

International Relations in the Ancient Near East: The Birth of a Complete Diplomatic System

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Over the three millennia of ancient Near Eastern pre-classical history, the second millennium BC represents a kind of 'golden age' as regards international relations. Particularly at the time of the so-called 'amorrhite kingdoms' (eighteenth to seventeenth centuries), then during the El Amarna period (fifteenth to fourteenth centuries), a real, rational, methodical and complete diplomatic system developed throughout the Near East, with a whole series of shared institutions, procedures and rituals. This system was rigorously drawn up at the end of the third millennium, then ritualized and improved during more than 1,000 years. Recently, the rich documentation from the cuneiform tablets of Mari (Syria, seventeenth century) has deepened our knowledge on this question. Finally, during the first millennium, this international system disappeared with the advent of empires with a 'universal' claim and then with the hellenization of the East and the vanishing of the 'cuneiform culture'.

In order to search for evidence of diplomatic methods used in the ancient Near East, from the time of the first Sumerian cities at the beginning of the third millennium BC until the hellenization of these countries some 3,000 years later, it is most convenient to arrange the whole of this long segment of history by each of its three millennia.

During the third millennium BC, the area of Sumer in southern Iraq was one of the principal homes of civilization, where urban civilization appeared and blossomed for the first time. It is well known today, however, that Sumer was in constant interaction with other comparable centres, like Akkad in central Mesopotamia (around contemporary Bagdad), the Elamite homeland towards Iran, or Upper Mesopotamia and Northwestern Syria (with, for instance, the area of Ebla, close to contemporary Aleppo). Inside the land of Sumer, whose dominant role could not be disputed, we are well-informed about the prevailing rivalry between the Sumerian city-states and about their repeated conflicts and negotiations until the Empire created by Sargon of Akkad brutally put an end to them in the twenty-third century BC. It is in this context that we find the

oldest available evidence of diplomatic relations and negotiations established between sovereign states, which all date from the twenty-fourth to twenty-third centuries BC.

Some Sumerian royal inscriptions refer to the 'fraternal agreements' concluded by two kings from neighbouring city-states, or the oaths that they swore.¹ Dating from about the same time, two treaty texts are also known,² the oldest ever found, as well as a letter sent by the Syrian kingdom of Ebla to its neighbour of Hamazi, composed as follows:³ 'I am [your] brother and you are [my] brother. O brotherman: whatever desire you express, I shall grant and you, [whatever] desire [I express], you shall grant.'

Several characteristic elements appear in all these various early documents that will be found again thereafter: the concept of 'fraternity' between allies; mutual assistance in the event of conflict; attention paid to the question of fugitives and refugees; the formula 'friend with friends, enemy with enemies'; the importance of oaths with a curse called down on the head of betrayers; the sending and greeting of messengers; exchange of gifts; and finally matrimonial bonds. These texts, however, teach nothing about the preliminary negotiations that had to exist, nor about the reality of day-to-day diplomatic relations.

In the current state of our sources, these few documents from Ebla, Akkad or Sumer compiled over a period of one or two centuries constitute a kind of 'birth certificate' of diplomacy in the pre-classical antiquity.

At the turn of the third to the second millennium, the Sumerians definitively disappear from the historical scene and yield their place to Semitic newcomers who end up occupying the major part of the Syro-Iraqian area: the Amorrites. The first third of the second millennium can thus be defined as the 'age of the Amorrite kingdoms'. It is a period of great political fragmentation, best illuminated by the cuneiform archive found at Mari (Tell Hariri), on the Syrian middle Euphrates. Mari's archive casts intense light on a short period of about 30 years.⁴

Two or three centuries later, in the second half of the second millennium (fifteenth to thirteenth centuries; Late Bronze Age period), and after a period of intense upheaval, we have another set of documents that concerns our subject directly. It is found in such diverse places as Egypt (El Amarna), Syria (Ugarit), Babylonia or Hittite Anatolia (Boghazköy). This extremely rich documentation

shows the coexistence of several powerful states that form a single world, whether to wage war or to enter diplomatic alliance.

Altogether, this period in the second millennium seems to have favoured greatly the development of international relations. At two privileged times, the Amorrite and the Amarnian, a geopolitical stability between different states seems to have been achieved, resulting from intense diplomatic activity.

Finally, during the first millennium, beginning in the eighteenth century BC and in an expanding geographic framework, we see new ambitions and dreams of an imperialist and totalitarian type, taking the form of empires with a 'universal' claim: in less than five centuries, the Near Eastern people see, one after another, the empires of Assyria, Babylonia, Achaemenid Persia, and finally Alexander the Great. War and conquest then to a great extent replace diplomacy. Imperialism stands preminent and reigning potentates seek only to push back endlessly their own territorial limits, while often refusing to recognize the least rival, or even a neighbour.

In sum, unlike the third millennium, for which we have too little information, and the first millennium, which cannot foster the development of stable and balanced international relations by the very nature of its historical character, the second millennium offers a relative equilibrium that favoured the development of a coherent system of international relations.

For this particular topic, however, as for many others in ancient Near Eastern history, the main problem is that we only know about *illustrations* of diplomatic activity. The evidence has a non-descriptive character and provides us with a wealth of disparate details but no real framework in which to place them. No theory about, or general reflections on, what was or should have been diplomacy is available. Nor is there even any Sumerian or Akkadian word for 'diplomacy'. But is it necessary to conceptualize diplomacy to make diplomacy?

Conditions for the System – Required and Accepted Interdependence – The Family Metaphor – The Gods' Part

During Amorrite times (seventeenth century), there were four or five 'great kings' and many other kings who 'follow' them as their subjects, as explicitly indicated in a Mari letter.⁵ But even with so many kingdoms, a real *koïnè* characterizes the Syro-Iraqian area at

this time. From the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf, the main part of these populations come from the same Amorrite stock; they use the same language, share the same values and the same religion, and live within political, economic and administrative structures that are roughly identical. In spite of often strong antagonisms, they are conscious of belonging to a single world and a single culture and also share a high regard for their bedouin roots.

The written sources of the fifteenth to thirteenth centuries, coming from Egypt, Syria or Anatolia, document a different and considerably widened geopolitical horizon. The plentiful information about international relations in this period derives most notably from some 400 letters found at El-Amarna in Egypt and exchanged during a score of years, between the pharaohs of the eighteenth dynasty (Amenophis III, Amenophis IV, Tutankhamun) and their Asian counterparts of Babylonia, Assyria or Anatolia.⁶ Other actors, playing a minor role, appear in this archive as well, such as Ugarit (close to contemporary Latakia in Syria), Alashiya (Cyprus) or Arzawa (South Anatolian coast). Hittite texts found in Anatolia and Akkadian texts found in Syria give also much information regarding this subject.

In principle, the Amorrite and Amarnian periods should be opposites. In the first case, we are dealing with a closed and homogeneous world in which numerous kingdoms share the same Amorrite culture, while in the other we have a much larger world with a few great heterogeneous powers. In spite of this fundamental difference, we observe in both the adoption of a single inter-relational system, based on identical assumptions and using the same means and methods.

During both the Amorrite and the Amarnian periods, although there is a natural desire on the part of each to increase its power and influence, it seems that no state is able to dominate. In both periods, economic and military realities undoubtedly dictated the conditions of coexistence and cooperation. As a result we can glimpse at this time a real intent to form coalitions and to favour a balance of power.

In spite of the differences of period and context, we can observe that all these relations are established in the same way and are based on one same metaphor: that of the household and the family structure. According to the ideas that prevailed then and that had first appeared during the third millennium (see above), sovereigns consider themselves to belong to a single extended family or household. The alliance of 'fraternity' forms the fundamental

political bond between the various kings who consider themselves equals. So, kings of identical status call each other 'brothers', while those of lesser rank are the 'sons' or 'servants' of the first.

Within this system, competition and negotiation are constant, as each seeks to secure the best possible position for himself. These relations of alliance and dependence are therefore extremely unstable and complex and are susceptible to unceasing reevaluation based on the personal inclination and the real power of a given king at a given time.

In this system, the few 'great kings' are those whose influence pushes past their borders, who intend to take part in the political order of the whole Near East. They have the political, economic and military possibility to impose their ambitions, and they have a strong sense of belonging to a community of equals whose recognition they covet.

During the Amarnian period, although it is Egypt that dominates broadly the Near Eastern geopolitical scene, it is rather puzzling to see it acquiesce to the rules of a diplomatic game that it did not itself inspire, these rules having been created and used long before by its Asian neighbours, who are their true promoters. This adoption of external standards extends even to the recognition of a foreign Semitic language, Akkadian, as the international diplomatic language, adopted by kings as powerful and different as the Egyptian, the Babylonian, the Hurrian, the Hittite or the Elamite.

Texts from the Amorrite period and those from El Amarna, along with the contents of the Hittite treaties,⁷ allow us to see what are the mutual obligations of these kings who claim to be related: they are of a military, economic and political nature. In the case of an 'unequal' relation, they constrain especially the vassal. A garrison is maintained in his homeland, which he must support; he must provide troops at the least request; he is compelled to pay a tribute; he has to renounce all independent foreign diplomatic contacts; he is committed to extradite fugitives; he is obliged to make a yearly visit to pay homage to his overlord.⁸ By contrast, bonds of 'love' (*ra'amûtu*) and 'fraternity' (*ahhûtu*) are unceasingly reaffirmed between kings who consider themselves equals. Their mutual obligations mainly consist, at that time, in exchanging messengers, letters, gifts and princesses for marriage.

We should not forget to acknowledge the religious dimension of this system, the gods being called as witnesses at every stage of this

diplomatic life. In this respect, the Mari texts offer a particular detail, for, in the Amorrite context, the phenomena of divination and prophecy played a particularly important role.⁹ Thus, we see gods addressing kings directly through prophets who dictate to them what conduct they must pursue regarding international relations.

The settlement of international conflicts can therefore be achieved only by the express will of the gods. It is thus to Shamash, the god of justice, that the king of Aleppo appeals in order to attack his neighbour the king of Dêr: 'May Shamash inquire into your case and mine and give (us) his verdict! Me, I am a father and a brother to you, and you, you are an ingrate and an enemy to me.'¹⁰ Occasionally, one even sees a war between divinities replace the human confrontation. In a Mari prophecy, it is thus *the god* of one kingdom who is directly defeated by *the god* of the opposing party.¹¹ Thus, in all the contexts at our disposal, the guarantors of international agreements are the gods, and the only possible sanction is theirs. Every transgression is punished by the abandonment of the one at fault by the gods, who are always considered to stand behind a victory at arms over a rival or enemy. This sacralization of international relations is finally observed copiously in every treaty, covenant and sworn oath that is known to us.¹²

All in all, during both the Amorrite and El Amarna periods, we find a complete interdependence required and accepted between various kings, who need to cooperate even while remaining rivals. Throughout these periods, one observes, therefore, the existence of a genuine 'community', a family within which each member may nevertheless wish to be granted maximum recognition and the best possible position, everything placed under divine arbitration.

The Means for Keeping the System in Working Order – The Central Role of the Messenger – The Importance of Protocol and Etiquette

When they do not yet exist, how are diplomatic relations established between two kingdoms? How does a king go about attaching himself to a 'family' he wishes to join? This letter from a king of Assyria to Pharaoh provides an answer:

I send my messenger to you to visit you and to visit your country. Up to now, my predecessors had not written; today I

write to you. I send you a beautiful chariot, two horses and a date-stone of genuine lapis-lazuli as your greeting gift. Do not delay the messenger whom I send to you for a visit. He should visit and then leave for here. He should see what you are like and what your country is like, and then leave for here.¹³

Diplomatic relations are therefore initiated by sending a messenger and gifts. One requests that the messenger be able to visit the house of his host and that his curiosity be satisfied.¹⁴ This curiosity is perceived as a positive sign of interest and in no way indiscreet or suspicious. One requests also that the messenger be treated well and quickly sent back home.¹⁵

We observe here the two fundamental elements at the heart of the diplomatic systems in view: the sending of messengers and the exchange of gifts. Both represent the usual and indispensable signs of cordial relations. Failure to comply is inevitably perceived as a mark of hostility. Furthermore, the Mari letters teach us that the ambassadors accredited to a foreign court observe closely the interplay of exchanges and interruptions and report as soon as possible to their master, insofar as these are clear signals allowing recognition of friend or foe at a given time.

The capability of these diplomatic envoys varies according to circumstances: they can be simple messengers, only carrying royal mail, but also real 'plenipotentiary ministers'.¹⁶ Likewise, some travel alone while others lead large delegations including secretaries and servants, accompanied by military escorts with up to hundreds of men. At Mari, we see furthermore that some of these diplomats are explicitly regarded as king's 'personal representatives' (Akkadian: *kîma paḡrim*). According to their rank, the respect owed ambassadors is measured by the prostrations necessarily addressed to them if they represent a powerful sovereign,¹⁷ or that they themselves must perform in front of a 'great king'.¹⁸

Concerning the status of these diplomats, it is necessary to assume the existence of a real code of diplomatic deontology, in spite of the lack of any document referring to it explicitly. When one sees ambassadors going to the court of an enemy king in a period of acute crisis, this itself is proof that they feel relatively protected by their diplomatic status.¹⁹ Likewise, the embassies that only pass through Mari, without being officially received there,²⁰ display the usual obligation of every king to welcome travelling emissaries and to

facilitate the passage of all diplomatic missions, even those which do not come from allied countries.

During the Amarnian period, this 'personal inviolability' (better than 'diplomatic immunity' which would be inaccurate and anachronistic) is clearly recognized and accepted, as shown by a letter from the king of Mitanni, writing to Pharaoh's vassals, by whom his messenger sent to Egypt must pass: 'I herewith send Akiya my messenger, to speed posthaste to the king of Egypt, my brother. No one is to hold him up. Provide him with safe entry into Egypt and hand him over to the fortress commander of [the border of] Egypt. Let him go on immediately, and as far as his presents are concerned, he is to owe nothing' (*EA 30*). It is clear therefore that ambassadors are entitled to the protection of the authorities, and no one can detain or harrass them. They are exempted from taxes and payments. At Mari as at El Amarna, several texts confirm the existence of such inviolability.²¹

To authenticate their status, diplomats seem to have a kind of 'diplomatic passport', like the one found at Mari in tablet form that gives successively in five lines the name of the holder, his title as ambassador of a given king, his starting point, the description of his delegation and escort, and his destination. The document is authenticated by the seal of the king who sends the embassy.²² A kind of 'accrediting letters' are also well attested.²³

Many documents, however, show that the immunity owed diplomats was often defied. Thus, we see ambassadors sent to prison and delegations attacked, kidnapped, or even assassinated.²⁴ The information about these 'interceptions' of foreign envoys can moreover explain the existence among the Mari tablets of diplomatic messages that should not have been there and that were thus diverted before reaching their destination. It can also happen that embassies of hostile powers are kept outside the city gate, compelling the messenger to deliver his message from outside the city wall.²⁵

Thanks again to the Mari letters, we are also well informed on the course of accredited diplomatic missions. On their arrival, foreign diplomats are first of all put up in a particular residence, a 'guest house' outside the palace and especially reserved for them.²⁶ It is of course the host king who must provide them with their daily needs: they are entirely cared for, fed, accommodated and equipped, because they actually expect to be treated as would be their master.

As for the audiences to which they are invited, two main points must be noted. First, these audiences have broad attendance, with ministers, diviners, notables, officers, king's close relations, and all foreign envoys from every country taking part. Second, questions of protocol play a crucial role in them.

Consequently, diplomatic incidents are numerous, especially when envoys of enemy kings are simultaneously present. Thus, some ambassadors try to be received independently or refuse to deliver their message in the presence of inquisitive or hostile ears.²⁷ Some messengers, however, manage to be received in secret. This allows us to observe that besides the general audiences, there is a 'secret' royal council (*pirishtum*), to which the king invites only his closer allies and advisers.

Thus ultimately we can observe the existence of a true 'diplomatic corps' present at the court of every great king and composed of all foreign envoys entitled to attend the king's council. This involvement in the king's council is considered as a right by these diplomats, as shown by the vehement protests of those the king seeks to exclude.²⁸ Those who, in spite of everything, are refused the right to take part in the royal audience, must then try to bribe well placed people in order to obtain, at any price, information about what occurs there.²⁹ This is because the primary goal of all accredited diplomats is to gather the maximum of fresh news for transmission to their master.³⁰

The course of the royal audiences and of the reception of ambassadors, in a special room of the king's palace, thus follows an extremely strict protocol. After the usual greetings (*shulmum*), the ambassador offers the gift he brought (*tâmartum*). Then he reveals to the king the contents of the message he carried by reading the tablet, the envelope having been first broken in the presence of the king.

The important role of the written clay tablet,³¹ which must be exhibited and submitted to authenticate the transmitted message, is beautifully shown by a letter from the Hittite period found at Ugarit (in Western Syria). The text portrays the unfolding of an audience given by an Assyrian king, who relates:

The Hittite king sent me a messenger carrying two tablets [declaring] war and one tablet [proposing] peace. He presented me [first] the two tablets of war. When my soldiers heard these messages of war, they burned to go fight. And the Hittite messenger took note of this. Then, three days later, the

messenger of the Hittite king produced for me the tablet of peace.

One sees thus the unfolding of a peace negotiation.³² This document is one of the very few that allow us to perceive the skill of a diplomat, the different steps of discussion in which he is involved, and perhaps even a freedom to resort to ruse, since he had taken care to have several tablets composed, announcing war or peace. This text also shows that embassies and audiences may occupy several days, a detail also shown by Mari texts, with the tone and mood of negotiation changeable from one day to another. When the messengers are really 'plenipotentiary ministers', the presentation of the message may then be followed by a genuine discussion, possibly even by a negotiation, as shown in particular by several Mari texts.³³ Such ambassadors are allowed to receive personal and official agreement of the king they visit. It is also interesting to see that in such negotiations the sincerity and good faith of an envoy can be vigorously tested during the royal audience.³⁴

The protocol for the greeting of diplomats is not limited, however, to what occurs during royal audiences. The greatest attention is also paid to the way in which the messenger is received, as his care represents one of the most essential obligations of this king whom he visits. But it is especially at the time of the 'official' meals (*naptan sharrim*, 'king's meal') that we see best the intensity and the quality of the relations established. Besides the king himself, all the accredited ambassadors, the great ladies of the harem, high palace officials, notables and military heads attend these meals. The ritual related to these meals include the delivery of ceremonial garments to the ambassadors, the dispensing of scented oils, the distribution of gifts, and of course the sharing of food, a certain liveliness being ensured by musicians, dancers and acrobats.

At Mari, dignitaries and the ambassadors among them are allowed a seat at the royal table, the others being held further back, distributed through the reception room, where they squat to eat. According to their rank, the guests then begin to eat in conformity with precise rules, such as the one concerning the prostrations that must be exchanged several times with the presentation of every new dish. As far as we can see, questions of 'etiquette' and protocol are minutely regulated!³⁵

In fact, all these gestures of protocol may give place to endless discussions or protests. One of the most solemn ways for the visitor to express his displeasure involves ripping the ceremonial garments provided by his host.³⁶ Diplomatic incidents can, therefore, easily arise from any protocol disrespect. In addition to the gifts they bring on behalf of their master and those they take back in exchange, diplomats also receive personal presents in the form of vestimentary ornaments, weapons, metal objects and quantities of silver, the whole distributed according to extremely precise 'tariffs', according to quality and rank.³⁷

Thus, as well as the verbal or written messages transmitted by ambassadors, these detailed rituals and gestures and the way they are performed allow the transmission of important nonverbal messages from one party to another. Managing such a protocol is such a complex matter that a special minister, close to the king, may be appointed to take charge of it, as was the case under king Hammurabi of Babylon.³⁸

Depending on circumstances, these diplomatic missions might occupy more or less time: the range of durations portrayed in our texts go from a few days,³⁹ to two or three months⁴⁰ and up to six and even 20 years!⁴¹ Many documents address the return of messengers at the end of their mission, because their rapid return is always expected and requested. This request is a recurring *leitmotiv* in royal letters at every period. To be allowed to leave for home, however, this messenger must wait for permission and instructions (*wu'urum*) that are to be delivered by the host king for the return.

In these circumstances, it is clear that this capacity to retain a foreign envoy is used as a way to pressurize an ally or an adversary. Every king exercised this option, even his potential unwillingness to release a foreign envoy being meaningful: a sign of hostility or disapproval, a wish to display his power and his capacity to harm, or even a sign of indifference or contempt toward the rest of the world's problems, as undoubtedly true of Amarnian Egypt toward its Asian neighbours.

But a final well-established habit forms part of the protocol for messengers. The Mari texts show that at the end of his mission every foreign messenger is inevitably entrusted by the visited king to an 'accompanying person' (*âlik idim*) who will travel back with him. This provision suggests several reasons: in addition to the king's obligation for the safe return of his visitor, it is also a question of

ensuring the healthy continuation of the mission or negotiation. Actually, the accompanying person is not merely a guide or an escort soldier as it was often understood, but is himself a diplomat who must play the role of guarantor and witness for his foreign colleague. As a result, we understand better the existence of many 'pairs' of messengers that we see in our texts repeatedly visiting together every corner of the Near East.⁴²

Ultimately, from the Amorrite period to the end of the Late Bronze Age (end of the second millennium), international relations are mainly characterized by an itinerant diplomacy. In this system, real fixed embassies never seem to have existed in the great capitals of the time, contrary to what one might imagine. Neither at the time of Mari nor of El Amarna are such permanent embassies attested, even if one Amarna letter informs us that a diplomatic mission could be extended to more than 20 years. Envoys are sent for *ad hoc* purposes, not as permanent representatives.

The central character of the whole system was thus the *mâr shiprim*. This diplomat was entrusted by sovereigns with a triple responsibility for representation, negotiation and intelligence near neighbouring capitals, the exact definition of the ambassador's role today. His existence and the conditions for his moving and greeting by a foreign court induced the birth of a true diplomatic code which was never written but was scrupulously respected. We do not know precisely who these diplomats were. They do not seem to have received any specific training. It is not sure that they actually formed a specialized official corporation. 'Full time' diplomats did not exist and the most important of these emissaries were high royal officials occupying various functions when they were not commissioned.

The Need for Recognition – Gifts and Return – Interdynastic Marriages

Behind this extreme attention devoted to questions of protocol, one perceives a great thirst for recognition on the part of all sovereigns, which drives their desire to increase their diplomatic exchanges. War can provide booty, territories and slaves, but not the admiration of other kings as powerful as themselves. It is, however, this wish for status and recognition that seems to preoccupy them above all.

Along with the sending of messengers, this recognition infuses another essential element: the exchange of gifts. It is the second

concrete signal that must be transmitted in order to express good intentions.⁴³ A moral, political and social duty indeed forces kings, who claim themselves 'brothers', to give each other presents, but the value of a dispatched gift is actually fully measurable only after the reception in return of its counterpart. It is the rule of a subtle play of 'gift' (*shûbultum*) and 'return' (*shûrubtum*).⁴⁴

From the time when relationships between kings are established on the model of family relations, these family ties created not only a mutual duty to offer gifts, but also an obligation to accept them, and then to return a matching gift in strict observance of reciprocity. In this scheme, recent works have shown that the sender's authority is especially concerned: a 'great' king has to be generous because his *prestige* as well as his *interests* are concerned. In this game, it is worth noting that the Amarna letters invariably present Pharaoh, incontestably the most powerful king of that time, as the ultimate dispenser of worldly goods. The Asian kings, even the most significant of them, seem to be mere beggars. Most significant is undoubtedly the fact that these exchanges and receptions are public, performed in the full sight of everyone.⁴⁵ It should not then be surprising that in this diplomatic game appearances are everything, and that these rituals also are suffused with nonverbal communication.

If the price in silver of exchanged gifts is almost never given, their value is nevertheless carefully assessed. This concern leads the Amorrite king of Qatnâ, for example, to send his 'brother' at Ekallâtum a letter by which he vehemently complains about receiving only 20 minas of tin, in exchange for two splendid horses claimed by his 'brother' and dispatched by himself to Ekallâtum.⁴⁶ In the final analysis, it appears that the aim of these exchanges is to reach a symbolic balance between partners, and if not relationships are certain to be strained.

What kind of goods are exchanged? Texts show that 'gifts' consist of precious stones and metals, horses and other more exotic animals, cosmetics, manufactured objects (thrones, chariots, fineries, headdresses, vessels, jewels), and so on. Finally, it is sometimes quite difficult to discern the economic realities behind these apparently gracious gifts, so far as gifts constitute an elegant form of trade. Alleged gifts could hide or include real trading links, as was undoubtedly the case between Egyptians on the one hand and Ugarit or Cyprus on the other.

In the El Amarna letters, bargains over gifts are closely mingled with those concerning the exchange of princesses for marriage. This is not a coincidence: if inter-dynastic marriages hold such a significant place, here as in the archives of the Amorrite period, it is because they pertain simultaneously to the 'gift/return' system and to the family fiction.⁴⁷ Texts show that to prepare these marriages several steps are followed: request for a princess;⁴⁸ excuses often given by the recipient;⁴⁹ exchange of ambassadors in particular 'to examine' the princess⁵⁰ and to negotiate the amount of dowry and then the marriage price;⁵¹ travel in procession and celebrations on arrival.⁵² These marriages respect perfectly the rules for symmetry of exchange, since the dowry provided by the father to his daughter (*nidittum*) is counterbalanced by the wedding present (*terhatum*) from the bridegroom's family.⁵³ During the Mari period diplomatic marriages had to respect complex balances between clans across the tribal Amorrite society, all the more so since queens then played a preeminent role in various kingdoms.

Within the framework of international relations, with so many exchanges of so many kinds, one last point remains to be considered. It concerns royal movements. One of the surprises produced by the Mari tablets was indeed to see the kings themselves travelling, sometimes for long distances beyond their borders.

One occasion to leave on such a journey may be offered by entrance into alliances with other kings. But other circumstances may prompt kings to leave their domains, as shown for example by the spectacular travel undertaken by king Zimri-Lim of Mari, when he went first to Aleppo, the capital of his father-in-law, then to Ugarit on the banks of the Mediterranean sea. This tour occupied five months and provoked the composition of a whole series of written documents, by which it is possible to see how the large accompanying caravan was organized and managed.⁵⁴ Some of these travels could have been of a religious and ritual nature, as 'pilgrimages'. In the ancient Near East, several sanctuaries or 'holy cities' existed,⁵⁵ towards which we can see foreign kings converging from all horizons.

We also have evidence for stays of young princes at foreign courts, either to complete their education and to learn abroad their future job of prince or king, or to give political 'pledges' to an ally and to serve more or less as hostages.⁵⁶

Mutual Loyalty and Fidelity – Alliances and Treaties

In such a context, it is of course with special interest that researchers have located the existence of ‘international’ alliance treaties in the ancient Near East, as far back as the mid-third millennium BC.⁵⁷

Until recently, for the 3,000 years of early Near Eastern history, we were aware of about 60 international treaties,⁵⁸ among which were about 15 real treaty texts.⁵⁹ All these alliances were concentrated in three periods, out of the whole historical time-line: (1) the twenty-fourth to twenty-third centuries, with the first known treaties already pointed out above; (2) the fourteenth to thirteenth centuries, with 35 treaty attestations coming from the Hittite archives. These represent more than half of all the available documentation about treaties. These alliances, coming 1,000 years after the preceding ones, are concluded either between kings of equal rank, or the Hittite king and his vassals. ‘Vassal’ treaties, written in Hittite or Akkadian, were composed by the chancellery of the Hittite capital before being presented to the vassal. This individual was then to pledge an oath of allegiance, approving the text stipulations in the presence of the gods and many witnesses. The treaty presented to the vassal was engraved on a metal tablet (made of bronze, gold, silver or iron) intended to be stored inside a temple. Therefore, the clay tablets which were found are undoubtedly only copies or drafts.

The text of these treaties always follows the same structure and form: the titulature of the Hittite king legitimating his dynastic position; a historical recollection of the former situation that brought the contracting parties to alliance; reciprocal obligations, underlining those of the vassal; and, last, a list of divine witnesses and curse formulae in case of disloyalty.

Among the Hittite ‘parity’ treaties, the best known is the Egypto-Hittite treaty of friendship and fraternity concluded in 1270 between Ramses II and Hattusili III, after the undecided battle of Qadesh in Syria. We have an Egyptian version and an Akkadian one, copies of originals which were inscribed on silver tablets. The outline is roughly identical to that of ‘vassal’ treaties, but the clauses follow the principle of strict equality between the contracting parties. Thus, the main characteristic of all these Hittite treaties is that they are *bilateral*, leading to the production of a single master text that recapitulates each party’s obligations and adopted simultaneously by both.

(3) The eighth to seventh centuries, the period of the Neo-Assyrian empire, with several 'vassal' treaties, almost five centuries after the Hittite examples.⁶⁰ But these documents do not form a set as coherent as the Hittite one. Most are concerned with the internal politics of the Assyrian empire, in relation to this country's repeated problems of dynastic succession.

But recent research has revealed the existence of international alliance treaties for a fourth period, namely the Amorrite (seventeenth century). The new documents for this period show that the oath lies at the very heart of all the alliance treaties. It is accompanied, however, by two very different rituals that would seem mutually exclusive.⁶¹ The first concerns alliances concluded at a distance.⁶² One sends to the opposing party a draft of the treaty (called a 'small tablet'). On receiving this document, the solicited king then performs a ritual gesture by 'touching his throat'⁶³ in the presence of the ambassadors of the king who took the initiative. Reciprocally, the latter will have to perform the same ritual with the draft presented by his counterpart. After negotiation through ambassadors, a second step can then take place, each composing a text of final commitment (a 'large tablet') that is likewise ratified by the two contracting kings during two symmetrical solemn ceremonies called 'the oath by the god'.

One sees therefore that each king commits himself on the basis of a text assigned to him by his counterpart. There are initial drafts ('small tablets') linked to the 'touch of the throat', and then, after negotiation, definitive texts ('large tablets') linked to the 'oath by the god'. Thus, we have no single text stipulating reciprocal obligations, as with the Hittite treaties, but each time two texts of unilateral commitment, closely parallel without doubt, and used during the final and solemn oath ceremony sworn by each of the protagonists successively in the presence of ambassadors of the other party.

These 'small' and 'large' tablets, of which some examples were found recently,⁶⁴ undoubtedly have no value in themselves. They were used only to allow two remote protagonists to negotiate and prepare their agreement, so as to define the exact terms of their commitment, pronounced at the time of 'the oath by the god' ceremony. But there is a second way of entering alliances. For kings who desire it, this involves meeting in a place agreed beforehand and proclaiming solemnly their alliance during a ceremony where a young ass is sacrificed. This ritual of 'sacrificing the ass' (*hayâram*

qatâlum) obviously expresses an alliance concluded by blood (*ina dânim*), making the protagonists kin by alliance. In this case, a written alliance text is out of question: the ritual, carried out jointly in the presence of witnesses, is enough. Thus two kings who have committed themselves in this way can say: 'now, there is blood between us'.⁶⁵

According to our current documentation, this second ritual seems to come from bedouin origin and must be understood from a broader perspective. The ass sacrifice is attested to in all the northern area of the ancient Near East, this animal having undoubtedly a very particular relationship with bedouin kingship of Amorrite origin.⁶⁶

Finally, whatever the adopted protocol, the accent always falls on the ritual of swearing an oath. What is most important is the solemnity of the oral and public commitment of the contracting parties. Contrary to what will be performed during the following period (Hittite and Amarnian), the commitment is verbal only and does not lead to the writing of a final and bilateral treaty text.

Like the Hittite ones, Amorrite treaties are either military agreements or for fidelity and loyalty. They can be concluded at the time a new king accedes to the throne or following a conflict. They may also concern agreements about trade⁶⁷ or about the definition of borders.⁶⁸ After the seventeenth century, there is no further trace of these two different alliance rituals which seem specific to the Amorrite period.

In the legal, political and diplomatic life of the ancient Near East, we must always remember that the oath plays a most significant role.⁶⁹ Alliance ceremonies and treaties thus give highest place to swearing the oath in the presence of the gods and of the most possible witnesses. These declarations commit the swearer and give content to the alliance itself. Contracting such alliances is mainly a question of securing the honesty and fidelity of the partners, whether they are vassals or equal-ranking neighbours. Nevertheless, these pacts are always symmetrical commitments between *individuals* and not between states. When a king dies, alliances have to be renewed with his successor. The unilateral commitment texts of the Amorrites were followed in the Hittite period by bilateral ones, written on one tablet only and duplicated in several copies. These are the true forerunners of our modern treaties.

Conclusion

For the second millennium BC, abundant sources inform us about the development of very elaborate diplomatic procedures, means and methods. Several categories of symmetrical ceremonial exchanges indicate the specificity of the diplomacy in this period. They developed especially as, obsessed with questions of prestige, kings enter a continuing game of negotiations and bargaining. More than ever, the words *diplomacy* and *negotiation* seem to have been synonymous.

It is striking to note, however, that in spite of extremely different international contexts during the Amorrite and Hittite-Amarnian periods, great coherence and continuity existed in the way kings, four centuries apart, managed their external affairs. Examination of the sources allows us to observe, during these two periods, the formation of a single, genuine diplomatic system which was at once rational, methodical and complete.

Thus one may delineate a whole series of shared institutions, procedures and rituals, be this in the realm of the 'family fiction', the exchange of ambassadors, the rhetoric of negotiations, the attention paid to questions of protocol, the exchange of gifts following the tacit rules for gift and return, the princely marriages, the conclusion of treaties, and so on. All these elements allow us to recognize the existence of a truly complete diplomatic system, diplomacy having then become a fully governmental activity.

This system seems to have operated during most of the second millennium, in so far as historical circumstances allowed it, that is to say during periods of balance between rival powers, anxious to defend their interests and their prestige in some way other than war. The need for recognition prevailed over any aggressive policy combining threat and conquest, unlike in later times.

Admittedly, these methods may seem quite banal: it is legitimate to wonder whether, apart from exchanging ambassadors and gifts, arranging princely marriages or concluding alliances, there could exist other ways of conducting diplomacy in such ancient societies with pre-monetary economic systems: when one wants exchange with one's neighbour or settlement of a disagreement without war, there are not many options! What is remarkable, however, is that this formal system we have described, set up in the second half of the third millennium, was drawn up rigorously, then ritualized and

improved during more than 1,000 years, enabling its effectiveness when political circumstances allowed. Today, newly published documentation allows us to notice that the well-known 'Amarnian' system of the fourteenth to thirteenth centuries is by no means isolated. It belongs to a coherent process that appears by the time of Sumer and Ebla (second half of the third millennium), and then is attested, thanks to the new documentation, by the time of the Mari kings and then with the Hittites and the Egyptian Pharaohs of the eighteenth dynasty, and even in the Levant of the tenth to eighth centuries.⁷⁰ It is only with the advent of empires having a universal claim, and later with the hellenization of the East and the vanishing of the cuneiform culture, that this system disappeared.

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NOTES

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1. Cf. for example the texts *La 5.3* and *La 3.1* (inscribed on the famous 'Stela of the Vultures' kept in the Louvre) mentioned in J.S. Cooper, *Sumerian and Akkadian Royal Inscriptions*, I (New Haven, 1986).
2. The first one is a treaty in Eblaite language, found at Ebla (north-western Syria) and concluded between the cities of Ebla and Abarsal. Cf. D.O. Edzard, 'Der Vertrag von Ebla mit A-bar-QA', in P. Fronzaroli (ed.), *Quaderni di Semitistica* 18 (1992), pp.187–217. The second is a treaty between king Narâm-Sîn of Akkad and an Elamite king (text in Elamite language found at Susa in Iran). Cf. W. Hinz, 'Elams Vertrag mit Naram-Sîn von Akkad', *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 58 (1967), pp.66–96.
3. P. Michalowski, *Letters from Early Mesopotamia* (Atlanta, 1993), pp.13–14 nr. 2.
4. *Ca.* 1700–1670, according to the most recent data about absolute chronology. A pioneering work on diplomacy during this period is J. Munn-Rankin, 'Diplomacy in Western Asia in the Early Second Millennium B.C.', *Iraq* 18 (1956), pp.68–110. For the Mari documentation, see J.-M. Durand, 'Documents épistolaires de Mari, 1', *Littératures anciennes du Proche-Orient*, vol.16 (Paris, 1997), especially pp.383–639; and B. Lafont, 'Relations internationales, alliances et diplomatie au temps des rois de Mari', *Amurru* 2 (Paris, in press). Mari tablets are quoted here either as ARM NN nn, for texts published in one of the 28 volumes of the series *Archives Royales de Mari* (Paris, 1950–98), or as LAPO NN nn, for texts published in the new reference edition of Mari letters: J.-M. Durand, 'Documents épistolaires de Mari, 1 and 2', *Littératures anciennes du Proche-Orient*, vols.16 and 17 (Paris, 1997–98).
5. Cf. G. Dossin, 'Les archives épistolaires du palais de Mari', *Syria* 19 (1938), pp.117–18.
6. This documentation is available in the new reference edition of W.L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (1992). Texts quoted here as EA nn refer to this edition. This El Amarna documentation has been the subject of many works. For a recent synthetic study, cf. R. Cohen, 'On Diplomacy in the Ancient Near East: The Amarna Letters', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 7 (1996), pp.245–70.

7. G. Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts* (Atlanta, 1996).
8. For the Amorrite period, see Lafont, 'Relations internationales...'; and for the Hittite-Amarnian period, Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, p.3 and text nr. 21 p.121, for instance.
9. Cf. J.-M. Durand, *ARM XXVI/1*, pp.377–452; and idem, 'Les Prophéties des textes de Mari', in J.-G. Heintz (ed.), *Oracles et Prophéties dans l'Antiquité* (Strasbourg, Paris, 1997), pp.115–34.
10. *LAPO* 16 251.
11. *ARM XXVI/1* 196: Tishpak the god of Eshnunna is defeated by Dagan the god of the Middle Euphrates.
12. Cf. *infra*.
13. *EA* 15.
14. A more or less parallel text exists in Mari documentation: the king of Ugarit expresses there his wish to know the Mari king's estate and to send a messenger to visit it. Cf. A. Malamat, *Mari and the Early Israelite Experience* (Oxford, 1989), pp.25–6.
15. This Amarna letter *EA* 15 is especially interesting and important. Actually we understand that the Assyrian king is, at that time, a candidate to the great powers 'club'. His aim is to be recognized himself as a 'great king' by Pharaoh. For this initial contact, therefore, he does not immediately use the title 'brother' in writing to his correspondent. The next letter (*EA* 16) shows that he made a success of this move, as he now writes as 'brother' to Pharaoh and begins to enter the game of bargaining about gifts to be exchanged. Cf. P. Artzi, 'The Rise of the Middle-Assyrian Kingdom, according to El-Amarna Letters 15 & 16', in P. Artzi (ed.), *Bar-Ilan Studies in History* (1978), pp.25–41.
16. On messengers, see S.A. Meier, *The Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World* (Harvard, 1988), and Lafont, 'Relations internationales ...'.
17. As shown in *LAPO* 16 368, in the Amorrite period, a regular king himself must bow to Elamite ambassadors, as these are representatives of a 'great king'. See also *LAPO* 16, pp.69–73.
18. On the Amarnian period, see for instance these ambassadors who 'fall at the feet of the king seven times and seven times both on the back and on the stomach' (*EA* 211 and *passim*). See also the chapter 'Who Bows to Whom', in Meier's book, *The Messenger*, pp.152–61.
19. See, for instance, the file of Elamite ambassadors sent to Hammurabi of Babylon when war is imminent between Elam and Babylon, file studied by D. Charpin in *ARM XXVI/2*, pp.139–205 (see especially pp.149–51 and texts nr. 361 and 370).
20. Such embassies passing through a sovereign third party on a mission are those called *étigtum*, 'in transit'.
21. See for Mari: *MARI* 8 (1997), p.381 n.100 and *ARM XXVII* 116; and for El Amarna: *EA* 29, pp.173–81.
22. *ARM XXIII*, p.20.
23. Such letters were constituted by tablets called *wûrtum* (etymologically 'instructions') which had to be given to authorities toward which the ambassador was sent, as shown by *LAPO* 16 368.
24. Many examples: *ARM XXVI/2* 363, 372, 383, 449, *LAPO* 16 298, 416, etc.
25. Meier, *The Messenger*, p.151.
26. Akkadian: *bît naptarim*. See *LAPO* 16, p.299 note c). Identically, a similar residence is attested for ambassadors in El Amarna. Cf. *EA* 29: 28–54.
27. *ARM XXVI/2* 384 for instance.
28. E.g. *ARM XXVI/2* 308, 309, 438, 451, and *LAPO* 16 368.
29. E.g. *ARM XXVI/2* 381.
30. E.g. *ARM XXVI/2* 368, where Mari ambassadors in Babylon forward to their master the report given by ambassadors of the king of Larsa. Or *ARM XXVI/2* 372: 47ss where they forward the complete message of ambassadors of the king of Andarig. Initially, this information had to be delivered to the king of Babylon only!

31. Cf. Meier, *The Messenger*, pp.170–73.
32. I. Singer, *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 75 (1985), pp.100–123.
33. One of these official audience accounts, ARM XXVI/2 449, comes in the form of a true and spirited dialog between king Hammurabi of Babylon and the envoys of king Zimri-Lim of Mari.
34. Cf. J. Laessle and T. Jacobsen, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 42 (1990), pp.128–32.
35. Cf. *LAPO* 16, pp.69–75.
36. ARM XXVI/2 323 and 370; *LAPO* 16 404.
37. ARM XXI, pp.506–12.
38. This is the *sukkal ubāri*, ‘minister of the foreigners’. Cf. D. Charpin, ARM XXVI/2, pp.140–41 and n.4.
39. *Daily* sending of messengers in ARM XXVI/2 363.
40. At Mari *LAPO* 16 258. At El Amarna EA 27: 55–8.
41. EA 3 and 59.
42. There are many examples from Mari. For El Amarna, see the famous pair formed by the Egyptian Mane and the Hurrian Keliya.
43. Cf. above about the way the Assyrian king tries to enter the great kings ‘club’. He just begins in sending messengers *and* gifts.
44. Cf. J.-M. Durand, ARM XXI, pp.506–16, and the Italian works of C. Zaccagnini, F. Pintore and M. Liverani, the references of which can be found in M. Liverani’s book, *Prestige and Interest. International Relations in the Near East ca. 1600–1100 BC* (Rome, 1990).
45. Thus the Assyrian king is quickly informed about the amount of gold his Mitannian neighbour has received from Egypt (EA 16). And we can see the king of Mitanni ‘gathering his whole country’ to show it the gift he has received from Egypt (EA 24 § 11: 15–18).
46. *LAPO* 16 256.
47. See especially F. Pintore’s study, *Il Matrimonio interdinastico nel Vicino Oriente durante i Secoli XV–XIII* (Roma, 1978). See also P. Artzi, ‘The Influence of Political Marriages on the International Relations of the Amarna-Age’, in J.-M. Durand (ed.), *La Femme dans le Proche-Orient antique* (Paris, 1987), pp.23–6.
48. EA 1, 27, 29.
49. EA 4: 43.
50. ‘When Mane (the ambassador) saw her, he admired her a lot’ (EA 19: 21–2).
51. EA 25 is an example of a tremendous dowry inventory. At Mari, cf. B. Lafont, ‘Les Filles du roi de Mari’, in Durand (ed.), *La Femme*, pp.113–23.
52. Cf. Artzi, ‘The Influence of Political Marriages’, pp.23–6.
53. Cf. the file about the ‘matrimonial mission’ completed by Asqudum (a Mari ambassador) on the occasion of the Mari king’s marriage with an Aleppo king’s daughter, as studied by J.-M. Durand in ARM XXVI/1, pp.95–117.
54. Cf. P. Villard, ‘Un roi de Mari à Ugarit’, *Ugarit Forschungen* 18 (1986), pp.387–412; and idem, ‘Le déplacement des trésors royaux d’après les archives de Mari’, in Charpin and Joannès (eds.), *Marchands, diplomates*, pp.195–205.
55. As for instance the city of Terqa, close to Mari on the banks of Euphrates, where the main sanctuary of the great god Dagan is situated.
56. B. Lion, ‘Des princes de Babylone à Mari’, *Florilegium Marianum* II (Paris, 1994), pp.221–34.
57. Cf. above.
58. See, among others, J.H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context. A Survey of Parallels Between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Grand Rapids, 1989), pp.95–109.
59. B. Kienast, ‘Übersicht über die mesopotamischen Staatsverträge’, in H. Waetzoldt and H. Hauptmann (eds.), *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft von Ebla* (Heidelberg, 1988), pp.239–43.
60. S. Parpola and K. Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (Helsinki, 1988).

61. Lafont, 'Relations internationales'.
62. *ARM XXVI/2* 372 for instance and the commentary by D. Charpin, *ARM XXVI/2*, pp.144–5.
63. This gesture may have been a metaphor from the sacrifice of an animal whose throat is cut, or may have expressed, always as a metaphor, the risks brought on the one who would dare to break the alliance.
64. *LAPO* 16, pp.429–458. Cf. notably texts nr. 290–93.
65. *ARM XXVI/2*, p.33, text A.2730.
66. *ARM XXVI/1*, pp.121–2. See also S. Lafont, 'Nouvelles données sur la royauté mésopotamienne', *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* 73/4 (1995), pp.473–500.
67. J. Eidem, 'An Old Assyrian Treaty from Tell Leilan', in Charpin and Joannès (eds.), *Marchands, diplomates*, pp.185–207.
68. *ARM XXVI/2* 449, 468 and 469.
69. S. Lafont (ed.), 'Jurer et maudire: pratiques politiques et usages juridiques du serment dans le Proche-Orient ancien', *Méditerranées* 10–11 (Paris, 1997).
70. A. Lemaire, 'Ambassades, Traités, Hégémonies au Levant (Xe–VIIIe siècles avant notre ère)', in E. Frezouls and A. Jacquemin (eds.), *Les Relations internationales* (Strasbourg, Paris, 1995), pp.119–42.