

# EXPRESSIONS OF DATES AND TIME IN THE AMARNA LETTERS

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A constant state of stress, the hustle and bustle of everyday life, lack of time and the pressure of deadlines – almost everyone is familiar nowadays with these ideas and perceptions. Time is an overarching and key-aspect of the majority of our actions and routines. The past, on the other hand, is usually regarded – with a certain tinge of nostalgia and even a hint of exaggeration – as bygone days of peace and serenity. But was this also true in the remoter past? We may wonder how the attitude to time and/or history is reflected, for example, in the Amarna correspondence. What is the vocabulary employed to express various segments of time in these letters? It is the aim of this short paper to offer some insight into these intriguing questions.

## TIME AND DATES

It follows from the nature and content of the Amarna correspondence, both royal and vassal, that especially references to past actions, their impact on the present and the possible consequences for the future are practically ubiquitous within the corpus. But can dates be trusted or should it be perceived rather as a part of the overall framework in which a narrative of historical events is set? It is not the aim of this paper to analyze the grammar used to express the past, present or future actions of the individual correspondents, but to present a few observations on some unit-of-time expressions employed within the corpus of the Amarna letters.

As I have already mentioned, “time” represents a key-element in the absolute majority of these letters. Yet is time, or in other words “the space of time”, mentioned *in concreto* or are we dependent upon our interpretation of the context in order to elicit precise dates? In all the hustle and bustle of modern society, every single second, minute or an

hour plays a role. Yet it is not that long ago that a five-year plan represented a fundamental time-scale in some countries. From the nature of the Amarna letters it is obvious that other dates and unit-of-time expressions played a role.<sup>1</sup>

## The “Amarna paradox”

Anybody familiar with the Amarna letters cannot be surprised that concrete dates within the corpus represent yet another – what we might term – “Amarna paradox”. It is true that the whole corpus provides only a very limited number of dates and, moreover, these dates are not included in the content of the relevant documents themselves. The dates are written in hieratic script, either in red or in black ink, on the surface of only sixteen of the tablets. The deployment of these predominantly short inscriptions, or in other words “hieratic dockets”, ties right in with the usage attested elsewhere in the Egyptian administration.<sup>2</sup> Out of these sixteen texts only four refer to concrete dates: EA 11 (kept at present in the Vorderasiatisches/Near Eastern Museum in Berlin; VAT 151 + VAT 1878), EA 23 (housed in the collection of the British Museum in London; BME 29793); EA 27 (VAT 233 + VAT 2197, no. 1; VAT 2193) and EA 254 (VAT 335; both belonging to the Berlin collection). These dockets represent, in form, nothing more than technical notes written out by responsible scribes or archivists employed in the Foreign Office. It is very possible that, in these particular cases, the main information contained in the inscription was when and by whom the relevant letter was delivered to the “Place of the Correspondence of Pharaoh, l.p.h.”.

There are two dockets written in red ink out of the four, these inscriptions to be found on the sur-

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<sup>1</sup> Disregarding all adverbs of time.

<sup>2</sup> A research project dedicated to a re-evaluation of the corpus of hieratic dockets written on the Amarna tablets is presently being carried out by the author.

face of EA 11 and EA 254 respectively. Unfortunately in both cases their state of preservation is extremely poor, no modern-day documentation of these tablets being available.

According to the copy of Winckler and Abel,<sup>3</sup> as well as Knudtzon's study,<sup>4</sup> the hieratic docket on EA 11 (VAT 151 + VAT 1878) is located at the lower edge of the reverse of the tablet. Unfortunately, the present state of preservation is very disappointing, there being only scattered traces of red ink visible at the very bottom and middle of the lower edge. The pertinent part of the edge is completely missing,<sup>5</sup> but can be extrapolated from the context and by analogy with the preserved traces.<sup>6</sup> The first word might still be interpreted as the Egyptian *ḥ3t-zp* "regnal year". The inscription contains a date formula mentioning when the tablet arrived and/or was processed in the royal Records Office.

The very same type of the record is represented by the other red hieratic docket written on the surface of EA 254 (VAT 335). The inscription was written over an empty space<sup>7</sup> on the left edge of the tablet.<sup>8</sup> This inscription as well supposedly starts with the *ḥ3t-zp* "regnal year" followed by several almost illegible signs containing other parts of the relevant date formula. Based on the copy of the inscription, the likeliest interpretation of the passage<sup>9</sup> would be either "Year 12" – referring to the reign of Amenhotep IV–Akhenaten – or "Year 32". If the latter reading is correct, the tablet would be ascribable to the earliest stages of the Amarna cor-

respondence i.e. from the reign of Akhenaten's father, Amenhotep III. Unfortunately, in both examples, the inscriptions are very poorly preserved and their contribution to the debate as one of the Amarna "time subjects", i.e. chronology, is rather limited.

The remaining two dockets containing dates are of a different nature. Both letters – EA 23 (BME 29793) and EA 27 (VAT 233 + VAT 2197, no. 1; 2193) – are part of the Mittanian subset of documents. The inscriptions contain – aside from the dates – other details pertaining to contemporary events, the provenance of these documents and the identities of the relevant messengers. In both cases, the inscription starts – similar to EA 11 and EA 254 mentioned previously – with standard date formulae. In the case of EA 23 the hieratic docket recorded in black ink in three lines is positioned on the unwritten part of the reverse of the tablet underneath the final double line.<sup>10</sup> The interpretation of the formula is indisputable: *ḥ3t-zp 36, 4 prt, sw 1 ...* "Year 36, 4<sup>th</sup> month of *prt*, day 1 ...".<sup>11</sup> There can be no doubt about its dating to the reign of Amenhotep III.

The situation of EA 27 is quite different since the docket is written on the left edge and beginning at the bottom of the tablet.<sup>12</sup> The lowermost part of the edge has deteriorated and the start of the date formula containing the number of regnal years of the king is not fully preserved. Two remaining strokes representing the numeral "2" can still be observed. A detailed study of the particular pas-

<sup>3</sup> WINCKLER 1889–1890, I, 5b, no. 6.

<sup>4</sup> KNUDTZON 1964<sup>2</sup>, I, 98–99, n. e and I, 1001, no. 12. Unfortunately, Knudtzon's copy of the inscription differs largely from WINCKLER 1889–1890, I, 5b, no. 6 and cannot be trusted; the docket is not drawn in Schroeder's publication, cf. SCHROEDER 1915, 10, no. 6.

<sup>5</sup> The tablet was collated on August 16, 2010. See the triangular chipping at [http://amarna.ieiop.csic.es/amarna/Tablilas/EA%2011/EA%2011-VAT%20151%20\(5\).jpg](http://amarna.ieiop.csic.es/amarna/Tablilas/EA%2011/EA%2011-VAT%20151%20(5).jpg) (accessed on February 2, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> The visible trace might be interpreted as the beginning of "regnal year". With the exception of its opening part, the entire docket is lost!

<sup>7</sup> The fact that this particular place was very suitable for the writing of administrative notes was confirmed by a modern practice: the museum registration number is in fact written upside down over the hieratic docket which makes the reading and interpretation of the original inscription very inconvenient.

<sup>8</sup> KNUDTZON 1964<sup>2</sup>, I, 812–813 states that "Auf der Mitte des Schlußstriches befindet sich, mit roter Tinte und im Verhältnis zur Keilschrift umgekehrt geschrieben, folgender Vermerk in hieratischer Schrift (vgl. Autogr. Nr. 142) rnp1 10 (+) 2 ..". See also KNUDTZON 1964<sup>2</sup>, I, 1005, no. 142. For the placement of the docket see WINCKLER 1889–1890, no. 112. The hieratic inscription was not copied by Schroeder, see SCHROEDER 1915, 152, no. 145.

<sup>9</sup> Consult MORAN 1992, 308, n. 5 and xxxvii. At present the individual, supposedly numerical signs, are illegible.

<sup>10</sup> See BEZOLD & BUDGE 1892, xlii–xliv and 24–25. Collated on October 5, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> KNUDTZON 1964<sup>2</sup>, I, 180–181; MORAN 1992, 62, n. 6.

<sup>12</sup> WINCKLER 1889–1890, Tf. 19, no. 23; KNUDTZON 1964<sup>2</sup>, I, 240–241.

<sup>13</sup> The tablet was collated on August 18, 2010.

sage<sup>13</sup> suggests that there is no reason to reconstruct any tens preceding the numeral. The beginning of the text can be therefore reconstructed only as [*h3t-zp*]2, 1 *prt*, *sw* [x]... “[Year]2, 1<sup>st</sup> month of *prt*, day [x] ...”.<sup>14</sup>

### Unit-of-time expressions – year and month

Leaving aside the Egyptian part of the Amarna world, we shall now move to the actual content of the Amarna letters. It is no surprise that almost no specific dates are encountered within the corpus. Conversely, the attested examples of unit-of-time expressions provide us with an insight into the time scheme for the “Amarna people” and its working. The longest period of time recorded in the letters is a “year”, which – in fact – can be construed as one of the key-expressions of time in the majority of these texts.

As far as a “year” is concerned, the Amarna material offers us a relatively prolific group of attestations. Looking at the subset from a perspective of the individual sender, one notices that the expression appears both in royal and vassal correspondence. There are examples where the usage of the relevant word is identical. A number of years, for instance, is employed to express a lengthy period: for Tušratta, the Great King of Mittani – who thinks on a grand scale – eternity is expressed by “100,000 years”,<sup>15</sup> while the citizens of Tunip must make do with 20 years only.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, a very special expression for the time continuum can be observed in two letters from the ruler of Alašiya – “year by year” – EA 33: 27, 30 “[A]nd **year by ye[ar]**<sup>17</sup> may my messenger go [to you], and, on you[r part], year by year, may your messenger come *from* [*your*] *pre[sence]* into my presence.”;

EA 38: 11 “while the men of Lukki, **year by year**,<sup>18</sup> seize villages in my own country”. In the Amarna letters this particular expression has so far been attested in these two documents only. It is impossible at the present time to say whether this phenomenon is somehow linked to a particular scribe or some scribal tradition of Alašiya.

In both subsets – i.e. royal and vassal letters – one also encounters expressions enunciating an exact number of years. These expressions appear to have been used to highlight the importance of individual cases and to draw Pharaoh’s attention to the given facts. In the royal correspondence it is mostly the fate of the royal messengers<sup>19</sup> that concerns the author of the message whilst, in the vassal correspondence, the exact number of years is employed solely to explain – as well as to apologize – the failure of the sender to fulfill the tasks assigned to him by Pharaoh: Akizzi of Qatna in EA 52: 36 sets forth the reasons why he has not yet arrived in Egypt – “[*Fo*]r **3 years**, my lord, when *I wanted* [*to set out*] for my lord, *the messengers did not know of a caravan (going to Egypt)*.” (cf. MORAN 1992, 123). Rib-Hadda of Byblos refers to the serious complications brought about by ‘Abdi-Aširta in EA 85: 9 as he states: “Since he has aggressed on me 3 times **this year**, and for **2 years** I have been repeatedly robbed of my grain, there is no grain for us to eat.”<sup>20</sup> (or in more general words in EA 106: 17 “Behold, there has been war against me for **5 years**.”).

‘Abdi-Aširta’s message in EA 85 introduces another angle to this scheme: the desperate situation is not something that happened a long time ago. It is something very present, something that happened “this year” or at most “last year” (as in

<sup>14</sup> See most recently FRITZ 1991, 212 with references to further literature; see also MORAN 1992, 90 n.20; for chronological issues consult most recently PARKER 2002, 57; MILLER 2007, 266–267; CORDANI 2011, 111–112.

<sup>15</sup> EA 21: 39, concerning a necklace for the Pharaoh, “May it lie upon the neck of my brother for **100,000 years**”; or in EA 23: 27 a protection is provided to both kings by the goddess Šauška, “May Šauška, mistress of heaven, protect us, my brother and me (for) **100,000 years**; and may our mistress give both of us great joy.”

<sup>16</sup> EA 59: 13, 44 “And now for **20 years** we have been writing to the king, our master and our messengers have stayed with the king, our master. ... We have been writing to the king, our master, the king of Egypt for **20 years** and not a single word of our master has reached us.”

<sup>17</sup> Cf. COHAVI-RAINEY 2003, 7.

<sup>18</sup> COHAVI-RAINEY 2003, 32.

<sup>19</sup> EA 3: 14 from Kadašman-Enlil I of Babylonia: “... you have detained him for **6 years**.”; EA 35: 36 from the king of Alašiya: “My brother, do not be concerned that your messenger has remained **3 years** in my country, for the hand of Nergal is upon my country and upon my own house.”; or EA 36: 18 also from the ruler of Alašiya: “[Now, as for] my [messenger], you [have detained him for] **2 years**.”; the context in EA 29: 113 is not very clear: “... my messengers, since **4 years** ago, ...”.

<sup>20</sup> And it can be added “and to deliver to Egypt.”

case of Abi-Milki of Tyre) or something that needs to be solved by the end of “this year”<sup>21</sup> or at worst “next year”.<sup>22</sup>

References to events that happened “this year” appears both in the royal<sup>23</sup> and the vassal correspondence. It is important to stress that, in the royal letters, only three examples are attested: two in Burna-Buriyaš II’s letter EA 11 and one in Tušratta’s letter EA 20. This expression is more widely attested among the vassal letters. No apparent difference exists, whether the letters are addressed to the king of Egypt himself or to one of his representatives in the region. The particular phrase is mentioned mostly in a military context,<sup>24</sup> highlighting the desperate situation of the sender and calling for an immediate response from the Pharaoh and/or his troops. The geographical pattern of these occurrences is quite fascinating. We find such reference in letters from Akizzi of Qatna (EA 55),<sup>25</sup> among the correspondence of the persistent and relentless complainant Rib-Hadda of

Byblos (EA 93, EA 117, EA 129, EA 362),<sup>26</sup> and, last but not least, with ‘Abdi-Ḥeba of Jerusalem (EA 287 and EA 288).<sup>27</sup> Without wishing to repeat all the conclusions arrived at about the scribe of the Jerusalem letters and his idiosyncrasies, it has already been well attested that the tradition of the Jerusalem scribe differs largely from those attested in other southern cities. It is possible to conclude that this specific phraseological particle – the plea for the Pharaoh’s intervention by means of his troops – is just another part of the jigsaw puzzle showing the “northern” tradition, followed by this particular scribe, attempting to bring his “language” closer to the “language” of Akizzi or Rib-Hadda.

A subdivision of the year, i.e. a “month” is, from a statistical point of view, not a commonly used unit of time within the Amarna correspondence. Known occurrences indicate that the term was used in a way very similar to the term of a “year” as described before in this paper. Tušratta of

<sup>21</sup> EA 149: 27: “I, [si]nce **last year** [my wish has been] to go in [and beh]old the face of the king, my master, [*but Zimredda, the p]rince [heard about m]e.”* (for the reconstructed passages consult MORAN 1992, 236) and EA 149: 74 “[Si]nce **last year** there has been w[ar] against me.” Cf. also EA 160: 27 from Aziru of Amurru: “**This year** I will rebuild Šumur.”

<sup>22</sup> See EA 162: 43 king of Egypt to Aziru of Amurru: “this year”; EA 162: 44 “next year”; EA 162: 47 “this year” – quoting from Aziru’s communication: “And when you have written, saying, ‘May the king, my master, give me leave **this year**, and the I will come **next year** to the king, [my] m[aster]. If this is impossible, I [will *send*] my son [*in m]y [place]*’ (MORAN 1992, 249). The king, your master, has left you **this year**, in accordance with what you have said. [C]ome yourself or send your son and you will see the king at whose sight all la[nds] live. (And) do not to say, ‘May he give me also **this year**’.”

<sup>23</sup> EA 11: rev. 17 from Burna-Buriyaš II of Babylon: “[I]f you wish to sen[d here] chariots and soldiers within this year, [then a messe]nger should come out to me quickly and info[rm me].”; EA 11: rev. 29 “By the end of [this] year I wish to bring the work quickly to completion.”; EA 20: 15 from Tušratta of Mittani “T[hi]s year, now, I will gi[ve] my brother’s wife for mistress of Egypt, and they will bring her to my brother.”

<sup>24</sup> EA 51: rev. 10 Addu-nirari of Nuḥašše asking the Pharaoh to come: “[And] may our master *come forth* (this) **year**.” (MORAN 1992, 122); EA 76: 31 from Rib-Hadda of Byblos: “For **years** archers would come out to see [the coun]try, and yet now that the land of the king and Šumur, your garrison-

town, have been attached to the ‘Apiru, you have done nothing.”

<sup>25</sup> EA 55: 19: “If my master takes this country for his own country, then let my master send **this year** his troops and his chariots and let them come out here and the whole Nuḥašše may belong to my master.”; EA 55: 25: “If the troops and [chario]ts of my master do not come forth **this year** and do not *fi[ght]* (MORAN 1992, 127), it (= the country) will be in fear of Aziru.”

<sup>26</sup> EA 93: 25 from Rib-Hadda of Byblos to Amanappa: “[I]f there are no archers **this year**, [the]n he will be strong [for e]ver.”; EA 117: 56 from Rib-Hadda of Byblos: “If there are no archers **th[is] year**, then all the lands will belong to the ‘Apiru.”; EA 129: 41 from Rib-Hadda of Byblos: If arche[rs] do not come out within **this year**, they will t[a]k[e] Gubla.”; EA 129: 49 from Rib-Hadda of Byblos: “If there are no archers **this year**, then send ships to fetch me with (my) living god, to my master.”; EA 362: 66 from Rib-Hadda of Byblos asking for a visit; MORAN 1992, 350: “May the king, my lord, not *leave this year for free* for the sons of ‘Abdi-Aširta, for *you know* all their *acts of hatred* against the lands of the king.”; RAINEY 1970, 19: “Should the king my lord not come forth **this year** against the sons of ‘Abdi-Aširta then they will trample(?) the sons(!) all of them on the lands of the king, my lord.”

<sup>27</sup> EA 287: 20 from ‘Abdi-Ḥeba of Jerusalem: “If there are archers **this year**, then the lands and the mayors will belong to the king, my master.”; EA 288: 52 from ‘Abdi-Ḥeba of Jerusalem: “If there are no archers **this year**, all the lands of the king, my master, will be lost.”

Mittani, for instance, considered “six months” very probably a realistic period,<sup>28</sup> while Rib-Hadda of Byblos – in some cases – mentions “two months”<sup>29</sup> to make an even more urgent appeal for help from the Pharaoh’s military troops. It is however plausible that, when he mentions “four months”, in the context of his son’s visit to Egypt,<sup>30</sup> it might be construed as expressing an actual period of time. The latter might also be the case when he speaks of certain military actions led against him and lasting for two months.<sup>31</sup> There is also no reason to disbelieve Mut-Ba’lu when he mentions in his report to Yanḥamu that Ayyab is not with him – “In fact, he *h[as been in the fie]ld* for two months.”<sup>32</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS

It is obvious that unit-of-time expressions as well as various temporal adverbs attested in the Amarna letters represent a much wider category than the examples presented in this contribution.<sup>33</sup> It is true that the only precise dates are given exclusively by means of hieratic dockets or, more specifically, by means of four short hieratic inscriptions. Although their importance to chronological discussions is rather limited, one cannot underestimate their significance for gaining a better understanding of the procedures and functioning of the royal Records Office. The short overview presented in this paper only goes to confirm that, in order to understand a given context properly, each of the relevant expressions must be considered carefully and separately. In most cases, and regardless of the social position of both the sender and the addressee, the

Amarna material shows that a given unit of time is acknowledged as a real unit of time. A fewer number of examples must be interpreted as rhetorical formulations in which mention of a specific unit of time – especially a “year” – should not be taken literally. These expressions appear to have formed part of the so-called “Amarna language” or “Amarna phraseology”, which was shared, followed and understood by the majority of the Amarna correspondents. In this “language” a “year” represented a key-expression. Based on the occurrence of this expression within the texts, we may conclude that the Egyptian administrative and military practice of sending troops on a yearly basis undoubtedly played such an important role that it found its way into the “language” of several local kinglets. It is indisputable that a successful run of correspondence depended upon its addressee’s correct understanding of a given message. It remains hard, if not impossible, to ascertain how such a message was interpreted at the Egyptian court. Was it understood literally or could it be identified as a way of putting pressure on the Egyptian administration to assure the writer of a better political and economic position? Could it be taken as a diplomatic code or just a plain description of reality? A time scheme, unit-of-time expressions and the way they are perceived always bear a relationship with their relevant cultural environment and, to a great extent, “time” is a cultural and social phenomenon. In case of the Amarna letters it is evident that, in this case at least, it is a trait shared by the “Amarna people”.

<sup>28</sup> EA 20: 23: “In **six months**, I will send Keliya, my messenger, and Mane, the mes[senger] of my brother.”

<sup>29</sup> EA 81: 29, 45: “[I]f there are no archers in these **two months**, then [...]”; “If the archers do not come ou[t] in **two months**, then [‘Ab]di-Aširta will come up and take the two ci[ties.]”. EA 82: 42: “If there are no archers in **two months**, then I will leave the city (and) go off, and my life will be safe.”

<sup>30</sup> EA 138: (20?), 23, 78 from Rib-Hadda to the king: “*After the re[vol]t of my territory, s[in]ce [I]2 mo[nth]s ago, have I not lived in Beirut? ... Now [...] has come out to me*

*[since] four months ago. ... Though I sent my son to the palace of the king seconds after I arrived in Beirut, he has not had an audience with the king for four months.”* (MORAN 1992, 221–222).

<sup>31</sup> EA 114: 41 from Rib-Hadda to the king: “He has been encamped against me for **two months**.”

<sup>32</sup> Cf. EA 256: 14; MORAN 1992, 309.

<sup>33</sup> The corpus itself is much wealthier and contains expressions like a “day”, “today”, “yesterday” and a “day before yesterday”, as well as an “evening”, “morning” and a “night” or more general ones as “earlier” or “later in time”.

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