

Introduction: The Amarna System

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The Amarna Project

In 1887, a remarkable cache of documents was found at Tell el-Amarna in Egypt, the ancient site of the palace of King Amenhotep IV (better known as Akhenaten) in Akhetaten, his abandoned capital. It consisted of 350 or so letters from the mid-fourteenth century B.C.E. between the Egyptian court of the Eighteenth Dynasty and other states of the ancient Near East. The letters were edited in 1907 by J. A. Knudtzon, who attempted to place them in chronological and geographical order. His numbering system is still used (with the siglum “EA”) and accepted as a reasonably accurate guide to the sequence of letters. In 1992 W. L. Moran, of Harvard University, published the letters in English, drawing on almost a century of scholarship. In so doing he made the archive available to the general reader and provided the key stimulus to the present project.

The letters themselves can be grouped under three headings: The *international* correspondence consists of about fifty diplomatic documents mostly sent to Pharaoh by the rulers of other Great Powers and lesser independent states. A wide variety of subjects are dealt with: dynastic questions, particularly marriage, the exchange of gifts, alliance and strategic matters, trade, legal problems, the mechanics of diplomacy. Although the files are very incomplete, taken together they provide a rare insight into the international relations of the time. The second batch of more than three hundred *imperial* documents consists of administrative correspondence mainly sent to the Egyptian court from Egypt’s Canaanite (western Asian) empire. Many of the letters deal with the vassals’ domestic problems, quarrels between vas-

sals, trade and tribute, and internal security. The wider strategic question of Egypt's relations with its neighbors is also touched upon, providing a common thread between the international and imperial correspondence. A third batch of documents, not included in Moran's compilation, were intended for training purposes in school and are beyond the scope of this book.

This volume of essays arises out of a workshop on the Amarna Letters that was held at the Bellagio Study and Conference Center of the Rockefeller Foundation from September 17 to 19, 1996. The participants were eight historians of the ancient Near East, eight scholars from the social sciences specializing in contemporary international relations, and two working diplomats. Over several days of intensive discussion we attempted to shed new light on the documents themselves and on the system of diplomacy they depict, to reconstruct the international relations of the ancient Near East, and to identify universal features of international politics.

The sixteen essays in this volume have been revised and edited in light of the discussions that took place at the conference. Although the diplomats, Ambassador Robbie Sabel and Mr. Avi Binyamin, were unable to participate in this stage of the project, the other members of the workshop benefited greatly from their presentations, comments, and anecdotes from practical experience, the influence of which are discernible in the written contributions.

In what follows, we have tried to retain the spirit of dialogue that prevailed at the original conference and deliberately avoided segregating "ancient" from "modern" approaches. Our starting point is the international system, the set of (in this case) states in regular interaction and contact. It is the system that provides the context and structure within which component entities are constrained to act. From the whole, we move on to a study of the part: Egyptian foreign and imperial policies, reflecting the goals and needs generated by Egypt's involvement in the wider system. At a third and final level of analysis, we examine the pragmatic aspects of diplomacy between the Great Powers: the system of mutually beneficial exchanges of goods, gods, and persons; negotiating tactics; and the diplomatic mechanisms that were called upon to implement policy and manage relationships.

The volume is thus an interdisciplinary effort, which will, it is hoped, be of inherent interest to scholars and students in many fields. The results must, however, be justified also in terms of the contributory disciplines individually.

From the point of view of the ancient Near Eastern specialist, this project is an opportunity to apply to the Amarna Letters concepts and tools of analysis drawn from the social sciences in general and international relations in particular. A century of intensive work by specialists has resulted in consider-

able advances in our understanding of the script and language of the Letters. Where not broken, the text can be deciphered and translated at least literally with reasonable confidence. Progress on the understanding of the content of the Letters has been considerably less satisfactory. Little correlation has been made between the seemingly trivial issues, the disingenuous or hysterical rhetoric, and the repetitive arguments of the ancient rulers, on the one hand, and the system of international relations that forms the context for their discourse, on the other. It remains unclear how these elements fit into and form the system.

The reason is not hard to find: most specialized scholars, being essentially trained in philology, are ill-equipped to examine the Letters as political documents. Yet it is as political documents that they are most important. The Amarna Letters represent the culmination of a tradition, developed over centuries, through which states might communicate with one another in a common language, might pursue their interests and resolve their differences by reference to common standards and conventions, and might inform themselves of and accept or resist the moves of their neighbors without necessarily resorting to war. An accurate translation of the Letters' content, still less an analysis of their implications, is not possible unless the concepts that underlie them are properly appreciated.

In recent years, more sophisticated techniques adopted from the social sciences have been used by historians of the period. A further step is needed, however, if this approach is to be fully exploited, namely, the inclusion of experts from the social sciences, in particular from political science, in the process of analysis. On the one hand, enormous cultural and material differences exist between the community of the ancient Near Eastern Great Kings and the present global community represented by the United Nations. On the other, it is often assumed that there are certain constants in the conduct of international actors that are predicated on the logic of international interaction and the structure of the international community. Through cooperation across disciplines, culturally grounded forms of expression can be interpreted in terms of responses to invariable problems. Rational choice and decision-making theory, strategic and geopolitical analysis, anthropology and psychology, intelligence and diplomatic theory, and the tool kit of ideas drawn upon by political scientists can all shed light on the Amarna material.

The advantage for ancient historians in interpreting the Letters is that they gain a context within which to place apparently meaningless or pointless statements. The *political* context is provided to essentially *political* communications, inadequately understood because dressed in the discourse of ancient cultures that did not have at their disposal the vocabulary of modern analyti-

cal thought. Through this medium, the text can be analyzed in terms of our own culture and indeed translated into its language(s).

For the international relations scholar, this exercise presents a fascinating challenge. Although incomplete, the Amarna correspondence contains sufficient material to permit concerted study in reasonable depth of the first *international system* known to us. It is in the Amarna period that we observe for the first time the Great Powers of the entire Near East, from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf, interacting among themselves, engaged in regular dynastic, commercial, and strategic relations. The mechanism for the political management of this interconnected set of relationships was Amarna diplomacy, a diplomatic regime consisting of rules, conventions, procedures, and institutions governing the representation of and the communication and negotiation between Great Kings.

The more elaborate justification for this project is as an exercise in broadening horizons. Since its inception after the First World War as a discipline in its own right, international relations has in effect sought to achieve two complementary goals: theoretical understanding of the abiding nature of relations across sovereign collectivities and greater insight into contemporary international affairs. Often, preoccupation with current issues—the United Nations, the Cold War, regional integration, globalization—has determined the theoretical agenda. With some distinguished exceptions, this has meant that generalizations about international relations are derived from a narrow database drawn, at best, from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If we assume that sovereign collectivities have engaged in more or less regular international contact for at least 4,500 years, it can be seen that modern scholars have tended to restrict their attention to about 200 of those years, or only 4 percent of this immense span of time.

While there is every justification for the policy analyst or current affairs specialist concentrating on the present and recent past, there is no reason for the theorist concerned to interpret the deeper forces at work to ignore 96 percent of international history. For many of the international phenomena we investigate, the number of cases in the contemporary period is quite small, hindering meaningful comparative analysis. Preoccupation with a few well-known events of the twentieth century, the Sarajevo–Munich–Suez–Cuba syndrome, is particularly restrictive and misleading. Obviously, adequate data are not available for the entire four millennia; but where they are, there is surely a good case to be made for reflecting on and comparing as broad a range of variations of these phenomena as possible.

Consideration of remote periods certainly has its difficulties and drawbacks. Making sense of the Amarna Letters, even in translation, is harder than

reading *Foreign Relations of the United States*. It requires substantial background knowledge and interdisciplinary dialogue. But it is worth the effort. Most hypotheses about international behavior are based on the received truths of the age or the experience of the observer. Testing those hypotheses *synchronically* against recent events risks circular reasoning, or “proving” something with the same evidence used to generate it in the first place. It is more suggestive and methodologically sound to work *diachronically*, deriving hypotheses from one period and testing them against another. Thus, the Amarna Letters enable us to investigate the validity or explanatory utility of controversial modern assumptions, concepts, and theories in a totally unfamiliar setting.

To put it another way, comparison of the working of international systems thousands of years apart enables us to put things in their historical context, to think beyond the short term. Students of the present never really know how things work out; they have difficulty enough identifying salient trends. When we study ancient periods, we acquire limitless hindsight; we can determine consequences over the long run in a way that is impossible for the student of contemporary affairs.

True, ancient history lacks immediate “relevance,” narrowly defined. But this remoteness from contemporary concerns is educative about such fundamental features of the contemporary international system as states, national identities, borders, sovereignty, government, international law, the balance of power, diplomacy, and so on. Are these permanent or transitory features of international life? How have these concepts been understood in times past? Have functional equivalents to them existed?

Remoteness can also aid objectivity. Many writers in the West care very much if democratic government and economic interdependence promote peace, if alliances and armaments are conducive to stability or its opposite, or if diplomacy and international law are essential to conflict resolution. Since we live in the present, we are concerned with and involved in consequences. Even ostensibly theoretical research may serve, consciously or not, some policy agenda. The debate over the validity of the democratic-peace theory is a case in point. Such commitment may contaminate data and bias analysis. All the more reason for investigating, whenever we can, such subjects far away and long ago. Who cares if the Hittites or Hurrians prevailed?

Despite the seeming irrelevance of ancient history, we would also argue that some contemporary issues are amenable to investigation in the context of Amarna (and other historical periods). An example is the sources of international stability. The Amarna system existed for at least two hundred years, with few major wars between the Great Powers. Are there possible lessons

here? How did Great Kings avoid war? What mechanisms of conflict resolution, if at all, did they resort to?

The Amarna Correspondents

The Amarna Letters span the reigns of the Egyptian Eighteenth Dynasty rulers Amenhotep III (called Mimmureya/Nimu'wareya/Nibmureya in the Letters) and Akhenaten (=Amenhotep IV, called Naphurureya in the Letters), and possibly another king, Smenkhkare or Tutankhamun. Akhenaten is famous for his religious revolution, in which he concentrated official worship on the sun god, Aten. His accession to the throne is recorded in the Letters and provides a major chronological reference point. It appears to have had unsettling effects on Egypt's neighbors.

All but about ten of the documents are letters received by the Egyptian court. The correspondents may be divided into three categories: fellow Great Powers, independent states, and Egypt's vassals in Canaan.

Great Powers

The period from the late sixteenth to the twelfth century B.C.E. is referred to by Near Eastern archaeologists as the Late Bronze Age. In political terms, it has been called the "Great Powers' Club," because the area was divided up among a few major powers who regarded themselves as members of an exclusive group. Their rulers were entitled to call themselves "Great King" and to use the term "brotherhood" to describe their relationship. *Egypt* had joined the club in the fifteenth century, after the campaigns of Thutmose III had taken Egyptian arms as far as the Euphrates and won for Egypt an empire in Canaan. The other members, and correspondents with Egypt in the Amarna Letters, were Mittani, Babylonia, Hatti, and Assyria.

Mittani (EA 17–30), also known as Hanigalbat and as Nahrin, was centered in northern Syria, between the Tigris and the Euphrates, with its capital at Washukanni (exact location as yet undiscovered). It was often referred to as the land of the Hurrians, after its main ethnic component, which had coalesced in the fifteenth century to form a major empire. Egyptian expansion had led to war between the two kingdoms, which had been resolved by a truce and later by a marriage alliance. By the time of the Letters, it was an old ally. The sole correspondent in the Letters is King Tushratta. Later, Tushratta was assassinated and his kingdom destroyed by internecine warfare. His son Shattiwaza fled to the Hittites, who reinstalled him on the throne of a much-reduced kingdom as a vassal.

Babylonia (EA 1–11) is also called Karaduniyash or Shanhar in the Letters. At the end of the sixteenth century, it had been taken over by a foreign dynasty, the Kassites, who had, however, quickly assimilated. Its correspondents in the Letters were the Kassite king Kadashman-Enlil I and his successor Burra(/Burna)-Buriyash II.

Hatti (EA 41–44) was a kingdom in eastern Anatolia that had been founded by the Hittites in the early second millennium B.C.E. It is sometimes called after its capital, Hattusha. After decline in the early fifteenth century, its fortunes were revived by King Suppiluliuma, who invaded Syria, taking vassals from Mittani and eventually from Egypt. He is the sole correspondent with Egypt, Mittani being the victim of Hittite expansion at the time of the Letters, and Egypt's turn coming only shortly thereafter.

After the death of Tutankhamun, to whom one letter (EA 41) may be addressed, an agreement with his widow to marry Suppiluliuma's son failed when the Hittite prince died on the way to Egypt, possibly murdered by the widow's opponents. This led to armed reprisals by the Hittites. By their own account, Egyptian prisoners brought back to Hatti carried with them an epidemic that ravaged the kingdom for some years, killing Suppiluliuma himself. Intermittent warfare with Egypt followed for the next fifty years, culminating in the battle of Qadesh, a direct clash between the imperial armies under Suppiluliuma's grandson Muwatalli and Ramesses II, respectively. No decisive victory was won, but the Hittites appear to have had the upper hand. Sixteen years later, Muwatalli's successor, Hattusili III, concluded a peace treaty with Ramesses II.

Assyria (EA 15–16) had been a vassal of Mittani but, by the time of the Letters, had not only broken free but was asserting itself as a Great Power. Its king, Assur-uballit, was an energetic monarch responsible for a major expansion of territory. His establishing diplomatic relations with Egypt led to protests by the Babylonian king Burra-Buriyash (EA 9), but apparently he later made his peace with Babylonia, marrying his daughter to Burra-Buriyash's son. Relations with Hatti were troubled, as the two states vied for control of the former territory of Mittani, with Hatti reluctant to admit Assyria into the Great Powers' club.

Independent States

The two independent states that appear in the Amarna Letters are Arzawa and Alashiya. *Arzawa* (EA 31–2) was a medium-size power on the south Anatolian coast west of the Hittite sphere of influence. It was courted by Egypt with the proposition of a diplomatic marriage. *Alashiya* (EA 33–40) was a

kingdom located on Cyprus. Known as a source of copper, it conducted extensive trade with Egypt.

Vassal States

By far the largest component of the archive is the letters from some forty vassals of Egypt in Syria-Palestine (EA 45–339, 362–67, 369–71, 378, 382). Of course, they are by no means equally represented, nor does the quantity of correspondence bear any relation to their size or importance. Important buffer states in the north, such as Ugarit and Damascus, are represented by a mere handful of letters, while the bulk of the letters are from a single hand, that of Rib-Hadda of Byblos. The most noteworthy Egyptian vassals in the Amarna Letters were the following:

Amurru (EA 60–67, 156–71). One of the northernmost vassals of Egypt and a gateway to Syria, it flourished under the charismatic leadership of ‘Abdi-Ashirta, who expanded its territory at the expense of the neighboring kingdoms. ‘Abdi-Ashirta constantly claimed to be a loyal vassal of Egypt (EA 60–65), which appears initially to have tolerated his actions, in spite of the constant warnings of Rib-Hadda, ruler of Byblos. However, his expansion must have reached a point where it threatened Egyptian interests, perhaps after he had occupied the Egyptian garrison at Sumur, claiming to have rescued it from another set of raiders. The Egyptians sent an expedition; ‘Abdi-Ashirta was captured and taken to Egypt (EA 108, 117), where he apparently was executed (EA 101).

‘Abdi-Ashirta was succeeded by his numerous sons, headed by Aziru, who set about restoring the fortunes of their kingdom. Again, they pursued a policy of local expansion while at the same time placating the Egyptians and seeking to be accepted as a loyal vassal (EA 156–71). Aziru was summoned to Egypt and managed to persuade the Egyptian king of his good intentions. He was permitted to return home, ostensibly to face the new menace of Hittite forces on the northern border. Aziru, however, was playing a double game: while pretending to protect Egyptian interests, he was negotiating with the Hittites. The Egyptians became suspicious when they discovered that Aziru was in consort with Aitukama of Qadesh, at that point a Hittite ally (EA 162; cf. EA 59, from the citizens of Tunip). Aziru eventually went over to the Hittites and remained their loyal vassal for the rest of his reign.

Byblos (Gubla) (EA 68–138, 362, + 139–40). Its ruler, Rib-Hadda, was the most prolific of all the Amarna correspondents. He tirelessly complained of the dangers to his kingdom and his own position caused by the expansion of ‘Abdi-Ashirta and later of Aziru. He had the satisfaction of seeing ‘Abdi-

Ashirta fall but was then deposed himself by his brother and sent into exile (EA 137–38).

Shechem (*Šakmu*) (EA 252–54). Its ruler, Lab'ayu, had a career similar to that of 'Abdi-Ashirta of Amurru. Lab'ayu expanded at the expense of his neighbors, provoking their complaints to Pharaoh (e.g., Biridiya of Megiddo, EA 244), while he continued to protest his loyalty and good intentions. He was eventually captured, apparently by the Egyptians or at their order, but his sons replaced him and continued his policy.

Qadesh (*Qidšu/Qinsa*) (EA 189–90). This city represented the northernmost edge of Egyptian influence. At the time of the Letters, it was ruled by Aitukama, who went over to the Hittites and consorted with Aziru of Amurru in attacking other Egyptian vassals on the Hittites' behalf (cf. EA 151, 162, 175–76, 363). The city and its territory became a bone of contention between Egypt and Hatti and changed hands several times in the decades leading up to their peace treaty. It was also noteworthy as the site of the greatest battle of the Egyptian-Hittite war.

Damascus (EA 194–97). Like Amurru and Qadesh, this was an important northern buffer state. It suffered for its loyalty to Egypt by being attacked by the latter two (EA 151; cf. EA 189). It was ruled by Biryawaza, who was noteworthy for being the subject of a protest to Pharaoh by the Babylonian king for robbing a Babylonian caravan (EA 7).

Ugarit (EA 45–49). Although it does not figure prominently in the Letters, Ugarit was a wealthy and very important port city on the Syrian coast. Shortly after the period of the Letters, it was absorbed by the Hittites into their empire and became a loyal Hittite vassal.

A word of explanation is necessary about the *'Apiru* (*/ḥabiru/ḥapiru*), who receive frequent mention in the vassal correspondence. There is much dispute as to their identity, but they were apparently landless elements or fugitives who, as brigands, attacked the settled areas or hired themselves out as mercenaries. In the Letters, the word is also used as a general term of abuse in denouncing one's opponents.

Script and Language

Although the archive was located in Egypt, the Letters are written on clay tablets in cuneiform script, the writing system used throughout western Asia at the time. The language of most of the Letters is Akkadian (Babylonian), which was the lingua franca of international relations. In their correspondence with the Egyptian overlord, the vassals relied on a local version of Akkadian containing many words and grammatical forms from their own re-

gional dialect. In corresponding with Arzawa, which evidently did not have the facilities to make translations into Akkadian, the Egyptians used Hittite. One letter from Mittani (EA 24) is in Hurrian, for reasons that are not clear. The Egyptian language does not appear to have been used at all in international correspondence.

The reason why the powers, great and small, preferred to use Akkadian, a language utterly foreign to most of them, was that it served as a *lingua franca* through which they could conduct their relations. In attempting to define *lingua franca* Professor Moran has drawn our attention to the concept of an *interlanguage*, an artificial development designed to serve as a neutral intermediary between different cultures.¹ In social science, this would be called a medium for constructing intersubjective reality in a world of many cultures.

It is in its *polycultural* nature that the Amarna system may have the most to teach us. By polycultural, we mean a society in which different cultures coexist on equal terms. *Multiculturalism* refers usually to the tolerance of minority cultures by a dominant culture.² Since the Renaissance, the international system has been dominated by European culture and values. Until very recently, great civilizations such as China, Egypt, India, and Iran were not admitted as full-fledged members of the diplomatic club. The great challenge facing the contemporary international system in the future will be to accommodate non-Western civilizations not as tolerated minority cultures but as equal cultures in their own right. The only precedent for a viable polycultural system is Amarna. Speaking totally unrelated languages, worshipping an assortment of gods, possessing widely divergent cosmologies, the rulers of the Amarna Age were nevertheless able to sustain a viable international system over a long period.

Amarna and Its Antecedents

The Amarna system does not mark the absolute beginning of international relations in history. The first decipherable written records from the early third millennium B.C.E. already reveal a world composed of organized polities in the form of city-states, which exchanged envoys; negotiated, formed, and broke alliances; and made treaties in solemn form. From mid-third millennium Syria we have preserved a treaty, apparently on equal terms, between Ebla and the neighboring kingdom of Abar-SAL, and from Mesopotamia of the same period another treaty, possibly of vassalage, between King Naram-Sin of Akkad and an Elamite ruler.

The forms, conventions, and rules of international relations had been developing for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years in Mesopotamia, based

on necessity (in the absence of a hegemon), trial and error, and that silent form of diplomacy, international trade. But they did not yet amount to an international system. The early second millennium saw further development, as the whole of Mesopotamia and Syria was divided among rival city-states striving for hegemony, a situation that led to a frenetic pace of diplomatic activity, with alliances made and broken, and mini-empires won and lost, as reflected in the correspondence of the Mari archive. The success of the best-known figure of the Mari Age, King Hammurabi of Babylon, in forging most of Mesopotamia into a single if ephemeral empire, was due as much to his diplomatic as to his military skills. At the same time, this too was not yet a full-fledged *international* system: it was confined to the city-states of Mesopotamia/Syria, with their close cultural, linguistic, and religious ties, and to kingdoms on the periphery such as Elam, which historically had been part of the same cuneiform civilization, and it was characterized by almost constant warfare, diplomacy being an ad hoc tool in the process of empire building. It was only in the Amarna Age that the horizons of diplomacy expanded to the whole of the ancient Near East and acquired the concept of a group of equal powers, a “club,” membership in which gave responsibilities as well as privileges.

It was a system that, although not static, gave a modicum of stability and peace to the region for more than two centuries. Mittani, “the sick man of the Near East,” lost its empire and was reduced to a vassal state, but this was as much due to civil war as to external pressure. There were minor skirmishes and clashes with vassals as surrogates, but major battles, such as that between Hatti and Egypt at Qadesh or between Assyria and Hatti at Nihriya, were rare and exceptional events. The Hittite archive from Boghazköi, the other point of reference for the extended Amarna Age, records the system still functioning a hundred years after the letters in the Amarna archive were written. When the system finally collapsed, bringing about a period of turmoil that was marked in particular by the disappearance of Hatti from history, it was not from reasons inherent in the system, such as institutional decay or warfare between the Great Powers, but from the intrusion of outside forces. When civilization reasserted itself, it was in the form of hegemonic empires, which gave less scope for diplomacy, although they continued to use the concepts and instruments refined during the Amarna Age, many of which passed into the Greek and Hebrew spheres and thus came to form part of the heritage of modern international relations.

The Amarna system was, therefore, not the beginning of international relations nor was it a dead end, but to borrow a Churchillian phrase, it was the end of the beginning. It was the culmination of an organic development

that drew together the elements of native Mesopotamian statecraft into a machinery for truly managing international relations. Not until the Amarna Age, in the circumstances of a multipolar, polycultural system encompassing the Great Powers of the ancient Near East, could the machinery of statecraft achieve its full potential, traversing immense barriers of distance, language, culture, and political tradition. In the following pages we explore how and why it did so, and what were the consequences.