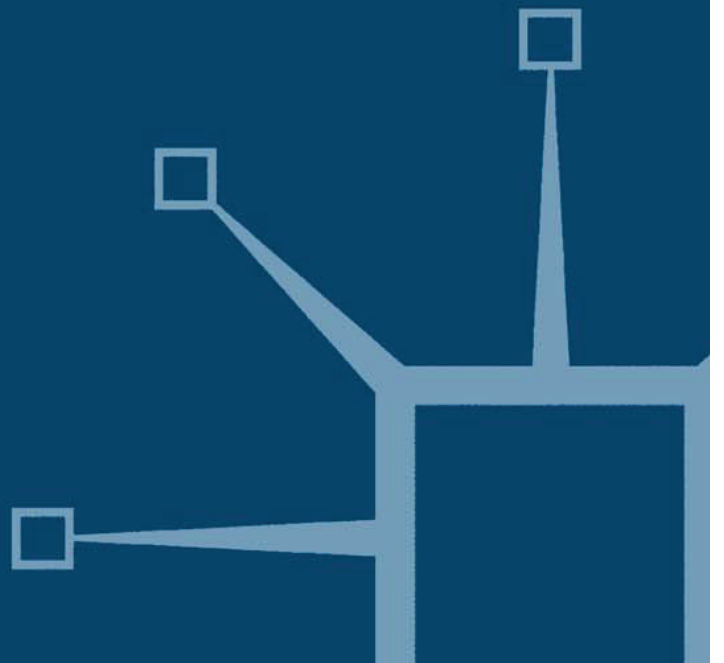


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International Relations in the Ancient Near East, 1600–1100 BC

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Introduction

The 'first' diplomacy

The history of international relations, as conceived by the majority of scholars engaged in it, is limited to the modern and contemporary worlds. An exact date for its beginning can be disputed, but historical research going back just a few centuries before contemporary events acquires the value of an antiquarian curiosity rather than a sound functional exercise. Yet the subject of the discipline, namely the formalized norms and procedures keeping states in mutual relation, can be applied to every society – wherever located in time and space – after the rise of 'states', these being defined as politically and administratively organized communities which underwent their first attested formative development in the Near East (Egypt and Mesopotamia) around the end of the fourth millennium BC. And in fact some handbooks or general histories of international relations do include ancient Near Eastern data in a first chapter.¹

While it is interesting to compare the 'international relations' formalized in early state formations with those obtaining in our modern world,² a correct historical evaluation of the 'archaic' systems can only be accomplished by embedding them in their own technological, social and cultural settings. The question is not about their similarity to modern systems, but about the functionality of their procedures to the needs of their time. This is as true of their diplomacy, or for that matter their international relations in general, as anything else – provided that their inter-state relations reached a level at which their norms and procedures were both formalized and shared.

In the course of the last century, archaeological discoveries in Egypt and the Near East brought to the attention of historians a variety of more and

more remote cases of archives documenting periods of intensive inter-state interaction. The 'Late Bronze period' (c. 1600–1200 BC) was first brought to the fore by the discovery of the Amarna archive (1887),³ to be later complemented by the Hittite archives in Boghazköy (1906–7)⁴ and the archives of the Syrian town of Ugarit (1951–7).⁵ In the meantime an older 'international period' had been revealed by the Mari archives (1933–9), so that the label 'Mari age' became current for the eighteenth to seventeenth centuries BC.⁶ More recently, the discovery of the Ebla archives (1975) has pushed back in time the history of inter-state relations to the 'Ebla age' in the twenty-fourth century BC.⁷

Definitions such as 'the first diplomacy' or 'the beginnings of international relations',⁸ as applied to the Late Bronze period are therefore naive in perspective and factually wrong. It remains true nevertheless that this period provides a unique opportunity for studies on the topic. In contrast to the Mari and Ebla cases, Late Bronze inter-state relations are documented by texts stemming from a variety of locations (Egypt, Hittite Anatolia, northern Syria, Assyria and Babylonia) and belonging to a variety of types (letters, treaties, literary and administrative texts). Our case study is therefore the first in terms of its complexity rather than its date (which is not the most remote recorded). The attempt will be made to demonstrate that inter-state relations were in fact quite formalized, according to juridical rules and rules of behaviour that were accepted by states belonging to different cultural traditions. In this sense we have in the Late Bronze period a 'fully-fledged diplomatic system',⁹ perhaps not according to the requirements of modern scholarship but certainly according to the appreciation of people and communities of that time.

The regional system of the Late Bronze Age

The Late Bronze period (ca. 1550–1200 BC) in general, and the 'Amarna age' in particular, are a privileged case for the study of international relations in the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean. This is because the relevant documentation is widely if not uniformly distributed over the whole area, from Egypt, through Syria-Palestine, Anatolia, Upper Mesopotamia, to Babylonia and Elam, and includes – to a much larger extent than in any other period – texts specifically intended to formalize its international relations. The amount and quality of the relevant texts also seem to be sufficient to reflect the typical arrangements and specific trends in the political world of the time.

It is not so much a question of the intensity characterizing the international relations of this epoch, or of the distances covered – both

seem to have been quite impressive in earlier periods, from the long-distance trade of the proto-historical era to the networks revealed by the Ebla and Mari archives. It is rather a question of these relations being more clearly structured into a system encompassing the whole area, and taking into account the coexistence of different political units of regional significance, the opportunity to establish a fixed hierarchy inside the regional units but a conventional parity of rank between them, the aim being to preserve the existing balance of power. Not by chance a 'diplomatic' language, Akkadian, is employed throughout the area; the habit of recording the politically and juridically relevant inter-state documents in bilingual texts becomes usual; and (even beyond the existence of actual bilingual texts) the technical terminology and phraseology of politics becomes largely common, filled with semantic calques and loanwords, in order to reproduce a largely common, even if somewhat conventional, view of political relationships. Not by chance, from the archaeological point of view the Late Bronze period also marks the apex of the circulation of specialized techniques, iconographic motifs, precious materials and worked objects, building up a flavour of 'international' culture above and beyond the strong persistence of the local 'original features'.

In a broad chronological perspective, the equilibrium achieved between the regional powers (Egypt, Hatti, Mitanni, Assyria, Babylonia, Elam) is the outcome of the long and not entirely clear processes by means of which they were formed through the unification of the previous 'cantonal' (city-centred) political units. During the 'balance of power' period, the regional political units are rather evenly distributed so as to cover all the Near Eastern area (with a few empty or 'weak' spaces left between them), and none has yet reached the military, technological or organizational level that will make a further step possible: that of an 'imperial' unification of the Near East. This will be attainable only after the collapse of the 'regional system' at the end of the Bronze age,¹⁰ and (significantly enough) when a part of the area has reverted to a political organization of 'cantonal' extent, thus offering to the extant regional states the opportunity for a further growth through annexation of their 'weak' periphery.

From a structural point of view, therefore, the 'balance of power' period is a rather static phase ('equilibrium') between two dynamic phases marking successive steps in the construction of the political systems. Of course, specific political movements also took place within the period considered (cf. maps at the front of the book for an immediate visualization), but they did not affect the structural arrangement of the

area. It is during the static phase that the political conventions of the time, already evolving during the Middle Bronze period, were formalized in a more organic and sophisticated way – a way that we will try to recover through our analysis.

The state of the art

Whatever the interpretation of political relations in the Late Bronze age in a long-term perspective, it is a matter of fact that the attention of scholars has often focused on them, the impetus coming especially from the discovery of the archives at Amarna, Boghazköy and Ugarit. Apart from many analytical studies of texts and individual problems, some broader studies have been produced in the last 100 years, varying in subject and approach. Many of them have been of great help in approaching the data and singling out the problems for our analysis. Yet it must be said that the main directions of historical studies have been quite different from those characterizing my project.

Archaeological studies are of little use in the present study, which maintains an ‘ideological’ level of interpretation. Trade is the most obvious subject for placing inter-regional contacts to the fore but though proto-historical trade in particular has enjoyed the application of elaborate methodologies, trade in the Late Bronze period is still mostly analysed in purely factual terms of little or no relevance for the study of ideology.¹¹ Chronology is a privileged topic because of the many synchronisms linking the inner chronologies of the different regions in a unitary network, and it has stimulated many monographs.¹² The degree of consensus here (with deviations over a range of a dozen years) is quite enough for a study like our own, more concerned as it is with structure than events. The general schemes supplied in the chronologies at the end of the book are only meant to provide the (non-specialist) reader with locations in time for the different texts and persons named.

Many juridical studies, especially on the formal and legal aspects of international relations,¹³ have a much more direct relevance to the present monograph. However, jurists usually have a normative approach based on a compact and well-established methodology, while a comprehensive and nuanced historical understanding requires a more flexible approach using different methodologies. Extreme cases of methodological disagreement will be examined below.

From a properly historical point of view, some important monographs have been produced. These are mainly regional in extent¹⁴ but also deal especially with the problem of the connections between regions – the

Egypt–Asia relationship being the most studied.¹⁵ Much more difficult seems to be the attempt to achieve an overall historical account of the entire area, the outstanding reference work on the history of the ancient Near East, namely the revised edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, being the best illustration of this predicament. Detailed historical reconstruction seems to be incompatible with a treatment of general problems and unifying features – and even with a coherent treatment of single areas (Syria–Palestine in particular),¹⁶ which are fragmented into a plurality of contributions following the philological competence of the authors more than the historical reality.

Today we do not need to look for new perspectives or methods of analysis. Semiology and communication theory, economic and political anthropology, and many other disciplines are all a part of our common knowledge. Within these fields, specific techniques of analysis have been tested and improved, which – provided we are able to introduce the necessary adaptations – may be useful for a better understanding of the ancient Near East. We need simply to be aware and take advantage of the cultural trends peculiar to our own time. This means foremost to join an anthropological perspective to the historical one. History and anthropology are different, even opposite points of view, only in a short-term perspective. In the long run, it should be clear how similar they are in underlining the difference between us and the object of our study, in making us aware that the observer should not influence the observed phenomenon but should keep his own culture, his own system of values, his own ideology, apart from those under study – which otherwise run the risk of being completely misunderstood as distorted, or inferior, or anomalous instances of our culture, of our system of values, of our ideology.

Reciprocity and redistribution

In order to analyse inter-state relations in the ancient Near East at a first level of approximation, two of Karl Polanyi's 'patterns of integration' have been selected: reciprocity and redistribution.¹⁷ In their simplest definitions, 'reciprocity denotes movements between correlative points of symmetrical groupings; redistribution designates appropriational movements toward a center and out of it again ... Reciprocity, then, assumes for a background symmetrically arranged groupings; redistribution is dependent upon the presence of some measure of centricity in the group'.¹⁸ We can use these analytical tools without necessarily accepting many presuppositions and implications of Polanyi's own views (cf. the next

section below). This is because they signify quite general and elementary patterns, which as a result are suitable for the analysis (rather than description) of *any* situation; they are so general as to avoid the risk of establishing their hierarchy in relation to 'our' pattern.¹⁹ Furthermore, they are structural (or 'ideal') types, not evolutionary stages, thus again avoiding the risk of a sequence obviously culminating with our own system. The contrasting patterns of reciprocity and redistribution will be used here in order to analyse the same historical realities; an attempt will certainly not be made to force our data to fit one or another of them.

Of course, at the level of family and small group relations reciprocity and redistribution are evident in every historical (and pre-historical) period, back to the very beginnings of social organization. The household is a small redistributive organization, and its face-to-face relations follow the lines of reciprocity. It was only later that the two integrative patterns were transferred to the properly political level, and more specifically to the level of inter-state relations, according to the circumstances of the time. Yet the overlaps between the outlooks characteristic of both inter-state and family/household relations are so extensive in the ancient Near East (with its all-pervasive peasant culture) that terminology and symbolic behaviour always exhibit obvious traces of their origins.

The application of the redistributive pattern to inter-state relations goes back to the very beginning of our (written) sources, and presumably to the very origins of the states existing since the Uruk period, ca. 3500–3000 BC. It is strictly linked with the origin of the state organization as an expanded household, or 'great house(hold)',²⁰ if we want to keep the ancient terminology.²¹ It is best applied to a situation of basically isolated state formations that consider the outer world only as a function of themselves.

As for the appearance of the reciprocative pattern, this (though at least in principle as 'simple' and 'primitive' as the other one), seems to occur somewhat later, belonging to a period when the interactions between different states became so intensive as to require another view, one suggesting more flexibility than that displayed by the 'monocentric' household. The reciprocative view is then re-employed (in a metaphorical way) with reference to relations among states that basically maintain their inner redistributive organization.

It will thus be clear that the two patterns have a different tradition and a different resonance, redistribution being usually seen as more 'archaic' and reciprocity as more 'evolved'. Both were in any case already long in use by the Late Bronze age, though the reciprocative view is more relevant to this period than to those which came before or after it, when the absence of a

balance of power and the centrality of some states left little room for a multicentred 'symmetrical' understanding of political relationships.

The interpretive nature of the integrative patterns

The integrative patterns of redistribution and reciprocity were first proposed and are more properly applied to the circulation of goods. Their wider implications, however, make them suitable for a general understanding of all social and political relations, even when no displacement of goods takes place. In each of the three parts into which the present book is divided ('Territory and Borders', 'War and Alliance', 'Circulation of Goods'), the contrasting use of the two patterns has turned out to be of great heuristic value. The centralized vs. symmetrical arrangement of the circulation of goods corresponds in more general terms to a centralized vs. symmetrical view of political interaction as a whole. This implies that the two patterns of integration are here considered not as descriptive models of really different networks of exchange, but as interpretations, mental models, of a reality that in itself does not belong to any pattern.

It is in overlooking the ideological character of the integrative patterns that the 'orthodox' Polanyian approach is seriously at fault. In this approach these patterns exist in reality,²² with the result that exchanges take place according to one or another of them and it would be impossible to describe according to one pattern an exchange system built up according to another pattern. The 'reality' of Polanyi's patterns has been the source of many disagreements and misunderstandings, so some preliminary observations need to be made about it. In particular it must be noted that:

1. The reciprocity pattern brings about, in its optimal form, the existence of two or more peer-ranking partners. Now, parity in rank does not exist 'in reality': it does not exist at an objective level because two persons will always be different according to their place in society, their age, prestige, wealth, family and trading relationships, and so on. It does not even exist at a subjective level, each of the two partners viewing differently their respective ranks. Moreover, in a single act of exchange, a discrepancy in status is always introduced by fortuitous circumstances: the person who started the negotiation, the one who is more in need of concluding it, the result of the previous negotiation, and so on.²³

2. The reciprocity pattern also brings about an equivalence in exchanged goods, and this does not exist 'in reality' either. The two partners have different hierarchies of values, so that evaluation by the one is never coincident with that by the other. A third, 'objective' equivalence simply does not exist, the conventional one being the result of economic, political and other factors, and changing through time.

The reciprocity pattern thus really needs to be seen as involving two partners who, in order to preserve their mutually advantageous relationship, adopt the convention of at least pretending to consider each other as equals and of regarding their exchanged goods as equivalent, at any rate in the long run. In this way the pattern shifts from a description of real exchanges to an ideology of the actors involved in them. Under the ideology of reciprocity, quite unequal relations – extending even to the extreme case of 'colonial exploitation' – can be seen to exist.²⁴

3. The redistributive pattern underscores both the disparity in rank between the central agency and peripheral partners and the imbalance between centripetal and centrifugal contributions, the latter being in some cases completely missing.²⁵ So the 'real' situation can range from unidirectional contributions (forced by physical or ideological constraints, and with purely ideological returns), to a centralized arrangement of reciprocal (balanced or unbalanced) relations.²⁶ Now, the centralized pattern superimposed on a complex network of reciprocal relations is the point of view of the central partner, and the pattern is built by simply ignoring other relations in which he is not involved, or which do not agree with his centrality. But any 'peripheral' partner could similarly build a centralized network of his own. So at both ends of the possible range ideology plays an essential role, and the same act of exchange may be considered as a constitutive element both of a simple symmetrical relationship and a more complex centralized network.

To return to the main point, then, it should be clear that the two patterns – reciprocity and redistribution – are not descriptive models but *interpretations* of a unique reality. In other words, the adoption (first by the participants and secondly by outside observers) of one pattern or another is the result of an ideological decision, a selecting of only some elements as meaningful and a discarding of others as irrelevant or inconvenient.

So the very same episode, as we shall see, can be framed into both patterns at the same time. The two partners can view their relationship differently, as symmetrical according to one or centralized according to the other; or else the same person can describe the same exchange act as

reciprocative (when addressing his partner) and as redistributive (when addressing his inner audience); or else the evaluation of an exchange relationship can be more complex, including elements from both patterns together. The Brazilian village studied by Lévi-Strauss²⁷ was described by some inhabitants as a centralized structure, by others as a symmetrical structure, and the 'real' plan fits both descriptions and belongs to neither. Likewise the international political world of the Near East in the Late Bronze age is presented in some texts as a centralized one, in others as a network of symmetrically arranged relationships. The 'real world' is much more complicated and cannot be described for lack of quantitative data, but it certainly contained features of both patterns. An intelligent selection of the elements allowed the protagonists to describe reality in the way most appropriate to their cultural background and political aims.

Prestige and interest

The selection of an interpretive pattern by the political actors themselves is not arbitrary. In order to be plausible and effective, it must correspond as much as possible with the actual situation, and it must be deeply embedded in the traditional worldview of their country and their culture. In fact a country like Egypt, because of its geographical compactness and isolation in a surrounding 'void', well-established centralized worldview and real material superiority over its partners, makes prevalent use of the redistributive pattern. By contrast, the Asiatic kingdoms, whose borders are more open and fluctuating, whose balance of power is less stable in individual cases but basically well balanced in the long run, and whose exchanges are multi-directional in character, necessarily adopt a symmetrical view of political relations. Of course, this invites the objection that the suggestion of a contrasting analysis of the two integrative patterns is simply a suggestion for a study of the Egyptian vs. Asiatic worldviews.

The diachronic development of political relations must also be taken into account. Perhaps Ramesses II encourages interpretation in terms of the reciprocal pattern more than does Tuthmosis III simply because the former's military balance with the Hittites was rather even, while the latter's military balance with Mitanni was quite favourable. Does the growth into empires of both Hatti and Assyria explain the elements of centralization in their worldviews? And after all, could not the properly political dynamics explain most of the statements in the texts, without having recourse to ideology and semiology?

Now, the geopolitical factor is undeniable, already well known and frequently taken into account (usually as the only factor!); the diachronic

factor is also easily understood. Yet the most interesting differences, the truly conventional character in the use of the interpretive patterns, are revealed by contrasting texts of different typology but belonging to the same country and period. As in a laboratory experiment, we have to control some factors (here, time and space differences) in order to test the relevance of the factor under study. The result of such an 'experiment' is that the basic difference lies between two sets of documents, with the connected differences in addressees, in purposes and in character.

On the one hand we have documents addressed to the inner public. These texts range from inscriptions on royal monuments to those on private tombs but have in common a celebrative purpose, an underscoring of prestige, a centralized worldview and a disregard for the point of view of the outer partners. Thus the texts provide documentary proof or ostentatious evidence of the author's political and/or social position, whether the issue be the Pharaoh's ideological and administrative control of his kingdom or the social rank of a deceased official.

On the other hand we have documents addressed to the outer partners, and these constitute the operative substance of inter-state relations. These texts range from international treaties to letters exchanged between private persons, but have in common an integrative purpose, an underscoring of interest, a symmetrical worldview, and an interest in the point of view of the partner – the more so if the purpose is to modify or overwhelm it.

The two situations are, of course, interconnected. Great prestige with the inner public is necessary in order to negotiate from strength, and success in negotiations increases inner prestige. But we are dealing with two moments that are basically distinct and thus require a different perception and representation of reality. Our decoding of the texts belonging to the two different sets (and also to more specialized subsets with their own characteristics, of course) requires a constant concern for the main elements in communication theory: who is the sender, who is the addressee (including further, secondary, addressees), what is the medium of communication, for what purpose has the message been issued, what code is used and why, what do we know about previous contacts between the same partners, and so on. In considering these points we can distinguish what belongs to the level of ideology and what belongs to the level of reality, what is stereotyped convention and what is specific information.²⁸ Some historical information (too simplistically considered as such for lack of a correct analysis) should probably be discarded, but most of the information will be perceived in a deeper way, with all the pertinent nuances and connotations. Above all, the dynamics of the interacting systems can be reconstructed to a certain extent – the

limit being imposed by the uneven and scanty sample of data at our disposal.

The aim of reconstructing a system of values rather than a set of specific historical facts, the focus on structure more than on events, does not mean a lack of interest in history, in political history. After all, we have to know the code in order to understand the single messages; we have to reconstruct a 'grammar' in order to read a text. Likewise, we have first to deal with the overall political ideology if we want really to understand political events. But just as an unknown code is deciphered by decoding messages, and a grammar is reconstructed from analysing texts, so our structural analysis starts from single documents; and even if the purpose is not to rewrite here the political history of the Near East in the Late Bronze age, an attentive reader will find many pointers in this direction – although the structural arrangement of the subject matters makes it difficult to use this book as a handbook of political history.

Geographical and chronological limits

Having selected the Late Bronze period as particularly suitable for analysis (cf. the section on the regional system of the Late Bronze Age above), the limits in time and space were left somewhat free to fluctuate, being basically imposed by the documentation itself. As concerns space, the bulk of data comes from (or refers to) Egypt, Syria-Palestine, Central/Eastern Anatolia and Upper Mesopotamia. A country that was a major element in the system, namely Babylonia, is rather under-represented here simply because the data coming from it is of little use from our point of view. It would have been useful to enlarge the picture to include the Mycenaean world on one side and Elam on the other, but the documents coming from these areas are even less appropriate to the kind of analysis we are carrying on. As for the area beyond – the Mediterranean, East Africa, Arabia and Iran – this is 'prehistoric' at the time, no written evidence having come from there. The spatial borders are thus those of the written evidence endowed with an ideological value, but this kind of delimitation is not artificial. It is inconceivable that the archaeological sample is so distorted as to miss completely an area that was interacting with the central core of the system at the same level and through the same procedures. The distribution of royal inscriptions, letters and treaties follows the distribution of the interacting political centres. And the very availability of writing is limited to and distinctive of the countries that had reached the technological and organizational level to be accepted as partners in the regional system.

The same kind of practical (but historically sound) considerations apply to the time limits. The beginning and end of the Late Bronze age are marked by two 'dark ages' during which the amount of available documents diminishes considerably, and in some areas disappears altogether.²⁹ This is especially true for the end of the period, the troubles in the early twelfth century bringing about a complete absence of written documents in Anatolia, Syria and Palestine. The better-protected states of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia kept their scribal and organizational levels but their involvement in international contacts declined as well. As a result, the final limit (ca. 1180 BC) is quite obvious, though use has been made of documents from the subsequent decades in Egypt (Wen-Amun) and Assyria (Tiglat-pileser I) when this was helpful in showing the mixture of persistence and innovation in the political procedures and ideologies of the most conservative centres.

The problem of the upper limits is more complex: just as the archaeological transition from Middle to Late Bronze is more conventional than substantial, so the inter-regional system functioning from the fifteenth to the thirteenth centuries was already well advanced in the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this case, some major political events are available: in Egypt the beginning of the eighteenth dynasty (ca. 1580 BC) also means the beginning of the Egyptian expansion into Asia. In Upper and Lower Mesopotamia the constitution of the Mitanni and Kassite kingdoms (ca. 1600 BC) provides an obvious starting point. In this case, too, use was made of data from the formative period, if particularly interesting. But the period under proper analysis lasts for four centuries, from the early sixteenth to the early twelfth century BC.

A third delimitation of our database is political in character. All of the documents belong to the political elites, and most of them to the royal palaces. This means that the political ideology they reflect is the ideology of the ruling class. Two problems should be discussed in this connection, but given the tremendous discrepancy between the limited data and the extensive space for speculation and hypotheses, I will confine myself to a few uncontroversial statements.

The first problem is that of the addressees of royal propaganda. Since only scribes could read the texts and some were not even visible, it seems that the audience was never more than a few people – which makes it difficult to call it 'propaganda' at all.³⁰ In fact it is all a matter of degree, and it seems clear that there is an inverse relationship between detail and the spread of the political ideologies. The most technical, detailed and complex texts were directed to palace circles, mostly scribes and high officials: only they had access to them and understood their implications; only they were

professionally interested in them; and the king needed to keep them convinced and supportive of the official ideology. In short, the authors and addressees of the political texts were virtually one and the same, and this is quite normal in every historical period. But there were more channels for a wider diffusion of political ideologies throughout the country: verbal, visual, and ceremonial channels, with even architecture playing a role. Of course, the richness of the political ideology is reduced by using vehicles such as these, but so is the need for ideological training when moving from royal palace to capital city, and thence to peripheral cities and provinces, to small villages in the countryside, to pastoral camps in the steppes or in the highlands. So the texts that we have were not accessible to the whole population, but a sufficient reflection of them reached everybody according to his cultural level and political involvement.

The second problem is that of a differentiation in ideology according to socio-political stratification. Almost nothing is known about the political ideologies (and worldview in general) shared by the lower classes, at least in the period here considered, and the little we do know is always filtered through the texts of the ruling elites. The most general elements of the ruling ideology – especially on the topic of relations with foreigners and the outer world – seem to have been basically common to all social and political layers, while more particular aspects were selected according to the interests, needs, feelings and special traditions of the different groups and classes. At all events, our treatment is unavoidably limited to the political ideologies of the ruling elites.

A last qualification, more practical in character, is also necessary. The treatment here is not meant to be comprehensive in its coverage of the international relations of the ancient Near East, or intended to make use of all existing documents which bear on this subject. It is selective in its approach, with some general and some very specific analysis, and particularly detailed discussion of some texts and terms having special relevance for our assumptions. Every single paragraph of this book, if treated on a fully documented basis and at a deeper analytical level, could become a monograph in its own right. This is of course neither feasible nor even desirable: I want simply to emphasize that the present work does not exhaust its topic but instead, hopefully, suggests a new direction in historical studies on the Late Bronze period. The uneven treatment of the subject, dictated by the uneven availability of the data and the uneven reflection of the political world in that data, makes this essay a rather personal perspective on a topic that ‘in reality’ should have been much more complex and contradictory.

Part I

Territory and Borders

1

Inner vs. Outer Territory

The notion of a homogeneous, qualitatively indifferent space, viewed as the geometrical locus of reciprocal positioning among objects, which in consequence is unchanging from any point of observation, is an abstraction which is appropriate only to particular fields of analysis. In political activity, and more generally in human relations, however, space – or territory – has hardly ever been viewed as homogeneous. This is so today because, while we are ‘Euclidean’ and rational beings when dealing with problems of geometry or physics, we are not when facing other persons or other political communities. This was even more true in the period which is the subject of this study, when ideas and symbols in official texts found a free application that in modern political documents tends to be less obvious – partly hidden by rewriting in the terms of hegemonic rational thought.¹

Qualitative differentiation in territorial perception is based on obvious psychological impressions, basically centred on the quest for security. The most influential approach in the past stemmed from theorizing about ‘mythical’ (or even ‘primitive’) thought,² which also found its way into studies of the ancient Near East.³ The prejudice to be removed is that all this applies only to the ‘primitive’ and ‘archaic’ mind, while ‘our’ thought is normal and rational – a pretty mythical idea in its turn.⁴ Once this prejudice is eliminated, the studies of mythical thought retain a great deal of heuristic value and are still commonly employed in the phenomenology of religion and related fields.⁵ We do not need to analyse here the psychological roots of the differentiated appreciation of space. Suffice it to state that they find a concrete application in preferring the known to the unknown, the light to the dark, the enclosed to the open, the solid to the weak, the compact to the scattered, the fixed to the moving, the familiar to the unfamiliar, and so on. The concentration of all the positive qualities

in the above alternatives makes up (at its best) the area where the subject is, all the negative qualities being pushed toward the periphery. It is not only and not so much a question of practical behaviour, but also and even more a question of symbolic representation of reality, a system of values.

The opposition between centre and periphery can be perceived at different levels and influences social organization to a greater or lesser extent.⁶ There is the personal (house or family) level of relationships; the local (community or settlement) level, encompassing the people and places with whom we are accustomed to deal in daily life; and the larger application to the national or cultural unit. People sharing language and values, customs and procedures, who are inserted into the same administrative, economic and political system, are led to view their own territory as different from the surrounding areas. This difference can appear even in terminology: for example, in Sumerian the inner country is *kalam* and the surrounding lands/mountains are *kur.kur*,⁷ in Egyptian the flat Nile valley is *t'*, while the surrounding mountains are *ḥ'swt*, and the black agricultural land is *kmt* while the red outer steppe is *ḏšrt*.⁸ A similar juxtaposition between 'our' population and foreign peoples seems to be a development of the first millennium,⁹ not yet to be found in the territorial (as opposed to national) states of the Bronze age.¹⁰

Now, the clear-cut opposition between inner and outer land may in some cases have been influenced and made easier by topographical and ecological factors – which in fact influenced the very constitution of some political units, as well as the establishment of cultural and linguistic frontiers. The most obvious case is Egypt, where the differences between the fertile and irrigated valley and the arid steppe or desert, between the intensively populated countryside and the surrounding 'empty' space, are quite impressive. Egypt is also a rather closed area, with only a few 'gateways' linking it to other (but looser and distant) areas of intensive settlement.

Mesopotamia is somewhat different, bordering on desert to the south-west and mountains to the north-east, but much more open to contacts with the surrounding areas. It is also endowed with a greater internal complexity and mobility of social and ecological borders.¹¹ Other countries (Anatolia, Syria-Palestine and Iran) have still fewer compelling geographical reasons to consider themselves well defined and qualitatively different from their neighbours – yet they also developed a centralist view and a diversified cultural appreciation of space.

In effect, we have to take into due account the uneven spread of settlement in the Near East in the Late Bronze age.¹² People (especially those enjoying city life and state organization) were concentrated in relatively limited areas, ranging from the large alluvial plains of Egypt and

Lower Mesopotamia to quite small enclaves in the highlands, separated from one another by steppe or woodland or mountains inhabited by a sparse population – if any at all – of lower technological and organizational development. Consequently, contacts with and even knowledge of what was beyond the ecological and political borders were rather difficult, and did not belong to the daily experience of the common people.

This tendency to isolation was effective in keeping alive a ‘nuclear’ or ‘centralist’ perception of territorial relations, a perception which will fade away only if more contacts with the outer world become frequent enough; and an experience of different peoples makes it clear that this diversity is cultural rather than natural, quantitative rather than qualitative. In other words, the ecological barriers are not the reason for the differentiated appreciation of geographical space (which springs from basic psychological features), but are a factor in its organization and reinforcement into cultural (and eventually ‘national’) stereotypes.

The geographical elements and cultural characteristics of the inhabitants of the peripheral world are considered not only different but inferior to those in the central country. If the periphery is a desert, it is the seat of death and emptiness (even the image of the netherworld);¹³ if it is a woodland, it is the seat of darkness; and if it is a highland, it is difficult of access. Its economic resources (see Chapter 21) are limited and insufficient for human life: they acquire a reasonable value only as a function of the complex and substantial needs of the central country. The culture of the foreigners is viewed either as lacking the basic requirements of the civilized world (as in the Mesopotamian stereotypes of the nomads who ‘do not know/have house/city/grain/etc.’),¹⁴ or else as being the very reverse of ours. In a Ramesside royal hymn, the Asiatics are ‘those who plough in summer and reap in winter’.¹⁵ Among the many topics suitable for analysis, we will select here just two of them: language as a qualifying item of culture, and water as an essential for life.

In the scribal milieu of the Ramesside period the training of children, foreigners and animals is unified and contrasted to the culture of the male, adult, educated Egyptian. The Instructions of Any, a wisdom text that goes back to the late eighteenth dynasty, provide the most detailed picture:

The savage lion abandons his wrath, and comes to resemble the timid donkey. The horse slips into his harness, obedient it goes outdoors. The dog obeys the word, and walks behind its master. The monkey carries the stick, though its mother did not carry it. The goose returns from the pond, when one comes to shut it in the yard. One teaches the Nubian to speak Egyptian, the Syrian and other strangers too.¹⁶

The same perspective is reflected in the scribal miscellanies: 'The ape understands words, yet it is brought from Kush.'¹⁷ The difficulty for an ape to speak 'Egyptian' (but remember that 'Egyptian language' [*ns n rmt*] is literally 'the language of men')¹⁸ derives not from its being an animal, but from its being from Kush. We have to presume that apes normally understand, and perhaps speak, the language of Kush. Animals and foreigners alike can learn Egyptian, but their original language is physically different, their tongue/language is 'inverted' in comparison to the 'human/Egyptian' one:

Having been brought into Egypt, (the Libyans) were settled into fortresses ... They heard, while in the service of the king, the Egyptian language, and the king let them forget their own language, he overturned their tongues.¹⁹

Also in Asia we can trace the idea that foreign languages are objectively ununderstandable, and rather similar to animal (especially bird) calls. But wherever bi- and multilingualism become a common experience, the different languages are evaluated to the same level, there is 'correspondence' (*mithurtu* is the technical term) between them,²⁰ which finds expression in the arrangement of bi- and multilingual vocabularies,²¹ in inter-linear translations,²² in the widespread use of interpreters.²³

The case of water is somewhat similar. If a foreign river, comparable in size to the Nile (e.g. the Euphrates), is ever encountered, it is classed as 'inverted water' (*mw qd*) because it flows the wrong way.²⁴ But generally foreign countries are assumed to lack rivers, relying instead on rainfall for their agricultural needs – a rather inferior and unreliable substitute:

You made the Nile in the underworld, you bring him when you will, to nourish the people, for you made them for yourself ... All distant lands, you make them live, you made a heavenly Nile descend for them: he makes waves on the mountains like the sea, to drench their fields and their towns. How excellent are your ways, O Lord of eternity! A Nile from heaven for foreign peoples, and for all lands' creatures that walk on legs; for Egypt the Nile who comes from the underworld.²⁵

This is the Aton hymn of Amenophis IV, an unusual attempt at a universalistic and balanced vision of the world in which all enjoy the benefits of a universal god, yet the Egypt-centred evaluation remains an all-pervading feature.

Of course the inner country too can be considered at different levels, from the mythical to the technical. In the case of Egypt, the mythical idea is centred on the 'union of Both Lands' (*sm' t'wy*), a political myth quite central in pharaonic ideology.²⁶ Texts of a more realistic kind range from those providing a theoretical/generalizing calculation of the extent of the country,²⁷ to those containing a quite technical/administrative knowledge of its partition into large (temple or palace) estates and single fields, as in the extensive survey of the Wilbour Papyrus.²⁸

The same range of possibilities applies to foreign lands: from a mythical and stereotyped list of the 'Nine Bows',²⁹ to the technical tool of the 'Itinerary'³⁰ – like the one that found its way into the Annals of Tuthmosis III,³¹ or the one that can be reconstructed from the Anastasi I letter.³² By rearranging the information contained in this text, we can also reconstruct a differentiated appreciation of Syria as viewed by the Egyptian messengers and officials travelling through it. Some places under Egyptian administrative control, like Jaffa, are quite safe (apart from thefts and minor problems with the inhabitants) and quite efficient (the chariot can be repaired by local craftsmen). Other sites, like Tyre and Byblos, are somewhat strange but at least urban and civilized. But the space between them is quite hostile: the physical difficulties (mountains and rivers to be crossed, bad roads, forests) are increased by the presence of wild animals, including men who are also wild and ferocious.³³ Civilized control on the chaotic periphery is difficult, the territory is so large and different, at the same time empty and filled with dangers, everything moving, everything hidden or in the dark. The general feeling is one of insecurity.

Hittite control on the Kashka territory is not too different from Egyptian control in Syria-Palestine. The Instructions for the *bēl madgalti*³⁴ (the chief of the garrison in a watchtower) can be analysed in a similar way. There is a closed and well protected space: the *madgaltu* itself, the fortified castle of the garrison, and inside this space everything must be run with a care and an exactitude so obsessive as to reveal a good deal of anxiety. Every year the walls are to be plastered, the drain channels cleaned and the locks verified; beams and planks must be of exact dimensions (cubits and fingers are given); and so on. The greatest care is devoted to keeping watch from the walls and opening and locking the doors of the castle – the most critical element, giving access to the outer world (and vice versa!) which is not under firm control.³⁵ Beyond the walls, where robberies and various kinds of crime take place, the Hittite garrison has to proceed with the utmost caution: scouts go ahead of the troops, who must not pursue enemy forces for more than three days; the garrison chief must not be

absent for more than two. Beyond a day's walk security is believed to disappear.³⁶

Between the closed and fortified castle and the dangerous and unknown territory, there is an intermediate belt: the local villages, inhabited by foreigners and deportees, themselves foreign in nature. In the villages Hittite control must be enforced and civilization established. These tasks must be accomplished in a cautious way, always in tune with the wishes of the local authorities, and showing maximum concern for two matters especially close to the needs and values of the local population: the restoration of temples and cultic furniture, priestly personnel and feasts, and the administration of justice:

As it has been from olden times, in a town in which they have been accustomed to imposing the death penalty, they shall continue to do so. But in a town where they have been accustomed to imposing exile, they shall continue that (custom).³⁷

So 'ethnologically minded' and so capable of appreciating cultural diversities when dealing with peripheral peoples,³⁸ and trying to enlarge their cosmos at the expense of the chaos surrounding it, the Hittites become much more ruthless and 'centre-minded' when some strange custom from the barbarian periphery challenges the inner country and even the royal palace. In this event – as shown unmistakably by the norms applying to the marriage of a Hittite princess to the 'barbarian' chief of the Hayasha – deviance becomes a crime.³⁹