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## CONTENTS

MARÍA ROSA OLIVER, FRANCO D'AGOSTINO, LETICIA ROVIRA, <i>Introduction: Tribute to Cristina Di Bernardis/De Bernardi</i>	9
NIDIA R. ARECES, <i>To Cristina, colleague and friend</i>	11
ANA ESTHER KOLDORF, <i>Biographical sketch of Cristina Irene Di Bernardis. Colleague and friend</i>	15
MARCELO CAMPAGNO, <i>The Question of the State in the Ancient World: Towards a Concept of State Logic</i>	19
MARTÍN CIFUENTES, <i>The peace sent by the King. A juridical control strategy in the Greek world</i>	27
SILVIA CROCHETTI, <i>The Shasu and their relationship with Egypt</i>	33
SILVANA BEATRIZ DOS SANTOS, <i>Networks of Sociability and Relations of Alterity in the Hittite Royalty during the Second Millennium BC</i>	39
BERNARDO GANDULLA, <i>Nomad and Sedentary life: Demonization and Reality in the Story of "Marriage of Martu" and Letter A. 1146 from the Royal Archive of Mari</i>	47
ADRIANA B. GARCÍA, <i>Palatial administrative dynamics in the production and circulation of goods, in Larsa, during Hammurabi's reign</i>	55
AGNÈS GARCIA-VENTURA, <i>Diversity, alterity and the "battle of the sexes" in 19<sup>th</sup> century CE ancient Near Eastern studies</i>	63
ANGELA GRECO, <i>The Code of Hammurabi in Later School Tradition</i>	69
VERÓNICA LAZARTE, <i>Gods and Men in Prophetic Communication in Mari under Zimri-Lim's reign</i>	81
JOSÉ LUIS LÓPEZ CASTRO, <i>Toponymy and Phoenician Navigation Routes to the Far West at The Beginning of Colonization</i>	87
FEDERICO LUCIANI, <i>Some Remarks on Kingship in Times of Zimri-Lim (1782-1759 BC): Tribal and State Traditions</i>	95
IANIR MILEVSKI, <i>The Figurine from Quleh and the Iconography of the Ghassulian Chalcolithic in the southern Levant</i>	101
CECILIA MOLLA, <i>The Conflict over Hit. The Hit Affair as a Means for Enquiring into Power Relationships between the Kingdoms of Mari and Babylon during the Old Babylonian Period</i>	113
JUAN-LUIS MONTERO FENOLLÓS, <i>Mari and the use of tin within the context of the Near East during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BC</i>	121
MARÍA ROSA OLIVER, <i>Between the Textual, the Archaeological and the Codifiable: Thinking Gender Relations in Old Babylonian Society through the Stele of Hammurabi</i>	127
EMANUEL PFOH, <i>Tribal Politics (without Tribes?) in the Southern Levant during the Late Bronze Age</i>	135
ELEONORA RAVENNA, <i>Personal Networks, Institutional Connections: a 'Guarantee' to Succeed in Business and to Improve Social Prestige. A case from Old Babylonian Sippar</i>	141
LETICIA ROVIRA, <i>Ethnic and Pan-ethnic Identity in the Kingdom of Mari (18<sup>th</sup> century BC). A Model Kit</i>	149
LUCIANA URBANO, <i>The meaning of clothing in the rituals of constitution/dissolution of political and marriage alliances. Reflections from the Mari Letters</i>	157
LORENZO VERDERAME, <i>Cuneiform Texts in the Fort Collins Museum of Discovery</i>	165
JORDI VIDAL, <i>Phoenicians at War</i>	173
WALBURGA MARÍA WISHEU, <i>Leadership Strategies and Ritual Economy in Early Complex Societies in China</i>	181
FRANCO D'AGOSTINO, <i>A new foundation clay-nail of Nūr-Adad from Eridu</i>	191



## GODS AND MEN IN PROPHETIC COMMUNICATION IN MARI UNDER ZIMRI-LIM'S REIGN

VERÓNICA G. LAZARTE

**ABSTRACT** · The practice of propheticism was discovered by Mari historiography since the 1940s and the interest for it has increased as the tablets of the great palace reflected a tradition temporarily previous to that recorded by the biblical canon. The importance of this practice can be observed not only in the private sphere but also in the government acts; political and religious features can be visualized in instances of communication with the deities.

Prophetic activity in Mari is listed as qualified work for those belonging to the clergy of the great deities' temples and many of these cases are registered during Zimri-Lim's period (1780-1758). The contexts of production of these sources tell of the kind of communication employed in the kingdom, of the problems in the exercise of power and of the legitimacy that men seek in their divine sovereigns.

In this universe where the sacred sphere is found in everyday life, I propose to analyze a selection of letters with prophetic content, which reflect how the divine world is interwoven with the political aspects set within the reign of Zimri-Lim, the last sovereign of Mari.

**KEYWORDS:** Mari, propheticism, gods, Zimri-Lim, prophetic letters, *qitlum*.

### INTRODUCTION

THE archaeological works started last century in the site of Tell-Hari, Syria, allowed an arduous historical and philological task involving the reading of thousands of clay tablets recovered from the palace of Mari. From this documentary corpus I will take some sources that show us the communication through letters between gods and kings.

The aim of this article is to highlight the communication system between gods and men, task that was carried out by scribes and prophets, in an administrative framework where everything must be informed to the king. The circulation of information towards the kingdom's capital was vital

to understand the material, religious and political conditions of Mari.

The recovery of these tablets and their later interpretations by historiography made it possible to detect letters that contain messages from the gods. Such letters have been denominated *letters with prophetic content*. This corpus began to take shape in 1938 when Georges Dossin published two letters with divine wices.

From that reading to the present 52 letters with prophetic content have been gathered and edited. The corpus is not definitive but depends on the translation from the Akkadian of other thousands of tablets that wait to be edited.

This collection of sources provides the historian of the present a material wealth that enables the reflection on the function of scribes and prophets involved in the transmission of messages. These characters are part of the royal administrative staff and become, in the eye of historians, key elements for the study of the communication system between gods and men. Communication which comprised an oral and a written instance. The transmission of these messages, their procedures and protocols give us a hint of the hierarchization of these officials, of their names, places of origin, of which gods were involved in the letter, what they asked or claimed. The material selected for the analysis in this work is limited to the reign of the last Mari sovereign, Zimri-Lim (1775-1761 BC), who is one of the main addressees of the letters.

It is worth remembering for the analysis of this documentary corpus that the distinction between private and public correspondence does not exist in the middle Euphrates society. Finet highlights this feature as he states that «from the moment and individual, man or woman, appears in the king's environment or in the officials' world,

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his/her life is thrown into the public life domains» (Finet 1983: 199).

In this communication system between gods and men, the divine word is never questioned. It is listened and resent to the king. This characteristic is important, for it speaks about a society where the religious dimension pervades the daily acts of exercise of power during that historical period.

#### SCRIBES AND PROPHETS

The administrative organization of the Kingdom of Mari included scribes and prophets. They were not the only officials, but in this analysis they are key figures in the communication between kings and gods. The kingdom of Mari maintained an organization governed by districts or *Halsum* in Akkadian language: Mari, Terqa, Sagarâtum, Dur-Yahdun-Lim, and finally Qattunam. These districts had a governor and a staff of officials, among them scribes and prophets from the temples of the most important gods of the pantheon.

The information that left these districts was transmitted to the royal palace in the district of Mari; this city was also the capital of the kingdom. Sending this information implied the writing in cuneiform system of the events in Akkadian language. This not a minor fact for the historiographical work, since the Mari society consisted of the west Semitic Amorite ethnic group, who did not use their language but adopted Akkadian instead to transmit all the events.

In the dissemination of the prophetic message the actions of these officials interact. The communication with the deity is considered to be produced by an act of consultation by the *apilum* or god's spokesperson. This first act takes place in the oral stage of communication, which is provoked and interpreted by the *apilum* (Merlo 2004: 326).

The Akkadian vocabulary to name the receiver of the message, and who is not the final addressee, is varied. It could be a common person, man or woman, old or young. In case this person belonged to the clergy, the terms most mentioned in the sources are: *apilum/apiltum*, male/female answerer; *muhhu/muhhâtum*, male/female ecstatic; *asinnu* that has been interpreted as a eunuch or sacred prostitute; and *sangum*, high rank priest. Although scribes have also used other terms such as: *qamma-tum*, *nabu*, *têrtum*, *egerru*.

The person *elected* by the deity then became a prophet as he/she received the manifestation of the god from mouth to ear, although in the

sources' narratives it is not easy to establish whether that was the case; there are also mentions to dreams, oracles and even animal organ inspections. But if the prophet did not belong to the clergy, the scribe wrote down the divine word and sent a lock of hair and the tassel of their garment together with the tablet.

The second stage would be the written one, where the scribe states in the tablet the god's answer that has been given by the *apilum*. We do not have the precise information in every source whether the *apilum* could write down the deity's message.

In our analysis the deity's communication process constitutes a religious act that in Mari may be, following the study by Jean Bottéro (1998: 199), «of the inspired type». This implies that the communication initiative comes from the deity, who transmits a message to a person, and then this message must be verified and/or interpreted by *professionals* and communicated to the king. Dominique Charpin (2001: 24) calls this form "indirect contact". Martti Nissinen (2003: 1-2), on his part, considers prophecy as a transmission process that includes four elements: the divine origin of the message, the message itself, the person who transmits the message and the receiver.

However, the sources reveal that also men have started the communication with the deity. The exchange of letters takes place within the Mari bureaucracy; the officials will have the task of dissemination. The studies on the epistolary genre by Nora Bouvet (2006: 38) bring us a reflection about this kind of sources in the ancient near east societies; she catalogues them as "elite genre". This elite functioned as the eyes and mouth of state powers recording everything relative to the State.

We can observe that many times topics not directly related to the *divine word* are inserted into the prophetic messages. This does not mean that they minimize the message, but all the contrary Bureaucratic machinery continues, which implies that the prophet must always transmit the message to the king through the officials, and the latter must send the tassel of the dress and a lock of hair to the palace, hence the preventive and practical nature of prophetism in Mari.

#### ORALITY AND WRITING IN EPISTOLARY EXCHANGE

Our inquires will seek answer in *that yesterday* which had *its own codes of transmission*, both



oral and written. We recover Cristina Di Bennardis's reflections on the management of sources which lead to privilege the relation text-context, that is, to consider the material and ideological conditions where the text was produced and consumed. No doubt the reconstruction of a distant context always entails a risk of falling into anachronism, which demands that historians, with their questions, do not be the only protagonists, but that they allow the text to speak, and learn to listen to it. This implies a more exacting dialogue between text and context, as well as between producer's cultural code and researcher's cultural codes (Di Bennardis 1998).

The sources we will analyse provide *marks of orality*, which is important since the illiterate population in this kind of society constituted the majority, even kings were unable, many times, of writing their own decisions.

The heading of the letters was the place where the scribe left those traces. The source belongs to Zimri-Lim, who dictates the letter for the god that protects the Euphrates river:

To the river god, my lord, say: 'Thus (speaks) Zimri-Lim, your servant.

At present I have just sent my Lord a gold-vase. Previously I had sent a report to my Lord and my Lord had given me a sign. May my Lord allow me to obtain without reservation the sign that he showed me! May my Lord not neglect anything pertaining to the protection of my life! May my Lord not turn his face away! May my Lord not direct his kindness anywhere but toward me!' (ARM XXVI / r: 191).

This letter was first edited by G. Dossin in 1938. The sovereign makes offerings to the god of the river with the aim of obtaining a sign favourable to his person. The kings' legitimacy through the gods' benevolence is important. Unfortunately, the context of this source is unknown, but perhaps it is a political moment in which Zimri-Lim requests the god's protection. The offering of a gold vase is not a fact of minor importance, since it is a delicate object and, besides, in the source in Akkadian we can observe the use of the word *gal* which means great. Is it perhaps a gift that the deity had asked in another instance of communication? Well, we do not know.

The following source is a tablet that contains three letters from different senders to the king

Zimri-Lim. Who are in communication with the king? They are three deities: Addu, Eštar of Ninēt and Šamaš.

To Zimri-Lim say: 'Thus (speaks)[Addu]: 'I will reinstate you in your ...; I have for you your ... amidst the losses. I have sent to you my powerful weapons and I have sent seven nets to subjugate the Elamites. From the fifteen to ... you will prepare the fight and ...' To Zimri-Lim say: 'Thus (speaks) Eštar of Ninēt: 'With my powerful weapons I will stand at your side. Make me in Mari a temple (in the shape of) a shepherd's cabin. This is the command I give you: When (there is) a distance of two leagues (left) to (reach) your enemies, hasten to light a fire and let Habdu-Malik, the minister, put it out'. To Zimri-Lim say: 'Thus (speaks) Šamaš: 'At your entrance in Mari. (ARM XXVI / r: 192)<sup>1</sup>

Three letters to the king gathered in the same shipping; economy of efforts we could think. Yet the context of production of these letters is the political conflict with the Elamite kingdom. Probably Zimri-Lim has consulted the oracles with different prophets and they have sent the answers to the king.

Addu's and Eštar's answers are clear: they will protect the king in his fight against the Elamites, whereas the third answer could not be recovered. The gods involved in this communication are among the most important in the Mari cult.

The request of the goddess Eštar of Ninēt of having a temple with characteristics of a shepherd's cabin reflects the other reality of the Amorites settled in Mari. The pastoral nomadism and the settlement in cities articulated the organization of the government in Mari. However, the shape of the temple asked by the goddess also implies, according to Cagni and Durand's analysis, the mobility of it. The goddess might have wanted to accompany the forces of Mari, moving along with them during the military campaign towards the Upper Habur against the Elamites. The use of fire as signal in front of the enemy troops can also be traced in the letters of the El-Amarna corpus, and can be understood as an alert for the troops.

The letter below is also addressed to Zimri-Lim. It is the god Šamaš who by *mouth* of his *apilum* transmits a message that a scribe will have to write down. In this case we have another source that provides information and complete the mentioned one. Firstly I will transcribe the god's letter:

<sup>1</sup> The translation into English is mine.





Speak] to Zimri-Lim]: 'Thus the prophet of Šamaš:

'Thus says Šamaš: '[I am] the lord of the lan[d]. Send quickly to Sippar, the [ci]ty of life, a great throne for [my] enjoyable dwelling, and your daughter whom I desire from you! Now the kings who [con]fronted you and regularly pl[undered you] have submit[ed] to your p[ower]. Now the he[ap] (of the enemies' corpses?) is given [to you] in the land!

Con[cern]ing the portion consecrated to Ad[ad], about which I had wr[itten] to you through [K]ānisānum before the defe[ct], gather all the consecrated portion and [let it] be taken to the temple of Adad [in] Aleppo. As to the [pre]sent for Dagan [about which the pro]phet spoke to [you], g[ive] it; and [may it br]ing [you] your [life] and [your] exist[ence].'

Another matter: Ner[ga], king of Hub[ša]lum, stood at your and your army's side when you defeated (the enemy)! Have them produced whatever you have vowed, including the large sword of bronze. They should be delivered for Nergal, king of de Hub[ša]lum.'

Another matter: thus says Šamaš: 'Hammurabi, king of Kur[di], has [talked d]eceitfully with you, and he is contriving a scheme. Your hand will [capture him] and in [his] land you will promulgate an edict of restoration. Now, the land in [its entirety] is given to your hand. When you take con[trol] over the city and promulgate the edict of restoration, [it shows] that your kingship is etem[al].'

Another matter: let Zimri-Lim, governor of Šamaš and Adad, listen to what is written on this ta[ble] and let him send my [adv]ersary to Himdiya. (ARM XXVI / 1: 194)

Another matter: Atamrum, prophet of Šamaš, came to me and spoke to me as follows: 'Send me a discreet scribe! I will have him write down the message which Šamaš has sent me for the king.' This is what he said to me. So I sent Utu-kam and he wrote this tablet. This man brought witnesses and said to [me] as follows: 'Send this tablet quic[kly] and let the king act according to its words.' This is what he said to me. I have herewith sent this tablet to my lord. (ARM XXVI / 2: 414)

The production context of Šamaš's letter to the king could be classified as political-religious. The political events commented make a clear reference to the submission of the King of Kur[di] by Zimri-Lim, fact that can be dated in the year 30 of his reign. It would seem that the victory of Mari over Kur[di] has been possible thanks to the divine intervention of Šamaš of Sippar, Addu of Aleppo, Dagan and Nergal of Hub[ša]lum. Now it is time for the king to fulfil the requirements of the deities: a temple for Šamaš in Sippar and the sending of one of his ten daughters. The daughter's name does not appear in the tablet, but historians agree that she could be Erišti-Aya, who was a *naditum* in the

temple of this city. For Addu, «the consecrated portion», of which we cannot infer what is Šamaš referring to; for Dagan, an *apilum*; and for Nergal, the sword of bronze. It is worth mentioning that it is the deity who reminds the king of all the requests made by the other deities, so that he does not fail to keep his promises. By reading the letter it seems that Šamaš has asked Zimri-Lim's daughter in another opportunity/letter.

Moreover, the "edict of restoration" is another fact that leads to the victory over Kur[di]; the god hands Zimri-Lim the city in exchange for him stating in it. The divine favours will now have their counterparts; Zimri-Lim will have to comply with the requirements. The second source provides the names of the scribe and the prophet of Šamaš of Sippar. Both belong to the royal administrative staff and combine their duties in the transmission of the divine message.

#### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The selection of sources for this analysis tried to give the reader an approach to the circulation system of the word, both human and divine. Exchange that leaves us, millennia later, the materiality of consultations, protection requirements, constructions, material and human offerings, transfer of goods and people to different places according to the god's requests.

The circulation of this kind of communication implied a clockwork bureaucratic system, where bureaucracy becomes the backbone of the palatal system. In this framework, officials and common people converge in the oral stage of the message circulation system. In the written instance, it is the elite core with its high officials who will be in charge of transmitting the message to the king or deity.

The use of what we call today epistolary genre made the voices of those in charge of the kingdom's protection travel through the interior of the country. The fulfilment of the task of writing down the oral message allows us to appreciate this interaction of men with their deities. The messages should arrive on time, the king should know it all, the power of the pantheon combines with the earthly power in a coming and going of letters. Maybe the letters were delivered to their spokespersons and they read them in the temples in front of the statue that represented the divinity, or maybe not. Still, the divine voices in the daily exer-