Messengers who must live or die. A Note on EA 16 and ARM XXVIII 14 [A.2114]

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In the last paragraph of the Amarna letter EA 16, addressed to the Egyptian king Amenophis IV, the Assyrian king Aššur-uballit makes a series of considerations regarding messengers. The detailed understanding of this part of the letter (lines 43-55) is not unanimous amongst the commentators because of the diverging interpretations of the syntagm ina šitti (or šētti), repeated six times throughout the section. W. L. Moran (1992: 39), for example, translates (lines 43-51): “Why should messengers be made to stay constantly out in the sun [ina šitti] and so die in the sun? If staying out in the sun means profit for the king, then let him (a messenger) stay out and let him die right there in the sun, (but) for the king himself there must be a profit. Or other[wise], why should they [d]ie in the sun?”. According to this interpretation, the key point of the speech would be that if a king is to gain any benefit from the death of a messenger, he is entitled to let him die. S. A. Meier (1988: 237) says about this: “messengers can not in any sense be pictured as having diplomatic immunity, even among those to whom they are sent. Indeed, the messenger is a pawn whom one may dispose of as one wishes. This is nowhere more clearly stated than in Ashur-uballit’s note to pharaoh [= EA 16:43-55]”.

On the other hand, in his translation of the Amarna corpus, M. Liverani (1998: 364) translates: “I messaggeri, perché dovrebbero far stare in (attesa di) uscita [ina šitti], e (persino) morire in (attesa di) uscita? Se, stando essi in (attesa) di uscita, c’è un vantaggio per il re, che stiano pure in (attesa di) uscita, e muoiano pure, se c’è un vantaggio per il re! Altrimenti, perché mai dovrebbero morire in (attesa di) uscita, i messaggeri che noi mandiamo?”; the author explains in a later work his understanding of the expression and of the fragment (Liverani 2004 : 118-120). This section continues to be discussed as can be seen in other recent translations of the letter.

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2 According to Liverani (2004: 119) šēti should be understood literally as “exit, going out”: “The expression uzuzzu ina šēti, literally ‘stay in exit’ and practically ‘await before leaving’, ‘await for a
Regarding lines 43-55 of EA 16, and notwithstanding the specific interpretation of \textit{ina šitti}, it may be relevant to note one section of the letter ARM XXVIII 14 \cite{Kupper1998} from Mari published by J.-R. Kupper (1998: 15-17, 18, 272-273). It is a letter sent by Amût-pi-El, king of Qaṭna, to Zimri-Lim of Mari. Zimri-Lim has detained a messenger of Amût-pi-El who was going to Ešnunna; the reason given by the king of Mari to justify his attitude is that he is trying to protect the life of this messenger because the king of Ešnunna had already killed a previous messenger from Qaṭna. However, Amût-pi-El insists that the messenger be allowed to continue his trip to Ešnunna, although he requests that he be escorted by a messenger from Mari. As part of his argument, Amût-pi-El says the following about his messenger (lines 22-27), according to Kupper’s version: “Si on doit le laisser vivre, on le laissera vivre, mais si on doit le faire mourir, on le fera mourir: il se sera dévoué pour son pays et ses frères”\textsuperscript{5}. These ideas of Amût-pi-El about messengers do not seem to differ much from those expressed some centuries later by Aššur-uballit in EA 16.

As Meier already described \cite{Meier1989:67-82}, messengers from the ancient Near East had to face numerous dangers and difficulties to accomplish their missions. Not only did they have to face the lack of diplomatic immunity but they also had to take into consideration the possibility of encountering bad roads, extreme temperatures, robberies and assaults, being murdered or being halted by wars or by kings who detained them because of various diplomatic circumstances. The opinions about messengers stated by the kings who sent the letters EA 16 and ARM XXVIII 14 must not, therefore, be considered mere rhetoric.

Both letters, distant in time and place, also illustrate how two kings coincide, for different reasons, in using the messengers (their own and the other’s) as a means to allow them to demonstrate clearly and distinctly the royal prerogative on life or death over their subjects and the persons under their jurisdiction. Another letter from Mari published by Lafont (1997) illustrates, through a specific case, the relevance that this prerogative had in everyday life.


\textsuperscript{4} Regarding this letter see also Charpin – Ziegler (2003: 195 n. 203).

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