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War as Elimination of the Rebels

Before leaving for war, the army has to be reassured that the enemy is really inferior, lacking any ability to resist and launch a counter-attack. For magical purposes, the Egyptians broke clay figurines representing their enemies and inscribed with their names.\(^1\) The Hittites performed various rituals, mostly based upon magical procedures:

They divide the young men into two halves, and they name them: one half they call ‘men of Hatti’ and the other half they call ‘men of Masha’. The men of Hatti have bronze weapons, the men of Masha have reed weapons. They fight together and the men of Hatti win.\(^2\)

We made two figurines, one of cedar and one of clay. On the one of cedar we placed the name of the enemy of His Majesty, and on the one of clay we put the name of Hishmi-Sharruma.\(^3\)

Take from them (= the enemies) masculinity, prowess, robust health, swords, battle-axes, bows, arrows, daggers! And bring them to Hatti! Place in their hands the spindle and mirror of a woman! Dress them as women! Put on their (heads) the kureššar (headgear for women)! And take away from them your favour!\(^4\)

Deprived of their gods, weapons and valour, their enemies now fitted perfectly the idea of an inferior entity, whose impotence is paralleled by their wickedness and foolish insubordination.

Besides being reassured about their military superiority, our soldiers also have to be reassured about the moral correctness of their actions. The ‘guilt complex’, always connected with the act of killing, has to be appeased. This is achieved by spreading the conviction that the enemies
are evil and sinful, and thus the authors of their own punishment and annihilation.\textsuperscript{5}

The basic idea is that hostilities have been started by the enemies. The Hittites actually organize law-suits against the enemy peoples and their gods, charging that they have begun hostilities against the peaceful and innocent Hittites.\textsuperscript{6} Only after this ritual has been accomplished do the Hittites cross the border, physically invading the country of the nominal invaders, physically attacking the persons of the nominal attackers.

Egyptian ideology is similar: the enemies are ‘rebels’ who are responsible for starting hostilities either by some precise act of aggression or simply by refusing to acknowledge the overlordship of the sovereign of the central country. In the phraseology of the Egyptian inscriptions, the enemies are ‘rebels’ by definition\textsuperscript{7} – even if they do not commit any specific rebellion – just because they do not submit or might ‘conceive’ or ‘plot’ a rebellion. In fact, it is possible to be an enemy/rebel even for people who ‘do not know Egypt’, and the most paradoxical boast of the king is to have been able to discover rebels in lands so distant that nobody previously suspected their existence.\textsuperscript{8}

The standard Egyptian justification for a military expedition is the elimination of rebels: ‘His Majesty sent a numerous army to Nubia ... in order to overthrow all those who were rebels against His Majesty and hostile to the lord of both lands.’\textsuperscript{9} This justification is usually offered in response to the announcement that the start (or plotting) of a foreign rebellion has been brought to Pharaoh’s attention. This serves to emphasize that the time-gap between rebellion and punishment is minimal: as soon as Pharaoh knows, he intervenes.\textsuperscript{10}

In any case, the idea that the responsibility for the punishment and extermination is to be credited to the enemy/rebel is generally expressed. Either he attacks us first: ‘One came to inform His Majesty: “Kush has come up to the land of Wawat, starting a rebellion against Egypt: he gathers with him all the vagrants and rebels of other lands”’,\textsuperscript{11} or he is just ‘planning’ to attack – so deserving the ‘pre-emptive retaliation’ of the threatened inner country: ‘One came to inform His Majesty: “The miserable vanquished Kush has planned in his heart to rebel”.’\textsuperscript{12} In any case the reaction is the same: an expedition against the rebels to restore peace and confirm Egyptian dominion.

In the middle-Assyrian royal inscriptions the evaluation of the enemies as rebels is more specific from the juridical point of view. The act of ‘opposing’, ‘being an enemy’ (\textit{nakāru}) and ‘engaging in hostilities’ against Assyria becomes a true ‘rebellion’ (\textit{nabalkutu}) if the enemy, already acknowledging submission and bound by a loyalty oath, breaks that