

The ancient Near East in contact: an introduction to the Egypt-Mitanni affairs in the Amarna Letters

*O Oriente Próximo em contato: uma introdução às relações
Egito-Mitani nas Cartas de Amarna*

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Priscila Scoville¹

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1. PhD candidate at Universidade
Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.
Representative of the Association for
Students of Egyptology (ASE).
[ORCID: 0000-0003-1193-1321](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1193-1321)

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to provide an introduction to the study of diplomatic relations in the Ancient Near East, more specifically during the so-called Amarna Age. A field so commonly dismissed among scholars of International Relations, ancient diplomacy can be a fertile ground to understand the birth of pre-modern political contacts and extra-societal issues. In order to explore this topic, I will make use of the Amarna Letters, a collection of tablets, found in the modern city of Tell el-Amarna, that represents one of the first complex diplomatic systems in the world (a system that is subsequent to the Ages of Ebla and Mari). I will also discuss the context of the relationships established and the affairs between the kingdoms of Egypt and Mitanni, using as a case study to demonstrate how the rhetoric and the political arguments were present – and fundamental – to the understanding of diplomacy in Antiquity.

Keywords: Amarna Letters, Mitanni, Egypt, Near East

RESUMO

O objetivo deste trabalho é apresentar uma introdução ao estudo das relações diplomáticas no antigo Oriente Próximo, mais especificamente durante a chamada Era de Amarna. Sendo um campo comumente esquecido entre estudantes das Relações Internacionais, a diplomacia antiga pode ser uma área fértil para o entender o nascimento de nascimento dos contatos políticos e questões extrassociais pré-modernas. Para explorar este assunto, irei utilizar as Cartas de Amarna, uma coleção de tabletes, encontrados na atual Tell el-Amarna, que representam um dos primeiros sistemas diplomáticos complexos do mundo (sistema este que é subsequente às Eras de Ebla e Mari). Irei, também, discutir o contexto dos relacionamentos estabelecidos e as relações entre os reinos do Egito e Mitani, usando-os como caso de estudo para demonstrar como a retórica e os argumentos políticos estavam presentes – e eram fundamentais – para entender a diplomacia na antiguidade.

Palavras-chave: Cartas de Amarna, Mitani, Egito, Oriente Próximo

Introduction

There is a tendency, nowadays, to isolate ancient civilizations, as if they did not interact with one another. However, this was certainly not the case. Ancient societies and past civilizations were not isolated. Kingdoms and Empires of the past interacted with each other, with different levels of communication. These webs of contact in the ancient world could also be seen as a form of influence, whether direct or indirect. The intensive contact between polities stands as one of the reasons for the presence of mixed cultures and religions in antiquity, for example².

Since the discovery of the famed Amarna Letters, our notions about these ancient relationships have been changing. We are now aware of the political and economic interests of kings that interacted with Egypt. The goal of this paper, then, is to introduce these ancient contacts and political communications, by focusing on the relationship between Egypt and Mitanni as a case study. The Amarna Letters are a great source into the modes of communication of the past, and we could even argue – as I will – that these contacts, preserved to us through the tablets of Amarna, configured a proper, functioning diplomatic system.

The concept of diplomatic system, however, needs to be clarified beforehand. By definition, diplomacy is the process by which different peoples negotiate their interests. The study of diplomatic and international relations, i.e. the academic discipline of International Relations (IR), is somewhat new, and tend to be limited to the modern world. If we consider that foreign contacts has existed for at least 4300 years (PODANY, 2010, p. 19-20), for the major part of history, diplomatic interactions are mostly ignored or overlooked in IR (COHEN; WESTBROOK, 2000, p. 4)³.

There is a discussion concerning the extent to which the Amarna Letters actually embody a diplomatic system or not. In my view, it does embody a diplomatic system, but a pre-Modern one. At first glance, a diplomatic system aims to reach an agreement between polities in a variety of aspects. Some norms and institutions are set in order to reach this goal. Some researchers believe that the Amarna System cannot be classified as a diplomatic system because it lacks supranational mechanisms (REDE, 2007). However, I consider the “divine jurisdiction” a sufficient condition for a diplomatic system: the “divine jurisdiction” is the system of thought that postulates that divine rules were above any legal triggers of men and, therefore, were to be universally respected – any man, any group or tribe would be under scrutiny and judgement of a divine being (WESTBROOK, 2000, p. 31). In a world where gods prevail, respecting what was considered to be their wishes and rules would help to establish, define and maintain societal and political behaviors and norms – even across different groups and pantheons. In other words, the lack of supranational mechanism was compensated by the idea of a “divine legal system”. In this context, the Amarna Letters are a key source to clarify the origins of diplomacy and foreign relations, even if these ideas, as properly formulated concepts, still did not exist and operated differently than they do today. Certainly, the kings of the Amarna Age helped shape international relations as we know them,

2. To illustrate the influence of communications and trades on a cultural level, we can look at the Egyptian case: their pantheon included foreign Semitic gods, such as Astarte, Baal, and Reshep (all three present in Egypt since the 18th Dynasty (HART, 2005, p. 34, 43, 137).

3. Part of the reason can be explained by the very name of the discipline. Studying an *international* relation implies the presence of two or more nations, therefore, the period that precedes the formation of Nation-States is rarely contemplated by scholars.

although they were not aware of it and did not have a proper name (a modern concept, in other words) for what they were doing.

In fact, the Amarna System was based on more ancient methods of interaction. Historiography understands that there were three “diplomatic ages” in the Ancient Near East, and the Amarna system is just the last of them (PODANY, 2010). First, there was the Ebla Age, c. 2500–2000 BCE, in which a simple form of contact and negotiation between Syria and Mesopotamia was established, but was also expanded to include some trading groups from distant lands, such as Egypt. Then began the Mari Age, c. 2000–1595; while the interaction was still between Syria and Mesopotamia, it was slowly expanding. At this point, the Near East was filled with cities competing for lands and power, and, because of that, negotiations were aimed at forming alliances. Diplomacy appears precisely as a tool to establish hegemonic forces that would influence and normatize certain regions. Diplomacy, thus, would help the involved kingdoms to have strong military power and to conquer, and influence minor kingdoms. One example of this can be understood by the reign of Shamshi-Adad. He was the king of a region between the Zagros Mountains and the Euphrates River and conquered the cities of Mari and Ekallatum. To guarantee that they would still respond to him, Shamshi-Adad gave the cities to his sons, Yasmah-Addu and Ishme-Dagan, so they could rule as viceroys. The governance was made through letters exchanged between the king and his viceroys (PODANY, 2010, pp. 68–69).

However, kingdoms still fought each other, which is attested by the recapturing of Mari by Zimri-Lim, and his subsequent fragile alliances with Hammurabi from Babylon (VAN DE MIEROOP, 2005, p. 64). Eventually, because of these escalating conflicts, a moment of fullcrisis began (c. 1595–1400) – which sometimes is even called ‘Dark Ages’ (VAN DE MIEROOP, 2007). It was not a long period, but it lasted enough to rearrange the distribution of power in the region. When the Amarna Age began, c. 1400–1300, diplomacy spread through the Near East and, having learned from earlier mistakes, kings probably decided that it would be profitable to establish (and follow) a system of contact which had solid customs, rules, and conventions to be followed.

The points I have presented so far have to be kept in mind in order to better understand this “birth” of diplomacy. As my purpose here is to provide some basis for those who are interested in this kind of investigation or study, I believe that not only some aspects of the history of ancient diplomacy, but also the very context of the research field (in this case, IR) needs to be clarified. From this point onwards, then, this paper will be more focused on this goal: an introduction to the Egypt-Mitanni affairs in the Amarna Letters and how they can be seen as a prime example of early diplomacy. The discussion will be divided into three parts: the first and the second are the historical and archaeological contexts in general and in the Amarna Age. These topics will give us support to understand conventions and actions in the letters. The third part is more focused, with a brief analysis of the relationship between the Mitannian king Tushratta, and the Pharaoh Akhenaton.

Historical Background

4. In short, the Amarna Period is known by Akhenaten's elevation of Aten as a sole god, incorporating in him all other deities. With this, Egyptians transformed not only the religion and its cults, but everyday life also changed, as every aspect of life was connected. For more: Aldred (1994); Dodson (2009), Dodson (2014) and Watterson (2002).

The Amarna Letters were discovered in 1887 at Tel el-Amarna, both the correspondence and the period are named after it. The city was once called Akhetaten and it was the stage of many changes in Ancient Egypt⁴. However, Akhetaten did not last long: the city was built at the behest of pharaoh Akhenaten, and shortly after his death, it was abandoned. These letters therefore cover a brief period of time. Much of this correspondence was sent to Akhenaten, but some of it was sent to Amenhotep III, Akhenaten's father, in Thebes (the previous capital) and were taken by Akhenaten to his new city. There are a few others sent to a third pharaoh, probably Tutankhamon or Semenkhare (MORAN, 1992, p. xxxv). It does not mean, however, that the negotiations were restricted to these kings. In fact, there is evidence of trades with Tothmes IV (EA 29 *apud* RAINEY, 2015, p.302-303) and, as pointed out by Betsy Bryan (2003, p. 51), it is possible that the marriage of Tothmes IV with a Mitannian princess was a renewal of an alliance already established by Amenhotep II.

The letters are written in dialects of Akkadian, with some exceptions: EA 24 in Hurrian, and EA 31-32 in Hittite (MORAN, 1992, pp. xix – xxi). The usage of the Akkadian language, even before the Amarna Age, shows the existence of a seemingly *lingua franca*, conventioned as a language of negotiations between kings throughout western Asia. Although Akkadian was that *lingua franca*, “the vassals relied on a local version of the Akkadian containing many words and grammatical forms from their own regional dialect” (COHEN; WESTBROOK, 2000, p. 9–10). In this period, to be a “vassal” means to be a minor kingdom that was subjected to one of the Great Powers (i.e. Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Hatti, Mitanni).

There were three types of correspondence: the ones making requests, the ones sending gifts, and the mixed ones. The major part of the collection is composed by this combined version, containing both requests and gifts. Therefore, we can assume that this was a common convention, and kings would expect to receive gifts with the letters. Furthermore, there were correspondences of two natures: administrative (exchanged with vassals) or imperial (exchanged with Great Kings or the Independent States)⁵.

Another important element to have in mind when discussing the tablets found in Amarna is that the only letters that we have are the received ones, that is, the ones sent to Egypt⁶ (mostly by Egyptian Vassals). The Great Powers, on the other hand, were major kingdoms, with political and economic influence upon others. In spite of the great amount of “vassal letters”, there is also a decent number of letters sent from these so-called Great Kings – and some of these are the ones we will be investigating in this paper.

This correspondence dates from Egypt's 18th Dynasty, which marked a moment of expansion and power. Babylon and Hatti were already in contact and had many conflicts with one another; Mitanni had just consolidated itself and was taking control of northern Syria; Assyria had broken free from the Mitannian rule and had made itself a Great Power. Egypt was the last one to concur space between the Great Kings. Egypt,

5. Although Raymond Cohen and Raymond Westbrook (2000, p. 6) categorize the letters in three types (Great Power, Independent States, and Vassals), I believe that it is better to separate according to their structure: parity or subjection. Westbrook (2000, p. 39), later in the same book, uses this kind of categorization.

6. There are exceptions: letters EA 1, EA 5, EA 14, EA 30, EA 99, EA 163, EA 367, EA 369 and EA 370 were written by Pharaohs and EA 96, EA 333 and EA 382 by Egyptian Officials.

before becoming an empire (as we shall see next), was quite isolated. Of course, contacts existed, but it had only grown into diplomatic matters after the Hyksos⁷ were expelled from Egypt.

During the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1759–1539) Egypt was divided. Hyksos and Thebans fought for control of the area. The Hyksos were ruling Northern Egypt, centered in a city called Avaris, while the Thebans controlled most regions that composed the Upper Egypt. There was also another conflict: the rulers of Kush were a threat in the South. Thus, the Thebans were stuck between two enemies. The Kamose stele described the situation. It says:

(One) prince is in Avaris, another is in Ethiopia, and (here) I sit associated with an Asiatic and a Negro! Each man has his slice of this Egypt, dividing up the land with me. I cannot pass by him as far as Memphis, the waters of Egypt, (but), behold, he has Hermopolis. No man can settle down, being despoiled by the imposts of the Asiatics. (PRITCHARD, 1969, p. 232)⁸.

After a long conflict and siege, the Thebans finally won. Notwithstanding, Egypt had not solved all its issues yet and this was only the beginning of Egypt's external policy. The kings that came after the end of the Second Intermediate Period inaugurated a whole new era for Egypt: The New Kingdom (c. 1539 - 1077). At this moment, Egypt needed to increase its political power both within and outside its borders and, to do that, the Pharaohs had to project their influence and prove their strength. To deal with this kind of problem, kings of the early 18th Dynasty (c. 1539 – 1292) promoted campaigns in the East.

First, Ahmose sent a military expedition to the east, to Sharuhem (southwest of modern Gaza), defeating the Hyksos once and for all. Then, Amenhotep I resisted Kush's attacks, fortifying Egypt's strength at home. Tothmes I came next. He went with his army to the Euphrates River, in Carchemish – at the Mitannian border. Tothmes's conquests, however, were not effective and followed the Hittite tendency of looting and leaving. Because of that, his successors did not go so far. Tothmes II went to Niya, on the east bank of the Orontes River. After that, Hatshepsut left the military campaigns aside and focused on economic affairs, with the "Punt Expedition" being the most famous exploit of her reign. Then, came Tothmes III. His most famous and decisive military expedition was against Meggido. This campaign was responsible for finally establishing Egypt's power in the Near East. His successor, Amenhotep II, kept Egypt stable and, thus, guaranteed the rise of Egypt as a Great Power.

Although it is not certain if the Near Eastern diplomatic system was already used in Egypt during the reign of Tothmes III, we know that the contacts that he made were fundamental to establish the diplomatic parameters that would follow. It was during this period that the first gifts from Babylon and Hatti were sent to Egypt, for example (DODSON, 2014, pp. 6–7). At this point, the ancient Near East was leaving behind a moment of crisis and recreating itself. New military and economic techniques were developed. Kingdoms like Hatti and Mitanni rose and gained strength. Mitanni expanded and took northern Syria, Babylon was now under the Kassite Dynasty and Hatti had consolidated its power in Anatolia. They started to communicate with one another in order to maintain their in-

7. The word "Hykso" is a Greek adaptation from Egyptian 'ḥq3w-ḥswt', meaning "rulers of foreign lands". According to Manetho the Hyksos invaded Egypt and were very hostiles. This idea followed Manetho through other texts, as Flavius Josephus and Julius Africanus. However, as pointed by Cyril Aldred (1966, p. 129), when Manetho wrote about the Hyksos, he was following and reproducing notions that were part of the official Theban narrative. The Hyksos were probably different Semitic tribes that entered in Egypt to trade or work as "cooks, brewers, seamstresses, vine-dressers and the like", and ended up staying there (ALDRED, 1994, p. 117).

8. It is important to keep in mind that the text was rhetorically exaggerating the importance of the king and his acts.

fluence over the rest of the Near East. As Marc Van de Mieroop says, “The Near Eastern world that arose out of the ‘Dark Age’ was in many respects a totally new one” (2007, p. 125). They initiated a diplomatic system based on the early interactions (The Ebla and Mari Ages), but now with rules and conventions that aimed a greater goal: to keep the peace between the great kings and the controlling power over the Syrian-Palestine territory.

The Amarna System

The Amarna Letters represent a tradition that had developed for centuries, responsible for maintaining a regular way of contact between kings through common practices. Thus, it united the peoples from the ancient Near East in a multipolar and policultural way, overcoming language, culture, and political barriers. With these features, the System was able, in general, to guarantee good relations between kings.

There were some conventions regarding how the letters should be written. As we have two categories of correspondences (administrative and imperial), each of them has different particularities, but the basic structure is the same for both. The pattern “ana” (to/ say to) “umma” (thus [says]) was the first thing to be written. An example of a typical letter begins like this: *a-na* ¹*Ni-ib-mu-a-re-ia* L[UGAL KUR *Mi-iš-ri-i*] ŠEŠ-*ia* *qí-b*[í-ma] *um-ma* ¹*Tu-iš-e-rat-ta* LUGAL KUR [*Mi-*]it-ta-^{an}-[n]i (EA 17 *apud* RAINEY, 2015, p.134); “To *Nibmu’areya*, k[ing of the land of Egypt], my brother, speak: Thus (says) *Tuišeratta*, king of the land of [Mi]ttan[n]i” (EA 17 *apud* RAINEY, 2015, p.135).

This configuration reflects some of the nature of the system: the content of the letters was dictated by kings and written by his officials. Once the messengers arrived at their destination, the official in charge of that role would read it aloud to the other king (HOLMES, 1975, p. 377; BECKMAN, 2003, p. 765). Another point that we should pay attention to is that the great kings were part of a so-called brotherhood, while the vassals were not. Thus, when the letter was sent from a vassal, they would refer to their suzerain as “my lord”, “my sun”, whilst the Great Kings called each other “brother”, showing the ideological equality and the familiarity in their relations¹⁰.

After that, kings would make greetings, showing their loyalty (vassals) and love (great kings). According to Graciela Gestoso (2003, p. 81–83), the expression of love, *râmu*, can have three different meanings. The first one is related to loyalty (to show their commitment to Egypt); the second, to brotherhood (to maintain good relations, represented by the sending of gifts), and the third is an analogy to the exchange of gifts, which is very close to the second meaning. This last meaning was used to keep the economic affairs always active. Every time a king claimed to love more or ask for more love, it actually meant that the gifts should be more abundant. In the case of EA 19, for example, it should be “ten times better”:

When I wrote to my brother, then I verily said: “Let us always love one another very, very much and between us may we be in friendship. And to my brother I said: May my brother always surpass ten times what he did for my father!” (...)

9. For example: “To the king, my lord, my deity, my sun god, the sun god from heaven, message of Yidia, your servant, the dirt at your feet, the groom of your horses: At the two feet of the king, my lord, I have verily prostrated myself seven times and seven times, on the back and on the stomach” (EA 323 *apud* RAINEY, 2015, p.1-9).

10. The letters from the Great Kings are: Babylon, EA 1-14 (EA 1 and EA 5 were written on the behalf of Amenhotep III, and EA 14, of Akhenaton); Assyria EA 15-16; Hatti EA41-44; Mitanni EA 17-30. The letter EA 18 is to fragmentary to be read, but the second line suggests the word “brother”. EA 30 was written to the kings of Canaan, but it still refers to the Pharaoh as a brother (lines 1-6).

So, my brother, very much gold that is not worked, may my brother send to me; and may my brother send gold, more than to my father. And in the land of my brother gold is plentiful like dirt. May the gods grant it that just as now gold is plentiful in my brother's land, may he increase the gold ten times what it is now. And the gold that I requested, may it not be distressing to my brother's heart. And may my brother not cause distress to my heart. So may my brother send to me very much gold that has not been worked. And whatever my brother needs for his house, let him write and let him take and I will verily give ten times what my brother requested. This land is my brother's land and this house is my brother's house. (EA 19 *apud* RAINEY, 2015, pp. 142-145.)

In practical terms, it is possible to explain the great kings' relationship in one word: reciprocity. Good relations were a socio-political matter that was guaranteed by the mutual exchange of gifts (LIVERANI, 2003, pp. 205-210).

Still on the greetings part, once the love and friendship were declared, the kings would make wishes of well-being to the other king, his family, and things owned by him. With that being said, a typical letter, from a great king, would begin more or less like this:

Speak [to Nim]muare'ia, king of the land of [Egypt], my son-in-law [whom I] love, who loves [me]. [The message of T]ushratta, king of the land of Mitt[anni], your father-in-law [who I] loves you, your brother. It is well [wi]th me. With you [may it be w]ell; with your household, with [your] wives, with your [so]ns, with your senior officials, [with] your chariotry, with your horses, with your warriors, [wit]h your land and your possessions, may it be very, very well. (EA 20 *apud* RAINEY, 2015, p.148-149).

And the vassal's letters should be like this:

[Speak to the king, m]y[lord, my]s[un god;] the message of Ri[b-Hadda, your servant: may the lady] of the city of [Byblos grant str]ength to the ki[ng, my lord, my sun god; a]t the feet of my [lord], [my sun god, seven] times (and) seven times have I [fallen]. (EA 110 *apud* RAINEY, 2015, p.592-593).

It was not a static formula, though. The letters should follow certain patterns, but each one had their unique character. The body of the letters was less stereotyped, normally jumping straight to the point. The content varied with different diplomatic subjects, such as marriages, exchange of gifts, the defeat of a common enemy and the maintenance of earlier relations. The kings used rhetorical and norm-based arguments¹¹ to get what they wanted. So, this kind of text must be understood with its significance of propaganda and persuasive messages (LIVERANI, 2000, p. 17).

With this in mind, we can find some differences between what was expected and the actual practice. Kings would appeal to emotional issues to get better terms in the negotiations. Some attitudes of the kings, such as the political arguments (see WESTBROOK, 2000) used in the letters, were aimed at getting better economic terms and stand out in relation to others. To clarify: according to Liverani (2000) gifts should not be asked for, but given; they should be accepted and appreciated; and they should be reciprocated. However, the letters reveal to us that many gifts were actively requested and rarely appreciated. Although the gifts were accepted, there is a frequent complaint about the quantity and the quality of them. Reciprocity, therefore, is fundamental but fragile. Therefore, the hierarchy that established great kings as equals was, as we could imagine, more theoretical than practical.

11. There is no document regarding what is expected in the relations between kings. Thus, this kind of expectation must be noticed from vestiges left in diplomatic correspondences and some international treaties (BECKMAN, 2003).

The Egypt-Mitanni Affairs

12. Tushratta, for example, says several times that gold is like dirt, as in this passage: "And in the land of my brother gold is plentiful like dirt" (EA 19 apud RAINEY, 2015, p.144-145).

The most common complaint found in the Amarna Letters is about the Egyptian gold. The Asiatic kings frequently asked for gold, as they believed it was plentiful in Egypt¹² and, because of that, they thought that the Pharaoh should send them much gold. This issue is more noticeable in the letters sent to Akhenaten, perhaps because the major part of the Amarna archive was sent to him or because Amenhotep III had recently established marriages and the gold became an ongoing issue. Notwithstanding, the complaints about Akhenaten's posture are normally understood as negligence by the other kings - since these Near Eastern kings were led to believe that Egypt had lots of gold and they claimed that not enough of it was being sent. If one jumps to hasty conclusions, Akhenaten could be seen as a Pharaoh that did not pay attention to international relations and focused only on internal matters.

There are some points that need to be clarified, though. The first one is about Akhenaten's context. In topic 1, I explained how the Pharaohs of the beginning of the 18th Dynasty fortified themselves and the Egyptian territory through several military campaigns. When Akhenaten rose to the throne, however, Egypt was at peace, with tributes coming from north and south, and no apparent threat. Akhenaten did not have the same needs that his predecessors had. That is because, in the past, it had been very important for the Pharaohs to keep Egypt strong, but once an apparent level of security was reached, concern for new conflicts gradually faded out. Diplomacy was not a revisionist tool, but one of status-quo maintenance. The Near Eastern kingdoms were in a different situation altogether. The borders of Mitanni, Babylon, Assyria and Hatti were much closer to each other and, because of that, these kingdoms sought to keep expanding their relative power, lest some other place seize their territory. Egypt and Mitanni had been enemies during the Egyptian early 18th Dynasty, fighting for territories in Syria. During the reign of Amenhotep II, however, a diplomatic marriage secured a good relationship between polities. Egyptian and Mitannian rulers regularly exchanged letters and gifts.

The letters sent from Tushratta, king of Mitanni, to Akhenaten, seem to expose a moment of fragile relations. Tushratta constantly complained about the Pharaoh's posture. One possibility that could explain why Tushratta did not turn against Egypt is the fear of needing military support - as we now know that, not much later, Hatti and Assyria took over the Mitannian kingdom. Although the letters are not clear about this, it is possible to assume, for example, that Tushratta was maintaining his contact with Akhenaten because he was feeling threatened by an expansion of Hatti and expected to rely on Egypt's military help, even if Akhenaten behaved indifferently. In fact, according to Artzi (2000, p. 205), the main claim of the relations between Egypt and Mitanni, when it was forged, was to prevent the Hittite from expanding in northern Syria. However, this does not explain everything. If the reasons for keeping a relationship with Egypt were merely to assure support in the case of an invasion, even though the Pharaoh was not being diplomatic enough,

why would Hatti or Babylon also keep the messages and presents coming to Egypt when faced with a negligent ruler?

There is another point to note. As the letters were aimed at persuasion, we should consider the appeal that they carried. Liverani (2000, p. 26) points out that there were rhetorical frameworks employed to obtain better negotiation terms. One of these frameworks is related to time and to the understanding that the past is better than the present¹³. That is why it is rare to find letters that do not allude to previous relationships (LIVERANI, 2003, p. 205). If the past is seen as a better time, it is only natural to complain about the present and the current interactions. Furthermore, this sort of complaint carries a plea that works as emotional coercion. In theory, it would appeal to the conscience of the king and make him more generous. I believe that Tushratta does that by pointing to Egyptian mistakes. Since these kingdoms should be treated as equals, no voice should prevail. Thus, Tushratta could not say that he is better or hierarchically above Akhenaten. However, he could say that Egypt was not honoring the friendship and, being an honorable king, Tushratta would still maintain that relationship. By showing how great he was, Tushratta possibly aimed at proving himself as a good ally to be kept (SCOVILLE, 2017).

With this in mind, it is possible to assume that some of the complaints were a rhetorical tool to obtain more gold and gifts. However, it is also possible that there were some inconstancies about the agreed terms in the letters. As we have seen, the emotional arguments could be used to increase the amount and quality of gifts received; on the other hand, it could also be a strategy to make the case for reciprocating with fewer presents. As far as we can infer, the Pharaoh was not, most likely, improved with the posture of the other kings either (Tushratta, for example, defends his attitudes in EA24, explaining why he acted a certain way). Besides that, it is not only Akhenaten who is criticized by his neighbors. Although his father was complimented in many letters sent to Akhenaten, the letters sent to the Amenhotep III himself were not always so positive as we may think. By reading only the letters that were addressed to Akhenaten, our perception of how negotiations between Amenhotep III and the other kings are softened, but on some occasions, there were complaints about the quantity and the quality of the gold that Amenhotep III sent. To Akhenaten, Tushratta says:

[My love for] my [brother] is tenfold more than what we always had with Nimmureya, your father. [And whatever] Nimmureya, your father, would continually discuss with me, he never caused me distress in any [matter]. And whatever word that I would say then on that very same day, [he did]that. [And as for me,] in no matter whatever did I cause him distress, and whatever [word that he would s]ay to me, then on that very same day, I would do that. (EA 29 *apud* RAINEY, 2015, p. 302- 303).

However, a letter sent to Amenhotep III shows otherwise:

But, my brother will take it to heart that my heart was somewhat distressed. And only may he be mollified. Never again may Teshub permit me that I should rage thus at my brother. Thus have I spoken to my brother in order that he may know (EA 20 *apud* RAINEY, 2015, p.152-153).

The letters from Mitanni are especially harsh on Akhenaten. The severity of Tushratta, though, does not necessarily mean that Akhenaten

13. The relation that the ancient peoples had with time is normally associated with religious matters and alludes to the perfect times – when gods lived and ruled the Earth. Of course, that is only one view about it. In Egypt, for example, there were two concepts of time, one is cyclical the other is linear. More about that can be seen in Galán (2014) and Coelho & Santos (2014).

was such a bad correspondent, particularly because we have no record of what he said in reply. Maybe, as pointed out before, it was an attempt to manipulate Akhenaten to give away more presents (and gold). All we can do is to speculate about the arguments and the reasoning that Akhenaten made when addressing these issues. The kings from other lands were not so stern on Akhenaten as Tushratta was, and normally just complained about the gold. It leaves us with another question: was Akhenaten really negligent or was he only in disagreement with Tushratta?

This question cannot be fully answered while the state of the documentation is fragmentary and many tablets are missing. However, understanding the structure, the norms and the practical arguments used by the kings may be a good place to start looking for tentative conclusions.

In terms of regulating actions and establishing equality, some attitudes were expected among the kings. As, theoretically, there was no supremacy between them, the great kings were under the jurisdiction of gods and should answer to them. Thus, the rules were based on honor, consciousness, and honesty. They believed that bad behavior would be punished by the gods in three possible ways: personal (attacking the king himself), vicarious (punishing the king's subjects) or both (WESTBROOK, 2000, p. 37). Then, if the rules established were in accordance with a divine principle, appealing to the consciousness would be a good rhetorical argument – and using the names and will of the gods to justify their demands would be, hence, even more effective. Tushratta probably knew that and I suggest this is why he mentioned the gods (normally Teshub and Amon – to represent Mittani and Egypt) and their love, as in the example of EA 24:

As now my brother loves me, as now I love my brother, so may Teššop, Šauška, Amanu, Šimige, Eâ-šarri and all the gods love us in their hearts very, very much so that [we] for long years joyfully. And the things that we desire for ourselves, may we graciously do generously, one for the other, between us. (EA 24 I *apud* RAINEY, 2015, p.194-195).

The use of the emotional appeal, thus, was a reflection of a system based on the jurisdiction of gods and that is, precisely, why it seemed to be effective. Still, religious principles are not the only explanation for the practice of this kind of emotional and strong-willed rhetoric. When conventions and norms (expected from the kings) did not cover something that one wished for, the emotional appealing would be used. This kind of persuasive argument would be longer than those of pre-established conventions. Thus, it is possible to notice two types of arguments: political and juridical. The juridical arguments are based on custom and the political ones tend to be rhetorical. As they aim to persuade the other part of something, political arguments are much more elaborate.

Everything written in a letter had a purpose. Therefore, political arguments could function as tools to maintain or break norms and conventions. Discourse is embedded in relations of power and is used as a tool to shape these relations and establish patterns of normativity (see FOUCAULT, 1999). Arguments could be used to establish an (untold and invisible) hierarchy between great kings, even if equality at the top was supposed to ground the Amarna system. In the Amarna letters, this

can be noticed by the terms related to a brotherhood between specific kings, for example. We know that great kingdoms should be treated as equals (EA 42 *apud* RAINEY, 2015, p.362-363). However, according to the ethnologic theory, a group (or person) is identified as such by itself and by the “others” (JENKINS, 1998, p. 40-52). There is, then, a difference concerning how peoples understand themselves, “us” being better than the “others”. In the Amarna system, such difference could not exist in official terms. However, in the personal scope of the kings, alterity was very much a reality. This difference can be understood as a symptom that allows rhetoric to create an individual hierarchy. The Amarna System forecast the relations with vassals as unilateral, even though the Great King still had some responsibilities. However, when talking about kings in parity, eloquence is indeed a good talent to have.

Tushratta claims that Amenhotep III had promised two statues of solid cast gold, but died before he could send them. Akhenaten, then, was responsible for sending the statues, but instead of solid gold, he sent wood, only plated with gold. So, Tushratta says:

And now, my brother, the solid statues that your father was going to send, you have not sent. But you have sent plated ones of wood; the goods that your father was sending me, you have not sent and you have reduced (them) greatly. (EA 27 *apud* RAINEY, 2015, p.286-287).

Considering the presence such arguments (and their strong-willed nature), I cannot believe that everything written by Tushratta is true. The missing tablets and the existence of political and rhetorical argument are examples of why we cannot simply accept Tushratta’s words. There are many possibilities that could explain the complaints about Akhenaten or justify his actions.

Nicholas Reeves (2002) once suggested that Akhenaten faltered the Egyptian economy. If that is true, it could mean that the gold was used in the projects of the Pharaoh and in the work of Akhetaten, thus neglecting any exchange of gifts with foreign powers. However, if that was the case, some king would probably have mentioned the decline of Egypt; on the contrary, they kept talking about the abundance of gold¹⁴. In spite of that, Tushratta says that his messengers have seen the gold and the statues that should be sent:

And statues of solid cast gold one statue of me and another statue for a statue of Tadu-Ḥeba, my daughter, did I request from your father, Mimmureya. And your father said “Lay off of giving statues only of solid cast gold, and I will give you (statues) of lapis lazuli and other gold, moreover, (and) many goods without limit with the statues will I give to you.” And as for the gold for the statues, all my envoys who were posted in Egypt saw with their own eyes, and as for the statues, it was your father, in the presence of my envoys, who recast them, fashioned them, finished them, purified them. And when the recasting took place, my envoys saw with their own eyes and when they were finished and they were purified, with their own eyes they saw. (EA 27 RAINEY, 2015, p.284- 285).

If the statues were, in fact, ready, why would not Akhenaten send them? Of course, he could have melted them and used the gold for other purposes. Still, if gold was not scarce, why would he get into this kind of trouble? Perhaps the statues were made of wood on the behalf of Amenhotep III, and Akhenaten indeed sent exactly the same objects that his father planned to send. If that was the case, it would mean that the agree-

14. Burnaburiash once asked about the gold, saying: “Now, my brother has sent two minas of gold as a greeting gift. Now if gold is plentiful, send as much as your fathers. But if it is scarce, send half of what your fathers (sent). Why do you send me only two minas of gold?” (EA 9 *apud* RAINEY, p.11–14). The following letters, however, do not leave any suggestion that the Pharaoh said it was indeed scarce, but Burnaburiash kept asking for better gifts. This probably mean that Akhenaten did not say the gold was scarce.

ments that Tushratta claimed to be done were not the same that were in fact made. It could be, perhaps, a mistake made by one of the kings, or maybe Tushratta's complains were a subterfuge to get more gold by trying to trick Akhenaten.

We may never know what was the case, in part because the agreements were made orally, with "the written version being a record thereof and of evidentiary value only" (WESTBROOK, 2000, p. 38). Nevertheless, the messenger acted in the name of the king that sent him and the negotiation itself could have been made by one of these officials. One example of this is EA 7, in which it is possible to note the action of an Egyptian messenger to persuade Burnaburiash II and conduct the negotiations.

Another point that we should consider is that the first letter from Tushratta that was sent to Egypt during Akhenaten's reign was addressed to Tiye, his mother. By the content of the letter, we can assume that Akhenaten, at least, had contacted Tushratta before, since the Mitannian king is complaining about the statues and the Pharaoh's diplomatic postures to her. Tushratta asks Tiye to speak with her son and tell him what Amenhotep III had agreed to send to Mitanni. Since Tiye is the only queen to receive a letter from a king in the Amarna archives, it is also possible to assume that she was very important within Egypt's administration and a highly influential person. Thereby, if Tiye told Akhenaten to send more gold and statues of solid cast gold, by not doing it he would not only harm diplomatic relations but also depreciate his mother – and the Egyptians did value motherhood¹⁵. It is not likely, thus, that Akhenaten would not listen to his mother. Perhaps, Tiye did speak to her son, but instead of making Tushratta's case, she could have told Akhenaten to not send more gold to Mitanni.

There are plenty of options that could solve the case of the wooden statues and even more questions we can ask about that. Indeed, Akhenaten was severely criticized by other kings over his attitudes, and it is possible that he was not being so mindful of international relations as his predecessors were. The historical context in which Akhenaten had been born and lived was the stage for many changes in Egypt and in the Pharaoh's behavior. Such changes were all but a symptom of a new trend in terms of religion, culture, administration and politics. As Akhenaten's Egypt was different from Tothmes IV's Egypt, it is not surprising that some things have changed. However, it does not necessarily mean that Akhenaten would simply ignore his role in international affairs.

Conclusions

Naming this last topic "Conclusions" feels a bit wrong, since there are more questions and possibilities than answers when it comes to the Egypt-Mitanni affairs. It is not, however, "the end of the road": by questioning all the possibilities I have pointed out in the text (and many other more), it is possible to get close to glimpse of what the past might have been and how we can understand it. No historian should be afraid to ask or create theories about the past. David Fischer (1970) once wrote about historian's fallacies, and, with this book, reminded us that we can never

15. "Evidence of that is, for example, in the Instructions of Any. It says: Double the food your mother gave you, support her as she supported you; she had a heavy load in you, but she did not abandon you. When you were born after your months, she was yet yoked (to you), her breast in your mouth for three years. As you grew and your excrement disgusted, she was not disgusted, saying: 'What shall I do!'. When she sent you to school, and you were taught to write, she kept watching over you daily, with bread (8, l) and beer in her house. When as a youth you take a wife, and you are settled in your house, pay attention to your offspring, bring him up as did your mother. Do not give her cause to blame you, lest she raise her hands to god, and he hears her cries". (LICHTHEIM, 2006, p. 141) In spite of that, during the Amarna Period (especially, but not only), there was a growing tendency of depict the family and their private moments in art.

stop questioning our documents and never believe in what we are told without understanding the motivation. Only after interpreting contexts, rules, and ideologies, can we assume anything about anyone. Every possibility must be carefully analyzed before being discarded and we should never hide any information that could change our arguments.

Based on Fischer, Gee (2010, p. 150-153) wrote about some fallacies that we can find in Egyptology, one of them being the *Canonized Guesswork*. It consists of a theory that is accepted for so long that starts to be treated as a fact, without further questioning. One of the conclusions we can reach after analysing the sources for the contacts between Mitanni and Egypt is that the idea that Akhenaten's posture was neglectful is, basically, *Canonised Guesswork*. That is, I do not believe that we should accept the idea that Akhenaten was passive just because Tushratta says so while there are reasons to account for this situation.

We cannot fully trust Tushratta's words, but we also cannot assume everything boiled down to political matters. Perhaps it was a little bit of both. Rhetoric was used to persuade and appeal to the consciousness of Akhenaten and had it worked, it would have led to a good economic deal for Mitanni. On the other hand, Akhenaten could have also used political arguments to convince Tushratta that he could not send him everything that he demanded. If Tushratta had been persuaded, it would have been a good economic deal for Egypt.

Diplomacy was responsible for keeping the peace, but also for performing commercial transactions, and for the maintenance of power. If the great kingdoms were not treated as equals, the system would collapse – and it was not the case at this time, although it did indeed collapse not long after that. And, if they were in parity, complaints about the Egyptian posture were only a matter of persuasion. Every king wanted to have a greater share or the goods than their brothers could arrange. Egypt was known for its gold – something that was not easily found in the Near East. Great kings would, then, do their best to get their hands on it.

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