

VILE THREAT: THE RHETORIC OF A MARITAL SPAT

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A letter from the Rimaḥ archives has intrigued me for many years now, perhaps a tad longer than the many decades of friendship and collegiality that have bonded me to the recipient of these *mélanges*, Dominique Charpin. The letter is by no means neglected in the literature, the latest comments on it coming from Dominique's prize-winning advisee, Anne-Isabelle Langlois, in her seminal study of the archives of Iltani of Karana/Qaṭṭara (2017a-b).¹ The letter includes a threat to do bodily harm to a spouse, and in commenting on it, I lightly review a category of opportunist language by which Mari era writers sought to alter the behavior of others.

I offer these pages to Dominique, a colleague and friend of many generations, in the hope that such investigations may bridge the consciousness gap that separates us from the cultures we study. A historian and a philologist of unimpeachable scholarly probity, Dominique may be bemused by my tribute; nevertheless, let him also be amused by this odd sortie into a fraction of the archives he has mastered for many decades. I have learned from him for all these decades and, gods willing, I hope to continue to do so for years to come.

1. ILTANI

The letter that engages me is one of two authored by Iltani that remain in the Rimaḥ archives. Iltani was a princess, daughter of King Samu-Addu and sister of King Asqur-Addu of Karana. At one point, she was given as bride to Ḥaḳba-ḥammu, a diviner, so likely also a close adviser to the king. Eventually, she bore him at least one son (Re'um-ili), perhaps

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¹ In referring to the Rimaḥ archives, I cite Langlois' recent edition which itself has relied on Dalley's *editio princeps* (1976) as well as on the comments of many reviewers. I readily acknowledge consulting Langlois' good pages on the life and activity of Iltani and her circles.

also a daughter (Belessunu).² On reaching power, Ḥaḡba-ḥammu likely resided in Karana while Iltani lived in another palace, this one in Qaṭṭara.³ From there, she generated a fine dossier through her communications with bureaucrats, family members, and rulers, among whom most prominently, her husband. Correspondents reacting to her requests or making their own entreaties cite her commonly in that dossier, often with deference if not also fawningly. Yet, we have just two of the letters she authored, presumably because they addressed folks who had no reason to archive them in Qaṭṭara. In one of these letters (OBTR 156), she asks her husband to help her gather harvesters on land she owns in two villages. As it happens, we have a note (OBTR 157) that shows him acceding to her wish. The other letter is OBTR 158.

2. THE LETTER

Iltani opens OBTR 158 by citing her husband's accusation, "My lord wrote this to me about releasing the cattle, sheep, and donkeys of Tazabru: 'If you do not release the cattle, sheep, and donkeys, I will cut you up into 12 pieces!'" (This is) what my lord wrote to me (ll. 5-10)." His allegation avoids specifics, mentioning categories of hooved animals owners normally assigned to keepers for long distance grazing.⁴ They belonged to Tazabru, a man unknown from elsewhere, but evidently one of means. The charge implies that Iltani has seized them opportunistically and so needed a husband's intimidation to set things right. Assuming that Iltani is quoting Ḥaḡba-ḥammu accurately—not always a reliable

² The pattern of binding major officials to the throne was known in the period, as evidenced by the marriages of some of Zimri-Lim's sisters and daughters. Zimri-Lim had many daughters to marry off, some to vassals, thus generating a nice body of jeremiads and encomiums for those lucky or otherwise. A few of the princesses, as well as a couple of sisters, were married to high officials: see Ziegler 1999: 59-69 and 211-12 for her comments on *FM* 4 33, as well as Lafont 1987. Among Zimri-Lim's siblings, Yamama, daughter of Yaḥdun-Lim, married the diviner Asqudum, probably when the latter was working for Išme-Dagan, son of Samsi-Addu. A fraction of his dossier is in *FMA*: 168-72.

³ Another wife of Ḥaḡba-ḥammu, Yatar-Aya, lived with him in Karana, caring for that palace. One can argue for either as the principal spouse—see Langlois 2017a: 73-74; but I attribute primacy to the spouse whose proximity to the ruler gave her a better chance to produce an heir.

Whether or not Ḥaḡba-ḥammu was a "king" is thoroughly discussed by Langlois (2017a: 96-106). Babylon certainly kept him on a short leash; but for those under his control, he was effectively *the* ruler.

⁴ Horses came from the West with rulers offering them as prized gifts. Pork was raised in modest numbers (Langlois 2017a: 189-91).

conjecture given what we know from Mari exchanges⁵—Ḥaḡba-ḥammu's threat (*ana 12-šu anakkiski*) was at once explicit yet ambiguous. Because it addressed a woman who displayed a tendency toward apprehension, it was sure to make its mark.⁶

In Akkadian, while there are many verbs to express mutilating specific parts of the body (*baqāmum* for hair, *ḥepūm* and *palāsum* [D] for ears, *šahātum* for skin, and so forth), the verb *nakāsum* (G for one individual; D for many, including animals) applies most frequently to severing crucial organs, normally with mortal consequences. What to do with Ḥaḡba-ḥammu's reference to the suffix attached to the number 12 (**šinšerīšu*) is at issue. Treating it as a multiplicative, Stol translates (2016: 510), "I shall cut you down twelve times."⁷ This menace is certainly terrifying; but it also requires repeated resurrections for suffering Iltani as well turning the deed into a Sisyphian burden for her husband. However, as with most others who have translated this phrase, I regard the suffix as participative, the preposition *ana* delimiting the numbers of segments to which Iltani's body (here: *-ki*) is to be cut.⁸ Hence, the above translation.

Iltani was clearly riled by the threat, for she frames her defense with a (quasi verbatim) repeat of the phrase (ll. 11-14; 27-28), "(about what my lord wrote to me), why did my lord write (to me) about the ending of my life—*ammīnim bēlī ša la balāṭiya {avyāšim} išpuram?*"⁹ For me, Ḥaḡba-ḥammu's threat raise three issues: *its language; its rhetoric; its message.*

⁵ In Mari epistolary, the quotation of an original passage need not meet our standards of accuracy; simply rehearsing its content will suffice, provided no detail is willfully distorted or enhanced; see my comments in Sasson 2002.

⁶ As displayed in OBTR 20 and 147, on which see Langlois 2017a: 108-109.

⁷ This notion is normally construed with (*q*)*adi* preceding a numeral (with *ta.àm* or *-(i)šu*).

⁸ The construction is pretty standard see ARM 1 7 [LAPO 16: 187]: 9-10 (diverse timber) *ana šalāšīšu ližūzū*.

⁹ The idiom *la balāṭum* implies at least brutal misery if not also abrupt cessation of life, CAD B 51. Dalley (1976: 130) refers to ARM 5 4 [LAPO 16: 20]: 9-10, in which Yasmaḥ-Addu complains about a man he accuses of being an intriguer with acid tongue, "in the past this man had plotted my demise (*ša la balāṭiya lú idbub*)..." I cite these three other examples:

1. In A.1246 (Ziegler 2016: 118-26), our own Ḥaḡba-ḥammu defends himself to Zimri-Lim when accused of conniving with Išme-Dagan (ll. 16-17), "By having the letter sent to me, my lord has marked my demise (*ša la balāṭiya bēlī išpuram*)."

2. With characteristic chutzpah, Šidqi-epuḥ complains to Zimri-Lim, "Now, (treating me) as one who has disobeyed, my lord has posted me notice of my demise (*tuppam ša la balāṭiya... yāti bēlī ušābilam*)" ARM 16 27: 23-25; see Reculeau 2018: 30-33.

3. An individual claiming to be Zimri-Lim's nephew, is said to be so imprudent as to utter "a word endangering his life" (*awātum ša la balāṭišu ina pīšu ittaši*) ARM 27 162: 17.

2.1. Language

When reviewing the *editio princeps*, Anbar (1978: 212) commented tersely on the language of Ḥaqba-ḥammu's brutal threat, "Cette menace rappelle Jd. 19, 29." In a sordid incident detailed in the *Book of Judges*, an un-named Levite is making his way back home after retrieving an errant concubine (*'iššâ pîlegeš*, likely a "secondary wife"; simply "wife" according to Josephus). They stop in Gibeah, a town in Benjamin. When set upon by debauched townsmen, the Levite (or his host) surrenders the concubine to the abuse of the mob. Reaching his home with the woman's body (corpse, according to the LXX), the Levite "picked up the knife, took hold of his concubine and, hacking her to the bones into twelve parts, he scattered her in every territory/border in Israel" (Judges 19: 29). This was a one man's decision, with no threat or warning precipitating it.

Since antiquity, practically every phrase in this horrid drama has been debated or massaged—from the relationship between the man and his *pîlegeš* to the bodily condition of the woman when carved into twelve parts. It does not help that on rehearsing the events (20: 4-7), the Levite gives a slanted account of the earlier narrative. Here, suffice it to note that by its callousness, the act successfully inspired awe and revulsion, turning Israel against Benjamin, the tribe that protected the miscreants.¹⁰ Partitioning into twelve parts does advance a consistent conceit of Hebrew historiographers about its origins and persistence as a confederacy of twelve tribes, even if that number is not evident in Judges (as hardly anywhere else but in Pentateuchal and Chronicles lore).¹¹ The verb (D of *nātaḥ*, "to carve") and the noun (*nētaḥ*, "a cut of meat") have to do with the slaughter of animals. A great *Judges* exegete (Moore 1895: 400, n.*) argued for dismemberment at the joints of the limbs (3 segments

¹⁰ Many commentators (already Wallis 1952) alleged a "parallel" in ARM 2 48 (LAPO 17 559 = *FMA*: 226). Frustrated by the nomads' lack of cooperation, palace majordomo Baḥdi-Lim advises the king to parade among them the head of a decapitated criminal. The intent is to shock—Israel into angry retaliation, in Mari, into fearful obedience—but it remains a matter of speculation whether Zimri-Lim followed this advice. A similar empty threat is at ARM 3 73 (LAPO 18 1067 = *FMA*: 227-28).

¹¹ Saul distributed segments (how many not stated) of a dismembered ox, threatening to do the same to the *cattle* of those who do not support his call to battle the Ammonites (1 Sam 11: 5-11). Coincidental or ironic, when he issued the challenge Saul was at Gibeah, the site of the outrage against the concubine. Of interest too (if only because of its symbolism) is the tale of the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh who tears the robe of Jeroboam b. Nebat into twelve pieces, allocating ten pieces to the future founder of Kingdom Israel (1 Kings 11: 29-39).

from each arm and leg), “the head and trunk not included.” A tangy comment, for sure; but I pick up on it just the same.

Because Ḥaqba-ḥammu’s letter had a bovine context, I might imagine that his ghastly threat likewise is suggestive of butchering animals. One problem is that (as far as I can tell) the dismemberment of animal carcasses for either consumption or sacrifice hardly achieved standardization anywhere in the ancient world.¹² Turning to human mutilation for a possible inspiration is likewise difficult to maintain. The head must certainly be a major component as, whether in triumph or to inspire fear, the shutting of human skulls remains a sorry constant, even into our own days (Dolce 2018). Literary and artistic evidence for grizzly display of human parts include the hands, feet, skin, tongue, male organs, and the like.¹³ Still, I can scarcely pretend to know the specific libretto Ḥaqba-ḥammu had in mind for his spouse’s dismemberment. Given his culture’s powerful attachment to sexagesimal reckoning, I might have him turn numerical or cosmic when conjuring his wife’s dismembered body: her head, her torso, and 4 + 6 limb segments, depending on what we deem to be the more likely choice of jointing. Beyond that lurid thought, no guarded scholar would want to venture.

2.2. *Rhetoric*

In English, the relevant vocabulary for forcing one’s will on another is broad, generally arranged by whether the threat is relatively mild (to “admonish” “reprove”) or intentionally harsh (to “censure,” “rebuke”); whether it is expressed privately (to “reproach”) or publicly (to “reprimand”). Beyond such interchanges that may or may not hint of retaliation, we also meet with “warning” and “threat,” terms that signal an escalation of consequences. As far as I can tell, we do not have a developed equivalent vocabulary in Mari Akkadian. The few nouns that we might bring to the fore tend to mutate depending on the contexts. Among them, we might cite *šiptum*, which is mostly about royals declarations

¹² For Egypt, see Ikram 1995: 113–44. An equivalent study for Mesopotamia is highly desirable, but more difficult, given the lack of equivalent artistic evidence as richly documented in Egypt. Assyrian reliefs do give us some details on dismemberment of fallen enemy. Listings for parts and organs of animals and humans are in Hallo 2001 (with bibliography) and Holma 1911. [See now Post scriptum below.]

¹³ Diverse accounts, with different emphases in Talalay 2004; Richardson 2007; Minunno 2008; Villard 2008. My (light) inspection of physiognomic as well as the medical texts revealed attention to diverse parts of the human anatomy but they are hardly recorded in an orderly catalog; see Böck 2010; Geller 2010; Popović 2007: 69–118.

that bear serious consequences for contraveners; however, when invoked by an official, it may simply mean to speak toughly, threateningly.¹⁴ Similarly, *tukkum* may shift in accent from “rumor” to “warning,” with the verbs *nadûm*, “to cast,” and *šemûm*, “to hear,” controlling the difference.¹⁵ This lack of correspondence notwithstanding, we may nevertheless extract cultural insights from contexts.

Mari era archives stem largely from palaces and, as such, the scolding they propagate range from (mild) reproach/reprimands aimed at recalcitrant officers to dire declarations forecasting catastrophic destruction on rebellious vassals or problematic allies.¹⁶ Exchanges developed around military confrontations have their share of bellicose phrasings. Similarly, documents that preserve treaties as well as those with (copies of) monumental or foundation inscriptions will rely on curses to launch devastation upon willful infractions.¹⁷ Warnings by the gods via prophecies and dreams implicitly contain penalties for trespass or dismissal.¹⁸ Limiting here the inquiry to notes exchanged among political or bureaucratic colleagues and family members, we might cull a broad repertoire of menaces:

2.2.1. *Gripes*

Gripes come readily to bureaucrats, often invoking or dragging rulers into their frays as potential punisher. Thus, a brief note from La’um to Yasmaḥ-Addu (ARM 26 4 = *FMA*: 168-69) accuses Asqudum of slandering him (among many others); “no one is safe in his hands,” he writes, promising

¹⁴ An early list of usage is in Charpin 1991: 16-17. Based on their theme vowels, Durand (1998: 425) distinguishes between verbal roots with different theme vowels: one with *i* = “to govern,” the other with *a/u* = “to threaten.”

¹⁵ Kupper 1951: 120-25. The CAD lists a *tukku* B, “oppression, coercion,” with a *tukkānu* (rather than *tukkātu*) as plural. The lack of clear etymology complicates certainty about such a differentiation.

¹⁶ For convenient examples, see *FMA*: 183-84. Threats are natural to diplomacy, especially when seeking to force submission. They are also frequently featured in the Mari letters, where fear of enemy attacks keep all concerned (suzerains, vassals, citizens, diviners) à la qui-vive as well as resorting to feverish writing for help (A.649 = LAPO 17 592).

¹⁷ As in A.361 (LAPO 16 292). We have several treaties from Tell-Leilan (Šubat-Enlil/Šeḥna), mostly dating a generation after the fall of Mari; see Eidem 2011: 310-433. Credit for the death of an enemy under unusual circumstances is commonly given to the gods, as in this brief note posted by Zimri-Lim to one of his generals (ARM 13 97 = LAPO 311), “Atamrum (of Andariq), for whom I have done so much good, he has treated me badly. Repaying all that is good with evil, he had set himself for (more) evil. God has brought him to justice. Be happy.”

¹⁸ The motif is intrinsic to the genre, but a parade example is Addu-duri’s dream (ARM 26 237 [ARM 10 50] = LAPO 18 1094 [*FMA*: 285-86]).

details on a later occasion.¹⁹ Occasionally, the complaints may produce the desired effect.²⁰ In our case, however, Asqudum's come-uppance had to await divine interference.²¹

Gripes need not be explicit for them to make their point. Vassals in particular are prone to veiled threats, when complaining about lacking protection or receiving needed aid. None is as straightforward as the litany of failures that Ibal-Addu of Ašlakka communicated his suzerain, Zimri-Lim, each ending on the refrain, "Who has grasped the hem of your lord and saved himself?"²² Interesting manifestations of the same originate in rivalry that is natural to court officials.²³ In one case (ARM 14 48 = LAPO 17 651 = *FMA*: 59-60), Yasim-Sumu, the palace's chief accountant and estate manager, and Yaqqim-Addu, governor of Saggartum province, are locked in battle of will. In Yaqqim-Addu's rehearsal of recent events, it would seem that before undertaking an operation that included provincial commoners (*muškēnū*), the king had absolved them from providing oxen for palace threshing. Yasim-Sumu had heard the king's directive, yet he likely needed an infusion of labor to complete his threshing assignment. He therefore demands that Yaqqim-Addu procures the needed oxen, a request that is refused. Not giving up, Yasim-Sumu continues, "I am herewith sending a letter to the king about assigning the oxen of commoners to thresh the palace's threshing-grounds. If you are about to deliver the oxen of the commoners so they can thresh the palace's grain, send back to me the letter that I have sent to the king. Otherwise, if you are not delivering the oxen, my letter should be transmitted to the king." In effect, Yasim-Sumu is corseting Yaqqim-Addu into either fulfilling his demand or forwarding a letter that undoubtedly would pin blame on Yaqqim-Addu for failing to assist.

What is delicious here is that Yaqqim-Addu sensed the vacuity of the threat. Not only would he not halt Yasim-Sumu's letter from reaching

¹⁹ I have collected many such accusations elsewhere (Sasson 2012, citing Durand and others).

²⁰ As in OBTR 163 (= Langlois 2017b: 166-67): 5-12, an official writes Iltani of Qaṭṭara, "No sooner did I write my Lady, my Lady's servant got scared. He collected a band (of workers) at the threshing ground and within a couple of days we finished winnowing all the grain at the threshing floor."

²¹ Reported on ARM 14 4 (= LAPO 18 1019; *FMA*: 335). Asqudum, whose best moments will come in Zimri-Lim's days, left us a career that is nicely rehearsed in Charpin 2011. He found many opportunities to generate clients as well as enemies.

²² A.3194 cited from Guichard 1999: 28-29 (see *FMA*: 77-78). Many comments on the context are in Guichard 2011.

²³ A rich harvest of (implied) threats launched by administrators includes invoking or dragging the kings into their *mêlées* as a potential punisher; see Sasson 2012.

the king, he also attaches his own version of events, in which his rival is practically contriving for the king to break his own pledge to the commoners. I am certain that on learning of Yaqqim-Addu's plan, Yasim-Sumu feverishly drafted a justification.²⁴ With a king who seems highly tolerant of bureaucratic squabbles, this particular contest of wills needed not end here.

2.2.2. *Reprimands*

Depending on the severity of the perceived offense, it might suffice for individuals to lecture their correspondents about their past failings, likely hinting that discipline may be forthcoming. Such occasions are most common when there is a manifest imbalance of power between the correspondents. Familiar are the exchanges among Samsi-Addu and his sons; yet because they were maintained by scribes and they echoed among the king's advisers, they cannot be deemed private. The great king berated his son for failures on each and all his conducts in governing Mari, linking them to humiliating metaphors of physical immaturity and sharpening their sting through contrasts with his older brother's military prowess. Yasmah-Addu offered detailed responses.²⁵ Yet their repetition in several letters in the archives suggests that the perceived flaw persisted; but it also intimates that the bite did not measure up to the bark.

²⁴ Although they lived miles apart, these two officials likely had occasions to cross paths during their bureaucratic rise; they were certainly aware of each other's personality. Several postings display the imperious side of Yasim-Sumu when ordering underlings. In A.367 (unpublished, cited from Charpin 2015: 38), he needed only to suggest omniscience, "There must be regularly for me tablets of yours giving me news of the palace and of its workshops. Indeed, from your tablet you had sent to me I have learnt of people being sent away. In fact, I was informed even before your tablet reached me!" Similar approach in ARM 13 53 (= LAPO 16 66 = *FMA*: 152).

²⁵ The letters are assembled as LAPO 16 1 (ARM 1 52), 2 (ARM 1 28), 35 (ARM 1 6). Yasmah-Addu's response (LAPO 16 34 [ARM 1 108] and 36 [ARM 1 113]) fully display how hurtful were the barbs. I cite an extract from the last in *FMA*: 23-24, "About matters that Daddy wrote to me, 'Now you—how long must we keep on guiding you? Are you still a kid and not a grown up? Is there no hair on your cheek? How much longer will you not take charge of your house?' This is certainly what Daddy wrote me on a couple of occasions. Am I really not able to take charge of my house and earn respect? ... Furthermore, Daddy wrote to me, 'Can you not observe your brother, who leads vast armies? Yet you cannot take charge of your palace and house!' This is what Daddy wrote to me."

It could not have helped his self-esteem (nor stabilized his sense of inadequacy) that the allegedly perfect brother (Išme-Dagan) salted the wounds by offering Yasmah-Addu unsolicited advice. That "advisors" appointed by his father surrounded the young king only provoked Yasmah-Addu to act impulsively and foolishly when seeking to replace or contravene them. The drama is worthy of a good movie script.

As far as Yasmaḥ-Addu was concerned, his father may have been an insensitive clod; but he was not necessarily dangerous. Still, despite the onslaught of repeated shortcomings, Yasmaḥ-Addu was never at a risk of losing his throne, even when scolded for seriously endangering an alliance his father had orchestrated by mistreating a bride from Qatna (A.2548 = LAPO 18 1010; *FMA*: 105). In fact, Yasmah-Addu never lost his seat of power as long as his father lived.

2.2.3. Warnings

Warnings are gloved reprimands in which the consequences of perceived offenses remain vague, so likely to enhance anxiety by forcing memory of previous punishment.²⁶ The presumption is that precedents for the retaliation existed and were manifest to the recipient. A succinct example comes from the Rimah archives when Ḥaqba-ḥammu of Karana writes an obviously recalcitrant official in a nearby town (OBTR 94), “I have written you (at least) 5 times, ‘release the recruits; don’t claim (them).’ Yet, you persist on claiming these men. Now, on listening to this tablet of mine, release these men and do not claim them. You must know the penalty I will impose on you at one time.”²⁷

Somewhat similar in tone are penalties that are implied rather than specifically stated.²⁸ From the Leilan archives comes a couple of illustrations. Angered when his missives went unanswered, Yamši-ḥatnu of Kaḥat ends a note to his boorish “brother,” Till-abnu of Šehna, “Since you do not send me a reply to my tablet, there can be no meaningful exchange between us. You can just tell me and I will no longer write to you” (*RATL* 75: 37-42; *FMA*: 102-103). The menace is not particularly

²⁶ A good amount of the angry missives a ruler posted to underlings, carried threat of punishment. None was as white hot as A.1285 (LAPO 16 136; see *FMA*: 154-55) in which Zimri-Lim scathingly berated Mukannišum about a garment he wished prepared for a public convocation. See LAPO 16 133 to 135 for the likely thread of the discussion.

²⁷ The implication is that he will not warn him again. Admittedly, there is a problem in how to render “1-šū” in the phrase *1-šū arnam (emmidka)*: Dalley 1976: 80 (“[If you do] once [more]”); Langlois 2017b: 97 (“je t’infligerai la [prochaine] fois !”); Groneberg 1979: 268, “... ich dich einmal (doch) bestrafen werde!” Elsewhere (OBTR 90), Ḥaqba-ḥammu imposes a penalty of 2 minas on an individual who did not release (?) another. On penalties imposed, see Langlois 2017b: 250-51.

²⁸ In fact, when rulers issue orders to officials, only occasionally is the penalty for infraction explicit. As example, when Zimri-Lim gives strict orders on the control of river traffic (likely during hostilities), he warns Mukannišum and his aides, “I shall hear of the matter of the raft that you are releasing, and for every raft that you are releasing, I shall have you pay a mana of silver. Do not be negligent over this matter” (ARM 18 7 = LAPO 18 909; see *FMA*: 61).

fearsome; yet, because earlier in the same letter Yamši-ḥatnu had invoked sacred oaths, the expectation was for some form of divine retribution.

More striking in this regard is another Leilan example because it appeals to the recent past as a portent of certain degradation. Ea-Malik (likely a priest and/or diviner) writes Till-Abnu: “In the past, before he could ascend his throne, Mutiya kept on making the following vow, ‘If I were to ascend my throne, I shall donate silver, gold, cups of silver, cups of gold, and skillful maids to Belet-Nagar, my Lady!’ This is what he kept on vowing. (Yet) when this man did ascend his throne, he totally ignored the goddess and did not even visit her once! You are the one the goddess has touched with her finger, and you have indeed ascended the throne of your father’s house... You must grant—and not withhold—whatever is the need of the goddess....” (*RATL* 28; see *FMA*: 240).

The three named personalities are known; but how they chronologically dovetail into each other remains murky.²⁹ The letter gives information that is not yet affirmed by the records: Mutiya (formally Mutu-abih) had a brutal fall and his contemporaries drew a lesson from it, intimating that neglecting divinity is bound to have repercussion. Ea-Malik certainly believed it, and in warning Till-abnu about honoring the goddess, he is giving him no room for excuses.³⁰ How Ea-Malik profited by it all is not clear to me.

2.2.4. *Hollow threats*

Hollow threats come in a variety of flavors, a veritable smorgasbord of alerts, warnings, or the like, forecasting the direst consequences to offenders; yet it is not always clear to what degree either their promoters or recipients took them literally. Two notes with such instances come from Kibri-Dagan, governor of Terqa, frustrated by his inability to control tribal elements. In ARM 2 92 (*LAP*O 17 681; *FMA*: 128), he threatens death on any Yaminite leader who lets nomads escape the king’s control. Yet, he advances a more lenient (rather than harsher!) punishment for similar infraction by members of his security patrol (*bazaḥātum*). Similarly, Kibri-Dagan proposed to burn those who plot or even listen to

²⁹ When Mutiya (Mutu-Abih) ruled at Šeḥna, Ea-Malik addressed him as his “servant” while Till-Abnu had lesser power at Šurnat. Nonetheless, he had standing at Šeḥna and eventually ruled it. See Eidem 2011: 44-59 as well as his 2008: 267-75; 287-89. Comments by Charpin 2014, especially at 146-49.

³⁰ Mutiya’s fall from grace is likely collaborated by a follower of Till-abnu who gloats that Mutiya, who threatened his frontiers, went to his fate. He credits two divinities for letting Till-abnu on a golden throne (*RATL* 128).

false or scandalous information (ARM 3 73 = LAPO 18 1067; *FMA*: 227-28). My notion is that these and other examples of verbal intimidations certainly wished to sharpen the seriousness of intent;³¹ yet I doubt that they were to be taken at face value. While slave owners and group leaders could impose extreme corporeal punishment or major faults (as in ARM 26 434; see Durand 2002), the execution of criminals, or traitors was a royal prerogative, even if its actual implementation (in contrast to its advocacy) is hardly documented in our archives.³² If officials were not free to impose capital punishment on their own authority, it would seem also that rulers also do not arbitrarily do the same. Thus, when a king asks officers to dispose secretly of an individual, they seem to find ways do deflect out the order.³³

Variations on threats that lacked teeth are many, but not always transparently so. Some are *rhetorical*, if not also literary.³⁴ I have treated as such a famous war declaration Yarim-Lim of Yamḥad was purported to have sent to Yašub-yaḥad, a (still unattested) Transtigradian king, zillions

³¹ For example, ARM 3 73 (LAPO 18 1067; see *FMA*: 227-28).

³² S. Lafont (1997) nicely discusses these matters. There, she features A.1947 in which the *merḥûm* Ibal-pi-El stopped a man intent on impaling a servant caught escaping with two women. The man, however, did blind his victim, apparently without penalty. Lafont also cites A.637 (117 n. 33) in which an official (a vassal?) asks the king to give him authority to execute captive criminals. Perhaps relevant here is A.2822+: 51-63 (Guichard 2014: 94-104), in which a vassal manages to have a mob kill an alleged traitor to Zimri-Lim, refusing to do the deed himself. Exceptional seems to be FM 6 4 (S. Lafont 2002; see *FMA*: 148-49) in which Lanasum, resident-commissioner (*ḥazannum*) for Zimri-Lim in Tuttul, takes it upon himself to contravene his king's order and strangles captured caravan robbers. Lanasum's tenure in Tuttul was problematic and he may not have kept his post for long; nonetheless, his move towards summary execution startles.

Escapees from military or work conscriptions seem to receive the harshest punishment when caught. Still, I cannot easily explain how Kibri-Dagan could plan to impale such a person, *together with his family* (ARM 13 108 = LAPO 18 1080; see *FMA*: 127 n.17)? Elsewhere, escapees are merely shackled and publically displayed (ARM 6 35 = LAPO 17 569; see *FMA*: 208).

³³ When ordered to "make disappear" Yarim-Dagan (possibly the bearer of scandalous news), Kibri-Dagan claims not to locate a place in which to dispose of him; ARM 13 107 (LAPO 18 1069; *FMA*: 228-29). Kibri-Dagan may have feared responsibility with the murder of the man should reversal of fortunes (or of sentiments) overtake his king. He thus postpones its fulfillment, giving Zimri-Lim a chance to reconsider. See also the closing paragraph of ARM 26 199 (new edition in Durand 2012), in which Sammetar (governor of Terqa) buys time when ordered to decapitate an individual by shifting the topic to the fate of the latter's family. When Samsi-Addu orders the jailing of an individual beyond the knowledge of others (ARM 1 57 = LAPO 18 1076; see *FMA*: 228), we are likely dealing with an unfortunate *keltum*, a claimant to the throne being kept in case of future use. Political murders, some more grizzly than others, were hardly rare in the Mari age.

³⁴ Admittedly, this categorization depends on internal inspection of ensuing events.

of kilometers away.³⁵ I imagine the same (with less certainly, though) for the coeval ultimatums the king of Elam posted to Babylon and to Larsa, using formulaically the same language, “Among troops of yours that I saw/keep hearing about, if just one person is in opposition, I will turn and head your way” (ARM 26 362: 8-10/22-23).³⁶ Equally rhetorical is Yarim-Lim of Yamḥad’s ultimatum to the elders of Imar, “The Yaminite kings must not stay in Imar. Expel them! From now on, they must not remain here. Should these men try once more to enter Imar, Zimri-Lim and I will war against you” (FM 7 7: 32-40). This may have been a genuine warning when issued; but when Yarim-Lim cites it to Zimri-Lim’s envoy Dariš-libur, the ostensible fugitives had already left Imar. In fact, in a subsequent update on events (FM 7 8), Dariš-libur simply skips over this part of the interview.

2.2.5. *Suicide as threat*

Reporting from Ilanšura to Zimri-Lim, the diplomat Yamšum writes: “Now, my lord’s daughter, Kiru, who lives here, had said, ‘write to my lord, Ḥaya-sumu has never cared for me.’ Now she says, ‘Since my lord (= her father or her husband) cares nothing about me, either a woman kills herself or she jumps from the roof.’ Kiru said this forcefully.”³⁷ Stol (2007) has collected a fair number of “to jump from the roof,” and while the phrase may not have become a metaphor for “committing suicide,” it certainly refers to a relatively public way to do oneself harm. Because Kiru found several mouthpieces to carry her dire message back to Mari, believing her threat or not, the king eventually did seek to retrieve her. The end of the story remains unclearly charted; but it could not have ended well for the princess.

On several other occasions in which Mari princesses reported marital discord, we do not find expressly suicidal language, although Princess Inib-šarri, miserably unhappy as a widowed bride to conniving Ibal-Addu

³⁵ A.1314 (LAPO 16 251). Latest discussion at Sasson 2014: 686-90.

³⁶ *FMA*: 183-84 (1st line of 2nd paragraph should read, “In the same way that the vizier of Elam wrote to *Hammurabi*, he wrote the following to Rim-Sin (of Larsa...)”).

³⁷ ARM 26 304: 37-46. The melodramatic saga that pitted to sisters (Kiru and Šimatum) who vied for primacy in the same husband’s court is too well-known to restage here. Significant portion of the dossier is in LAPO 18, p. 426-47. A briefer compilation is in *FMA*: 111-16, both with bibliography. The warning is repeated in ARM 10 33 (LAPO 18 1230), “My life is ebbing away in constantly listening to Šimatum’s words. If my lord does not fetch me back to Mari, I shall grasp my nose (i.e., “take my resolve”) and jump from the roof.”

of Ašlakka, comes close to becoming unhinged, “Having now entered Ašlakka, I am facing even more misery. Ibal-Addu’s wife is now the reigning queen; it is this woman who continually receives the donations of Ašlakka and of other towns. As for me, she/he has set me in a corner and has had me grasp my cheeks in hand as if a fool. He regularly takes his meals and drinks in the presence of the woman, his wife” (ARM 10 74: 10-26 = LAPO 18 1242; see *FMA*: 116).³⁸ One princess who actually might have made an attempt on her own life is Beltum (or whatever her personal name may have been) of Qatna, the neglected wife of Yasmaḥ-Addu. Stol (2007) renders entries in a dream oracle that I paraphrase as follows: “[If a dreamer is greeted by a dead person,] he will die by a collapsing wall; [if a dead person kisses him or is kissed by him,] he will die from sun-heat; [if he bites a dead person,] he will die by jumping from the roof.”³⁹ The implication is that exposing oneself to a hot sun was one avenue to end one’s life. Miserable in her new home, Beltum reportedly ventured out to into the mid-day sun to dance (or to perform calisthenics). Naturally she became severely ill; but alas for her, she apparently recovered (ARM 26 136), her future not exactly rosy.⁴⁰

2.3. *Message*

With few references that reflect on datable political events in the region, the chronology of Iltani’s epistolary dossier is vague at best. Nonetheless, it would be unreasonable to assume that OBTR 158, in which Ḥaḡba-ḡammu communicated his nasty threat, was the last missive she penned. I expect that the two continued to correspond long afterwards. In fact, there are (at least) two caveats to consider: One is that Ḥaḡba-ḡammu was known to wield veiled threats (see above on OBTR 94) as well as hyperbolic sentiments. Langlois (2017b: 37-38) cites a letter he sent to Zimri-Lim (A.1246; see Ziegler 2016, cited

³⁸ Her story is nicely told in Guichard 2009 and reprised (in English) in his 2013.

³⁹ He is citing from Oppenheim 1956: 328.

⁴⁰ The letter describing her misadventure is ARM 26 298 (*FMA*: 105-106). It has received many comments; see Charpin 2012: 78. I do not share the (plausible) opinion that she morphed into Dam-ḡuraši, one of Zimri-Lim’s wives; see Durand 2000: 295-30; Sasson 2010.

The act of suicide has not gathered much scribal attention beyond philosophical treatises (“Dialogue of Pessimism”) and the boasts of first millennium kings; see Worthington 2010. It is surprisingly well-attested in the Hebrew Bible, but the instances in cuneiform and Hebrew literatures shrink significantly if one excludes self-inflicted death when leaders are about to fall into enemy hands (as in the case of Saul) or are to be publically executed (as in the case of Samson); see Dietrich 2008.

above), in which he offers this quasi-oath (ll. 29'-30'), "(If accusation could ever be substantiated), may I be slashed midriff with a saw (*ina šiššārim qabli lišrimū*)." The other caveat is the obvious playfulness displayed in some of the exchanges between husband and wife, in particular the nicely teasing note that Ḥaqba-ḥammu posted Iltani (OBTR 58). With characteristic banter, he threatens to punish those who have neglected her festivities.⁴¹ There is reason, therefore, to locate Ḥaqba-ḥammu's nasty OBTR 158 tirade in the *Hollow threats* category.

Yet there is cause for further consideration, mostly because OBTR 158 was kept in Rimah, so apparently in Iltani's possession, when it should have been in Karana, with Ḥaqba-ḥammu. Here are three possible scenarios:

1. *The letter was a copy.* Such a procedure is certainly known, especially as it concerns legal documentation. Yet, we might ask: what was so crucial about its contents that a copy needed to be kept in Iltani's personal archive? Certainly, Iltani felt innocent from the charge that she kept Tazabru's animals, claiming that in fact his own shepherds had marched them into her own land. Iltani does indeed invoke oath language, "May my lord impose punishment on me, had I taken any of the cattle and sheep" (ll. 22-24). But did she need to preserve a copy of such an assertion when it could be used against her?
2. *The letter was returned.* Either Ḥaqba-ḥammu brought it back on one of his trips to Qaṭṭara or had it returned by messenger together with his reply. (We keep in mind that, unlike Zimri-Lim who brought his correspondence back to Mari, Ḥaqba-ḥammu likely had Karana as center for his chancellery and archives.) This solution is applicable to the other Iltani letter from Rimah, for not only do we have OBTR 156, with its petition for help in harvesting, but we also have Ḥaqba-ḥammu's reaction (OBTR 157). Not impossible; but where is his answer to OBTR 158?
3. *The letter was not posted,* possibly because of its unseemly whining or because of its potential *chutzpadik* (impudent) quality (Langlois 2017b: 37-38). Several examples of letters in the Mari archives

⁴¹ The fourfold repeat within a dozen brief lines of the crucial phrase *da'ātam (la) šālum* underscore the whimsical nature of the note. It is possible that Ḥaqba-ḥammu is referring to religious occasions, for which he does indeed come to Qaṭṭara (OBTR 58, 64).

that, for diverse reasons, were not delivered might support such a suggestion.⁴² Still, we also know that tablets could be recycled for their valuable clay.

3. REFLECTION

One may defend any of the just-mentioned possible avenues, but let me opt for the last, with a reason complementary to the two suggested above. OBTR 158 must certainly have had a prequel for, in defending herself, Iltani writes (ll. 16-19), “Yesterday, I told my lord, ‘For a while now, his own shepherds have kept his cattle and sheep that he is grazing in Yašibatum (Iltani’s land).’ This is what I told my lord.” It would appear that just one day earlier Iltani actually had defended herself orally (*qabûm*) to her husband, claiming that Tazabru’s shepherds had entered her own land, or had charged one of her servants to do so, the same. Ḥaḡba-ḡammu had simply to urge Tazabru to remove the animals where they should not have been. Iltani offers her pledge before making a potentially sarcastic suggestion, “Would I, without my lord’s permission, lay hand to take anything?”

Iltani was a princess, a daughter and sister of kings before she became the wife of an erstwhile diviner who attained whatever we might decide was his present status as a Babylon pawn. Her underlings and correspondents treated her with all the protocol (if not also sycophancy) reported in the Mari letters when addressing Zimri-Lim, but hardly the same for any of his wives or daughters.⁴³ The language of the day did indeed require Iltani to speak to her husband as a *bēlum*, “lord,” deploying all the subservient rhetoric attached to it. In fact, with all due deference to the more prestigious deployment of power, I wonder if their relationship is not paralleled by a decaffeinated version of what obtained in the “The Kingdom of Upper Mesopotamia” (as termed by the Mari team). After conquering a vast territory, Samsi-Addu assigned portions of it to two sons, granting one more autonomous control than the other. Each of the sons had independence of movement, but there was always the potential of being overruled or having to act on an imposed decision.

⁴² Brief list of unposted Zimri-Lim letters in Guichard 2002: 117.

⁴³ See Langlois’s many-layered review of the rhetoric used by correspondents 2017b: 6-39.

When Iltani received the indelicate threat from her husband, she had a missive (OBTR 158) ready to send, faulting her husband for bringing up a matter she thought was settled orally just a day earlier. She decided against ordering its posting, likely for the same reason that Zimri-Lim decided to retain the jeremiad he had intended for his father-in-law and suzerain, Yarim-Lim of Yamḥad.⁴⁴ It was simply beneath Zimri-Lim's dignity as a sovereign ruler to whimper so demeaningly, even when addressing a suzerain. Iltani may have felt the same. She decided to let this breach of their understanding go by, in the expectation that her husband already had all the information needed to resolve the matter. For Iltani, no less than for Zimri-Lim, retaining the letter was emblematic of resolve, defiance, integrity.

I am speculating of course. Just the same, I am pleased to entertain Dominique with this brief entry into a marital spat that probably had many more volleys in its future.

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⁴⁴ ARM 28 16 (LAPO 18 857; *FMA*: 81-82). See also A.1101 (LAPO 16 230; *FMA* 81 n. 150), in which counsellor Sammetar sought to coach Zimri-Lim on how to address Yarim-Lim.

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Post scriptum. In a forthcoming *FM* study on meat accounts in Mari, Lionel Marti discusses the segmenting of butchered stock animals. He has kindly allowed me to communicate a version of his comments:

Le texte SAA 12 77 [CDLI photo: <<https://cdli.ucla.edu/dl/photo/P336290.jpg>>], collection de décrets datant de différents règnes de rois assyriens, livre un passage fort intéressant sur le découpage d'un animal:

ii:24-28: 5 uzu-úr-meš 5 uzu-zag-meš 2* uzu-giš-kun 6 uzu-ti 3 uzu-gaba-meš 1 uzu-gú 2 uzu-gú-sig₄ pab 2 udu šá uzu-meš

L'équation ici est donc : «5 cuisses, 5 épaules, 2 rumstecks, 6 côtes, 3 poitrines, 1 cou, 2 « colonnes vertébrales » / « échines » = 2 moutons de viande.» Il apparaît clairement ici que le «mouton» est une réalité de compte et non un animal entier, qui d'après ce texte est composée de 12 morceaux soit un nombre de deux supérieurs à ce que l'on a pour Mari.

Ce nombre correspond en revanche à ce que nous indique la Bible, au sujet de la découpe d'une concubine en 12 morceaux [Juge XIX, 29], ou à la menace, imagée, d'Haqba-Ahum envers Iltani de la découper en 12 morceaux [OBTR 158: 10]. On remarquera que dans le monde hittite, il semble que les animaux comportent 9 parties (voir le commentaire d'A. Mouton, *RA* 101, 2007, p. 86 n. 20).