

On the Old Assyrian Letter Heading

Playing with Social Hierarchy for Rhetorical Effect



Matthias Adelhofer

University of Vienna*

ABSTRACT:

Among Old Assyrian merchants, the epistolary form of address follows a strict pattern that directly reflects social hierarchy. Social standing dictates who is named first among the letter authors and the addressees. In rare occasions, this pattern is reversed. This paper investigates the effects to which this purposeful rhetorical play is used.

KEYWORDS:

Old Assyrian, letter, epistolography, address, social hierarchy, rhetoric

The letter heading that comprises the address denoting author(s) and addressee(s) displays an impressively high degree of formularisation — especially in terms of vocabulary — throughout the millennia in ancient Mesopotamian epistolography.¹ The Akkadian version ‘*ana X qibīma umma Y(-ma)*’ (“Speak to X! Y [says] the following.”) was already fully developed in the Old Assyrian (OA) city-state at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. Among the Old Assyrians, the sequence of addressee section ‘*ana PN qibīma*’ and author section ‘*umma PN*’ reflects the principal persons’ social hierarchy: whoever enjoys superiority is named first, and in case of multiple addressees and/or authors, the standing of the single most important person decides the overall sequence. The individuals within the respective groups are arranged likewise.² Seniority seems to have been the most pertinent value. This usage of the letter address is worthy of mention not only for its importance for OA social history, but also for its uniqueness among most other epistolographic practices in Mesopotamia; compare e.g. the Old Babylonian address that always starts with the addressee.³

* This study was carried out while working on the author’s Ph.D. thesis on Old Assyrian epistolography at the University of Vienna, supervised by Michael Jursa and Cécile Michel.

1 For earlier times and the standardisation of the general formula by the Ur III period, cf. Sollberger 1966: 2–5 and Michalowski 2011: 31–32.

2 Naming entire groups of people in the address occurs commonly in OA letters, while it is equally often clear from the letters’ contents that only one of those persons is the actual author who might be speaking directly to only one of the addressees, not necessarily the ones mentioned first in the address. Cf., e.g., Michel 2008b: 126.

3 Cf. Sallaberger 1999: 22.



While this general principle has long been recognised⁴ and has recently been fruitfully elaborated upon,⁵ some aspects of this practice have escaped scholarly scrutiny. The neat pattern, as described above, is at certain times breached and not strictly adhered to. Oftentimes we can discern the relative position of individuals within OA society and perhaps even anticipate the structure of the letter heading they would choose. Yet in specific situations, we find the sequence of the same individuals switched, their hierarchy inverted. Letter authors only ever invert the address in order to ascribe themselves a lower ranking than normally, and only as the severity of their issues increases unbearably. We clearly see this of course only in those instances in which we possess continuous correspondences.⁶ Furthermore, we would assume that it is only possible in circumstances under which the correspondents' social proximity allows for it.⁷

Certain, mostly philological reservations need to be addressed for our analysis: first, the high degree of homonymity in the OA onomasticon necessarily entails some uncertainty regarding the identification of individuals, especially when dealing with letters. Second, there is also the possibility of different scribal hands which composed individual letters of one continuous correspondence and which might have perceived the author's place in society differently — even despite the widespread literacy among OA merchants that often suggests that writer and author are the same person.⁸ However, these arguments would be all too easy a pretext to rule out those instances of variation, especially in examples for which rather clear social and/or archival contexts exist. The demonstrable deliberateness of writers of OA letters further argues against attempts at discounting the variability of the letter address as merely arbitrary.

Furthermore, in order to give a quick idea about the pertinent differences between our sample texts, we will try to roughly characterise them by assigning them to one of two groups: requests vs. injunctions. For our purposes, requests are direct in tone and can often offer sound economic arguments (e.g. *quid pro quo*) that are also in the immediate interest of the addressees, whereas injunctions engage in more elabo-

4 J. Lewy (1926: 61 fn. *) noticed this already in the 1920s, some 40 years after the first tablets from Kültepe came to light. H. Hirsch (1981) elucidated the reasoning behind the changeable address structure, and C. Michel (1991: 70–71) aptly applied this knowledge in her reconstruction of the Innaya archives.

5 A. Anderson (2017) scrutinised this phenomenon in order to build social hierarchies and at the same time verify it through a strong quantitative approach through the perspective of Social Network Analysis in his dissertation.

6 Of course, we also have letters dealing with events unique to and detached from the rest of the correspondence with any one addressee that nonetheless swerve from the typical pattern. In our attempts at systematisation, we need to bear in mind that we find in the letters organic conversations that cannot for the most part have been premeditated and cannot as a whole be submitted to a uniform rhetorical scheme.

7 The question as to the margin within which the Old Assyrians could engage in such hierarchical games has a certain allure to it, and perhaps with A. Anderson's (2017) data it may even be approachable.

8 The first to articulate the particularity of Old Assyrian literacy was probably M. Larsen (1989: 132–136), with C. Michel (2008a) elaborating profusely on the topic.

rate convincing mostly by (implicitly) referring to social bonds (in that one affiliated trader should help the other even without immediate personal gain) and have for the most part an air of urgency about them.



Our first and most clear-cut example consists of a continuous conversation in three letters sent by Šimat-Suen to her brother Ušur-ša-Ištar.⁹ It concerns the death of the siblings' elder sister, Akatiya, and Šimat-Suen's wish for her brother to come and sort out the economic aftermath. However, Ušur-ša-Ištar seems to largely ignore her letters and remains inactive.¹⁰

Kt n/k 650 (translation Michel 2020, no. 272)¹¹ — request

umma Šimat-Suen-ma ana Ušur-ša-Ištar qibīma

For the instructions concerning the house of your father that you have been repeatedly sending me, why do you not come here and put in order the house of your father? When you heard the tablet, (you should have) gotten ready and come here. You did not come here and did not put in order your father's house! (Now) your father's house is being ruined! Your sister has passed away! And as for me, he gives us an abundance of (misfortunes), while you, they dream about you! If you are my brother, get ready and come, seize the foot of Aššur, your lord, and save your life! And put your father's house in order, lest it be ruined.

Kt n/k 584 (translation Michel 2020, no. 273)¹² — request/report

umma Šimat-Suen-ma ana Ušur-ša-Ištar qibīma

As for the house of Lila, the 3 minas of silver for which your guarantor Puzur-ilī, son of Ušur-ša-Ištar, had been recorded, when your sister was still alive, she paid

9 For Ušur-ša-Ištar's broader background in the Anatolian copper trade, see Dercksen 1996: 140–147.

10 Judging from the content of the letters, we would agree with C. Michel (2020: 397–410) in ordering the texts in the given way. In the first letter, Šimat-Suen refers to previous ones sent by her brother, which he must have started to issue as soon as he had heard about his other sister's death. In the second one, she reports on various problems which have arisen, also mentioning Ušur-ša-Ištar's daughter whom she will now have to care for. In any case, it seems clear that Ušur-ša-Ištar had not complied with Šimat-Suen's request to come to her. In the third letter, Šimat-Suen can no longer cope with having to deal alone with the fallout of Akatiya's death and writes a letter expressing just that. Might Ušur-ša-Ištar's daughter be behind the inept young woman (*šuhartum*) who is left in charge of the household in this last letter? If so, the chronology of the correspondence would be evident, otherwise the second and third letter should perhaps be switched. In the latter case, Kt n/k 584 would have been written after some sort of resolution with Ušur-ša-Ištar had been reached after Šimat-Suen's more desperate letter (Kt n/k 713). This course of events would then be similar to the situation observed in the "Asqūdum-affair," introduced as our last example below, in which the correspondence between the king and Pūšu-kēn continues after the first and most pressing issue had been resolved.

11 First published in Çeçen — Gökçek 2017.

12 First published in Bilgiç — Bayram 1995, no. 31.



back the interest. After your sister's death, Iddin-Aššur gave the Lady 10 minas of copper from the wages of Sirabi. And as for me, two or three times I called upon Puzur-ili to demand payment, and I have cleared him from obligations. Today the Lady has saved me, but she keeps coming in order to seal the house!

Urgent! Send the silver, so that they pay the Lady, and she will not break up the household. You are my brother, send the silver of Ia-šar, as much as you had me pay, so that I can store barley (and) wheat for our food. The season is there!

Your daughter has learned a lesson from her aunt: she left her nothing! The toggle pin that you sent her is here, it has been deposited with me. I will personally clothe her and cover her, and she always will go with me. You should not be anxious about her. I will take care of her.

Kt n/k 713 (translation Michel 2020, no. 274)¹³ — injunction

ana Ušur-ša-Ištar qibīma umma Šimat-Suen-ma

For how long will you not come, and for how long will I suffer on account of the house and the furniture? Why don't you come and put in order the house of your father? How long will I have to keep in order your father's house? Indeed, you left a young woman in charge of the feeding of a large household! As for me, I suffer from that young woman! Truly, your sister is dead and I sent you a letter several times. Your instructions never came back to me. Urgent! When you will hear my tablet, set out and come here!

At the beginning of the affair Šimat-Suen vents her indignation and asserts that their "father's house is being ruined," which is a rather typical statement in this context.¹⁴ At the same time, she is confronting her brother with the valid economic considerations commonplace when members of the OA trade pass away, such that her brother should come himself to conclude the matter.¹⁵ In the second letter, she retains a somewhat aloof air of factuality in complaining to Ušur-ša-Ištar about various points of business. Only in the third letter does her personal distress become explicit, rather than simple concern for the paternal household and business. Šimat-Suen accuses her brother of neglect of the family's household with emphasis on her own suffering, showering him with reproachful rhetorical questions.¹⁶ Thus, Šimat-Suen mentions herself in the address of this final letter only after Ušur-ša-Ištar, thereby ceding the position of slight superiority she claimed in her other letters. We would, therefore, suggest that she does this in order to underline the gravity of the situation and her own chagrin which causes her to disregard her own pride, while in the previous two

¹³ First published in Çeçen — Gökçek 2017.

¹⁴ See, e.g., AKT 6 232, 14–18, where Ennam-Aššur uses the same phrase in the context of his father Šalim-Aššur's death: "Do not act rashly there, I must not be delayed here for long and my father's house must not be ruined!"

¹⁵ For a synopsis of the economic aftermath of OA merchants' deaths, see Veenhof 2008: 100–101.

¹⁶ The rhetorical question is a popular means to express indignation and perhaps sarcasm, as will be demonstrated in our Ph.D. thesis.

letters, assured by the customary expediency of her requests, she does not need to stoop, but rather asserts the appropriateness of her writing.

At this point, it needs to be acknowledged that these three tablets were not all written by Šimat-Suen herself, nor even by one and the same person. As C. Michel already points out in her commentary, in Kt n/k 713 the sign LA₁ is (uncommonly for OA) consistently used instead of LA₂, which is found in the other two tablets. It is also clearly visible from the hand-writing that the scribe of Kt n/k 713 is different from that of Kt n/k 584 and Kt n/k 650.¹⁷ We were, however, not able to unequivocally decide whether the latter two were written by the same hand or not. Since, as relates to our main focus, Kt n/k 713 is also the one that differs in address, one may object that it could have been the different writer who simply did not deem it proper to rank the younger sister above her elder brother. Yet we do not believe that a writer would have acted in this way, entirely on their own initiative. We stress again the deliberateness in the choice of the exact form of the letter address, which will be clear by the end of this paper.

The next set of examples consists of two letters, not directly connected, that are exchanged between Aššur-mūtappil and Puzur-Aššur, who had already been a business partner of the former's father, Pūšu-kēn, hence superior in rank to Aššur-mūtappil.¹⁸

TC 3 19 (translation by the author) — request

umma Puzur-Aššur-*ma ana* Aššur-mūtappil *qibīma*

Since, here, Kuzizia paid me with silver of his working capital for the textiles of Kulziaz which Kuzizia entrusted to you in the City, release, there, the garments to Kuzizia's representatives!

TC 3 18 (translation Michel, 2001, no. 125) — report

ana Aššur-mūtappil *qibīma umma* Puzur-Aššur

Asānum m'a confié 28 étoffes de bonne qualité, 1 talent 28 mines d'étain au sceau de tes représentants, 2 ânes noirs et leur équipement. Šamaš-bāni m'a confié 47 mines d'étain scellé et en outre 4 mines d'étain provenant d'Asīya, 12 étoffes-*kutānum* d'excellente qualité, tout cela au sceau de tes représentants. Un âne étant malade, je viens de le laisser à Šamaš-bāni.¹⁹ Ton serviteur étant malade, j'ai dû charger (les ânes) moi-même.

6 mines d'étain ont été dépensées pour les frais de transport de ton équipement jusqu'à Zalpa et pour le fourrage de tes ânes; là-bas, scelle leur montant en argent et remets-le à ma servante, et qu'il soit conservé sous son sceau. Tes serviteurs vont te conduire les ânes et leur équipement.

17 Photos of Kt n/k 650 and Kt n/k 713 are provided in Çeçen — Gökçek 2017: 475–479. C. Michel kindly provided us with her own photos of Kt n/k 584 which she had taken for collation.

18 Cf. Matouš 1969, especially 158 fn. 5–7 and 162 fn. 15, about the relation of Puzur-Aššur and Aššur-mūtappil (also mentioning our tablets) in the context of Puzur-Aššur's death.

19 He might be the same Šamaš-bāni who also worked for Pūšu-kēn as transporter, according to TC 2 8 (partly translated in Stratford 2017: 232 fn. 24).



The first letter deals with succinct business instructions, in the address of which Puzur-Aššur — again being the older partner and practically on the same level as Aššur-mūtappil's father — mentions himself before Aššur-mūtappil. Yet against expectations, in the second letter he ranks Aššur-mūtappil first. This text is a typical caravan notice²⁰ without much rhetorical embellishment, but there is one passage we would take as an explanation of the irregular address by virtue of its content and perhaps tone. Puzur-Aššur has to convey the bad news that not only did Aššur-mūtappil's donkey fall ill but also his servant, so he himself had to graciously prepare the load.²¹ He emphasises this latter fact doubly by using the independent pronoun of the 1st person singular (*anāku*) together with the enclitic particle *-ma*,²² in order to dim the bad light cast on him by the misfortunes that occurred under his supervision. This he does, of course, in addition to the conciliatory effect of the address.

Compared to the previous one, our third example set comes from a more secure (archival) context. The identity of the protagonists is beyond doubt: the letters are chosen from the correspondence of Šalim-Aššur with his representatives in Kaneš²³ and his sons, Ennam-Aššur and Ali-ahum.

AKT 6 150 (translation after M. Larsen) — request

umma Šalim-Aššur ana ša kīma iāti Ennam-Aššur u Ali-ahim qibīma

The tin I sent to you I bought the same way a colleague and friend would, at 2 shekels under the rate. Later, there was no tin. After you give it to Ennam-Bēlum you will also give it for a pledge according to my instructions. Now, as to the rest of my tin, if the rate is not 1:7 or 1:8, then do not sell the tin for refined silver. I hear that there is a market for *kutānus* in Kaneš. Inquire, and if you cannot realise any silver in Kaneš, you must not release the *kutānus* to credit agents in Kaneš itself. You will bring the *kutānus* up to either Hattum or Burušhaddum ... Give instructions to ...-Aššur... ... Amkuwa and ... turn to ... and ... on the narrow track and either to Durhumit or to Tišmurna wherever ... that I have promised to you ... until I come, my smuggling goods, fine *kutānus* ... the proceeds from the Akkadian textiles. Until I come ...

²⁰ Type 2 of Larsen 1967: 10.

²¹ TC 3 18, lines 15-19: "(...) 1 *e-ma-ru-um / ma-ri-iš-ma a-na / ^dutu-ba-ni : e-tī-zi-ib-šu / šu-ha-ar-kà ma-ri-iš-ma / a-na-ku-ma : as-ri-dam.*"

²² Cf. Kouwenberg 2017: 470 for this usage of *-ma*.

²³ According to AKT 6 214 these representatives are Iddin-abum, son of Aššur-rabi, Itūr-ili, son of Amur-Ištar, Ennānum, son of Amriya, and Īnah-ilī, son of Šū-Aššur. Šalim-Aššur writes many letters to them among others (with Iddin-abum always heading the list) and is himself always the very first person in the address (AKT 6 133 [+his sons]; 136; 137; 138; 141 [+his sons]; 142 [+his sons]; 143 [+his sons]).

AKT 6 149 (translation after M. Larsen) — injunction

ana ša kīma iāti Ennam-Aššur u Ali-ahim qibīma umma Šalim-Aššur

I am staying in Tegarama.²⁴ Before I take away my goods — urgent! — before I arrive, collect every mina of silver and let it be in my house. Do not send any silver to the City. On the day you hear my letter Ali-ahum should come to meet me either in Hurama or in Kuššara, and he should bring every mina of silver that is at my disposal. The textiles that Ali-ahum transported from the smuggling must remain under seal.

Šalim-Aššur begins AKT 6 150 by reminding his correspondents of a favour he had already done them, and proceeds to give his instructions how to fare with the goods. As we can see from many other texts, Šalim-Aššur ranks unequivocally above these representatives²⁵ and especially above his own sons. It thus comes as a surprise to see him reverse this order in AKT 6 149. In this letter, one can verily hear his pressing distress and glean that he must have been running precariously low on money. Šalim-Aššur therefore entreats his representatives to act on his behalf unquestioningly, and above all, fast.

Two more of Šalim-Aššur's tablets help to demonstrate our main hypothesis further. They appear less immediately applicable to the observed pattern, but upon closer examination fit well in overall tone and message. In both of them Šalim-Aššur expresses a certain urgency while maintaining his superior rank in the address that is directed to (a selection of) his representatives — here by name (cf. fn. 23) — together with his sons.

AKT 6 141 (translation M. Larsen) — request

umma Šalim-Aššur-ma ana Iddin-abum Ennānim Īnah-ilī Man-mahir Ennam-Aššur u Ali-ahim qibīma

Check my certified tablets concerning my outstanding claims, and make anyone who owes me a single shekel of silver pay the silver and its interest. You yourselves must decide there in whatever matter you observe. Take care to have the silver paid and to send it to me as soon as possible. The silver from my outstanding claims must be available; do not make trouble mixing it with my merchandise. 7 ½ minas of silver, the share of the man from Tumliya: you received interest for 4 years at 2 minas of silver each and two times 80 (sacks) of grain, half of it wheat. 8 minas of silver plus 320 sacks of grain: make the proceeds from my grain and my interest on the silver available and send it. And if they will give you the full payment on my share, then take it. Also, if any of my partners do not agree with you, then sell the share. Send me all of the silver. 1 mina of silver and 30 sacks of grain, the interest for 2 years, I charged to you with Šuppun-ahšu/Ušhata before my departure, and you received 80 sacks and 2 pots as interest for 4 years. So, offer

²⁴ For Tegarama, see Barjamovic 2011: 122–133 and Barjamovic — Gander 2012.

²⁵ Although the representatives perhaps do not always have to constitute a static group (courtesy C. Michel), considering the bulk of evidence for Šalim-Aššur, the likelihood of this being the deciding factor here appears negligible.



this grain for sale and deposit the price with the silver of the man from Tumliya. 20 sacks of beer-bread, 20 sacks of malt minus the price of ... and 6000 sacks from that of the man of Tumliya: the lady received the interest when I was staying in Burušhaddum. She gave me 6 minas of silver thereof and said: "I shall send you the rest later." Don't you know how much silver Amur-Šamaš has taken there on the account of his son Irišum? And the lady is robbing even me, but you, you keep quiet! Concerning 27 minas 10 shekels of silver, 2 minas 3 shekels of gold and ... thousand minas of copper: I left my tablets and *īšurtu*-documents with Ennam-Aššur in Burušhaddum. As for the losses of Ali-ahum's son: I heard about ... shekels which they imposed and he returned. Of all this Ennam-Aššur has not sent me any silver. There, let him send ... which he took. I shall not reach ... I shall not reach and shall not be unhappy. Speak ... I expect to see your care and gentlemanly behavior. These men may know ...

As in AKT 6 149, Šalim-Aššur here appears pressed for money and instructs his representatives in Kaneš to collect all outstanding claims.²⁶ However, the matter does not exhibit the same quality of urgency that made him place himself lower than even his sons in that tablet. Rather, he is demonstrating his indignation, e.g., through the rhetorical question "Don't you know how much silver Amur-Šamaš has taken there on the account of his son Irišum?", at once followed up by the reproach "And the lady is robbing even me, but you, you keep quiet!" in lines 45-49.²⁷

AKT 6 142 appears connected to what is talked about in AKT 6 141; both texts mention, e.g., the man of Tumliya and a debt of grain owed by Šuppun-ahšu.

AKT 6 142 (translation M. Larsen) — request

umma Šalim-A[ššur(-ma) an]a Iddin-abim Ennanim Īnah-ilī Adida Ennam-Aššur Ali-ahim u Amur-Ištar qibīma

My tin and my textiles have come to you from the caravan of Anninum's son. You have not sent me any silver from that! You are my brothers and lords, check my certified tablets and reach an agreement where possible with those of my customers you see. Set terms where you are able to, so you produce my silver for me. Set aside your own needs for just one or two days and clear my outstanding loans. 8 minas of silver owed by the man from Tumliya: at the rate of 2 minas in silver and 80 sacks of grain, half barley, half wheat, he will pay interest annually. He has held the silver for 4 years. 1 mina owed by Šuppun-ahšu: he will pay interest of 20 sacks of grain annually. Why is it that interest on the silver and the price of grain in silver from his interest from the man of Tumliya has come to my partner Kurub-Ištar/Ali-ahum, but nothing has come to me? You are my brothers, reach

²⁶ M. Larsen (2010: 250) insinuates in his comment on this tablet that Šalim-Aššur's writing may be a natural action "late in the season, before the last caravans would leave Anatolia for Assur."

²⁷ AKT 6 141, 45-49: "(...) *ma-lá A-mur-^dutu / i-šé-er I-ri-ši-im me-er-i-šu- a-ma-kam / 'kù.ḫabbar il₅-qé-ú a-tù-nu lá tí-de₈-a / [ú] a-wi-il₅-tum i-a-tí ta-ma-ši-hi-ma / [a]-tù-nu ta-áš-ta-pu-a (...)*"

an agreement with the man from Tumliya and take my share of the silver. I do not need the interest. Or reach an agreement with someone else and take the agreed amount in silver, and let the man from Tumliya be responsible for this. You are my lords, save me while I can still be saved. If Adida has arrived there, take care to send him with ... my servants. the balance ... You are my lords, save me while I can still be saved!



Again, the chief emotion of this text is indignation. Šalim-Aššur masks it by courteously calling the addressees brothers and lords (*ahhūa bēlūa attūnu*, lines 8f.) and by ending the letter in an indulgent manner. He concedes the interest that should have accrued on the credit and contents himself with whatever silver they can garner.²⁸ He even emphasises that he will see their helping him as a big favour, via the repetition of the stock phrase “You are my lords, save me while I can still be saved!”²⁹ Yet this serves only to mitigate Šalim-Aššur’s venting of his frustration in the previous passage (and to show his rhetorical skill). Already in the second sentence he reproaches his representatives for their idleness. His anger most clearly shines through, while providing us with perhaps one of the clearest examples of sarcasm in his telling them to set aside their own needs for just two days,³⁰ as well as the rhetorical question as to why silver has reached others but not himself,³¹ only after which he presents himself as more amicable. Thus, even though Šalim-Aššur ends on a conciliatory note, this certainly does not warrant granting the addressees first place in the address. Neither does his minor, justified rebuke in AKT 6 141, in the rest of which he plainly lists his instructions.

An intriguing example comes from the archive of Elamma, son of Iddin-Suen.³² In AKT 8 263, Šāt-Tašmētīm is writing to Puzur-Anna and Šu-Suen. This letter is an example of such texts that are often found in an (original) archival context without immediate connection — as far as we can reconstruct it — to the rest of the archive and its protagonists/owners. The overall letter is structured in two parts by two addresses that mention the same correspondents in different ways. The letter begins with an address with Šāt-Tašmētīm in first position, but halfway through she inserts another address line inverting the sequence. As far as the letter’s contents can be understood, despite sometimes unclear readings due to damage on the tablet, the two parts correspond very well to our main hypothesis.

28 AKT 6 142, 32–35: “a-hu-ú-a a-tù-nu iš-tí / Tù-um-li-[a-]i-im nam^{am}-gi₅-//ra-ma / kù.babbar qá-tí [le-]qé-a-nim / ří-ba-t[im] ú-lá ha-áš-ha-ku.”

29 AKT 6 142, 39–41+46–47: “(...) be-lu-a a-tù-nu / a-na u₄-mu-ú e-řá-ri-im / eř-ra-ni (...)” ... “be-lu-ú-a ‘a-tù-’nu a-na u₄-mu-ú e-řá-ri-im / eř-ra-ni.”

30 AKT 6 142, 15–16: “ú ří-na u₄-me-e ku-ša-hi-ku-nu / ez-ba-ma ba-ab-tí za-ki-a-nim.”

31 AKT 6 142, 16–31: “(...) mi-šu řa a-na / Kur-ub-Iřtar dumu A-lá-hi-im tap-pá-i-a / kù.babbar ří-ba-sú ù ří-im ře-im / kù.babbar řa ří-ba-tí-řu / řa tù-um-li-a-i-im i-li-kà-//řu-ni-ma / i-a-tí lá i-li-kà-ni.”

32 The archive is edited in Veenhof 2017 (AKT 8).



AKT 8 263 (translation K. Veenhof) — request and injunction

umma Šāt-Tašmētumma a-[na] Puzur-Anna u Šu-Suen qibīma

“The house has been robbed and I wander around outside. Please, my brothers, come here so that nobody will harm your paternal house. To Tūram-ilī, son of Baḷṭum, a ... garment has immediately been forwarded. Seize him there and let them give you the garment. If you do not come quickly the city will take away the sustenance.”

ana Puzur-Anna u Šu-Suen qibīma umma Šāt-Tašmētumma

“Why is this the case that I keep ..., but he does not give you the slave ...? If you are really my brothers let nobody harm you. Forward the slave to them where you can, so that the creditors will not sell my father. As for the ... you are sending me, you yourself know that I stripped the garment from my shoulder and gave it to you! Provide silver and let one bring it me with the first caravan. If you love your ancestral god get moving and come here!”

In the first part, Šāt-Tašmētum, who must be related to at least one of the addressees, describes a serious problem: their house has been broken into. This affects herself inasmuch as Puzur-Anna and Šu-Suen, whom we have to see as its owners.

In the second part, by contrast, Šāt-Tašmētum is much more emotional. She starts off with what is probably a rhetorical question, continues in a highly accusatory tone and finishes the letter by appealing to her brothers. All of this constitutes what, for the purpose of this paper, is defined as an injunction that warrants an inversion of the address sequence.

From the royal correspondence,³³ the well-studied Asqūdum affair³⁴ elucidates our main points on OA rhetoric and mentality in a different light. Asqūdum, son of Abu-šalim, was conducting trade at the behest and to the eventual discontent of the king Sargon and his son and successor Puzur-Aššur,³⁵ on whose shoulders fell the task to remedy his father’s loss of silver. Three letters informing us about this are extant: CCT IV 32a, POAT 18 A/B,³⁶ and KTS 1 30.³⁷ In CCT IV 32a, addressed *umma waklumma ana Asqudim merā Abu-šalim qibīma*, Sargon inquires indignantly, but ultimately unavailingly, about his silver, about which Asqūdum has not sent any message. Soon afterwards, his son takes up the matter and enlists the help of the well-known merchant Pūšu-kēn. The two letters authored by Puzur-Aššur do not differ in the address which, as one might expect, always mentions the king by his epistolographic title first (*umma waklumma ana Pūšu-kēn qibīma*), but in the choice of words for referring to

³³ For the peculiarities of OA royal correspondence in a broader context, see Michel 2015 and Erol 2018, and for some new evidence Veenhof 2019.

³⁴ Larsen 1976: 132–140 constitutes the main study on the topic of the Asqūdum affair.

³⁵ For a critical review of the kings involved, see Kryszat 2004.

³⁶ See Gwaltney 1983.

³⁷ All of them are transliterated and translated in Larsen 1976: 132–139, and translated with further references in Michel 2001, nos. 9–11.

the addressee within the letters. In POAT 18 A he begins by quoting his father, who had urged Pūšu-kēn: “If you are my son, if you love me, seize Asqūdum’s silver!”³⁸ Not wishing to acquiesce to Pūšu-kēn’s excuse that it is too dangerous to approach Asqūdum, Puzur-Aššur proceeds by trying to convince him to do as told and invests him with additional authority, referring to him as father:

If you are my father, if you love me: alas they are bringing you two tablets. Read one and keep one with you! If you are my father, if you love me: my father gave him much merchandise. With determination, seize at least one talent of silver or more. Not a single shekel of silver may be lost! My heart will be soothed as if you gave it to me as a present. I shall pray for you before Aššur and my god. Exert yourself as if it were your own silver!

As to your matter that you disclosed to me during my father’s lifetime and your tablet I read, I am (now) responsible for you here.³⁹

In the final letter, KTS 130, we learn that Pūšu-kēn did act on Puzur-Aššur’s letter and seized a comparatively small amount of silver from Asqūdum. Herein, Puzur-Aššur introduces his renewed request to gain at least 1 talent of silver by the common phrasing *mer²i attā*.⁴⁰ We argue that Puzur-Aššur’s choice of referring to Pūšu-kēn in his first letter as *abī*, then, as his father used to and a king should, as *mer²i* in the second is a deliberate rhetorical one.⁴¹

Since POAT 18 A evidently was not the first letter to Pūšu-kēn in this affair, we would argue according to our main line of interpretation that he had grown restless enough to utilise the humble or even self-deprecatory rhetoric of addressing Pūšu-kēn as father in his injunction; whereas in KTS 130, after Pūšu-kēn had catered sufficiently to the king’s injunction, albeit not to his full satisfaction, Puzur-Aššur resumed writing in the standard regal demeanour. To boot, we must remind ourselves that the OA kings did not conform to the image of a king far removed from his

38 POAT 18 A, l. 5–8: “(...) *šu-ma me-er-i a-ta / šu-ma ta-ra-a-ma-ni / kù.babbar-áp / ás-qú-dim / ša-ba-at* (...)”

39 POAT 18 A, l. 15–35 (after Kryszat 2004: 357 fn. 14): “*šu-ma a-bi₄ a-ta / šu-ma ta-ra-a-ma-ni / a-ma 2 dub-pè-en / na-áš-ú-ni-ku-um / iš-tí-in dub-pá-am šé-me / 1 dub-pá-am i-na qá-tí-kà / kà-i-il₃ šu-ma a-bi₄ a-ta / šu-ma ta-ra-a-ma-ni / a-bu-ni lu-qú-tám ma-a-tám / i-dí-šu-um lu e-ta-lá-tí-ma / iš-tù kù.babbar 1 gú ù e-li-iš / ša-ba-at kù.babbar 1 gín / lá i-ha-li-iq ki-ma / ša a-ta / ta-qí-ša-ni / li-bi₄ ha-dí igi a-šur / ù i-li-a a-kà-ra-ba-kum / 'ki'-ma kù.babbar-áp ra-mì-ni-kà / šu-ta-am-ri-iš / a-šu-mì a-wa-ti-kà // ša i-bu-lu-uš a-bi₄-a / ta-áp-tí-a-ni ù šup-pá-kà' // áš-^rta-me' / a-na-ku a-na-kam ma-ša-ku-um.”*

40 The Assyrians usually refer to one another as *ahum*, *abum* or *bēlum*. The usage of *mer²um* is limited and must offend, unless used by the king.

41 The reasoning we offer for calling Pūšu-kēn father is at least in addition to M. Larsen’s explanation: he suspects Puzur-Aššur’s age as the main motive, that “he is very simply acknowledging that he is writing to an older man, and it is likely that the letter was written very shortly after his accession to the throne” (Larsen 1976: 140). The second point does not enhance the argument, much since the time span between Puzur-Aššur’s first and second letter cannot have been significant.



subjects at an unreachable height, such as we might obtain from Neo-Assyrian times. At least within the constraints of trade activities, the OA king appears much more involved also at a private level, so to speak as a *primus mercator inter pares*.⁴²

OLD ASSYRIAN SOCIETY AS REFLECTED IN THE LETTER ADDRESS

To summarise, the letter address and the inversion of its sequence as a rhetorical means appears in situations of distress and urgency, for the resolution of which the authors ask for quick support. This support should be quick in that the addressees should not challenge its validity and agree on it simply in order to help a fellow merchant.

The letter address is, of course, not the only way to express the underlying motive, which is to throw oneself at someone else's mercy, to intimate the severity of the situation by humiliating oneself. As OA merchants refer to their colleagues in kinship terms, Puzur-Aššur invokes the same principle in our last example by addressing Pūšu-kēn as father even though he should be ranked beneath the king.

We are hereby entering into the territory of OA society, its social norms, and also that of politeness. Showing strong emotions such as undue anger is certainly improper, as the OA merchants explicitly deride, or brusquely reject allegations of, such behaviour,⁴³ and similarly for exaggerated meekness or humility as well as haughtiness. The (male) merchants only ever speak to one another in terms of *ahum* and *abum* (in connection with *bēlum*).⁴⁴ In their trade ventures that must largely be based on mutual trust, they are essentially all peers, just as the king is *primus inter pares*.⁴⁵ They are direct and clear in their interactions. They are also strongly aware of hierarchic subtleties, which are epistolographically most clearly expressed via the letter heading. Thus, the inversion of the letter address and the conceptions it transmits is only possible under great duress and in order to elicit a very specific response. This rhetoric can be seen as somewhat of a last resort,⁴⁶ a last resort, as it would seem, utilisable only by the hierarchically superior. The Assyrian merchants use their relative position in society together with their collegiality with each other to exert social pressure on their addressees.

42 Already P. Garelli (1963: 199) came to describe the OA king as “une sorte de marchand magnifié, *primus inter pares*.”

43 For a discussion of this topic with many examples, see Larsen 2001.

44 *aḥum* ‘brother’ is used towards those of equal or lower social standing, while *abum* ‘father’ is used towards those of higher standing. *bēlum* ‘lord’ expresses additional humility.

45 For the power of new social norms in mercantile sectors of a society, see perhaps the interpretation of the Law Merchant in Brennan et al. 2013: 120–124 and 151.

46 It is a sparsely used means because of its strength and the social pressure it puts on the addressee. In terms of Brown — Levinson 2016, it is a face-threatening act that exploits conventional politeness, also on a power level (Brown — Levinson 2016: 229–230, section 6.1.2). At first it appears as a face-threatening act towards the letter author, but in exerting pressure on the addressee through a special and seemingly paradoxical facet of OA decorum, it becomes directed towards the latter.

So far, we can best observe this practice in (socially) powerful men. The women in our examples, however, seem to rank below their male correspondents and thereby appear in a different light. In our first example at the very least, Šimat-Suen is known to be the youngest of the siblings. Among OA women it appears possible in the right context to first demonstrate their own strength to their (socially superior) counterparts and only subsequently, but with all the more impact, make use of address inversion to return to the normal address sequence.



REFERENCES

- Anderson, A. G. (2017) *The Old Assyrian social network: An analysis of the texts from Kültepe-Kanesh (1950–1750 B.C.E.)*. Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University.
- Barjamovic, G. (2011) *A Historical Geography of Anatolia in the Old Assyrian Colony Period* [CNIP 38], Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum.
- Barjamovic, G. — Gander, M. (2012) Tegaram(m)a, in: M. P. Streck (ed.), *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie: Spinnen. A. — Tiergarten* [RIA 13], Berlin — Boston: de Gruyter, 503–504.
- Bilgiç, E. — Bayram, S. (1995) *Ankara Kültepe tabletleri II* [AKT 2], Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi.
- Brennan, G. — Eriksson, L. — Goodin, R. E. — Southwood, N. (2013) *Explaining Norms*, Oxford — New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, P. — Levinson, S. C. (2016) *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* [Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics 4], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (25th printing).
- Çeçen, S. — Gökçek, L. G. (2017) Uşur-ša-İstar Ailesinden fŠimat-Su'en'e Ait Dört Mektup, in: *Cappadocia Journal of Social Sciences* 9, 463–482.
- Dercksen, J. G. (1996) *The Old Assyrian Copper Trade in Anatolia* [PIHANS 75], Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul.
- Erol, H. (2018) Old Assyrian royal families as private entrepreneurs in the Anatolian trade, in: *JNES* 77/1, 47–66.
- Garélli, P. (1963) *Les assyriens en Cappadoce*, Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve.
- Gwaltney, W. C. (1983) *The Pennsylvania Old Assyrian Texts* [HUCA Supp. 3], Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion.
- Hirsch, H. (1981) Über den Briefbeginn in der Korrespondenz der altassyrischen Kaufleute, in: R. G. Stiegnér (ed.), *Al-Hudhud: Festschrift Maria Höfner zum 80. Geburtstag*, Graz: Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, 79–93.
- Kouwenberg, N. J. C. (2017) *A Grammar of Old Assyrian* [HdO 118], Leiden — Boston: Brill.
- Kryszat, G. (2004) Wer schrieb die Wakkum-Briefe?, in: J. G. Dercksen (ed.), *Assyria and beyond: Studies Presented to Mogens Trolle Larsen* [PIHANS 100], Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 353–358.
- Larsen, M. T. (1967) *Old Assyrian Caravan Procedures* [PIHANS 22], Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut in het Nabije Oosten.
- . (1976) *The Old Assyrian City-State and its Colonies* [Mes 4], Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag.
- . (1989) What they wrote on clay, in: K. Schousboe — M. T. Larsen (eds.), *Literacy and Society*, Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 121–148.
- . (2001) Affect and emotion, in: W. H. van Soldt (ed.), *Veenhof Anniversary Volume: Studies Presented to Klaas R. Veenhof on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* [PIHANS 89], Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 275–286.
- . (2010) *Kültepe Tabletleri VI-a: The Archive of the Šalim-Aššur Family*, Volume 1: *The First Two Generations* [AKT 6a], Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu.



- Lewy, J. (1926) *Die altassyrischen Texte vom Kültepe bei Kaisarije* [KTS 1], Konstantinopel: Antike Museen zu Stambul.
- Matouš, L. (1969) Der Streit um den Nachlass des Puzur-Aššur, in: *ArOr* 37, 156–180.
- Michalowski, P. (2011) *The Correspondence of the Kings of Ur: An Epistolary History of an Ancient Mesopotamian Kingdom* [MC 15], Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
- Michel, C. (1991) *Innāya dans les tablettes paléo-assyriennes*, II: *Edition des textes*, Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations.
- . (2001) *Correspondance des marchands de Kaniš au début du II^e millénaire avant J.-C.* [LAPO 19], Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf.
- . (2008a) *Écrire et compter chez les marchands assyriens du début du II^e millénaire av. J.-C.*, in: T. Tarhan — A. Tibet — E. Konyar (eds.), *Muhibbe Darga Armağanı — Festschrift Muhibbe Darga*, İstanbul: Sadberk Hanim Müzesi Yayını, 345–364.
- . (2008b) *La correspondance des marchands assyriens du XIX^e s. av. J.-C. De l'archivage des lettres commerciales et privées*, in: L. Pantalacci (ed.), *La lettre d'archive: Communication administrative et personnelle dans l'antiquité proche-orientale et égyptienne. Actes du colloque de l'Université de Lyon 2, 9–10 juillet 2004* [Topoi Supplément 9], Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 117–140.
- . (2015) *Les lettres des rois d'Aššur découvertes à Kaniš (XIX^e siècle av. J.-C.)*, in: S. Procházka — L. Reinfandt — S. Tost (eds.), *Official Epistolography and the Language(s) of Power: Proceedings of the First International Conference of the Research Network Imperium & Officium. Comparative Studies in Ancient Bureaucracy and Officialdom, University of Vienna, 10–12 November 2010* [Papyrologica Vindobonensia 8], Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 43–60.
- . (2020) *Women of Assur and Kanesh. Texts from the Archives of Assyrian Merchants*, Atlanta: SBL Press.
- Sallaberger, W. (1999) „Wenn du mein Bruder bist...“: *Interaktion und Textgestaltung in altbabylonischen Alltagsbriefen* [CM 16], Groningen: Styx Publications.
- Sollberger, E. (1966) *The Business and Correspondence under the Kings of Ur* [TCS 1], Locust Valley, NY: Augustin.
- Stratford, E. (2017) *A Year of Vengeance*, Vol. 1: *Time, Narrative, and the Old Assyrian Trade* [SANER 17, 1], Berlin — Boston: de Gruyter.
- Veenhof, K. R. (2008) *The death and burial of Isthari-lamassi in Karum Kanesh*, in: R. J. van der Spek (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Near Eastern World View and Society Presented to Marten Stol on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday, 10 November 2005, and his Retirement from the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam*, Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 97–119.
- . (2017) *Kültepe Tabletleri VIII: The Archive of Elamma, Son of Iddin-Suen, and His Family (Kt. 91/k 285-568 and Kt. 92/k 94-187)* [AKT 8], Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu.
- . (2019) *A verdict of the assembly of the Old Assyrian city-state*, in: D. Prechel — H. Neumann (eds.), *Beiträge zur Kenntnis und Deutung altorientalischer Archivalien. Festschrift für Helmut Freydanck zum 80. Geburtstag* [dubsar 6], Münster: Zaphon, 439–464.