

*L*OYAL SERVANTS OF THE KING:
A POLITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF
SUBORDINATION IN SYRIA-PALESTINE
(CA. 1600–600 BCE)*

1. Introduction

From a geopolitical perspective, the region of Syria-Palestine, strategically located in between Western Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and Africa, was a heavily transited road and also a reliable source of war spoils for the empires of the second and first millennia BCE. These empires intervened politically (in the structure of the socio-political relations between the petty local kingdoms and the surrounding polities), economically (by extracting material resources and tribute) and ideologically (through acculturation, and the transference of symbolic and conceptual features onto the subordinated elite).¹ This intervention is clearly evident in the epigraphic record from the middle of the sixteenth to the seventh century BCE in the form of inter-polity treaties, the most important and relevant ones being those between Ḫatti and the Syrian principalities and between Assyria and the Syro-Palestinian polities. In addition, the epistolographic corpora from the archives of El Amarna and Ugarit reveal the

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¹ Cf. M. Liverani, 'Dall'acculturazione alla deculturazione: Considerazioni sul ruolo dei contatti politici ed economici nella storia siriano-palestinese pre-ellenistica', in G. Nenci (ed.), *Forme di contatto e processi di trasformazione delle società antiche. Atti del Convegno di Cortone (24–30 Maggio 1981)*, Pisa-Rome 1983, 503–520.

mechanism of subordination and domination that seemed to be at work in this region.²

My intention in this paper is to analyze comparatively, and mainly from the perspective of a historical and political anthropology, some dynamics of polity subordination in the Levant during most of the Late Bronze Age under the imperial domain of Egypt and Hatti, and of Assyria from the eighth to seventh centuries BCE. The interpretative model underlying this socio-political reading is the practice of patron-client relations, or political patronage, which is attested in various forms and contexts in the Mediterranean world and the Middle East. This model is considered particularly useful in shedding light on some aspects of the textual materials from Syria-Palestine, which expose in different yet compatible ways the articulation of inter-polity power.

2. Syria-Palestine from ca. 1550 to 1150 BCE

Roughly between the middle of the sixteenth and the middle of the twelfth century BCE, we find in Syria-Palestine a prevalent situation of foreign rule due to the occupation of the territory by imperial powers. Egypt's expansion into Western Asia since the very beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty (ca. 1549–1292), and especially during Tuthmose III's reign (1479–1425), established a permanent presence by means of administrative centers and military garrisons in Palestine and southern Syria, in the face of the potential expansion of the kingdom of Mitanni in the southeastern frontier.³ Egypt's imperial control was political but also, as

² Cf. the following transliterations and translations of texts: J.A. Knudtzon, *Die el-Amarna-Tafeln mit Einleitung und Erläuterungen*, Anmerkungen und Register bearbeitet von O. Weber und E. Ebeling, 2 vols., Leipzig 1907–1915; J. Nougayrol et al. (eds), *Le palais royal d'Ugarit* (vols. II–VI; Mission de Ras Shamra, Tomes VI–VII, IX–XIII), Paris 1955–1970; D.J. Wiseman, 'The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon', *Iraq* 20 (1958), 1–99; A.K. Grayson, 'Akkadian Treaties of the Seventh Century B.C.', *JCS* 39 (1987), 127–160; S. Parpola, K. Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (SAA 2), Helsinki 1988; W.L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters*, Baltimore 1992; G. Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts* (WAWBSL 7), Atlanta 1996; M. Liverani, *Le lettere di el-Amarna*, 1. *Le lettere dei «Piccoli re»*, 2. *Le lettere dei «Grande re»* (TVOA 3/1–2), Brescia 1998–1999; H.A. Hoffner, Jr., *Letters from the Hittite Kingdom* (WAWBSL 15), Atlanta 2009. I will not refer in this paper to all the attested cases of political subordination, only to the most representative examples.

³ See A. Alt, 'Das Stützpunktsystem der Pharaonen an der phönikischen Küste und im syrischen Binneland' [1950], in A. Alt, *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, München 1959, III, 107–140; W. Helck, *Die Beziehungen Ägyptens zu Vorderasien im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 5), Wiesbaden 1962, 109–198; H. Klengel, *Syria, 3000 to 300 B.C.: A Handbook of Political History*, Berlin 1992, 84–180; D.B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, Princeton 1992, 125–213; and most recently, the thorough study by E.F. Morris, *The Architecture of Imperialism: Military Bases and the Evolution of Foreign Policy in Egypt's New Kingdom* (Probleme der Ägyptologie 22), Leiden 2005. On Mitanni, see J. Freu, *Histoire du Mitanni*, Paris 2003.

noted above, economic, and affected directly the local autonomy of the numerous small kingdoms and principalities of the region.⁴ Some considerable time after Tuthmose III's campaigns, the kingdom of Ḫatti under Šuppiluliuma I (ca. 1355–1320) expanded its military control over southwest Anatolia and northern Syria, leaving the kingdom of Mitanni out of the political game in the Levant and under Hittite control, sharing with Egypt the rule of Syria-Palestine – and competing for it as well.⁵

Departing from this basic geopolitical scheme, it is possible to offer a comparison of two different modes of imperial management of the occupied territories: a bureaucratic-military control on the part of the Egyptians, and rule by means of alliance and subordination treaties by the Hittites.⁶

2.1. Egyptian Rule

The bureaucratic-military nature of the Egyptian rule in the southern Levant over the small local polities was basically anchored in three factors: (a) the military dominance of the Egyptians, which guaranteed indisputable control over the local polities; (b) the fragmented political topography of Palestine, that is, the general situation of petty kingdoms which usually did not expand their influence beyond their immediate periphery and for long periods of time⁷ due perhaps to logistical factors, such as a lack of manpower, and therefore large armies, and/or administrative apparatuses, etc.;⁸ and (c) ideology, namely, the Egyptian perception that Egypt was the center of the cosmos and the Pharaoh the *only* true king among a group of regional powers of different scope, etc. The Egyptians in

⁴ See, on the economic interests of the Egyptian domination, S. Ahituv, 'Economic Factors in the Egyptian Conquest of Canaan', *IEJ* 28 (1978), 93–105; N. Na'aman, 'Economic Aspects of the Egyptian Occupation of Canaan', *IEJ* 31 (1981), 172–185; *idem*, 'Pharaonic Lands in the Jezreel Valley in the Late Bronze Age', in M. Heltzer and E. Lipiński (eds), *Society and Economy in the Eastern Mediterranean* (OLA 23), Leuven 1988, 177–185; and, in general on the Egyptian military presence, M.G. Hasel, *Domination & Resistance: Egyptian Military Activity in the Southern Levant, 1300–1185 BC* (Probleme der Ägyptologie 11), Leiden 1998.

⁵ See further in J. Freu, M. Mazoyer, *Les débuts du Nouvel Empire Hittite: Les Hittites et leur histoire II*, Paris 2007.

⁶ See A. Alt, 'Hettitische und ägyptische Herrschaftsordnung in unterworfenen Gebieten' [1949], in A. Alt, *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, München 1959, III, 99–106; and especially M. Liverani, 'Contrasti e confluenze di concezioni politiche nell'età di El-Amarna', *RA* 61 (1967), 1–18.

⁷ An exception to this is constituted by Hazor and Shechem. See I. Finkelstein and N. Na'aman, 'Shechem of the Amarna Period and the Rise of the Northern Kingdom of Israel', *IEJ* 55 (2005), 172–193.

⁸ See S. Bunimovitz, 'The Problem of Human Resources in Late Bronze Age Palestine and Its Socioeconomic Implications', *UF* 26 (1994), 1–20. On such a fragmented political topography, cf. S.H. Savage, S.E. Falconer, 'Spatial and Statistical Inference of Late Bronze Age Polities in the Southern Levant', *BASOR* 330 (2003), 31–45.

the southern Levant had no military rival among the small local polities, so this centralist ideology would have empowered them to exert an effective control over the whole territory.⁹

In the Egyptian case, it is indeed possible to identify what Mario Liverani called many years ago a friction or a clash of political and ideological conceptions between the Egyptian king and his Asiatic subjects.¹⁰ A recurring feature in the El Amarna letters is the petitions of assistance and help by the local petty kings to the Pharaoh, mediated by reminders of loyalty and obedience: 'The fact is that I am a loyal servant of the king! – proclaims Lab'ayu, ruler of Shechem – I am not a rebel and I am not delinquent in duty'.¹¹ Concealed within this statement is the expectation that, given such expressed loyalty and obedience, the Egyptian king will exhibit a reciprocal attitude. This is evident, for example, in the request of Rib-Hadda of Byblos: 'May the king, my lord, heed the words of his loyal servant, and may he send grain in ships in order to keep his servant and his city alive'.¹² But there are also reproaches in the case of a lack of a concrete reciprocity from the Pharaoh, for instance, as Rib-Hadda addresses again the Pharaoh:

I fall at the feet of my lord, my Sun, 7 times and 7 times. Why do you not send back word to me that I may know what should I do? I sent a man of mine to my lord, and both his horses were taken. A second man – a man of his – was taken, [and] a tablet of the king was not put [i]n my man's hand. Listen t[o m]e! Why are you negligent so that your land is being taken?¹³

Such a petition indicates that personal loyalty and obedience were of paramount importance for the local petty kings. However, Egyptian ideology did not allow, so to say, any answer or consideration towards such a personalized (and even impertinent) petition because the Pharaoh perceived the petty kings in terms of the bureaucratic workings of his rule: They were subjects, not allies! The clash seems then to be between the impersonal, bureaucratic, Egyptocentric perspective of the Pharaoh and the personalized view of politics of the local rulers, who behaved following norms of reciprocity. Moreover, these local petty kings were small, peripheral parts of the Pharaoh's foreign domain, and therefore not worthy of an answer – much less of an acknowledgement of personal reciprocity. Of course, Egyptian rule implied an annual tribute by the Asiatic subjects in

⁹ Cf. P.J. Frandsen, 'Egyptian Imperialism', in M.T. Larsen (ed.), *Power and Propaganda: A Symposium on Ancient Empires* (Mesopotamia: Copenhagen Studies in Assyriology 7), Copenhagen 1979, 167–190; and Hasel, *Domination & Resistance*, 17–21.

¹⁰ Liverani, 'Contrasti e confluenze'.

¹¹ EA 254:10–12; Moran, *The Amarna Letters*, 307; also Liverani, *Le lettere di el-Amarna*, 1, 117 (Liverani translates the latter part as 'non pecco, non sono colpevole', 'I do not sin, I am not guilty').

¹² EA 85:16–19; Moran, *The Amarna Letters*, 156; also Liverani, *Le lettere di el-Amarna*, 1, 192.

¹³ EA 83:5–16; Moran, *The Amarna Letters*, 153; also Liverani, *Le lettere di el-Amarna*, 1, 189.

return for which they were granted protection and the 'breath of life' by the Pharaoh; however, from the Egyptian perspective foreign subjects were no more than subhumans dwelling in the barbaric periphery of Egypt, and the Pharaoh let them live – both politically and symbolically – only as an act of grace. There was therefore no formal exchange, if perceived from the point of view of Egyptian ideology.¹⁴

2.2. Hittite Rule

Hittite rule over conquered lands differed significantly from that of the Egyptian administration essentially in the political communication and intercourse that the Hittite king allowed with the Levantine rulers. Hittite rule implied a formal exchange – an unequal exchange in reality – with the subjects of the king, but this exchange – unlike with Egyptian rule – was recognized in both its material and symbolic aspects. The usual procedure consisted in the celebration of a treaty of political alliance and subordination between the Hittite king and the subject king, including a series of seemingly symmetrical clauses established between the parties, and at times marriage alliances as well.¹⁵

Subordination treaties made room for personal relationships between the parties; and reciprocity – although, as already noted, asymmetrical – was an essential part of the sociopolitical bond: the Hittite king protected the subject king militarily, exempted him from certain tributes, and guaranteed his dynasty on the throne. The subject king, in return, had to assist the Hittite king militarily and protect him against any enemy, give any service required of him and be loyal to his person (not to his office). This arrangement, aside from expanding the Hittite Empire, assured the internal governance of the subject king's kingdom and the external protection by the Hittite king.¹⁶

¹⁴ See further on this, M. Liverani, *International Relations in the Ancient Near East, 1600–1100 BC* (Studies in Diplomacy), New York 2001, 17–45, 133–134; and E. Pfoh, *Syria-Palestine in the Late Bronze Age: An Anthropology of Politics and Power* (CIS), London (in press).

¹⁵ See Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, for a collection of treaties. On marriage alliances, cf. F. Pintore, *Il matrimonio interdinastico nel Vicino Oriente durante i Secoli XV–XIII* (OAC 14), Roma 1978; S.A. Meier, 'Diplomacy and International Marriages', in R. Cohen, R. Westbrook (eds) *Amaria Diplomacy: The Beginning of International Relations*, Baltimore 2000, 165–173 and 259–262.

¹⁶ See G. Beckman, 'Hittite Administration in Syria in the Light of the Texts from Hattuša, Ugarit and Emar', in M.W. Chavalas, J.L. Hayes (eds), *New Horizons in the Study of Ancient Syria* (Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 25), Malibu 1992, 41–49. In general on the Hittite treaties, see M.E. Balza, 'I trattati ittiti: Sigillatura, testimoni, collocazione', in M. Liverani, C. Mora (eds), *I diritti del mondo cuneiforme (Mesopotamia e regioni adiacenti, ca. 2500–500 a.C.)*, Pavia 2008, 387–418; see also in the same volume, E. Devecchi, 'La funzione del prologo storico nei trattati ittiti: Ipotesi e discussione', 361–385.

For example, in a treaty from the middle of the fourteenth century BCE between Šuppiluliuma I and Aziru, ruler of the Syrian kingdom of Amurru, the Hittite king details in the preamble how he placed Aziru on the throne of his kingdom and how the petty king had to pay an annual tribute. The treaty also stipulates a mutual offensive and defensive alliance and the exchange of fugitives, and ends with a conditional curses and blessings formula: if Aziru transgresses the oath, the oath gods will destroy Aziru; but if Aziru observes the oath, the oath gods will protect Aziru and his kingdom.

Previously [...] the King of Egypt, the King of the land of Ḫurri, the king of the land [of Aštata(?)], the king of the land of Nuḫašši, the king of the land of Niya, the king of the land [of Kinza(?)], the king of the land of Mukiš], the king of the land of Aleppo, and the king of the land of Karkemiš – all of these kings – suddenly became hostile [to My Majesty]. But Aziru, king of the land [of Amurru], came up from the gate of Egyptian territory and became a vassal [of] My Majesty, [King] of Ḫatti. And I, My Majesty, Great King, [accordingly rejoiced] very much. Did not I, My Majesty, Great King, accordingly rejoice very much? As I to Aziru [...] Because Aziru [knelt down] at the feet [of My Majesty, and] came from the gate of Egyptian territory, and knelt [down at the feet of My Majesty], I, My Majesty, Great King [took up] Aziru and ranked him (as king) among his brothers.

Whoever is My Majesty's [friend shall be] your friend. [Whoever] is My Majesty's enemy [shall be your] enemy. If the King [of Ḫatti] goes against the land [of Ḫurri], or Egypt, or Babylonia, [or the land of Aštata], or the land of Alši – [whatever foreign lands] located near your borders are hostile [to My Majesty], or whatever friendly lands – [that is, friendly to My Majesty] – located near [your borders – the land of Mukiš(?), the land of Kinza, the land of Nuḫašši – turn [and] become [hostile to the King of Ḫatti – when the King of Ḫatti goes to attack] this enemy, if you, Aziru, do not mobilize wholeheartedly [with infantry] and chariotry, and do not fight him wholeheartedly, you will have transgressed the oath.¹⁷

The treaty says nothing about what will happen if the Hittite king transgresses the oath. Also, the fact that the Hittite king is the one who imposes the bond and the arrangement for the exchange of assistance and loyalty, from one king to another (not between kingdoms!), clearly indicates *personal* rather than impersonal or bureaucratic dynamics of empire management. Inter-state subordination is then a personal affair between the royal houses under the Hittite rule and the Hittite king himself.¹⁸

Let us leave now this basic picture and turn our attention to the later Neo-Assyrian rule of Syria-Palestine, introducing first the sociopolitical transition from the Late Bronze to the Iron Age.

¹⁷ See the translation in Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 32–37 (here 33–34; I have slightly adapted the transliteration of proper names).

¹⁸ See further examples now on Hittite and Ugaritic political interaction in Pfoh, *Syria-Palestine in the Late Bronze Age*.

3. Syria-Palestine between ca. 1150 and 612 BCE

The general crisis of the twelfth century BCE that affected and restructured the whole of the eastern Mediterranean, bringing down the Late Bronze Age regional system of great kings and petty kings,¹⁹ left Syria-Palestine scattered with tribal and seminomadic elements.²⁰ Later on, relatively small autonomous polities began to develop throughout the region. In Syria, during the tenth century, the Aramean tribal kingdoms appeared in the desert fringe, along with the Phoenician city-states on the coast and the Neo-Hittite kingdoms to the northwest. This seems to be also the basic picture during the Early Iron Age in Palestine: contrary to what we learn from the Old Testament, there is no archaeological or historical evidence of a biblical United Monarchy during the tenth century in central Palestine, or in sociopolitical terms of a full-blown state, properly speaking, but rather chiefdom-like polities.²¹ Between the ninth and the late eighth centuries, it is archaeologically and epigraphically possible to detect the presence of a relatively major local power, namely, a kingdom of Israel in the northern Palestinian highlands, which in Assyrian sources appears under the name of *Bit Ḥumri*, the ‘House of Omri’, along with the Philistine city-states in the southern coastal plain of Palestine. After Israel’s demise, from the late eighth and until the early sixth century BCE, the kingdom of Judah would develop in the southern Palestinian highlands, around Jerusalem, under the political patronage of the Assyrian kings.²²

¹⁹ See further on this political system, Cohen, Westbrook (eds), *Amarna Diplomacy*; T. Bryce, *Letters of the Great Kings of the Ancient Near East: The Royal Correspondence of the Late Bronze Age*, London 2003; M. van de Mieroop, *The Eastern Mediterranean in the Age of Ramesses II*, Oxford 2007.

²⁰ See the synthesis in M. Liverani, *Israel’s History and the History of Israel* (BibleWorld), London 2005, 32–51; and also Klengel, *Syria, 3000 to 300 B.C.*, 181–187.

²¹ As I. Finkelstein observes: ‘The nature of the evidence from both Jerusalem and the hill country to the south suggests that until the 9th century B.C.E., the southern hill country still featured a typical Amarna-like formation. Most likely, a “king” and his court ruled from a highland stronghold, which did not include much more than a modest palace and a shrine, over extensive, sparsely settled territory with a few sedentary villages and a large pastoral population’ (‘City-States to States: Polity Dynamics in the 10th–9th Centuries B.C.E.’, in W.G. Dever, S. Gitin [eds], *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palaestina*, Winona Lake, IN 2003, 75–83, here 79). But cf. R. Kletter, ‘Chronology and United Monarchy: A Methodological Review’, *ZDPV* 120 (2004), 13–54 (13–31); E. Pfoh, *The Emergence of Israel in Ancient Palestine: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (CIS), London 2009, 87–112.

²² See on this process, I. Finkelstein, ‘The Great Transformation: The “Conquest” of the Highland Frontier and the Rise of the Territorial States’, in T.E. Levy (ed.), *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land*, New York 1995, 349–365. On the kingdom of Judah, see E.A. Knauf, ‘The Glorious Days of Manasseh’, in L.L. Grabbe (ed.), *Good Kings and Bad Kings: The Kingdom of Judah in the Seventh Century BCE* (LHB/OTS, 393/ ESHM, 5), London 2005, 164–188.

A disruption in this process of local sociopolitical development came from outside Syria-Palestine. Relevant political events include the conquest by the Assyrian king Aššurnāširpal II (883–859) of the Aramean polities of *Bīt Adini* and Karkemiš in Syria, and the intervention in the land by Šalmaneser III (859–824) in the famous Battle of Qarqar in 853 BCE, which pitted a Syro-Palestinian coalition of polities, including the kingdom of Israel, against the Assyrian invader.²³ After this episode, and taking advantage of a conjuncture of factors leading to Assyrian weakness, Hazael of Aram-Damascus (841–801) rose to power, expanding his sovereignty over the region, including the kingdom of Israel. However, this situation of political autonomy was not to last. The imperial integration achieved by Tiglath-pileser III (745–727) since 745 BCE, which included the submission of the Syrian kingdom of Aram-Damascus, together with other minor Syrian polities, and later the central-highland kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and the Transjordanian kingdoms of Ammon, Moab and Edom, sealed the political fate of the Syro-Palestinian region in the Iron Age as a mosaic of ‘vassal’ states/kingdoms and subdued polities under Assyrian overlordship. With the exception of Aram-Damascus and the short-lived kingdom of Israel (ca. 900–722), in addition to some city-states on the Phoenician coast, the entire region, from the late eighth century onwards, was not politically autonomous and came once again under the control of expanding empires.²⁴

From a sociopolitical view, current scholarship understands the transition of the political systems from the Late Bronze to the Iron Age as a shift from ‘territorial states’ to ‘national states’. In the first typology the key organizing factor is territory and political frontiers and in the second the idea of a common descent from an apical ancestor or, in other words, tribal ascription and ethnicity.²⁵ This understanding, although marking a typological change – with the semantic perils

²³ Cf. the inscription of the Kurkh Monolith in K.L. Younger, Jr., ‘Neo-Assyrian Inscriptions’, in W.W. Hallo (ed.), *The Context of Scripture. II: Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World*, Leiden 2003, 261–266. See further, for the political scene of this period, Klengel, *Syria, 3000 to 300 B.C.*, 187–218; G. Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine from the Palaeolithic Period to Alexander’s Conquest: With a Contribution by Gary O. Rollefson* (ed. by D.V. Edelman; JSOT, Suppl., 146), Sheffield 1993, 569–638 (although Ahlström, at times, gives much too credit to the biblical narrative about the period).

²⁴ This makes us wonder – with E.A. Knauf (‘Was Omride Israel a Sovereign State?’ in L.L. Grabbe [ed.], *Ahab Agonistes: The Rise and Fall of the Omri Dynasty* [LHB/OTS, 421 / ESHM, 6], London 2007, 100–103) – if there ever was a local sovereign polity in Palestine, even considering the existence of the kingdom of Israel. See Pfoh, *The Emergence of Israel in Ancient Palestine*, 183–184.

²⁵ See G. Buccellati, *Cities and Nations of Ancient Syria: An Essay on Political Institutions with Special Reference to the Israelite Kingdoms* (Studi Semitici 26), Rome 1967; M. Liverani, ‘Stati etnici e città-stato: Una tipologia storica per la prima età del Ferro’, in M. Molinos, A. Zifferero (eds), *Primi popoli d’Europa: Proposte e riflessioni sulle origini della civiltà nell’Europa mediterranea*, Firenze 2002, 33–47; Finkelstein, ‘City-States to States’, 80–81.

of referring to 'nations' or 'nationalities' in pre-modern times – does not imply however a radical alteration of the ways in which political subordination was practiced in the region or how domination was exerted over the local kingdoms from the Late Bronze Age onwards, as the textual evidence shows. Beyond some sociopolitical restructuring, continuities may in fact be identified in the local means of political subordination to the great powers.

3.1. Assyrian Rule

From the late tenth century BCE the reappearance of the Assyrian kingdom in northern Mesopotamia, in the Habur region between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, is evident from both archaeological and epigraphic evidence.²⁶ The strong militaristic and expansive character of this reemergence will lead to a progressive conquest of most of southwestern Asia from southern Mesopotamia to the Levant, throughout the so-called Fertile Crescent, ruling over Syria in the eighth century BCE and over Palestine during the seventh.²⁷ The unfolding of the imperial grip of Assyria over Syria-Palestine in this period will be carried out through two main strategies of control: (a) the 'provincialization' of conquered territories, with the subsequent deportation of part of the native population (the ruling elite, craft specialists, etc.) and the installation of an Assyrian governor;²⁸ and (b) the subjection of the conquered kingdom or polity by means of so-called vassal treaties between the Assyrian king and the defeated king.²⁹

As observed above, Assyrian rule of Syria-Palestine, in spite of some structural differences,³⁰ finds some direct analogies with Hittite rule of Syrian territory,

²⁶ Cf. M. Liverani, 'The Growth of the Assyrian Empire in the Habur / Middle Euphrates Area: A New Paradigm', *SAAB* 2 (1988), 81–98; J.N. Postgate, 'The Land of Assur and the Yoke of Assur', *World Archaeology* 23 (1992), 247–263.

²⁷ See in general, F.M. Fales, *L'impero assiro. Storia e amministrazione (IX–VII secolo a.C.)*, Bari-Roma 2001. On the Assyrian impact on Syria-Palestine, see Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine*, 665–740; Liverani, *Israel's History*, 143–164.

²⁸ 'The annexed kingdoms were often chopped up into at least two administrative units which the Assyrian king entrusted to his governors' (K. Radner, 'Assyrian and Non-Assyrian Kingship in the First Millennium BC', in G.B. Lanfranchi, R. Rollinger [eds], *Concepts of Kingship in Antiquity: Proceedings of the European Science Foundation Exploration Workshop held in Padova, November 28th – December 1st, 2007* [HANE / Monographs 1], Padova 2010, 25–34, here 29). See also A.M. Bagg, *Die Assyrer und das Westland: Studien zur historischen Geographie und Herrschaftspraxis in der Levante im 1. Jt. v.u. Z.* (OLA 216), Leuven 2011, 163, 296–301.

²⁹ Postgate, 'The Land of Assur and the Yoke of Assur'; F.M. Fales, 'Il periodo neo-assiro: Trattati ed editi', in Liverani, Mora (eds), *I diritti nel mondo cuneiforme*, 503–556; and especially, S.W. Holloway, *Aššur is King! Aššur is King! Religion in the Exercise of Power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (CHANE 10), Leiden 2002, 320–425; Bagg, *Die Assyrer und das Westland*, 163–173.

³⁰ Postgate ('The Land of Assur and the Yoke of Assur', 251) observes: 'The Assyrian imperial order differed from those of the Mitannians and Hittites, who incorporated a hierarchy of local dynasties into the same system as the high king's core domain. The formal pronouncements of

with respect to the character of the subordination. The Assyrian king imposed a submission treaty with the defeated or surrendering local king, through which a certain political reciprocity was established, though favoring always the Assyrian party. This guaranteed *de facto* the bond. The gods, as in the Hittite case, were also witnesses to the relationship of subordination. In the Hittite treaties, the contractual formalism expressed symmetry between the parties, but this was only an ideological expression and in reality did not exist.³¹ In the Assyrian treaties instead, the subordination of the lesser king was rather explicit.³² Political subordination in both cases was thus expressed by means of alliance, although an unequal alliance: the Hittites imposed treaties on kings on the periphery of their kingdom; the Assyrians imposed treaties or pacts (*adū*) and loyalty oaths on the subject kings from conquered lands, but also over officers from the kingdom's own administration.³³ These treaties or pacts would seem to enforce the subordinate king to protect and assist the Assyrian king (or the crown-prince) loyally and never to desert or betray him, under the threat of a godly punishment materialized in the form of an Assyrian army's incursion to the rebellious land. For instance, in Esarhaddon's succession treaty with Numbareš, city-ruler of Nahšimarti, a series of dispositions were set to be obeyed by the subordinated party. The petty king must accept and protect the Assyrian heir and be utterly loyal to his person and nobody else:

You shall protect Aššurbanipal, the great crown prince designate, whom Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, has presented and ordered for you, and on behalf of whom he has confirmed and concluded (this) treaty with you; you shall not sin against him, nor bring your hand against him with evil intent, nor revolt or do anything to him which is not good or proper; you shall not oust him from the kingship of Assyria by helping one of his brothers, elder or younger, to seize the throne of Assyria in his stead, nor

the Assyrian kings distinguish clearly between territory directly administered and incorporated within the "Land of Assur", and areas acknowledging Assyrian domination but retaining some form of autonomy'.

³¹ See M. Liverani, 'Shunashura, or: On Reciprocity', in his *Myth and Politics in Ancient Near Eastern Historiography*, London 2004, 53–81.

³² See M. Liverani, 'Terminologia e ideologia del patto nelle iscrizioni reali assire', in M. Liverani, L. Canfora C. Zaccagnini (eds), *I trattati nel mondo antico. Forma, ideologia, funzione*, Roma 1990, 113–147; Radner, 'Assyrian and Non-Assyrian Kingship in the First Millennium BC'.

³³ 'Adū were not "vassal treaties", in the sense that they established vassalage, for the inferior status of the bound party was neither stressed nor indicated in the texts. During the NA [Neo-Assyrian] era no party or power was equal to Assyria, and so every *adū* was by definition an imposition from above. Furthermore, it needs to be emphasized that *adū* were imposed upon all administrative areas of the empire. Individuals and states, both within Assyria and its provincial system and without, undertook *adū* obligations of loyalty to the sovereign' (M. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Century* [SBLMS 19], Atlanta 1974, 43); see also Liverani, 'Terminologia e ideologia del patto'; Holloway, *Aššur is King! Aššur is King!*, chapters 3–4.

seat any other king or any other lord over yourselves, nor swear and oath to any other king or any other lord.³⁴

The treaty continues with a long series of circumstances in which Numbareš must be loyal to the heir to the throne of Assyria against attempts of usurpation, rebellions, etc. After that, a long series of curses against the petty king follows, should he betray what is established in the treaty. And, just as in the Hittite treaty referred to above, nothing is said about the potential misbehavior of the Assyrian king or of his heir against Numbareš, and the penalty for that possibility.³⁵

Moving forward in time, the destruction of Niniveh in 612 BCE marks in fact the end of the Assyrian Empire. Shortly before that, the Chaldean general Nabopolassar (625–605) had taken over Babylon from the Assyrians and initiated the rise of the new Babylonian Empire.³⁶ In spite of some rearrangements, the submission treaty strategy of the Assyrian overlords was continued as a material (and symbolic) means of imperial control.³⁷ Therefore, the Neo-Babylonian expansion to, and then rule of, Syria-Palestine – excluding the relatively brief Egyptian domination of the territory (between 609/605 and 539 BCE) – could actually be analyzed in the same way the Assyrian rule is here.³⁸

4. Patron-Client Relations as a Native Mode of Political Rule and Subordination in Syria-Palestine

At least since the middle of the twentieth century, ancient Near Eastern historiography has made use of medieval political terminology to refer to a kind of sociopolitical bonding expressing subordination by means of an oath of loyalty and a treaty and mediated by certain reciprocity. The ubiquitous term here is ‘vas-

³⁴ Parpola, Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties*, 31.

³⁵ Cf. Parpola, Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties*, 31–58.

³⁶ Cf. in general, M. Liverani, *Antico Oriente: Storia, società, economia* (Biblioteca Storica Laterza), new updated edition, Bari-Rome 2011, 757–774.

³⁷ See M. Tsevat, ‘The Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Vassal Oaths and the Prophet Ezekiel’, *JBL* 78 (1959), 199–204; but cf. also D. Vanderhooft, ‘Babylonian Strategies of Imperial Control in the West: Royal Practice and Rhetoric’, in O. Lipschits, J. Blenkinsopp (eds), *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, Winona Lake, IN 2003, 235–262, who argues about the difference between Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian rhetorics of domination. The material strategy for controlling lesser polities seems, however, to have been similar, if not the same.

³⁸ See Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine*, 759–766, 781–783; Liverani, *Israel's History*, 165–199; on Babylonian patronage, cf. M. Jursa, ‘Patronage in Babylonien im sechsten Jahrhundert v. Chr.’, *Arta* 2011/1, 1–35.

salage' and their cognate expressions 'vassal kings', 'vassal states', etc., together with references to 'feudalism' or 'feudal' relationships.³⁹ However, from a comparative and historical perspective, it is difficult to see how this kind of relationship could be characterized precisely as 'vassalage' or as actually expressing 'feudalism' in sociopolitical terms. One main objection is that the political rights – if we may call them so – of the lesser party were not explicit in the treaties, as it was the case in medieval feudal bonds, but depended instead on the personal will and judgment of the king establishing the treaty.⁴⁰ And even though a group of gods acted as guarantors of the treaty and ensured that the parties acted accordingly, we may assume that the superior party (the Hittite or the Assyrian king) would have most probably acted according to the needs of the kingdom's *Realpolitik* and, therefore, with the favor of the gods, limited the political autonomy and agency of the lesser party to a minimum. Political authority rested ultimately with the overlord's person.

Considering the aforementioned examples of subordination to foreign powers, instead of a term like 'vassalage', which is conceptually filled with medieval connotations, there is a much better concept to express and understand socio-political subordination and the articulation of power it implies. A careful use of the concept of *patron-client relationships*, or *political patronage*, as it is documented in the ethnographic and ethno-historical records of the Mediterranean and the Middle East,⁴¹ can enhance significantly our interpretation of the sources and our understanding of power display, and subordination to such power, in them.

³⁹ See, among others, J. Gray, 'Feudalism in Ugarit and Israel', *ZAW* 64 (1952), 49–55; G. Boyer, 'La place des textes d'Ugarit dans l'histoire de l'ancien droit oriental', in C. Schaeffer (ed.), *Le palais royal d'Ugarit. Vol. III* (Mission de Ras Shamra, VI), Paris 1955, 283–308; Liverani, 'Contrasti e confluenze', 2, 6, 10, 17; E. Ebeling, 'Feudalismus', in E. Ebeling, B. Meissner, D.O. Edzard (eds), *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, Berlin 1971, vol. 3, 54–55; A. Archi, 'Il "feudalesimo" ittita', *Studi micenei ed egeo-anatolici* 18 (1977), 7–18; Klengel, *Syria, 3000 to 300 B.C., passim*. Postgate ('The Land of Assur and the Yoke of Assur', 252–256) represents an exception by calling very appropriately 'client-states' what is commonly – and wrongly, in my opinion – referred to as 'vassal states' in most studies. See also P.R. Bedford, 'The Neo-Assyrian Empire', in I. Morris, W. Scheidel (eds), *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires: State Power from Assyria to Byzantium*, Oxford 2009, 30–65.

⁴⁰ I refer further to the old but still relevant discussion in R. Boutruche, *Seigneurie et féodalité. Le premier âge: Des liens d'homme à homme*, Paris 1968. A recent overview of 'feudalism' in the ancient Near East is offered by S. Lafont, 'Fief et féodalité dans le Proche-Orient ancien', in E. Bournazel, J.-P. Poly (eds), *Les féodalités* (Histoire générale des systèmes politiques), Paris 1998, 517–630. A systematic reassessment of ancient Near Eastern 'vassalage' needs indeed to be done in order to avoid the perpetuation of anachronisms.

⁴¹ See, for instance, J.K. Campbell, *Honour, Family, and Patronage: A Study of Institutions and Moral Values in a Greek Mountain Community*, Oxford 1964; J. Boissevain, 'Patronage in Sicily', *Man* NS 1 (1966), 18–33; E. Gellner, J. Waterbury (eds), *Patrons and Clients in Mediterranean Societies*, London 1977.

In general, patron-client relations imply the following aspects: (a) it is a personalized and reciprocal, although necessarily asymmetrical, relationship between two individuals; (b) the greater party, the patron, imposes the conditions under which resources, goods and/or assistance will be exchanged with the lesser party, the client; (c) there is no institutionalized set of rules external to the dyadic relationship telling the parties how to behave, but rather expectations of behavior, probably due to the structural fragility of patronage bonds.⁴²

Departing from this brief characterization, we can certainly find traces of patron-client relations in both Hittite and Assyrian treaties: in both cases, it is imposed 'from above' a particular mode of sociopolitical bonding; in both cases, a set of asymmetrical reciprocal exchanges are accorded, mostly favoring the superior party; in both cases, the superior party – having the monopoly of coercion in the relationship⁴³ – governs the whole political situation. Thus, Hittite or Assyrian treaties should not be considered the ultimate 'legal' warrant of a situation, enforcing strict political subordination, but rather its celebration, that is, *the enhancement of the effective control over the subjected party in symbolic and ideological terms*. As stated above, patronage relations are not institutionalized in society and, therefore, the presence of written treaties connoting patronage bonds would appear, *prima facie*, paradoxical. Nonetheless, if we stress the celebrative and performative aspects of treaties, rather than their supposedly prescriptive or normative status with respect to sociopolitical practice, this problem can be solved effectively. The treaty is then to be seen as an ideological component of material rule over a defeated king, but *as important as the profane and material factors articulating the subordination of the defeated king*. The treaty seems to be the symbolic means by which a king expresses his effective rule and supremacy over foreign polities.

The Egyptian rule of Levantine lands represented an exception to this – let us call it, after Liverani – Western Asiatic manner of political dominion (and expected subordination), because instances of reciprocity were denied or not formally acknowledged with respect to the local polities of Syria-Palestine. Egypt

⁴² Among the general literature on the topic, adding to the one in the previous footnote, one must name S.N. Eisenstadt, L. Roniger, *Patrons, Clients and Friends: Interpersonal Relations and the Structure of Trust in Society*, Cambridge 1984; A. Maćzak, *Ungleiche Freundschaft: Klientelbeziehungen von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Deutsche Historisches Institut Warschau: Klio in Polen 7), Osnabrück 2005; V. Lécivain (ed.), *Clientèle guerrière, clientèle foncière et clientèle électorale: Histoire et anthropologie* (Collection Sociétés), Dijon 2007.

⁴³ Cf. M. Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (ed. by G. Roth and C. Wittich), Berkeley 1978 [orig. German edition, 1922], who considers the 'monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force' (p. 54) as the key element in defining a state. I rather use the concept of monopoly of coercion in this context to characterize the ultimate factor that exerts political order in society.

dominated through a clear exercise of the monopoly of coercion, by means of officers and military garrisons; there was no political interaction with the Syro-Palestinian petty kings, in the way that Hittite and later Assyrian overlords did, and no treaty was ever imposed or needed. Now, Hittite and Assyrian rule represented as well a kind of monopoly of coercion over their conquered territory.⁴⁴ However, these great polities chose or needed to carry out their rule through treaties, imposing a kind of ‘forced patronage’,⁴⁵ perhaps as a strategic means to assure the periphery of their kingdoms with buffer-polities, lowering considerably in this way the logistical and operative costs of the material means of dominion (both in people and resources) and defense of the territory.

Beyond the reasons offered for the use of treaties and oaths in the rule of conquered lands in Syria-Palestine,⁴⁶ we may propose that, first, the recognition of a certain political autonomy – though considerably restricted – for the local small kingdoms in the case of Hittite and Assyrian rule, and second, the petitions and demands of help and assistance the Syro-Palestinian petty kings made to the Pharaoh, reveal a singular expression of political behavior, one that inscribed subordination under the rules of what could be labeled *patron-client relationships*, that is, that expressed subordination in the form of *political clientelism*.

Hatti and Assyria recognized that a certain asymmetrical political reciprocity must be exercised in order to rule foreign lands. Egypt did not recognize a political reciprocity of any kind. The exception represented by the Egyptian rule, however, shows precisely – through the constant petitions of assistance and help by the local petty kings, accompanied by reminders of loyalty and obedience – that such asymmetrical political reciprocity evidently existed in Syria-Palestine as a native and seemingly hegemonic way of carrying out and expressing political subordination, from the bottom up, and the other way around, political rule, from the top down. In other words, and leaving now Egyptian rule aside and considering instead Hittite and Assyrian rule over the region, it is possible to find in Syria-Palestine an interaction between a local understanding of political subordination, expressed

⁴⁴ In the Assyrian case, political centralism is indisputable, especially in its ideological aspects; cf. M. Liverani, ‘The Ideology of the Assyrian Empire’, in Larsen (ed.), *Power and Propaganda*, 297–317; and more recently, G.W. Vera Chamaza, *Die Omnipotenz Aššurs: Entwicklungen in der Aššur-Theologie unter den Sargoniden Sargon II, Sanherib und Asarhaddon* (AOAT 295), Münster 2002.

⁴⁵ ‘Forced’ indeed, since a regular or standard patron-client relation requires some degree of consent by the client.

⁴⁶ On treaties and oaths in the ancient Near East, cf. D.J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (AnBib 21), Rome 1963; M. Weinfeld, ‘The Loyalty Oath in the Ancient Near East’, *UF* 8 (1976), 379–414; H. Tadmor, ‘Treaty and Oath in the Ancient Near East: A Historian’s Approach’, in G.M. Tucker, D.A. Knight (eds), *Humanizing America’s Iconic Book*, Chico 1982, 127–152.

over and over again through a patron-client relationship model, and foreign (or almost foreign) rule of local polities exercised under the same patron-client bond: the protection of the lord in exchange – again, often a forced exchange – for the loyalty of the servant. The similar modes of expressing local subordination during the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age in Syria-Palestine responded not only to similar strategies of domination by foreign powers, but also to what could be assumed to be a native understanding and conceptualization of power and politics. It is in this way that we may interpret the words of Rib-Hadda of Byblos, capturing the essence of subordination in the Syro-Palestinian political world:

If the king protects his servant, then I will live.
But if the king does not protect me, who will protect me?⁴⁷

There is no political life outside the protection of the overlord, and it seems that ‘patron’ and ‘client’ were the elements articulating the spectrum of possibilities in Syro-Palestinian politics. Therefore, it may be proposed that many, if not most of the aspects of local political reality in Syria-Palestine, at least during the centuries covered in this article, can be interpreted or conceived of as a transaction or an exchange in the fashion of patron-client relations, which were framed in a patrimonial arrangement of society, as the ‘father/son’, ‘brother/brother’ and ‘lord/servant’ recurrent household terminology (*qua* political relations) shows in the textual record.⁴⁸

In a sense, it is possible to think of patronage, following a theoretical contribution by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, as a particular sociopolitical *habitus* in Syria-Palestine, that is, a determinant social structure enabling social practices according to that same structure.⁴⁹ So, the small patrimonial kingdoms of the Levant, most probably articulated in their inner working through kinship and

⁴⁷ EA 112:14–18; Moran, *The Amarna Letters*, 186; also Liverani, *Le lettere di el-Amarna*, 1, 214. On such an ‘ideology of protection’, see Liverani, *International Relations*, 128–134. Although Liverani does not explicitly acknowledge it, this ideology undoubtedly reflects, in my opinion, patronage, as it is precisely observed that ‘[t]he Asiatic small kings were accustomed to their overlord’s protection in return for their loyalty’ (p. 133). Furthermore, it is relevant to observe that patronage can also be used as a means to understand the relationship of the rulers of Byblos with Egypt in a previous period, during the Middle Bronze Age, noting as well the Egyptian influence on the local representation of power; cf. R. Flammini, ‘Elite Emulation and Patronage Relationships in the Middle Bronze: The Egyptianized Dynasty of Byblos’, *TA* 37 (2010), 154–168.

⁴⁸ Cf. J.D. Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (SAHL, 2), Winona Lake, IN 2001; and confront with Liverani, *International Relations*.

⁴⁹ See P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford 1990, 53: ‘The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them’.

patronage structures, would have logically expressed external politics also through personal ties and unequal reciprocal bonds, and the manifestation of either domination or subordination would accordingly have involved patron-client dynamics.⁵⁰

5. Concluding Remarks

This overview tried to show that interpreting the native or local political culture of Syria-Palestine roughly from the middle of the second millennium to the middle of the first millennium BCE through the lens of patronage offers a better understanding of the ways in which political power was constructed, displayed and imagined in the region.⁵¹ The notion of political patronage successfully replaces the anachronistic idea of ‘vassalage’ in ancient Western Asia by attending first to political practices, instead to political institutions, and showing also that the *personal agency* of the king, and not his office, was actually the key aspect in the whole of sociopolitical relationships. The kings in Syria-Palestine, local and foreign (with the exception of the Pharaoh), behaved indeed like *patrons* towards their subjects and like *clients* towards their overlords.

This analytical model – and thus accepting patronage as a Syro-Palestinian *habitus* – also paves the way for understanding how the gods were conceived of and expected to act in Levantine societies: as patrons of humans, especially the king, who at the same time is the patron of his people. But the gods in the Levant were also imagined as clients of greater gods, until reaching the ultimate patron, the lord of the cosmos and creation – and the hierarchy found in the Ugaritic pantheon illustrates quite well this sort of pyramidal network.⁵² The Old Testament can also be read in a patron-client key, showing that Yahweh behaves like a patron does with his clients when He addresses the children of Israel.⁵³

⁵⁰ See E. Pfoh, ‘Some Remarks on Patronage in Syria-Palestine during the Late Bronze Age’, *JESHO* 52 (2009), 363–381; *idem*, *Syria-Palestine in the Late Bronze Age*, *passim*.

⁵¹ See N.P. Lemche, ‘Justice in Western Asia in Antiquity, or: Why No Laws Were Needed!’, *Chicago Kent Law Review* 70 (1995), 1695–1716; H. Niehr, ‘The Constitutive Principles for Establishing Justice and Order in Northwest Semitic Societies with Special Reference to Ancient Israel and Judah’, *ZABR* 3 (1997), 112–130. Cf. also R. Westbrook, ‘Patronage in the Ancient Near East’, *JESHO* 48 (2005), 210–233, with a variant perspective on the matter.

⁵² L.K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy*, Winona Lake, IN 1994; M.S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*, Oxford 2001, 54–61; Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol*, 349–357.

⁵³ Lemche, ‘Justice in Western Asia in Antiquity’; T.L. Thompson, ‘He is Yahweh; He Does What is Right in His Own Eyes: The Old Testament as a Theological Discipline, II’, in L. Fatum, M. Müller (eds), *Tro og Historie: Festskrift til Niels Hyldahl* (FBE 7), Copenhagen 1996, 246–263; Pfoh, *The Emergence of Israel in Ancient Palestine*, 143–160.

In sum, the patron-client model offers a better framework through which to understand the political culture and worldview of local societies as they are manifested in the textual political sources of pre-Hellenistic Syria-Palestine. Without doubt, an interpretation of sociopolitical dynamics expressed as patronage could be extended further into the Greco-Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods – from the Umayyad to the Ottoman – in the region; but that would require dealing with other sources and data, and other historical questions well beyond the time span of the present article. Nonetheless, a history of patronage in Syria-Palestine covering the last four thousand years is a perfectly legitimate and documented historiographical possibility – a task worth attempting in the future.

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