

## Amarna Letter no. 255 as Diplomatic Correspondence: A New Interpretation

*Krzysztof J. Baranowski* – University of Toronto, Canada  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9311-73012>

[The article proposes a new translation of lines 8-14 of Amarna letter no. 255. The letter is a diplomatic protest by Mut-Baḥlu, the local ruler of Pella, against the pharaoh's command that he relinquish his control over the local traffic of caravans. Mut-Baḥlu argues that to control the caravans is his hereditary right. Such an argument is well attested in the Amarna correspondence between the great powers. Its use in a vassal's letter is a crafty attempt to exploit the diplomatic conventions of the Late Bronze Age.]

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### 1. *The Amarna Diplomatic Correspondence and Amarna Letter no. 255*

The Amarna letters (*EA*) are commonly held as the prime example of ancient Near Eastern diplomatic correspondence. This characterization of them is largely, if not exclusively, due to the content and style of the letters between the great powers of the Late Bronze Age: Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Hatti and Mitanni. It is the letters of the great powers that attest to diplomatic codes and conventions, movement of messengers and reliance on political and legal concepts such as commitment, credibility and precedents (Jönsson 2000). Moreover, their authors, conscious of the cultural conventions, employ cunning rhetorical strategies to send hidden messages, as is accepted in the diplomatic practice (Westbrook 2000). A different picture emerges from the letters sent by the Canaanite kinglets. These letters typically contain assurances that the Canaanite vassals execute obediently the pharaoh's instructions and that they need desperately the Egyptian military support. Seen in this light, Amarna letter no. 255 from Mut-Baḥlu, the ruler of Piḥilu (Pella in Transjordan), is quite exceptional because he tries to negotiate his rights to control the international caravan route that passes through his territory.

### 2. *The Text of the Letter and Problems of Interpretation*

The tablet is relatively well preserved; only few words must be restored. Based on the available hand copies and Knudtzon's transliteration, the text of the letter can be established as follows:<sup>1</sup>

1. The copies are found in Winkler 1889, no. 144 and Schroeder 1915, no. 146. For transliteration and textual notes see Knudtzon 1915, 812-814 and Moran 1992, 308.

<sup>1</sup>*a-na LUGAL-ri EN-[ia]*  
<sup>ù</sup><sup>d</sup>*UTU-ia qí-bí-[ma]*  
*um-ma* <sup>m</sup>*mu-ut-ba-ah-l[um]*  
<sup>ÌR-ka SAĤAR ša 2 ĠÌR.MEŠ-[ka]</sup>  
<sup>5</sup>*ti-du ka-bá-ši-ka*  
*a-na ĠÌR.MEŠ LUGAL-ri EN-ia*  
<sup>7-šu 7-ta-a-an am-qut</sup>  
*LUGAL EN-li ša-pár a-na mu-ḥi-[i]a* <sup>m</sup>*ḥa-a-ia*  
*a-na qa-bi KASKAL-ra-ni.ĤI.A*  
<sup>10kur</sup>*ḥa-na-gal<sub>9</sub>-bat an-nu-ú*  
<sup>ú-wa-še-ru-na ù uš-še-ru-ši</sup>  
<sup>mi-ia-ti a-na-ku ù la-a</sup>  
<sup>ú-wa-še-ru KASKAL-ra-ni.ĤI.A</sup>  
*LUGAL-ri EN-ia a-mur*  
<sup>15</sup><sup>m</sup>*[la-ab]-a-ia a-bi-ia*  
<sup>[ur-ru-du] LUGAL-ra EN-šu</sup>  
<sup>[ù šu-tú] yu-wa-še-ru</sup>  
<sup>[ka-li KASKAL]-ra-ni.ĤI.A</sup>  
<sup>[ša yu]-wa-še-ru</sup>  
<sup>20</sup>*a-na* <sup>kur</sup>*ḥa-na-gal<sub>9</sub>-bat*  
<sup>a-na</sup> <sup>kur</sup>*ka-ra-du-ni-ia-aš*  
<sup>li-wa-še-ra LUGAL-ru</sup>  
<sup>EN-ia KASKAL-ra-na.ĤI.A</sup>  
<sup>a-na-ku ub-ba-lu-ši</sup>  
<sup>25</sup>*ki-ma ma-diš na-aš-ra-at*

Moran proposed the following translation of this letter:

Say [t]o the king, [my] lord and my Sun: Thus Mut-Baḥl[u], your servant, the dirt at your feet, the mire you tread on. I fall at the feet of the king, my lord, 7 times and 7 times. **8–11** The king, my lord, sent Ḥaaya to me to say, “A caravan to Ḥanagalbat is this (man) to send on, and (all of you) send it on!” **12–21** Who am I that I would not send on a caravan of the king, my lord, seeing that [La]b’ayu, my father, [used to ser]ve the king, his lord, [and] he [himself] used to send on [all the carav]ans [that] the king [would se]nd to Ḥanagalbat. **21–25** Let the king, my lord, send a caravan even to Karaduniyaš. I will personally conduct it under very heavy guard (Moran 1992, 308).

A closer look at the content of the letter in this translation raises some questions. If it is Ḥaaya who is charged with sending on the caravan, why are other individuals also commanded with sending it? Why is the faithful service of the author’s father, Lab’ayu, relevant to the present situation? And most importantly, if the author is so eager to help with sending pharaoh’s caravan on, why does he send this letter at all? Problems with understanding the contents of the letter as translated by Moran indicate the need for a fresh translation. Comparison with other translations shows that the main problems concern the syntax of lines 8-11 and the meaning of the verb *wuššuru*.

### 3. Translations of Lines 8-11

In the first authoritative translation of the Amarna letters, Knudtzon rendered EA 255:8-11 in the following manner:

Der König, mein Herr, hat Hâia zu [mi]r geschickt,  
um zu sagen: “Karawanen  
nach Hanakalbat hat man, siehe,  
abgesandt; so sendet sie denn (weiter)!” (Knudtzon 1915, 815).

A half century later, Campbell opted for a similar translation:

The king, my lord, has sent to me Haya to say: “Caravans of the land of Hanagalbat, behold they were sent. So send them on!” (Campbell 1965, 205).

Rainey, in his review of Moran’s French translation of the letters, understood the passage quite differently:

The king, my lord, sent me to Haya to say ‘Hanigalbat caravans, behold I am sending, so expedite them (it)!’ (Rainey 1989-1990, 69).

Moran was not persuaded by Rainey’s parsing and in the English edition of his work maintained an awkward translation in which he used explicative parentheses:

The king, my lord, sent Haaya to me to say, “A caravan to Hanagalbat is this (man) to send on, and (all of you) send it on!” (Moran 1992, 308).

Liverani’s translation is again different:

Il re mio signore mi ha spedito Haya per dire: “Hanno mandato questa carovana di (= diretta a) Hanigalbat, lasciala passare!” (Liverani 1998, 124).

Cochavi-Rainey’s translation follows the earlier rendition by Rainey:

המלך אדוני שליח א[ל] את חַיָּה לְאִמּוֹר: “רֵאָה, אֲנִי שׁוֹלַח שִׁירָה לְחַנְגַּלְבַּת, וְ(כּוֹלְכֶם) הֶעֱבִירוּ אוֹתָהּ הַלְאֵה!”  
(Cochavi-Rainey 2005, 205)

Perusal of the proposed translations shows that their authors parse the verb *ú-wa-še-ru-na* (line 11) in three different ways as: 1st pers. sing. (Rainey, Cochavi-Rainey), 3rd pers. sing. (Moran), and 3rd pers. pl. used impersonally (Knudtzon, Campbell, Liverani). All the scholars understand the verb *uš-še-ru-ši* (line 11) as the imperative plural but Liverani who translates it in the singular. The function of *an-nu-ú* (line 10) is another source of disagreement: most translators take it as an exclamatory presentation particle “behold”; for Moran this is a demonstrative pronoun and the subject of the verb *ú-wa-še-ru-na* while for Liverani a demonstrative adjective that refers to KASKAL-*ra-ni*.*ḪI.A*<sup>kur</sup> *ḫa-na-gal<sub>9</sub>-bat*. Although the verbs *ú-wa-še-ru-na* and *uš-še-ru-ši* derive from the same lexeme *wuššuru*, all translators feel compelled to assign to it two different meanings: to send and to send on, that is, to expedite further on. Obviously, all these proposals testify to the difficulty of the passage and call for its re-investigation.

#### 4. The Forms in Lines 8-11

The verb *ú-wa-še-ru-na* must be parsed as the 1st pers. sing. of the imperfective conjugation *yaqtulu* with the energetic ending *-na*. It cannot be the 3rd pers. sing. masc., as Moran wishes, because the prefix is

written with the sign *ú* and not with the sing PI, used to indicate the initial glide of the 3 pers. ms in the prefix conjugation. Such a writing of the 3 ms prefix occurs several lines later in our letter (*yu-wa-še-ru*, EA 255:17) and also a few times in the Amarna letters from Byblos (*yu-wa-ši-ru-na*, EA 71:13, 112:19, 116:31). It is unlikely that the verb *ú-wa-še-ru-na* is the 3rd pers. masc. pl. because with few exceptions this form of the prefix conjugation in the Amarna letters has the preformative *t-*, as it can be seen in the form *tu-wa-ši-ru-na* (EA 125:44).

The verb *uš-še-ru-ši* is most easily parsed as the imperative pl. with the 3 pers. fem. suffixed pronoun. Such a parsing is very probable in the light of *uš-ši-ra*, the frequent form of the imperative sing. with the fossilized ventive (for example, EA 84:44, 90:60, 132:12, 180:10). However, taking this form as the imperative pl. leaves us with an unexpected switch to the 2 pers. pl. which has no antecedent in the letter. Hence, I propose that the form *uš-še-ru-ši* should be parsed as the 1st pers. sing. of the imperfective *yaqtulu* conjugation. Such a parsing is admittedly difficult but is supported by the form *uš-ši-ru-na-ši* (EA 143:16) which is certainly to be understood as the 1st pers. sing. *yaqtulu* with the energetic ending *-na* and the suffixed pronoun of the 3 pers. fem. sing. *-ši*. Taking *uš-še-ru-ši* as the 1st pers. sing. of *yaqtulu* seems to be contradicted by the preceding word *ú-wa-še-ru-na*, which also is to be parsed as the 1st pers. sing. of *yaqtulu* of the same verb *wuššuru*. Nonetheless, the occurrence of the same grammatical form derived from two different bases in the same letter conforms to the scribal practice in the letters from Canaan. For example, in EA 142:12 the 1st pers. *yaqtulu* of the verb *našāru* appears as *uš-šú-ru* while four lines later, in EA 142:16, the same form of the same verb is derived from a different Akkadian basis and is written *i-na-ša-ru-šu*. In a similar manner, in EA 148, the Precative of *nadānu* is derived from two different Akkadian forms: three times it is written *li-it-ta-din* (lines 9, 13 and 26), once *li-id-di-din* (line 11) and another time *li-id-din* (line 30). In light of these examples, it is conceivable that the scribe of EA 255 wrote the same verb once as *ú-wa-še-ru-na* and once as *uš-še-ru-ši* but still meant the same grammatical form.

The word *an-nu-ú* in line 10 is hardly to be taken as a demonstrative adjective referring back to KASKAL-*ra-ni*.𐎠𐎢𐎩.A<sup>kur</sup>𐎧𐎠𐎢𐎩-*gal*-bat because of the gender discrepancy. Indeed, the syntagm KASKAL-*ra-ni*.𐎠𐎢𐎩.A<sup>kur</sup>𐎧𐎠𐎢𐎩-*gal*-bat may not be plural but it must be considered as feminine because it is referred to with the fem. sing. suffix *-ši* in line 11. Moran's parsing of *an-nu-ú* as nom. masc. sing. demonstrative pronoun depends on his erroneous identification of *ú-wa-še-ru-na* as the 3 pers. masc. sing. and therefore must be rejected. The only remaining option is to understand *an-nu-ú* as an exclamatory deictic particle "behold" (Rainey 1996, vol. 4, 156). This parsing must be chosen in spite of Moran's valid objection that the deictic *an-nu-ú* occurs at the beginning of the clause (Moran 1992, 308).

##### 5. Meaning of Lines 8-14

In line 22 the verb *wuššuru* occurs with its typical meaning "to send," that is, "to dispatch," "to cause to go" or "to be taken from one place or person to another" (Rainey 1996, vol. 2, 158-159). This meaning does not fit other occurrences *wuššuru* in EA 255 because none of the individuals who are its subjects could organize international caravans from Egypt to Ḫanagalbat and Babylonia. It seems that Liverani's proposal concerning the meaning of this verb is correct. He believes that *wuššuru* is used here as a technical commercial term meaning "to expedite," "to send on" (Liverani 1998, 124).<sup>2</sup> The correctness of this interpretation is confirmed by another verb with which the author of the letter describes his role in the entire caravan affair. In line 24, using the verb *wabālu* ("to carry"), he promises to take special care of the

2. In Mari, this verb is used in reference to the command of releasing or letting pass a boat on Euphrates, once the duty is paid. See Burke 1964, 68, 94-95.

pharaoh's caravan in order to facilitate its passage. It seems reasonable that the same action of sending on or bringing the caravan through is meant by the verb *wuššuru* in lines 11, 13, 17 and 19. Needless to say, sending the caravan on is not just a courtesy but it implies control over it and is an expression of sovereignty of the entity who agrees to the passage of the caravan through his own territory. This specific meaning of *wuššuru* "send on" is implied throughout the letter and is necessary for its correct understanding.

The verb *ú-wa-še-ru-na* is part of a quotation attributed to Ḫaaya; therefore he is its subject. The next verb, *uš-še-ru-ši*, is coordinated with the preceding and thus it can be taken as the continuation of Ḫaaya's direct speech. The attribution of both *ú-wa-še-ru-na* and *uš-še-ru-ši* to the same person is certainly possible and can be explained as a rhetorically motivated repetition of the same verb. Such a repetition, however, does not advance the author's discourse but merely reports the words of the command. Therefore, it is plausible that Ḫaaya's direct speech is limited to one word (*ú-wa-še-ru-na*) and that *uš-še-ru-ši* belongs already to the author of the letter. The change of the subject of the verbs creates a rhetorical contrast between the pharaoh's command and the author's will, both expressed in the 1st pers., and implies the adversative translation of the conjunction *u* as "but."

As for the tense-mood-aspect value of the *yaqtulu*s in lines 11 (*ú-wa-še-ru-na* and *uš-še-ru-ši*) and 13 (*ú-wa-še-ru*), the context suggests their present-future reference with a modal nuance that is determined on the basis of pragmatics. They refer to a present-future action of the speakers who place themselves in a position of authority. This position allows the speakers (Ḫaaya and Mut-Baḫlu) not only to make simple predictions about the future, but to present their actions as obligatory. This use of *yaqtulu* is comparable to the use of the future in English in the following sentence uttered by a person of higher status (e. g. a manager) to a subordinate (e. g. an employee): "You are going to come to my office and explain your actions." Although the verbs in this sentence refer to a future action, the pragmatic context of the utterance dictates their modal interpretation. In other words, this utterance expresses not a simple prediction of somebody's action but an obligation. Hence, this sentence is pragmatically equivalent of the request "You should/must come to my office and explain your actions." The *yaqtulu* forms in lines 11 and 13 should be interpreted in a similar manner as a pragmatic assertion of a right or a request.<sup>3</sup>

To sum up, the following elements should be taken into consideration in translating lines 8-14: 1. all the verbs of the prefix conjugation are 1st pers. sing. *yaqtulu* with a modal nuance; 2. the lexical meaning of all *yaqtulu*s is "to send on;" 3. the reported speech of Ḫaaya ends with the verb *ú-wa-še-ru-na*; 4. *an-nu-ú* must be interpreted as an exclamatory deictic particle "behold." These considerations determine the following translation of lines 8-14:

<p><sup>8</sup>LUGAL EN-li ša-pár a-na mu-ḫi-[i]a mḫa-a-ia  <sup>9</sup>a-na qa-bi KASKAL-ra-ni.ḪI.A  <sup>10kur</sup>ḫa-na-gal<sub>7</sub>-bat an-nu-ú  <sup>11</sup>ú-wa-še-ru-na ù uš-še-ru-ši  <sup>12</sup>mi-ia-ti a-na-ku ù la-a  <sup>13</sup>ú-wa-še-ru KASKAL-ra-ni.ḪI.A  <sup>14</sup>LUGAL-ri EN-ia a-mur</p>	<p>The king, my lord, sent to me Ḫaaya to say: "Behold, I should send on the caravans to Ḫanagalbat!" But I should send it on! Who am I that I should not send on the caravans of the king, my lord?</p>
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3. This cursory explanation cannot substitute for a full-fledged linguistic analysis of the modal uses of *yaqtulu* in the Amarna letters from Canaan which is still lacking. For now, one must accept Moran's over sixty years old assertion that "as in Arabic, and like Heb. *yiqṭōl*, *yaqtulu(na)* is often used where an accurate translation would seem to call for the expression of certain modal nuances such as "should," "can," etc. [...] However, these modalities are not of the nature of the form *yaqtulu(na)*, and were left unexpressed, though perhaps implied, where our own idiom is more explicit" (Moran 2003, 47).

Interpreting the verb “to send on” with its specific meaning that implies control over sending goods and their transportation, the argumentative logic of this passage becomes obvious. The pharaoh sends Ḥaaya with the command to take control over the local movement of international caravans. The pharaoh’s request provokes a strong reaction of Mut-Baḥlu who asserts his own rights. The protest of the Canaanite kinglet is redacted with rhetorical skillfulness. First, the author contradicts the Egyptian official’s word with a positive statement which directly challenges the pharaoh’s command and his superior position because it is formulated in the same 1 pers. sing. like the received command. Next, the author asks a rhetorical question which obviously requires a positive answer. The interpretation of the passage as the challenge to the pharaoh’s command allows a logical interpretation of the entire letter which fits the historical context of the Amarna letters from Pella.

#### 6. The Content of EA 255 in Its Historical Context

The new understanding of the crucial lines 8-14 allows a fresh translation of the letter which shows a clear line of argumentation. The following table contains the new translation of the letter and a description of its train of thought.

<sup>1</sup> Tell to the king, my Sun: Thus Mut-Baḥlu, your servant, the dust at your feet, the clay you tread on.	The epistolary address.
<sup>6</sup> I fall at the feet of the king, my lord, seven times and seven times.	The formula of obeisance.
<sup>8</sup> The king, my lord, sent to me Ḥaaya to say: “Behold, I should send on the caravans to Ḥanagalbat!”	The report of the pharaoh’s words who commands that Ḥaaya should control the caravan traffic.
<sup>11</sup> But I should send it on! Who am I that I should not send on the caravans of the king, my lord?	The protest of the author of the letter who asserts his right to control the caravans that pass though his territory.
<sup>14</sup> Look, my father, Lab’ayu [used to serve] the king my lord and [it was him who] used to send on all the caravans that the king would send to Ḥanagalbat, to Karduniyaš.	The author argues that the right to control the caravans is hereditary and belongs to him because of the faithful service of his father.
<sup>22</sup> Let the king, my lord, send caravans, and I myself will bring it through carefully guarded.	The author advertises his service as personal and reliable.

The historical context of this letter is given by the regional role of Pella, the city under author’s governorship, as a gateway community which facilitated the exchange of raw materials and commodities between local centers such as Beth-Shean, Megiddo and Ta’anach as well as other gateway cities (Akko, Ugarit, Gaza) and participated in long distance trade with Anatolia, Mesopotamia and Egypt (Knapp 1993, 85-90). The Egyptian interest was to assure that the city managed the local trade and facilitated a secure and speedy passage of the international caravans by providing hospitality and regional stability. Now, it seems that the Egyptians lost trust in Mut-Baḥlu because he was the son of Lab’ayu, responsible for igniting an inter-city conflict well known from the Amarna letters (EA 244, 246) and because he cooperated with his brothers and allies in Shechem, Gezer and Gath-Carmel in order to dominate a trade route from the Philistine coast to Damascus. Moreover, he was in contact with the rebel Ayyab and hence could be suspected of participation in preparations for an uprising (Knapp 1993, 47-48). Finally, it seems that Mut-Baḥlu also tried to gain more independence from Egypt by organizing his own trade enterprise with Babylonia (Artzi 1995). Mut-Baḥlu’s efforts did not go unnoticed by the pharaoh who charged

Ḫaya, his local representative, with restoring the Egyptian control over the local caravan movement.<sup>4</sup> *EA* 255 originated as a challenge to the imposition of this new regime. Since the analysis of the clay indicates that this letter was redacted in the Egyptian administrative center in Beth-Shean rather than in Mut-Baḫlu's native Pella (Goren, Finkelstein, and Na'aman 2004, 261), it must be concluded that he appeared there for instructions and a local scribe was responsible for this rhetorically sophisticated piece of correspondence. It is also reasonable to assume that the scribe in the Egyptian administrative center had to be better educated than his colleague in Transjordan. If so, the rhetorical load of this letter fits the circumstances of its composition by a skilful and well prepared scribe in Beth-Shean.

### 7. *EA 255 as a Diplomatic Letter*

The diplomatic character of *EA* 255 in the new translation is apparent. Unlike many other Amarna letters from Canaan, which document vassals' pleas and their subordinate position, *EA* 255 is the kinglet's attempt to negotiate with the pharaoh as an equal. After the customary greeting and expressions of obeisance, the author openly challenges the pharaoh's directive. The argument which he uses is very frequently attested in the correspondence of the Great Powers: the *status quo* should be preserved; the pharaoh should behave with the author in the same manner in which he used to behave with his father. For example, in *EA* 9, 6-18, Burna-Buriyaš of Babylon, writing to the pharaoh about the gifts, argues that he should be treated as his father was treated:

From the time my ancestors and your ancestors made a mutual declaration of friendship, they sen[t] beautiful greeting-gifts to each other, and refused no request for anything beautiful. My brother has now sent me 2 minas of gold as my greeting-gift. Now, ḫf gold is plentiful, send me as much as your ancestors (sent), but if it is scarce, send me half of what your ancestors (sent). Why have you sent me 2 minas of gold? At the moment my work on a temple is extensive, and I am quite busy with carrying it out. Send me much gold. And you for your part, whatever you want from my country, write me so that it may be taken to you (Moran 1992, 18).

Similarly, in *EA* 19, 9-16, Tušratta of Mittani requests from the gods that friendly relations with Egypt continue in the same manner of the past:

As far back as the time of your ancestors, they always showed love to my ancestors. You yourself went even further and showed very great love to my father. Now, in keeping with our constant and mutual love, you have made it ten times greater than the love shown my father. May the gods grant it, and may Teššup, my lord, and Aman make *flour[ish]* for evermore, just as it is now, this mutual love of ours (Moran 1992, 43).<sup>5</sup>

The use of the common diplomatic *topos* characteristic to the correspondence between equals but made by a vassal surely did not go unnoticed by the Egyptian court. One may, however, doubt if it was effective. In all probability, in spite of Mut-Baḫlu's rhetorical skilfulness, the entire affair ended with him losing control over the movement of caravans to the benefit of the Egyptian commissioner.

4. The Amarna letters mention several individuals named Ḫaya or Ḫaya. *EA* 71 seems to be addressed to Amenophis (nicknamed *Ḫwi*, the Egyptian source of *Ḫaya*), the vizier of Lower Egypt. Another Ḫaya was assigned to Byblos and Sumur toward the end of Amenophis III's reign (*EA* 101:1-2, 109:62-63, 122:42,48). It is impossible to tell if he was the same Ḫaya of *EA* 255:8-11, who also dealt with Abdi-Ḫepa and the sons of Lab'ayu at the beginning of Akhenaten's reign (*EA* 268:15-20 and 289:30-33). See Redford 1990, 12.

5. For other examples of the same kind of argumentation used in the international correspondence see *EA* 3, 6, 8, 16, 17, 27, 29, 51.

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