassals, Ancient Near East

Introduction

The Mitanni Empire was one of the most important states in the Ancient Near East, shaping the balance of power in the region from the 15th to the 13th century BC. Controlling the critical trade routes between Anatolia and Mesopotamia, the Mitanni exploited this strategic position to take advantage of the political vacuum in the region and gradually grew in power. Their dominance over the Euphrates River and its surroundings provided them not only with economic but also geopolitical advantages, enabling them to become a regional power acting as a bridge between Anatolia and Syria [Wilhelm 1989, 25–27; Bryce 2004, 31; Freu 2003, 41–45]. However, their expanding borders, encompassing significant parts of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Anatolia, brought the Mitanni into conflict with rival powers such as the Hittites, Egyptians, and Assyrians, forcing them into years of struggle.

The Mitanni were the main rival to all three great powers of the ancient world during their periods of rise. First, they challenged Egypt during the reign of Thutmose III, who brought Egypt to its greatest extent [Redford 2003, 17; Morris 2021, 132]. Then, they were the greatest rival of the Hittites during the reign of Šuppiluliuma I, who transformed the Hittites into an empire [Bryce 2004, 157–159; Bryce 2005, 156]. Finally, when the Assyrians broke free from Mitanni domination and became a great power once again, they took their place on the historical stage as Assyria's greatest rival during the reign of Aššur-uballiṭ I [Von Dassow 2022, 490]. However, while much attention has been paid to Egypt, the Hittites, and Assyria, the Mitanni seem to have been relegated to the role of a supporting actor

rather than a principal power in this equation. Accordingly, one of the aims of this study is to enrich the literature on the Mitanni and to analyze their political, strategic, and tactical abilities.

One of the key motivations for this study stems from the circumstances of Tušratta's accession to the Mitanni throne. When he took power, the state was facing internal problems and his brother had been killed [Moran 1992, 41–42; Bryce 2005, 156]. Although Tušratta's role in this incident is not fully known, internal turmoil ensued and external pressure increased [Mieroop 2007, 153]. In this ambiguous situation, the strategies pursued by Tušratta and the processes experienced by the state portray him as a king who led the empire to disaster [Von Dassow 2022, 504]. This study will examine the Tušratta's strategic choices, as well as the historical background of these decisions and the conditions of the empire at that time. Another important reason for this study is to seek the answer to the question: Why did Tušratta, who defeated the Hittite King Šuppiluliuma I in his first campaign, avoid confronting the Hittites and fighting in the second campaign? What was Tušratta's plan, and what was its historical background? Against whom was this defence plan implemented, and why was it successful? The paper seeks answers to why the same plan was successful against Egypt but turned into a great disaster against the Hittites.

This study is a case study showing that in the Ancient Near East, the fate of a state in the face of external pressures was largely determined by the interplay between internal consolidation processes and strategies of alliance management. This case reveals how ensuring political legitimacy, economic stability, and social consensus within the country strengthened the capacity to withstand external pressures, and how trust-building relationships with external actors, security guarantees, and economic integration mechanisms played a decisive role in preserving sovereignty and shaping long-term strategy.

Information about the Mitanni is available in documents written in Hurrian, as well as in the archives of states and empires such as the Hittites, Assyrians, Egyptians, and Babylonians, and in the Nuzi and Alalah archives, which cover different periods and political entities [Salvini 1998, 100; Von Dassow 2022, 457–467; Guisfre/Pisaniello 2025, 261–263]. The treaty made with Šattiwazza, known as CTH 52, is one of the most important records [Altman 2005, 43–48; Beckman

1999, 48–53]. The methodology of the study involves analyzing written and archaeological data in light of the aforementioned sources, establishing a theoretical framework to better understand the subject using historical methods, and subsequently conducting a historical analysis of the relevant events. However, one of the fundamental problems is that the location of the Mitanni capital, Washshuganni, has not yet been identified. Consequently, the available sources often originate from peripheral regions outside the Mitanni heartland around the Euphrates River, particularly from Nuzi, near modern-day Kirkuk. The fact that Nuzi had a primarily agricultural economy potentially skews the overall perspective on the Mitanni Empire [Maidman 2010, 1–14]. However, despite these shortcomings, it is still important that sources exist that can allow for the reconstruction of a historical narrative. This study utilizes contemporary scholarship in addition to the aforementioned primary sources.

The historical background of this period is directly linked to the power struggles that accompanied emergence of the Mitanni as a significant force on the historical stage. The collapse of the Old Assyrian Empire following the death of Shamshi-Adad I coupled with the fall of Mari created a significant power vacuum in the region [Hamblin 2006, 173; Liverani 2014, 291]. At this point, the Babylonian king Hammurabi came to the fore, but his kingdom quickly weakened and became vulnerable to the threat of the Kassites. However, with the fall of the Mari kingdom, the Hurrians established their dominance in the Middle Euphrates region without encountering significant resistance [Wilhelm 1989, 20]. Political changes in Anatolia during this period introduced a new power, the Hittites, who evolved from a small kingdom based in Hattusa into a major power in the region. However, the Hittites' conquest of Babylon during the reign of Muršili I and the turbulent period that followed benefited the Hurrians much more than the Hittites themselves. The Hurrians, who had been unable to establish a large state for centuries, filled the void left by the Hittites, who were on the verge of collapse due to internal strife following the assassination of Muršili I, their Babylonian conqueror [Dossow 2022, 81–83]. The Mitanni, who made Assyria a vassal state and drove the Hittites back from Syria, became the most powerful state in the region for almost two centuries. Historical sources cannot provide a clear answer to the critical question of why this

community, which had lived in scattered city-states for centuries, decided to unite [Kempinsky and Kořak 1982, 87–110; Bryce 2004, 31]. Within the political and military picture described above, the Euphrates River, which had long been an important border for states such as the Akkadians, Assyrians, and Hittites, defined the political boundaries of the period, provided the means to collect taxes, and served as an important route for military operations [Russell 1995, 57–64]. However, instead of waiting for the next power to dominate of the Euphrates River, the Hurrian communities established a new political order under their own control. As a result of this new approach and strategy, they became the new rulers of the Euphrates and its surroundings.

The Hurrians seized the major opportunity created by the regional instability resulting from the struggles of Assyria, Babylon, and the Hittites, as well as Egypt's internal problems. Indeed, around 1470 BC, the Mitanni Kingdom expanded its power westward, and The Hittites, shaken by royal murders following the reign of Mursili I, were unable to establish lasting dominance in the region. As a result, the Kingdom of Aleppo, which had regained its independence under the leadership of Ililima, became one of Mitanni's first targets. Idrimi, son of the king of Aleppo, lost his throne as a result of a rebellion supported by Mitanni and was only able to return to his throne with the pardon of the Mitanni king Barattarna [Wilhelm 1998, 25]. This situation proved that it was no longer possible to hold power in the region without the permission of the Mitanni king. Indeed, Barattarna organized campaigns to the west, bringing the cities in the region under his control and expanding Mitanni's borders to the Mediterranean Sea. With the inclusion of Kizziuwatna within these borders, the Mitanni kings became rulers of a vast territory that included significant part of Mesopotamia, the hinterland of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and the east-west vital routes extending to the Mediterranean. The Mitanni kings had earned a place for themselves among the *Great Kings* mentioned in the Amarna Letters [Liverani 2014, 291].

However, by the time of Tušratta, the political and military order the Mitanni kingdom had established was threatened by the accession of Šuppiluliuma I to the Hittite throne and the Hittites' renewed focus towards Syria, their traditional area of expansion since their founding. As a result of their struggle with the Hittites, the Mitanni lost their status as a great state during the reign of Tušratta and subsequently fell to the status of a vassal state.

Šuppiluliuma's First Attack: Tušratta's Strategic Successes and Weaknesses

The Hittites understood the importance of Syria early in their founding period and planned their strategy accordingly. The early initiatives of kings like, Hattusili I, and Muršili ultimately ended in failure due to internal conflicts [Macqueen 1986, 45; Van De Mieroop 2024, 122]. However, after resolving these internal problems, Šuppiluliuma I returned to the Syrian policy that his ancestors had unsuccessfully attempted to establish [Wilhelm 2015, 73; Harmansah 2007, 79].

After acceding to the Hittite throne, Šuppiluliuma I (c. 1350 BC – c. 1322 BC) relentlessly continued his military campaigns. He had already proven his military leadership under his father, Tudhaliya III, and had seized the throne from his brother. Meanwhile, in the Mitanni kingdom, Tušratta ascended the throne but was challenged by a pretender, Artatama II [Bryce 2004, 156–157]. Šuppiluliuma moved to take advantage of the weakness caused by this internal conflict and launched a campaign against the land of Isuwa, a Mitannian vassal. As Niccolo Machiavelli particularly emphasizes in his book *The Prince*, the reliability of vassals is fragile [Machiavelli IV]. In this war, one of the most important factors determining the outcome is the strategy pursued with regard to vassals. This maneuver led to a direct confrontation with Tušratta. According to a letter Tušratta wrote to the Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep III, the Mitanni king won a decisive victory. As proof, Tušratta sent gifts of spoils captured from the Hittites: a chariot, two horses, and two servants. Although the amount of spoils was small, this victory forced Šuppiluliuma to retreat [Moran 1992, 41–42; Goetze 1957, 63–73].

This first encounter showed Šuppiluliuma that Tušratta was a formidable enemy, one who could secure a victory despite losing territory, dealing with internal strife, and having his ally Egypt preoccupied with its own problems. The Hittite king must have realized that military force alone was not sufficient for ultimate success. It became clear that defeating Tušratta and destroying his empire required a more comprehensive strategy that combined political and military tactics. He therefore sought to isolate Tušratta from his main sources of support through a series of diplomatic alliances. This involved negotiating a treaty with Artatama II, the pretender to the Mitanni

throne, and recognizing him as the legitimate king of Mitanni in exchange for his support against Tušratta or at least his benevolent neutrality [Beckman 1999, 42–44].

At this point, rather than repeating what is already known, it is more important to focus on the debates and consequences of Šuppiluliuma I's first attack. Scholarly debate has not reached a clear conclusion as to whether this first battle was a major war, a border skirmish, or a trial operation. The ambiguity of the available sources opens the way for various interpretations. The general consensus is that the first encounter between these two states was not a major war. However, this study argues for a different interpretation based on the evidence of Šuppiluliuma I's own career.

Šuppiluliuma I is known to have been a very successful strategist even during his father's reign. He played a major role in the restoration of the Hittite kingdom and the establishment of the empire. During the reign of his father, Tudhaliya III, the kingdom's main focus was on campaigns aimed at reclaiming territory from enemy forces. Šuppiluliuma played a crucial role in these efforts, serving as his father's chief advisor, partner, and comrade-in-arms. These arduous campaigns ultimately led to the Hittites regaining control over their homeland and the territories they had previously lost. Although the texts of *The Deeds of Šuppiluliuma*, written by his son Muršili II tend to focus on Šuppiluliuma I, the influence of his father, Tudhaliya, should not be overlooked. Indeed, historical documents show that Šuppiluliuma I was extremely well-prepared under his father's tutelage and possessed excellent military and political skills. Notably, when he deposed his older brother, Tudhaliya the Younger, the loyalty he commanded from the state's leading figures suggests they viewed him as the most promising candidate for the kingdom's future. It seems unlikely that a commander, administrator, and strategist with such an impressive career would engage in a campaign for mere *trial* purposes.

Furthermore, starting with Sargon of Akkad, there was a strong tradition of propaganda that cultivated an image of invincibility for powerful emperors in the ancient Near East [Nigro 1998, 85–95; Westenholz 1983, 327–335]. While Hittite texts credit the gods for their victories, defeats are rarely mentioned in historical texts. This

silence is understandable, since defeats could trigger rebellions, weaken the state, and demoralize the army. Indeed, Šuppiluliuma's subsequent struggles with various problems in Anatolia support this judgment [Freu 2003, 104]. Therefore, categorizing Šuppiluliuma I's campaign as a trial or a minor border conflict does not seem reasonable or convincing. In addition, the Hittite belief that the gods punished them through their defeats could threaten the future of the state, as it could be interpreted as the king having lost the gods' favor.

When evaluating the available data suggesting that this war was not a simple conflict, the following reasoning emerges:

– Šuppiluliuma was an extremely successful and well-trained commander during his father's reign and therefore was capable of devising sophisticated strategies [Macqueen 1986, 46].

– It is known that Šuppiluliuma possessed not only military prowess but also exceptional diplomatic skills, making him a leader capable of calculating risks before blindly embarking on a major war [Weeden 2022, 576].

– In the Ancient Near East, defeats often shook a king's image of invincibility, supported by divine powers, which could trigger rebellions. Therefore, external defeats carried the risk of triggering internal conflicts [Kitchen 2003, 38–40; Podany 2015, 104; Bilgin 2018, 17–22]. For this reason, minor defeats sometimes carried the risk of a domino effect.

– Defeats could also demoralize vassals, pushing them to seek new patronage.

– Finally, the fact that the Hittite king was personally leading the war makes it unlikely that he would embark on a suicide mission into enemy territory with a small army.

Based on this reasoning, Šuppiluliuma may have planned to quickly break down the Mitanni defense lines with a *blitzkrieg*-like operation¹ after learning about internal divisions among the Mitanni.

¹ Blitzkrieg, a German term for lightning war, is a World War II military strategy based on a fast, powerful, and surprising attack to quickly overwhelm enemy defenses. The provided text suggests that similar tactics existed in antiquity, using units like armored cavalry and chariots to achieve a rapid breakthrough. However, it cautions that this ancient blitzkrieg should be viewed within its own technological limits, as it lacked modern elements like air support or firearms [Reilly 1940, 254; Bradford 2015, 74].

However, engaging in the direct combat that Šuppiluliuma desired for a quick victory, the Mitanni adopted a different strategy, switching to an indirect approach². As a result of the Mitanni king's refusal to engage in the decisive battle Šuppiluliuma sought, the Hittite king advanced deeper into enemy territory. At some point, he must have realized that he was now far from his logistical lines and had been drawn into enemy territory, perhaps exposed to a strategy of attrition. Šuppiluliuma must have concluded that the risk was increasing and withdrew his army without engaging in a major battle. It appears that the Mitanni applied an indirect strategy similar to the Fabian strategy [Liverani 2014, 239].

The most compelling evidence of this is how Šuppiluliuma later defeated the Mitanni by combining both direct and indirect strategies during the Great Syrian War. This earlier experience seemingly taught him how to counter Mitanni's defensive strategy, a lesson he later implemented with great success, demonstrating that this first campaign was more than a simple decision.

Several weaknesses undermined the Mitanni state's power at this point. First, its foreign relations were damaged and ties with Tušratta weakened because its key ally, Egypt, was preoccupied with its own internal problems. Internally, the state's inability to neutralize the threat of its rival Artatama II led to the emergence of a de facto dual leadership within the state, which was draining its resources. Furthermore, the power struggle with Artatama had a significant negative impact on the vassals, who were prone to exploiting such power vacuums for their own advantage. Finally, Tušratta's initial victory may have led him to believe that there would be no threat from the Hittites for a long time, causing him to become complacent. All these factors contributed to the conditions under which the defeat that led to the end of the Mitanni occurred and created a chain reaction. Moreover, Artatama's persistent claim to the throne suggests that Tušratta's legitimacy was being questioned. It was in this environment that the Mitanni were forced to go to war.

² The indirect approach is a strategic methodology focused on attaining objectives by circumventing direct confrontation with an adversary. It emphasizes the use of psychological disruption, deception, and the introduction of novel or asymmetrical factors to destabilize the opponent and secure victory [Hart 2012].



Fig. 1. As the army pursues the retreating enemy, the risks increase (Google Earth).

Considering the letter sent by Tušratta to Egypt, the Mitanni king states in the letter known as EA 17 that he won the war [Moran 1992, 41–42; Bryce 2005, 157]. Assuming that Tušratta was the victor of the first war would align with Tušratta’s letter, one of the rare historical documents we have on the subject. Furthermore, it is also possible that this war was not a major conflict and that the Hittites were defeated through an indirect strategy similar to the Fabian Strategy³. Therefore, it is also necessary to examine how Tušratta, who was successful and victorious in the first war, was ultimately defeated and what underlying weaknesses plagued the state despite his initial victory.

Why Did Tušratta Choose a Defensive Strategy?

In his first war with the Hittite king, the Mitanni king Tušratta was in a better position than in the second war, the Great Syrian War. At that time, his network of allies was still intact, and he was able to make strategic moves that forced the Hittites to retreat. However, it is necessary to analyze why Tušratta chose a defensive strategy in both the first and second wars.

³ The Fabian Strategy was implemented by Fabius Maximus Verrucosus in response to the strategies employed by Hannibal during the Second Punic War [Erdkamp 1992, 127–140]. It is known that the Mitanni people employed a similar strategy. However, due to insufficient data, it would be incorrect to claim that it was precisely the Fabian Strategy. On the other hand, although the theory is attributed to Fabius Maximus, it was proposed to the Persian Commanders by Memnon of Rhodes before the battle of Granicus during Alexander’s Asian Campaign (Arrian I, 19).

Historical Background and Fundamental Principles of the Strategy

Given their geography, the Mitanni, primary target for Egypt, the Hittites, and Assyria, had to fight against major powers many times throughout their history to maintain their sovereignty. One of these struggles took place during the reign of Thutmose III, one of Egypt's most powerful pharaohs. Despite suffering defeats in battles, the Mitanni managed to send the pharaoh home empty-handed. Analysing how this strategy was formed is crucial to explaining the hypothesis of this study. This is because a similar strategy would be applied against the Hittites in later periods, where it yielded the desired result initially but later turned into a major disaster for the Mitanni.

The great war between Egypt and Mitanni, considered the peak of his military career, was Thutmose III's eighth campaign, launched in his 33rd regnal year when he crossed the Euphrates River to invade Mitanni territory [Cline and O'connor 2006, 336]. The campaign began with the invasion of the lands of Katna. At the same time, uprisings broke out in the Negev in southern Palestine, and a force was sent there. Commander Amenemhab participated in the Negev campaign and took prisoners, then travelled north from Palestine and Syria to join the pharaoh. The Egyptian army advanced north from Katna and fought a battle west of Aleppo [Faulkner 1946, 40]. Amenemhab recorded that he took prisoners and booty at this location. The next significant event was the battle fought in the territory of Carchemish, as capturing this region would provide Thutmose III with the most suitable point to cross the Euphrates River [Gabriel 2009, 169, 170].

After crossing the Euphrates River, a clash ensued that ended in victory for the Egyptians. Although details are limited, it appears that the Egyptian army pursued the fleeing enemy along the river for some time. The Mitanni King reportedly fled in fear to another country, a distant place and the Egyptian records described his country as the land of Nahrin, abandoned by its lord out of fear [Wilhelm 1989, 24–25; Younger 2016, 96–100]. Thutmose III then easily plundered the lands immediately east of the Euphrates River. He did not penetrate deep into the heart of Mitanni and did not reach its capital, Washshuganni. To commemorate this victory, Thutmose III erected his own stele on the east bank of the river. Although Thutmose III viewed Mitanni as a vassal state after this campaign, Mitanni's dominance in the

region was not significantly affected, and Mitanni retained its status as a great power [Redford 2003, 222–228].

When analysing the strategy pursued by the Mitanni at this point, the first thing to note is the propaganda element in royal inscriptions. To give an example from Egypt, according to the writings of Ramesses II, he inflicted a heavy defeat on the Hittites [Kitchen 2003, 38–40; Bryce 2005, 235–241]. However, the fact that Kadesh, the real reason for the war, remained in Hittite hands shows that the war did not end as Egypt had hoped. At this point, it would not be quite right to question the success achieved by Thutmose III. For the pharaoh achieved a historic victory and managed to reach the borders of Anatolia. However, the implication in the text that the Mitanni fell into a vassal state [Reisner 1921, 68] and the strategic choices of the Mitanni should be discussed. In fact, according to the pharaoh's account, the Mitanni army, unable to face the pharaoh, retreated out of cowardice and virtually left the battlefield to the Egyptian army. However, analysing the Mitanni strategy suggests that despite Egypt's initial logistical success in reaching the Euphrates, the Mitanni knew that the Egyptian army could not remain in the region for long and would eventually be forced to retreat due to the impossibility of unlimited logistics. Thus, instead of engaging in an all-out war against the pharaoh, they embarked on a Fabian Strategy-like retreat designed to minimize their losses. Therefore, even though the pharaoh advanced into Mitanni territory, as soon as the Egyptian army withdrew, the Mitanni regained control of the region. Another clue to the Mitanni strategy lies in the nobles captured by the pharaoh. They also served as part of the strategy of attrition. Ultimately, Thutmose III, who won the battle, lost the war, while the Mitanni, who lost the battle, won the war, and due to internal problems in Egypt, Thutmose III's success was wasted. As a result, thanks to their successful strategies, the Mitanni were able to hold on to their territories without even engaging in a major war.

Ultimately, the changing geopolitical landscape, particularly the rise of the Hittites, eventually pushed Mitanni and Egypt towards diplomacy. The two powers, beginning with Amenhotep II, achieved peace through dynastic marriages, such as the union between Mitanni Princess Keluhepa and Amenhotep III [Schulman 1979, 177–186; Freu 2003, 92]. This alliance was reinforced by gift exchanges and diplomatic correspondence, as exemplified in the *Mitanni Letter*. However, internal turmoil in Egypt during the reign of Akhenaten and Hittite

pressure on Mitanni weakened the partnership between the two countries [Bryce 2014, 41]. Ultimately, the campaigns of Thutmose III symbolically expanded Egypt's influence, but it was not possible to establish permanent control over Syria, and diplomacy became the dominant tool in Mitanni-Egyptian relations due to common threats.

The strategic and challenging geography held by the Mitanni facilitated a successful defensive strategy, making it difficult for enemy states to reach deep into their territory, allowing them to achieve their desired outcome. This success may have established a tradition of defensive strategy. While this strategy initially saved the state, it ultimately became the very strategy that led the state to disaster.

The Collapse of Tušratta's Plan: Why Did the Strategy That Worked Before Failed?

Šuppiluliuma, who failed to achieve the desired result in his first attack on Tušratta, adopted a multifaceted divide-and-rule strategy that combined direct and indirect approaches [Bryce 2014, 41]. First, he exploited the fact that Tušratta, whose accession to the throne was also accompanied by a rebellion, was unable to fully consolidate his power. Šuppiluliuma, who made an agreement with Tušratta's rival Artatama II, created a de facto dual administration in the state and also supported rebels opposing Tušratta, encouraging them to overthrow him [Beckman 1999, 48–53; Altman 2005, 43–48].

Šuppiluliuma's second important move was to act with extreme caution in his relations with Egypt until the Mitanni state was neutralized and to take precautions to prevent the two great states from uniting against him. At this point, he did not intervene with some of Egypt's vassals; in fact, according to Šuppiluliuma's own words, he had established very close ties with Egypt [Bryce 2005, 161].

Šuppiluliuma developed a special policy towards the vassal states in Syria, made various agreements, and attempted to draw the vassals supporting Mitanni to his side. Through diplomatic means, Šuppiluliuma attempted to persuade states affiliated with or allied to Mitanni to switch their allegiance to Hatti. The most important example of this is the kingdom of Nuhashshi, located between the Euphrates and Orontes rivers. Before his year-long Syrian campaign, Šuppiluliuma succeeded in forming an alliance with Sharrupshi, one of the kings of this kingdom. However, this initial attempt to secure Nuhashshi became complicated when Sharrupshi was assassinated by his family

and the kingdom was returned to Mitanni before Šuppiluliuma could fully solidify relations [Bryce 2014, 42–45].

He also made overtures to the kingdom of Ugarit in northwestern Syria. The king of Ugarit initially tried to remain neutral or form an alliance with Egypt. After the king's death, Šuppiluliuma contacted his successor, Niqmaddu II, and succeeded in drawing him into an alliance. When Niqmaddu II was attacked by Mitanni's allies, Šuppiluliuma remained loyal to the alliance and sent an expeditionary force to help him. Šuppiluliuma exploited existing tensions within Egypt's sphere of influence in Syria. He established relations with vassal kings who were under Egyptian control but wanted to break free from Egypt. In particular, he developed relations with Aziru of Amurru and Aitakkama of Qadesh. His actions on the border of Egyptian territory raised concerns that these states might break away from Egypt's sphere of influence. These efforts to establish relations laid the groundwork for these states eventually becoming Hittite vassals, but their formal recognition as Hittite vassals and their status occurred after Šuppiluliuma's main military intervention in Syria [Bryce 2005, 175–178].

These diplomatic efforts and attempts to form alliances were important steps taken by Šuppiluliuma before and during the Great Syrian War to weaken Mitanni and secure potential allies or at least intended neutrality from the rulers of other major powers such as Syria and Egypt. These steps paved the way for his military conquests, which would later reshape the political landscape. Šuppiluliuma's preparations for the Great Syrian War went beyond simple military readiness; they were comprehensive and multifaceted. They involved a sophisticated process of diplomacy, alliance-building, and internal consolidation that lasted several years. Divorcing the queen, the mother of his five sons, and marrying the daughter of the King of Babylon, this could be seen as a one of diplomatic moves against Mitanni Kings marital alliance with kings of Egypt [Leick 2009, 505; De Martino 2013, 65–76]. The key steps of this strategy can be summarized as follows:

- Supporting internal unrest to weaken Mitanni (Artatama as a Pretender).
- Launching the invasion from an unexpected point (Antaratli of Alzi, vassal of Mitanni).
- Crushing Mitanni's defense lines with a swift and rapid attack (Blitzkrieg-like).

- Capturing the capital (Direct Attack) to shake the state's material and morale and discourage resistance among Mitanni's vassals.
- After capturing the capital, turning to the vassals (Indirect Strategy).
- Isolating and conquering the vassals to ensure they cannot be of any help before final collapse of the weakened Mitanni state.

Šuppiluliuma then launched the Great Syrian War (c. 1340 BC), rapidly invading Isuwa and Mitanni territory, capturing and plundering the capital Washshuganni [Beckman 1999, 48–53]. Tušratta was caught unprepared by the speed and violence of the Hittite advance and was forced to abandon his capital and flee. During these campaigns, Mitanni's vassals in Syria either switched sides or were conquered. For example, Ugarit became an ally of the Hittites through diplomacy. Amurru, initially a vassal of Egypt, declared its allegiance to Hatti around 1325 BC under the leadership of its ruler Aziru [Beal 2011, 587]. The king of Byblos, Rib-Hadda, also requested help, stating that Abdi-Ashirta (Aziru's father) was forming alliances against Gubla [Bryce 2014, 50].

The answer to why Tušratta's strategy against Šuppiluliuma failed lies in the strategies he chose. The fact that the Mitanni were embroiled in a civil war was Tušratta's greatest disadvantage against the Hittite attack. This is because he had to deal with both internal and external enemies at the same time. Tušratta was unable to counter Šuppiluliuma's divide and rule strategy.

Tušratta's probable plan was to establish deep relations with Egyptian pharaohs, including Amenhotep III and Akhenaten, through marriage negotiations and gift exchanges. This alliance secured a land agreement that allowed Egypt to accept Mitanni claims in northern Syria while retaining control over coastal and southern Syria. Furthermore, he expected unwavering loyalty to support the defence of vassal states in Syria, such as Carchemish, Aleppo, Mukish, Nuhashshi, and Qatna. Furthermore, his request for gold in his letter provides an important clue that the state was struggling with economic problems [Cline 2025, 158]. However, despite the established alliance, Egypt did not provide Tušratta with significant military assistance during Šuppiluliuma's major Syrian campaigns. This lack of intervention may have stemmed from internal political instability in Egypt (such as the end of the Aten cult and a return to traditional power structures) or from Šuppiluliuma's diplomatic efforts to maintain

peaceful relations with Egypt. At this point, Tušratta's plan failed to have the expected impact due to Egypt's internal problems and the Hittite king's careful planning.



Fig. 2. How Tušratta's strategy was undermined
(Background P. L. Kessler)

The neutralization of the vassals, whom Tušratta had placed his trust in, was the event that determined the fate of the Mitanni state. This is because Šuppiluliuma, who pursued an indirect strategy here, used Tušratta's vassals to engage the Hittites in a proxy war, which resulted in Šuppiluliuma quickly redesigning the region during a period when Egypt remained passive. This phase, carried out through vassals, resembles the Second Punic War, where Hannibal, who had never been defeated in Italy, was forced to retreat with the loss of Spain and Rome's attack on Africa. A similar situation occurred here, and the outcome of the war was determined by strategic moves made through vassals.

The collapse of the Mitanni Empire was sealed with the fall of Carchemish to Šuppiluliuma [Hoffner 2003, 190]. Ultimately, Tušratta was assassinated in an internal coup carried out by members of the

Mitannian elite, which prevented further organized resistance. [Wilhelm 1989, 37, 121; Freu 2003, 121].

Conclusion

This study focuses on the Mitanni Empire, which is generally mentioned in scholarship of the Ancient Near East in relation to the Hittite or Egyptian empires and is seen as a kind of supporting actor. It subjects its political, military, and strategic decisions, particularly during the reign of King Tušratta, to detailed analysis. The analysis clearly shows that the Mitanni possessed a unique defensive tradition that enabled them to maintain their existence and regional power even during the rise of three great empires (Egypt, Hittite, Assyrian). This strategy was primarily based on an indirect approach, similar to the Fabian Strategy, which avoided direct and decisive field battles and aimed to wear down the enemy by straining their logistical lines and ultimately forcing them to retreat.

This study examines the historical development and collapse of King Tušratta's defense strategies by focusing on the dynamic geopolitics of the Ancient Near East from the perspective of the Mitanni Empire. The analysis illuminates how Mitanni successfully applied this indirect strategy (a Fabian-like attrition strategy), its primary tool in its struggle for survival, against Egypt, but why the same strategy turned into a major disaster against the Hittite King Šuppiluliuma I.

The main finding of the study is that the success of a strategy is not absolute but depends on the context and conditions of the time. The Mitanni successfully applied this defensive strategy against the powerful Egyptian Pharaoh Thutmose III, forcing the Egyptian army to retreat due to logistical difficulties and internal crises, thereby maintaining their regional dominance. However, Tušratta's attempt to repeat the same strategy against Šuppiluliuma I's Hittites resulted in a major catastrophe.

The failure of this strategy can be attributed to several critical factors:

1. **Dynamic Enemy/Static Strategy:** Tušratta's strategy was static. Complacent from his previous success, he ignored how the Hittite king had adapted after an initial defeat and shifted the battlefield to the diplomatic arena. Šuppiluliuma first destroyed Mitanni's strategic buffer zones and logistical depth through proxy wars and vassal recruitment (Ugarit, Amurru), rendering Mitanni's indirect defense mechanism inoperable.

2. Need for an Inclusive Strategy: The Mitanni Empire relied heavily on a single defense doctrine, but failed to manage other crucial strategic components such as consolidating internal politics and actively maintaining its network of allies. The dual leadership created by Artatama and the loss of authority over the vassals had already weakened the foundations of the state before the Hittite attack.

3. Vassal Unreliability and Internal Division: Tušratta's trust in his vassals proved to be a critical weakness. Antaratli of Alzi's agreement with the Hittite king left the Mitanni heartland defenseless. Simultaneously, Tušratta's vassals in Syria failed to support the king and instead sought to secure their own positions in the new political order, resulting in the collapse of the Mitanni Empire.

Furthermore, two historical examples highlight, two important pieces of information are crucial in understanding the difficulty of establishing stable governance in the region. The first of these is that Šuppiluliuma, despite all his successes, inadvertently caused the rise of Assyria. This situation demonstrates that controlling the political actors in the region was nearly impossible. The second example can be taken from the Assyrian Empire. The state, which began to rise during the reign of Aššur-uballiṭ I of Assyria, was still unable to control the Mitanni territories for centuries. Even the great Assyrian Emperor Sargon II was killed during an operation against Tabal, a country which was later established in the Kizzuwatna territories, a former Mitanni vassal. This demonstrates the difficulty of establishing political order in this region. This situation provides extremely important data for understanding the political success of the Mitanni.

This article presents an important case study showing that internal consolidation and allied governance in the face of external pressures determine the fate of a state. It also shows that no military doctrine is universally effective, as one strategic doctrine may collapse when confronted with another.

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ОБОРОННА СТРАТЕГІЯ ТУШРАТТИ: ІСТОРИЧНІ ПЕРЕДУМОВИ, ПРИЧИНИ ТА НАСЛІДКИ ДЛЯ ІМПЕРІЇ МІТАННІ

В історії Стародавнього Близького Сходу імперії Мітанні зазвичай відводили другорядну роль порівняно з хеттами та єгиптянами. Це дослідження переоцінює такий підхід, зосереджуючись, зокрема, на стратегічних рішеннях, ухвалених під час правління царя Тушратти. Наш аналіз присвячений саме невідповідності у стратегічній ефективності, що спостерігалася під час критично важливого правління царя Тушратти. У дослідженні аналізується, чому успішна стратегія непрямой оборони Мітанні, доктрина виснаження на кшталт Фабієвої, виявилася дієвою для стримування Єгипту, але обернулася катастрофою при застосуванні проти хетського царя Суппілуліума I. Ця доктрина мала на меті виснажити логістику віддалених експедиційних сил шляхом використання принципу глибокої території та обмежених ресурсів. Однак дотримання Тушраттою цієї статичної стратегічної парадигми прискорило занепад Мітанні через нездатність адаптуватися до докорінних змін в умовах ведення війни у XIV столітті до н. е. та нового підходу хетського царя. У відповідь на попередні стратегічні патові ситуації, Суппілуліума I застосував витончений, багатошаровий оперативний підхід, спрямований на всю сукупність політичних та оборонних механізмів Мітанні. Він стратегічно нейтралізував державу, користуючись її внутрішньою політичною фрагментацією, свідченням чого є повстання Аргатами II, і систематично розриваючи її зовнішні союзи. Він ліквідував стратегічну глибину Мітанні, переманюючи на свій бік її периферійних васалів, зокрема Угарит та Амурру, шляхом прорахованого поєднання дипломатичних угод і військового примусу. Ця складна стратегія “розділяй і володарюй” фактично підготувала ґрунт для нищівного та швидкого військового удару, зробивши одновимірний, пасивний план оборони Тушратти абсолютно неефективним і застарілим. Отже, ця стаття розглядає крах Мітанні не як просту військову капітуляцію, а радше як наслідок глибокої стратегічної недалекоглядності та організаційної нездатності адаптуватися до динаміки конфлікту, що постійно змінювалася. Вона демонструє, що кінцева доля імперії залежить не лише від відносної військової могутності, а й від адаптивної здатності керівництва до стратегічних інновацій.

Ключові слова: Імперія Мітанні, Тушратта, Суппілуліума I, Васали, Стародавній Близький Схід

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