

Apresentação do Dossiê

The Amarna Letters: relations between polities in the ancient world

Lucas G. Freire¹

Rodrigo Corrêa Teixeira²

DOI: [10.5752/P.2317-773X.2017v6.n2.p5](https://doi.org/10.5752/P.2317-773X.2017v6.n2.p5)

The archive of cuneiform tablets discovered in the late 19th century in Tell El-Amarna (Egypt) has revealed an extensive amount of information about the inter-polity relations of the 2nd millennium BC Near East. The 'Amarna Age' was a period of considerable interaction between the great powers of the region and their client polities. With intensive exchange came an equally intensive flow of communication. The contents of the Amarna tablets are available now in translation, but these 'letters' are still relatively unknown in wider International Relations (IR) circles.³ In this journal forum, we introduce the fascinating Amarna system to our IR colleagues by adopting an interdisciplinary approach as our starting point. Through an analysis of the Amarna letters in light of social theory, IR and political economy, we hope to stress not only that an historical approach to world politics has much fruit to bear, despite the relative unpopularity of historical approaches in the discipline. We also suggest that IR scholars have much to gain from listening to what students of cognate fields in the social sciences and humanities have to say.

This project started as a conversation in 2013 between Lucas Freire and prof. Luis Moita at OBSERVARE's headquarters in Lisbon. We are very thankful for the encouragement and support of prof. Moita, as well as the rest of the staff of the institute based at the Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa. Perhaps the ziggurat that makes up OBSERVARE's logo should have provided an indication that the conversation would lead to an actual project on IR and Ancient Near Eastern Studies, but the fact remains that supporting the idea was an act of bravery. IR research has a short-term, policy-relevant bias. While we believe there is much to learn from the history of world politics we do not necessarily claim that our studies presented in this forum will contribute directly to make the world a better place in the short term, though we do hope to achieve something practical by readjusting our theoretical lenses in light of historical evidence. For this reason, it is also with deep gratitude that we thank the editorial team of *Estudos Internacionais* for taking some risk in lending us and the other authors this space to present our ideas.

Our key aim was to highlight a number of salient features in the inter-polity relations of the mid-2nd millennium BC ancient Near East, making extensive use of the text of the Amarna letters and making an indica-

1. Assistant Professor at Mackenzie Presbyterian University, Research Fellow at OBSERVARE – Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa and Postdoctoral Fellow at North-West University.
[ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4072-1924](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4072-1924).

2. Professor at the Postgraduate Program in International Relations at PUC-Minas. BA in Geography, MA in History and PhD in Geography (UFMG).
(rteixeira@pucminas.br).
[ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9107-0498](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9107-0498)

3. A good starting point for those interested in further exploring this topic is the account by A. H. Sayce (1917) of the discovery and early publication of the Amarna tablets, and Cyrus H. Gordon's (1947) evaluation of the subsequent publication of the rest of the Amarna archive.

tion of what these elements may represent for the study of world politics in general. Authors participating in this forum were free to focus their attention on a small number of documents or, alternatively, to attempt to establish wider claims by closely engaging with the primary sources. We asked each writer to use William Moran's (1992) English translation and edition of the Amarna Letters together with Anson Rainey's (2015) updated collation, translation and commentary as a basis. Another requirement was that each article was supposed to make use of social theory relating the analysis of the primary sources to the study of world politics. A benchmark for us was *Amarna Diplomacy*, the thought-provoking interdisciplinary volume edited by Raymond Cohen and Raymond Westbrook (2000).

Writing from Finland, Alex Aissaoui provides a helpful review of IR's underwhelming record of engagement with the Amarna material and ancient systems of politics in general, introducing IR scholars to the key developments in the history of ancient Near Eastern inter-polity relations. Aissaoui also draws extensively on the work of assyriologists, egyptologists and hittitologists. He implies that these historical and philological disciplines pay considerable attention to detail but tend to be wary of generalizations that one could sketch based on social theory. In his proposal to strike a balance between detail and generalization, he provides a theoretically laden description of the mechanisms of inter-polity relations during the 'Amarna age,' particularly with reference to the interaction between the key powers of that system and their security agenda. There is plenty of dialogue with IR theory in this study.

Lucas Freire's article also makes use of IR theory – the English School approach in particular, combined with elements of social constructivism, but focuses instead on one of the Amarna letters in particular, EA 15. This is the first publication of a translation and textual commentary of this letter in the Portuguese language. In the political commentary section of the article, Freire expands on his previous analyses of the role of institutions in the 2nd millennium BC Near Eastern system of politics (see FREIRE, 2013; 2017). Historians read this particular document as evidence of Assyria's rise to the group of great powers of the time. Freire sheds light on what this rise represents from the perspective of an IR approach that focuses on social rules of procedure and constitutional rules, including rules of membership. The article, therefore, theorizes the Amarna system as a society of politics.

While Aissaoui portrays the 'Amarna system' as a "system in the making" – to use his own words, Freire writes of at least two overlapping and interrelated systems, i.e., that of the 'great kings' and that formed by 'lesser kings' and their respective patron king. Both of these systems made up a complex society of politics.

Going beyond political and social relations without discarding such aspects of inter-polity relations portrayed in the Amarna letters, Fábio Frizzo de Moraes Lima looks at Egypt's imperialist policy in the Levant from a historical and economic point of view. His article combines an analysis of several passages of the Amarna archive with an examination of parallel Egyptian textual evidence from more or less the same period.

He makes this analysis in order to depict the relationship between Egypt's governmental bureaucracy, its *modus operandi* and Pharaoh's policy of projecting economic and political power onto the Near East – a policy in which the threat or actual use of force played a relevant role.

Priscila Scoville's egyptological approach complements that of Fábio Frizzo, first, by providing an introduction to historically significant details surrounding the Amarna archive and, second, by focusing on the relationship between Egypt and Mitanni, another great power of the system. While Frizzo focuses more on certain sub-units of the Egyptian government, breaking down the black box in order to show the bureaucratic politics behind Egypt's foreign policy, Scoville's attention falls more upon what went on *between* Egypt and Mitanni. Instead of dealing primarily with the threat or actual use of force by the Egyptians, Scoville treated textual evidence from the Amarna archive pertaining to protocol-related issues and the meaning attached to the exchange of gifts, drawing on cognate fields such as anthropology and literary criticism.

Frizzo's and Scoville's contributions are complemented in this forum by the work of Rodrigo Corrêa Teixeira and Marina Scotelaro. The authors combine political geography and IR theory with the political economy and economic anthropology of Karl Polanyi (2012). Teixeira and Scotelaro interact closely with some of the material on gift exchange emphasized by Scoville, but place that discussion within a wider argument that takes Polanyi's 'substantive economic history' as a starting point. As a result, they frame the practice of gift exchange in the Amarna system as a kind of trade embedded in a pre-capitalist economic system. The link between the disciplines of geography, economic history and IR theory remains underexplored in IR, apart, perhaps, from the work done by Immanuel Wallerstein and world-systems theorists (e.g. GUNDER FRANK, 1993). For this reason, the contributions of Frizzo, Scoville, Teixeira and Scotelaro in this forum are welcome additions to the interdisciplinary literature in IR that is open to such explorations.

IR theorist John J. Mearsheimer (2002) once gave an interview in which he advised young scholars in the field "to make sure that you expose yourself to lots of theories and to lots of history". This forum is our contribution to the literature on how to make better use of history in IR, a discipline that tends to ignore historical aspects in its strife to theorize general patterns of human behavior and interaction. In our view, the neglect of history leads to poor IR theorizing. Both history and IR theory aim to study "what man can do", to use R. G. Collingwood's well-known quote (1946, p. 10). Both aim at "human self-knowledge". However, history must go together with theory, as "the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is".

References

- COHEN, R. e WESTBROOK, R. (ed.) **Amarna Diplomacy: The Beginnings of International Relations**. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- COLLINGWOOD, R. G. **The Idea of History**. Oxford: Clarendon, 1946.

- GORDON, C. The new Amarna tablets, **Orientalia**, v. 16, n. 1, pp. 1-21, 1947.
- GUNDER FRANK, A. *et al.* Bronze Age World System Cycles, **Current Anthropology**, v. 34, n. 4, pp. 383-429, 1993.
- FREIRE, L. G. Foreign relations in the ancient Near East: oaths, curses, kingship and prophecy, **Journal for Semitics**, v. 26, n. 2, pp. 663-687, 2017.
- FREIRE, L. G. Covenant and international relations in the ancient Near East: A preliminary exploration. **Antiguo Oriente**, n. 11, p. 129-154, 2013.
- MEARSHEIMER, J. J. **Through the Realist Lens: Conversations with History**. Interview with Harry Kreisler. April 8, 2002. <Available at: <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people2/Mearsheimer/mearsheimer-con0.html>> Access in: 03. Jul.2018.
- MORAN, W. L. **The Amarna Letters**. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- POLANYI, K. **A Subsistência do Homem e Ensaios Correlatos**. Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto, 2012.
- RAINEY, A. F. (ed.) **The El-Amarna Correspondence: A New Edition of the Cuneiform Letters from the Site of El-Amarna Based on Collations of All the Extant Tablets**. Leiden, Brill, 2 vol., 2015.
- SAYCE, A. H. The discovery of the Tel El-Amarna tablets, **The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures**, v. 33, n. 2, pp. 89-90, 1917.