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Ships and Diplomacy. The Historical Connection between the Letters RS 18.031 (from Tyre) and RS 94.2483 (from Ugarit)

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The kingdom of Ugarit is famous for being both maritime and commercial in nature, features largely due to the location of the country and its physical geography. The Western border of the country is washed by the Mediterranean for a stretch of about one hundred kilometres and the natural contours of the coast facilitate access to the sea. This convergence of geographical, physical and technical factors combined with the Ugaritians aptitude for commerce in which they had invested so much, resulted in Ugarit dominating trade by land and sea in Late Bronze Age Syria.

Texts from Ugarit of various genres (especially administrative documents and letters) illustrate several aspects related to the ships of Ugarit: their number, their types, their parts and components, their crews and the recruitment of sailors, the deployment of ships in trade and warfare and so on.¹ One of these texts is a letter written in Ugaritic, namely RS 18.031 (KTU³ 2.38),² sent by a king of Tyre to a king of Ugarit. There are still passages in the text that are difficult to understand or are uncertain, as the translations attempted so far clearly show.³ However that may be, the missive is clear on the following points: 1) the king of Ugarit had sent a ship to Egypt;⁴ 2) a storm had forced the ship to drop anchor near Tyre; 3) the king of Tyre took charge both of the crew and of the ship's cargo and 4) by this very letter, the king of Tyre was informing the king of Ugarit of the situation.⁵ It can be assumed that the king of Tyre expected an immediate reaction of some kind from his Ugaritian colleague.

¹Vita 1995: 159-176; Sauvage 2012.

²KTU³ = M. Dietrich, O. Loretz and J. Sanmartín, *Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani und anderen Orten. Dritte, erweiterte Auflage*, Münster 2013.

³See, for example, the translations by Dietrich and Loretz 1985: 507; Cunchillos 1989: 349-357; Hoftijzer and van Soldt 2008: 334; Pardee 2002: 93-94.

⁴It is uncertain whether the text refers to a ship or a flotilla; on this see, for example, the translations given by Tropper: 'Schiff' (2012: 228, 235, 286, 703, 738), but also 'Flotte' (2012: 228, 254, 823). Perhaps the letter mentions a second ship later (in line 24).

⁵As an example, see the translation of the letter provided by Pardee 2002: 93-94: 'To the king of Ugarit, my brother, say: Message of the king of Tyre, your brother. May it be well with you. May the gods guard you, may they keep you well. Here with me it is well. There with you, whatever is well, send word (of that) back (to me). Your ships [anykn] that you dispatched to Egypt were wrecked near Tyre when they found themselves caught in a bad storm [gšm adr]. The salvage master [rb tmtt], however, was able to remove the ent[ire] (cargo of) grain [dr'] in their possession. (Then) I took over from the salvage master the entire

What could the king of Ugarit's reaction have been on receiving a message such as the one conveyed by the letter RS 18.031? The recently published letter RS 94.2483,⁶ written in Akkadian and addressed to the king of Sidon from the king of Ugarit, provides a possible answer. In it, the Ugaritian king explains to his Sidonian counterpart that he had sent his own emissary to Tyre to examine one of his ships and that he had decided that the captain of the ship should take charge of both the vessel and its cargo. This means, therefore, that the ship in question had experienced a problem of some kind which had prevented it from sailing further. It could have been a technical problem, but it is more likely that it was a bad omen concerning the ship.⁷ In these circumstances, the Ugaritian king asks the king of Sidon for support and assistance for the outward and return journeys of the emissary and for the captain's mission.⁸

There is no direct relationship of cause-and-effect between letters RS 18.031 and RS 94.2483, that is to say, the second is not (or does not seem to be) a direct response to the first. However, RS 94.2483 does seem to respond to a situation very much like the one described in RS 18.031. From RS 94.2483 it can be deduced that the king of Ugarit had previously received a letter from Tyre similar to RS 18.031, informing him of a problem that had prevented one of his ships from sailing. RS 94.2483 tells us about the measures adopted by the king of Ugarit in a similar situation, the persons he decided to mobilise (an envoy, a *sukkal*, the ship's captain) and the diplomatic measures taken in respect of the king of Sidon to ensure the success of the mission entrusted to his envoy in Tyre.

Both letters reveal, once again, the customary good political relations that Ugarit maintained with the chief South Levantine kingdoms, as well as the personal involvement of the king of Ugarit in matters of trade.⁹ However, these two letters taken together also allow us to understand, at least along general lines, the diplomatic machinery that was set in motion when circumstances obliged a ship of the king of Ugarit to dock in a port on the Levantine coast, a procedure that can be illustrated by the following diagram:

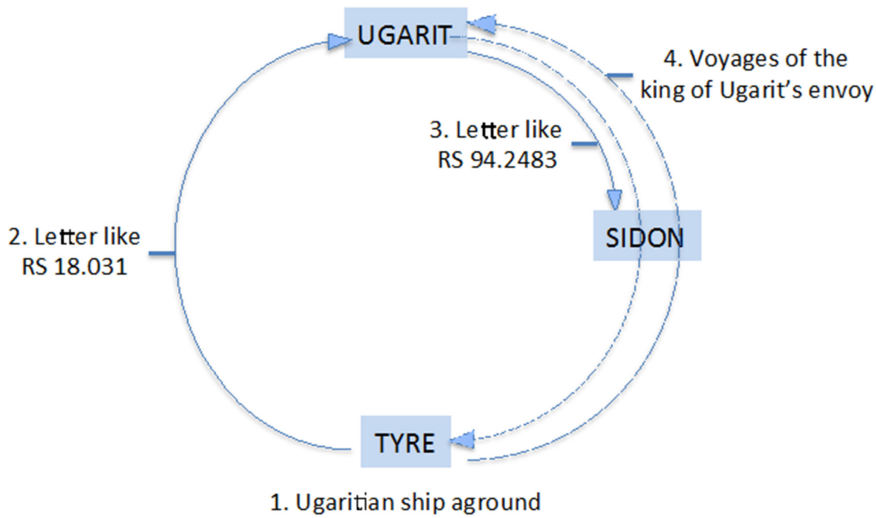
(cargo) of grain, as well as all the people [*npš*] and their food, and I returned (all these things) to them. Now your boats have been able to moor at Acco, stripped (of their rigging). So my brother should not worry.'

⁶Lackenbacher and Malbran 2016: 109-110.

⁷On this see the detailed discussion by Malbran-Labat and Roche 2007: 92-93.

⁸The editors, Lackenbacher and Malbran 2016: 110, translate the letter as follows: 'De la part du roi d'Ugarit, dis au roi de Sidon, mon frère: que cela aille bien pour toi; que les dieux veillent à ton bien-être! Mon frère, voici: j'envoie mon chargé de mission [LÚ.DUMU.KIN] à Tyr pour examiner mon bateau; aussi toi, mon frère, à l'intérieur de ton pays, veille sur lui lors de son (voyage-)aller et de son (voyage-) retour. D'autre part, mon frère, voici: le capitaine de mon bateau [LÚ.EN GIŠ.MÁ-ia] a fait un examen [*ba-ru-ut-ta*. MEŠ] pour Ili-milku et son examen n'est pas favorable! Voici: à présent je remets Yabni-ilu à Ur-Tešub, mon *sukkal*, pour que Ur-Tešub, mon *sukkal*, confie à Yabni-ilu mon bateau avec tout ce qui en relève. Donc, toi, mon frère, quel que soit le besoin de Yabni-ilu, le capitaine de mon bateau, eh bien, fournis-le lui! Et alors, quel que soit le désir de mon frère, écris(-le) moi et moi, je te le ferai envoyer.'

⁹On this see the brief historical commentary by Lackenbacher and Malbran 2016: 110, as well as the texts published there *ibidem*: 129-131.



It is likely that at least a third (as yet undiscovered) letter should be added to this outline: the one sent by the king of Ugarit to the king of Tyre as a reply to the latter's first letter.

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