

KTÉMA

CIVILISATIONS DE L'ORIENT, DE LA GRÈCE ET DE ROME ANTIQUES

La Royauté dans la Grèce antique

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The King's Household, Royal Gifts and International Trade in the Amarna Age*

RÉSUMÉ-. Les *Lettres d'Amarna* laissent le lecteur moderne tout à fait perplexe parce qu'elles se réfèrent surtout aux affaires privées des rois, tandis que les questions diplomatiques et commerciales ne sont discutées que brièvement ou ne le sont pas du tout, comme si les rois ne s'intéressaient pas à la politique étrangère de leur État. Il est soutenu dans cet article que ce n'était là qu'une façade destinée à préserver l'idée que les territoires du Grand Roi étaient auto-suffisants du point de vue militaire comme du point de vue économique; les demandes militaires ou économiques devaient être faites d'une manière telle qu'aucune des parties impliquées ne perdît la face. La discussion des affaires publiques est brève et bien dissimulée dans la partie des lettres concernant la maison du roi. Le commerce des matières premières n'est jamais discuté dans ces lettres, cela parce que l'activité commerciale était gérée par des administrateurs moins importants.

ABSTRACT-. The *Amarna Letters* seem quite puzzling to the modern reader, because they refer mostly to private affairs of the kings, while matters of diplomacy and trade are discussed only very briefly or not at all, as if the kings were not interested in the foreign policy of their states. In this paper it is argued that this was just a façade, designed to keep up the pretext that the countries of the Great Kings were self-sufficient from the military and economic point of view; economic and diplomatic requests needed to be made in a way that none of the involved parties would 'lose face'. The discussion of state affairs is brief and well hidden within the part of the letters concerning the 'household' of the king, in order to keep up appearances. The trade of raw material was never discussed in these letters, because the commercial activity was managed by lower administrators.

The Amarna Letters offer an unusual peek behind the scenes, which shows the Great Kings of the time in a light quite different from their public image. The kings often appear naïve and with apparently little interest for geopolitics, at least from the modern perspective. They show a lack of basic geographic knowledge and sometimes openly admit it,¹ they bargain exhaustively for the dowry, they use every imaginable pretext to ask for gifts, they constantly complain about the quality of the gifts sent to them, and they expect to receive invitations for all important events in the country of their 'brothers'² (i.e. fellow kings), even though it is evident that they would never attend them. In short, we get the impression that the kings corresponded with their counterparts without having the interests of their countries or international politics in mind, but mainly because they wished to receive fancy gifts and marry rich foreign princesses. One could indeed wonder whether

(*) I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of the very dear colleague Nikos Birgalias.

(1) e.g. EA 7: 14-32 (from the Babylonian King Burnaburias II to the Pharaoh Amenhotep III); MORAN 1992, p. 12-14.

(2) About the phraseology, see CLINE 1995, p. 143-145.

these rulers were at all able to design a complex foreign policy for their states or not³. Nevertheless, a closer look at the available texts shows that this is indeed a deceptive picture.

During the Late Bronze Age, the state seems to have been something like “a household on a grand scale”,⁴ with the king serving the role of the patriarch for his subjects. There were no homogeneous national states, so each ‘country’ was defined through its king. For instance, the Pharaoh ruled (or at least claimed to rule) a vast area, from Nubia to Syria, which was populated by various peoples, who spoke different languages, worshipped different gods, had different customs, and were often subjected to the rule of local (minor) kings.⁵ The unifying element was the great king himself, so in a way, the king was the ‘state’, or to paraphrase Louis XIV: “L’État, c’est le Roi”.

One gains the impression, that, in a way, the interests of the ‘state’ indeed overlapped with those of its ruler. But this is not entirely accurate; although the kings nominally claimed possession over everything that existed within the borders of their realm, they also had personal, private property, their own household, consisting of their palace and their land estates. So when the kings corresponded with their counterparts, they acted both as heads of their country, as well as heads of their own household. This becomes evident also from the salutations in the preamble of their letters. These salutations are ordered hierarchically and reveal what was considered important by the kings (table 1). In their fullest form the expressed wishes concerned the well-being of the following:⁶

- the recipient king,
- his household,
- his wives,
- his sons,
- his magnates,
- his chariots,
- his horses,
- his warriors,
- his country.

It is apparent that this list is structured hierarchically, starting from the person of the king and then gradually moving outwards to what is further away from him; as if the king is in the center of a series of concentric circles (fig. 1).

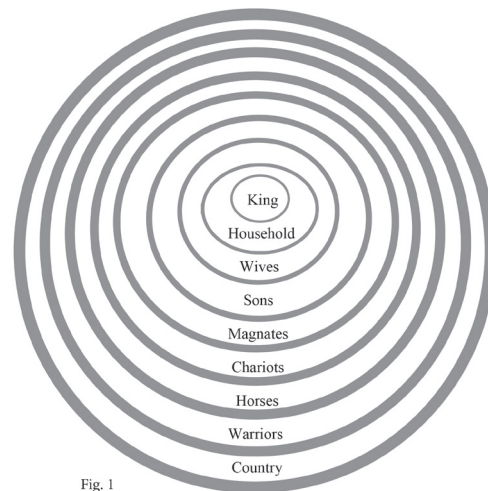


Fig. 1

There was no fixed formula for the salutations in the preambles of the letters, so there are several variations. Apparently, some salutations could be omitted, without insulting the recipient of the letter. But despite the variations, there is a clear order for the salutations and there was also a minimum that could not be omitted. The first salutation always goes for the well-being of the

(3) RAGIONIERI 2000, p. 50.

(4) BECKMAN 2003, p. 754–755. For a more general discussion, see SCHLOEN 2001.

(5) E.g. the northern Levant, which was part of the Egyptian state, but was governed by local rulers (*ḥazannu*), supervised by Egyptian officials (*rabiṣu*): HELCK 1971, p. 253–254; SINGER 1999. The kingdoms of the Amarna Period have features of both the ‘patrimonial’ and the ‘imperial’ empires, as defined by Eisenstadt (1979, p. 23). But they resemble more Wallerstein’s ‘world-empire’, which maintains “an economic flow from the periphery to the core via some centralized system of direct taxation or tribute, which is supported by coercive force” (WALLERSTEIN 1974, p. 15).

(6) EA 20, EA 23, EA 28. For a more detailed analysis, see MYNÁŘOVÁ 2007, esp. p. 99–114.

Table 1

EA1+EA35	EA20+ EA23+ EA28	EA5+EA17	EA 6	EA 8	EA 21	EA 38	EA37+ EA33	EA 19	EA 39	EA 34	EA 41
You	You	You	You	You	You	You	You	You	You	You	You
-	-	-	-	Country	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Wives
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Sons
Household	Household	Household	Household	Household	Household	Household	House(hold)	Household	Household	Household	Household
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Sons	-
Wives	Wives	Wives	Wives	Wives	Wives	Chief Wives	Wives	Wives	Chief Wives	Wives	-
Sons	Sons	Sons	Sons	Sons	Sons	Sons	Sons	Sons	Sons	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Wives	-	-
-	-	-	Country	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Magnates	Magnates	Magnates	Magnates	Magnates	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	-	Warriors	-	-	Men	-	-	-	-	-	Troops
Horses	-	Horses	Horses	Horses	-	Horses	Horses	-	-	Horses	-
Chariots	Chariots	Chariots	Chariots	Chariots	Chariots	Chariots	Chariots	Chariots	Chariots	Chariots	Chariots
-	Horses	-	-	-	Horses	-	-	Horses	Horses	-	-
-	Warriors	-	-	-	-	Troops	-	Warriors	-	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Countries	Country	Country	-	-	Country	Countries	Country	Country	Country	Country	Country
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	Magnates	-	-	-	-	-

EA 11	EA 3	EA 10	EA 9	EA 26	EA 27	EA 7	EA 15	EA 16	EA 2	EA 29	EA 42	EA 12
You	You	You	You	You	You	You	You	You	You	You	You	You
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Magnates	-
Wives	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Household	Household	Household	Household	Household	Household	Household	Household	Household	-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	Wives	Wives	-	-	-	-	-	-	Wives	Wives	-	-
Sons	-	-	Sons	Sons	Sons	-	-	-	Sons	Sons	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	Country	-	Country	-	-	-	Country	-	-	-	-	-
-	-	Magnates	Magnates	-	-	-	-	-	Magnates	Magnates	-	-
-	-	Troops	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Troops	-
Horses	-	-	Horses	-	-	Horses	-	-	Horses	-	Horses	-
Chariots	Chariots	Chariots	Chariots	-	Chariots	Chariots	Chariots	-	Chariots	Chariots	Chariots	Chariots
-	Horses	Horses	-	-	Horses	-	-	-	-	Horses	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	Troops	-	Troops	-	-	Troops	-	-
-	Magnates	-	-	-	-	Magnates	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	-	Country	-	Countries	Country	Country	-	Country	Country	Country	Country	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	People
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Household
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

recipient king, and then (with only four exceptions⁷) to his household. Then in all letters follow salutations for the well-being of the wives and the sons of the king, his magnates, his military and finally his country. The salutations for the well-being of the magnates were probably not considered so essential, and could be omitted.⁸ The military is also presented in climactic or anticlimactic order: either “chariots, horses, troops/warriors” or “troops/warriors, horses, chariots”. The chariots were obviously considered to be the elite of the army; the troops and horses could be omitted from the preamble of the letters, but not the chariots.⁹ The salutations for the country of the recipient king were considered to be important enough as to include them in almost all letters,¹⁰ usually at the end of the preamble, but sometimes also right after the king’s family.¹¹

The term ‘household’ in the preambles of the Amarna Letters is somewhat confusing, but it is clear that it does not refer to the ‘country’, because this term is mentioned separately. The ‘household’ was considered to be something very important, because it was included in almost all letters.¹² The fact that it is mentioned prior to the wives and the sons shows that it is directly connected to the person of the king, not to his whole family. It seems that this term referred to the palace and the land estates of king, i.e. the “royal household” of the Egyptian texts.¹³ This becomes even clearer in the case of letter EA 37, where the term ‘house’ is used instead of ‘household’. The most important king’s wives and sons also had their own houses and estates, i.e. their own households: in the preamble of the letter sent by the Mitannian king Tushratta to the Egyptian Queen Tiye, he wishes for the well-being of the Queen, her countries, and also her (own) household.¹⁴

The status of a Great King depended on the parameters mentioned in the preambles of the Amarna Letters: the extend of his household (the palace and his land estates), the number of his wives and sons, the excellence of his magnates and military, and also the prosperity of his country. The kings were very concerned with the glorification of their own ‘household’,¹⁵ and they often expressed very specific wishes for the items they wished to acquire for the beautification of their palaces and temples,¹⁶ because they were always in danger of losing this elevated status.¹⁷ The value of the gift was apparently regarded as an indicator for the international renommée of the recipient king, and it was expected to have a minimum value: it should at least cover the expenses for the journey of the messengers.¹⁸ The exchange of royal gifts had as a consequence that the palaces needed workshops for the manufacture of specialized artefacts and the development of the “international style” was its by-product.¹⁹

(7) EA 8, EA 11, EA 41, EA 42.

(8) In 13 cases: EA 11-2, EA 15-6, EA 19, EA 21, EA 26-7, EA 33-4, EA 37, EA 39, EA 41.

(9) With only two exceptions: EA 16, EA 26.

(10) With only two exceptions: EA 8, EA 11.

(11) EA 3, EA 6, EA 9, EA 15.

(12) Omitted only in three letters: EA 2, EA 29, EA 42.

(13) About the ‘royal household’, see Moreno GARCIA 2013, 50, 157, 395.

(14) EA 26.

(15) e.g. EA 5: 13-14 (from the Babylonian King Kadashman-Enlil to Amenhotep III): “I have [just] heard that you have built some n[ew] quarrers. I am sending herewith some furnishings for your house.”

(16) EA 16: 30-42 (from the Babylonian King Burra-Buriyash to Amenhotep III): “There are skilled carpenters where you are. Let them represent a wild animal, land or aquatic, lifelike, so that the hide is exactly like that of a live animal. Let your messenger bring it to me. But if there are some old ones already on hand, then as soon as Shindishugab, my messenger, reaches you, let him immediately, post-haste, borrow chariots and get here. Let them make some new ones for future delivery, and then when my messenger comes here with your messenger, let them bring (them) here together.”

(17) Ramesses II no longer considered the king of Babylonia a great king: EDEL 1994, no. 105 obv. 56.

(18) e.g. EA 16: 22-31 (MORAN 1992, p. 39): “[W]hen the king of Hanigalbat [wr]ote to your father in Egy[pt, h]e sent 20 talents of gold to him. [Now] I am the [equal] of the king of Hani[galbat] [=Mitanni], but you sent me [...] of gold, and it is not enough [f]or the pay of my messengers on the journey to and back.”

(19) COHEN and WESTBROOK 2002, p. 9-10; FELDMAN 2002; 2006.

A Great King should be able to boast that “in my country everything too is available and I for my part need absolutely nothing”.²⁰ Of course, both the author and the recipient of the letter knew very well that this was nothing more than void rhetoric, and since the author of the letter usually wanted to express a specific wish for his gift, he had to find a subtle way to do so, without openly admitting that in his country in fact not everything was available. The argumentation had to conform to a universally accepted code of social conduct, and a plausible reason for the gift had to be invented. A social visit and gifts were expected in certain occasions in every-day life (e.g. in case of an illness, the opening of a new house etc.). It seems that it was not embarrassing to request a specific gift, if it was needed for a specific reason (e.g. the building of a new palace or temple). So, when the Babylonian King Burna-Buriash II pretended to be angry because his brother the Pharaoh did not send him any get-well wishes when he was sick, but then his mind is put to rest when he finds out from his messenger, that Egypt is indeed a country very far away, it seems that it is just an elegant attempt to ‘embarrass’ his addressee, and thus increase the value of his potential gift, with which the Pharaoh had to ‘redeem’ himself. The arguments are in fact imaginative and elaborate.

The discussion of state affairs is well hidden within the part of the letters concerning the private household of the king. The case of the Mitannian king Tushratta illuminates this. He was feeling threatened by the Hittites, against whom he already waged war,²¹ so he was looking to secure an alliance with Egypt. The prospect of receiving gold, and other precious gifts was an additional bonus, that would help him to improve his public image in his country and abroad; but his main concern must have been the acute threat posed by the Hittites, so this must have been the main reason for his eager agreement to marry his daughter to Amenhotep III.²² When Tushratta accepted the marriage, he only spoke of friendship and love between himself and Amenhotep III, not of a military alliance.²³ Only after the marriage did he refer explicitly to the consequences of this union, namely that it was equaled by a military alliance between the two countries.²⁴ The ‘state’ and the ‘private’ interests of the kings must have seemed to them to be inseparately interlocked; the case of the gold statues that Amenhotep III apparently promised to the Mitannian King Tushratta, but his successor Akhenaten failed to deliver, is very characteristic. King Tushratta appears obsessed with this affair and relentlessly pursues this matter, despite the fact that it could jeopardize the relation of his kingdom with a much needed ally.

A usual misconception is that trade in the Late Bronze Age lied firmly in the hands of the kings and that it took place mainly in the form of gift exchanges, like the ones mentioned in the Amarna Letters. Nevertheless, this was not the case. The exchanged objects in the Amarna letters are almost always luxury items: garments, furniture, aromatic oils, jewelry etc. The kings who sent those letters were not concerned with the trade of base metals, like copper and tin, which were necessary for the production of tools and weapons, and thus essential for the subsistence of their states.

(20) EA 7, EA 24.

(21) EA 17: 30-8 (MORAN 1992, p. 41-42).

(22) EA 19. In another letter (EA 29: 16-27) Tushratta remarked to the Pharaoh that his father and grandfather only accepted to send their daughters as brides to Egypt after receiving five to six delegations bearing gifts.

(23) EA 19: 30-3 (MORAN 1992, p. 44): “When I wrote to my brother, I said, ‘Let us love (each other) very, very much, and between us let there be friendship.’ I also said to my brother, ‘May my brother treat me ten times better than he did my father’.”

(24) EA 24: 110-8: “If only an enemy of my brother did not exist! But should in the future an enemy invade my brother’s land, (then) my brother writes to me, and the Hurrian land, armor, arms, [...] and everything concerning the enemy of my brother will be at his disposition. But should, on the other hand, there be for me an ene[my],—if only he did not exist!—I will write to my brother, and my brother will dispatch to the land of Egypt, armor, arms, [...] and everything concerning my(!) enemy.” Nevertheless, as ARTZI (2000, 205) noted, “this relationship, perhaps never enshrined in a formal treaty...”

Only in the case of the Alashiya letters is copper also included as a gift for the king's household.²⁵ This exception could be explained by the fact that these particular letters deal with a disruption in normal procedure, since apparently for several years no copper from Alashiya was delivered to Egypt. The king of Alashiya claimed that this disruption was the result of a plague in his land, which eliminated the mine workers.²⁶ These letters have a more business-like character and the greeting-gift that the king of Alashiya requested from the Pharaoh was not gold or luxury items, but silver;²⁷ silver had been the established currency in the Near East since the 3rd millennium BC, so the Pharaoh obviously had to accept this arrangement and pay in silver, although Egypt was not producing it. Not only the Pharaoh, but also the Hittite and the Babylonian king recognized the king of Alashiya to be their equal.²⁸ This elevated status of the king of Alashiya was not based on his military power, but on the abundance of copper in his kingdom and the ability to transport it to the ports of the eastern Mediterranean.

The trade of raw materials was in the hands of lower administrators, not of the kings. This is evident, for instance, from a letter sent from the 'Governor of Alasiya' to the 'Governor of Egypt'.²⁹ Just like their kings, these officials also felt obliged to exchange 'greeting-gifts', which were intended for the enrichment of their personal households. The actual trade was conducted by merchants with special passes under their supervision:

[Mo]reover, my brother, these men? [and] this ship belong to the king, my lord. So send [me] (back) the ship [of the king, my lord], promptly and [safely [...]] These men are servants of the king, [my] lo[rd], and no one making a claim in your name is to approach them. My brother, send (them back) to me safely and promptly.³⁰

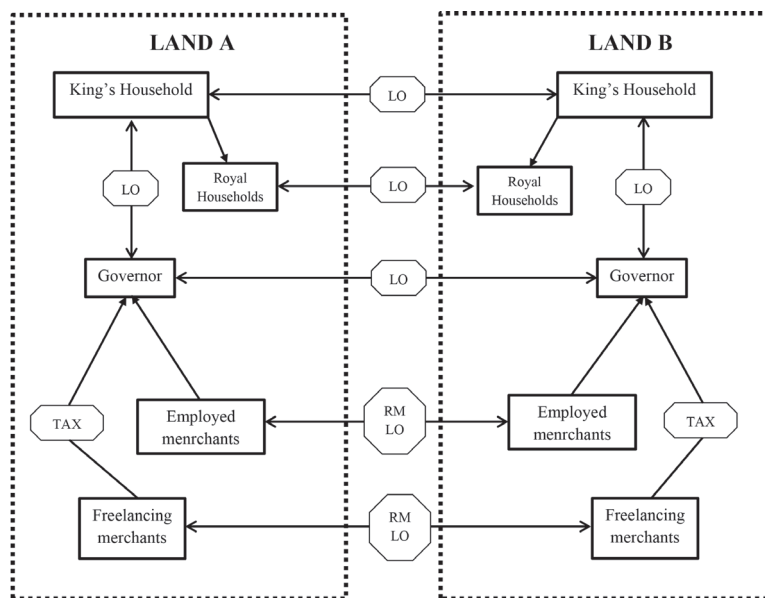


Fig. 2: LO = Luxury Objects, RM = Raw Materials

(25) EA 33-39.

(26) EA 35 (MORAN 1992, p. 107-109).

(27) EA 35: 43-48; EA 37: 13-20.

(28) EA 35: 49-53: "You [Pharaoh] have not been put (on the same level) with the king of Hatti or the king of Shanhar [=Babylonia], Whatever greeting-gift he (my brother) send me [king of Alasia], I for my part send back to you double."

(29) EA 40 (MORAN 1992, p. 113).

(30) EA 40: 16-20, 24-28.

The exchanged goods are not mentioned in the letter, which means that the actual business was controlled (and probably also recorded) by administrators of even lower status (fig. 2). There is also one short, business-like letter sent by the king of Alashiya to the Pharaoh; no greeting-gifts are mentioned, only the request for safe passage and tax exemption for merchants of the king of Alashiya: "These men are my merchants. My brother, let them go safely and prom[pt]ly. No one making a claim in your name is to approach my merchants or my ship."³¹ Again, neither the content of their cargo nor their client(s) are mentioned in the letter.

The Great Kings tried to establish good relations with each other, with the aim to create a network that allowed duty-free commercial exchanges of metals. This network was also used for the exchange of luxury items and gold (also a luxury item). This commercial activity was managed by lower administrators. The Great Kings did not have to burden themselves with such undignified activities, except in times when regular commerce was disrupted.³²

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(31) EA 39: 14–20 (MORAN 1992, p. 112).

(32) The Aegean kings were also included in this commercial network: CLINE 1995, 146–150.

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