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# The Involuntariness of Will. Borders and Circulation of People in the Kingdom of Mari (Syria - 18<sup>th</sup> century BC)

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## Abstract

In general, borders represent not only a physical issue but also a social one. All over time, social actors circulated through borders -implicitly or explicitly- forced by the political powers (tribe, state, etc.). In oriental antiquity, the borders (*pâtum*) of the realms were unstable: they were in constant mutation and movement. For this reason, it is necessary to investigate the circulation of people through such borders in order to achieve a better understanding of them.

In the syro-mesopotamian area during the Old Babylonian period, borders between realms, cities and villages were an important axis of the socio-political layout. At this time, the kingdom of Mari gives us a significant amount of written sources where we can track and analyze people's movements between kingdoms.

In this paper, we want to inquire into some topics related with forced circulation of people set on the premise that not all the movements that were considered voluntary were actually so.

**Key-words:** Mari; Old Babylonian period; Border; Will; Movements of People

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**La involuntariedad de la voluntad. Fronteras y circulación de personas en el reino de Mari (Siria - Siglo XVIII a. C.)**

**Resumen**

En general, las fronteras representan no solo una cuestión física sino también social. En todos los tiempos, circularon a través de ellas diversidad de actores acicateados o forzados, implícita o explícitamente, por los poderes políticos. En la antigüedad oriental, las fronteras (*pâtum*) de los reinos eran inestables, se encontraban en constante mutación y movimiento. Por ello, el análisis de la circulación de los sujetos a través de las fronteras nos resulta de ayuda para poder analizarlas miles de años después.

En la zona siro-mesopotámica, las fronteras eran un eje importantísimo del mapa socio-político de la época paleobabilónica (siglo XVIII a.C.). Los Archivos Reales de Mari pertenecientes a esta época nos ayudan a rastrear muchos tipos de movimientos de personas entre los reinos.

En este trabajo, trataremos de indagar ciertas cuestiones relacionadas al movimiento forzado de personas partiendo de la premisa de que no toda circulación que se cree voluntaria realmente lo es.

**Palabras clave:** Mari; período paleobabilónico; frontera; voluntad; movimiento de personas

“(...) Movement of the people  
 You cannot control  
 I will walk over desert  
 And swim across the sea  
 Like sand through your fingers  
 I will slip and be free  
 Bloody, bloody borders  
 Sanguinary times  
 Freedom to cross  
 Freedom to pass  
 Freedom is no crime  
 We will cross the line (...)”

Dubioza Kolektiv and Manu Chao (2019) *Cross the Line*

## 1 Investigating the Borders

In general, borders portray a physical question but they also have a social meaning. Also, borders play a double role: to be the place and the limit of diverse realities in contact. Moreover, they are points of encounter and missed encounters. Borders are *objects/concepts* and *concepts/metaphors* (Grimson 2002) where the material as well as the symbolic are unfolded. They are able to isolate and tie at the same time, they are occupied and dismissed, they can also act as limits and as thresholds; borders are lived as well as they are suffered. In short, they are always an area of socio-political struggle. All over time, social actors circulated through borders, implicitly or explicitly, forced by the political powers (tribe, state, etc.).

In our contemporary world, globalization is an axis of socialization but this is contradictory with the closure of national states' borders. This leads to the devaluation of human life: people fleeing from wars, famine and others evils; seeking refuge in other latitudes. Sad present-day examples are people of African countries who drown in the Mediterranean Sea in front of the impassive gaze of European governments in power; displaced children that “disappear” in the Europeans borders<sup>1</sup> or seasonal work migrators into Latin America where the stigma of the undocumented is the rule. These contemporary borders have been delineated since the emergence of each national state and they appear as fixed, defined and immutable.

In contrast, the borders (*pâtum*) of the realms in oriental antiquity were unstable since they were in constant mutation and movement. For this reason is necessary to investigate the circulation of people through these

<sup>1</sup><http://missingchildreneurope.eu/News&press/Post/1023/Europol-confirms-the-disappearance-of-10-000-migrant-children-in-Europe>

borders in order to achieve a better understanding of them. Whether they were geographical or not, borders were defined and controlled by the rulers through diplomatic protocols or war results. Thus, borders were labile.

In the syro-mesopotamian area during the Old Babylonian period, borders between realms, cities and villages were an important axis of socio-political layout. At this time, the kingdom of Mari gives us a significant amount of written sources where we can track and analyze people's movements between kingdoms. According to such sources, we know that boundaries were crossed, on the one hand, intentionally, by kings, armies, royal messengers, artisans and merchants among others. On the other, they were also crossed forcibly by people who had been captured, arrested or just by people that could not satisfy their basic needs<sup>2</sup>.

In this paper we want to inquire into some topics related with forced circulation of people, understanding that not all the movement that were considered voluntary were actually so.

## 2 Circulation and Control

Every type of circulation of people through borders implied an enormous supply of energy by the Old Babylonian kingdoms in order to constrain people's freedom of movement (Charpin 2016, 2004: 52). In particular, the Kingdom of Mari relied on a variety of officials, among which we can mention the *šâpitû*, "governors" of the four districts that shaped the kingdom (Saggarâtum, Terqa, Qatṭunan and Mari), the *sugâgû* (local leaders) and the *merhû* (pasture chief). In certain occasions, the roles allocated, acquired and developed by these different officials overlapped and this is not accidental if we take into consideration that the limits between the centralized state power, the internal borders and the fluid ethnical, tribal and clannish structures. This situation was especially evident when it came to the surveillance of the movements of the people under their care. As an example, we consider a letter that Yaqqim-Addu –governor of Saggarâtum– wrote to the king Zimrî-Lîm of Mari to inform him about the circulation of Bensim'alite shepherds and how properly the merhû performed their tasks. At last and presumably in a sarcastic tone, Yaqqim-Addu reports to his king that the

<sup>2</sup>Mass deportation was one of the most significant forced movements. In the case of Old Babylonian Mari, see: Rovira 2014.

sugâgû were not able of retaining the ḥana men<sup>3</sup> for the cultivation tasks:

“Dis à mon Seigneur: ainsi parle Yaqqim-Addu, ton serviteur. Il y a eu une lettre de mon Seigneur au sujet des *hanées*, disant: ‘Les *hanées* ne quittent pas les villes pour un travail à faire faire par les bœufs.’  
Lorsque j’ai quitté Terqa, où je me trouvais en présence de mon Seigneur, j’ai installé dans chaque ville deux hommes, chargés de faire partir (les *hanées*), disant: ‘Le *mer’ûm* s’en est déjà allé. Pourquoi vous-mêmes ne bougez-vous pas?’ Le jour même, on a fait partir tous les *hanées*.  
Il ne faudrait pas que les scheichs cherchent des prétextes, en disant: ‘Les *hanées* sont (encore) dispersés dans les différentes villes’. (En fait), il n’y a plus dans le district un seul des *hanées*.”  
(ARMT XIV 80)

In another letter, Zakira-Hammû -governor of Qaṭṭunân during the reign of Zimrî-Lîm- highlighted the surveillance that was being done on the circulation of people as well as the need of the king’s approval and the reports to him about such phenomena:

“À mon seigneur dis (ceci): ainsi (parle) Zakira-Hammu, ton serviteur. La ville de Qaṭṭunan et le district vont bien.  
Le grain de Ṭabatûm et de Magrisa a été épargné par les sauterelles, (mais) les sauterelles ont dévoré le grain de Zilhân. En outre, 470 (+x) arpents de terres moissonnées plus tôt du palais de Qaṭṭunan ont échappé au bec des sauterelles, mais les sauterelles ont dévoré toutes les terres du palais existantes (moissonnées) tardivement, ainsi que le grain des *muškênu*.  
Et (j’en viens) à ce que mon seigneur m’a écrit: ‘Celui qui, parmi

<sup>3</sup>Heimpel (2003) presented a reflection and summary about the meaning of the term *ḥana*, considering the suggestions made by Gelb (1961), Charpin and Durand (1986) and a later one by Durand (1992). Taking everything into consideration, the term *ḥana* could assume three interchangeable and complementary meanings depending on the context (Heimpel 2003: 34-36). *ḥana* could refer, in the first place, to an ancestral unit whose descendants were Bensim’alites, Benjamins, Yamutbal and Numhâ. According to this perception, *ḥana* would be a synonym to amorrite. Furthermore, this definition would imply pastoral nomads and sedentary people. Also, from our point of view, this group was a pan-ethnic unit (Rovira 2019). Secondly, *ḥana* could also be understood as shepherd or nomad in a general sense, “those who lived in tents” (Durand 2009). Finally, *ḥana* could designate Bensim’alite shepherds only. We prefer to maintain the original term because of its richness.

les muškênu du district, partira pour le pays du Šubartum sans ton autorisation, saisis-le et fais-le conduire chez moi!’ Voilà ce que mon seigneur m’a écrit.

Les sauterelles ont dévoré le grain du district: c’est pourquoi les travailleurs isolés et les journaliers qui gagnent de quoi manger au moment de la moisson –car on peut faire des gains dans le district grâce à la moisson–, la nuit (ces) individus quittent maintenant leurs demeures et partent vers le Šubartum pour gagner (leur vie).

Pourquoi aurais-je écrit cela à [mon seigneur] de façon mensongère? Que mon seigneur m’envoie son homme de confiance et qu’on examine cette affaire. Si mon seigneur dit: ‘Donne des ordres fermes pour qu’on garde les routes, et ne sois pas négligent quant à ceux qui passent!’ Que mon seigneur m’écrive [ceci ou] cela. (...) (ARMT XXVII 26)

The fact of crossing a border without the required permission became a problematic situation. Any person linked with the high echelons of the state –whether by profession or rank- had to carry a specific tablet of safe-passage to travel from one place to another or they were required be announced before their arrival. If such announcement didn’t take place, that person could be detained in their trip until everything was set back in order again. This sort of tablets were used to identify royal officials or messengers (Charpin 2004) and they eventually mitigate the feeling of suspicion that foreigners tended to provoke, no matter whether they came from an ally kingdom or an enemy one (Rovira 2011).

By these means, individual or collective circulation was a practice carried out under strict supervision of the realms. Durand suggests that the amorrite documents let us see the problems against which this people came up as well as the limitations that were their result; the extreme control under which every foreigner was suppressed when they had to go through shut and hostile places (Durand 1998a). The “other”, the foreigner was (and is) by definition the one who crosses “the lines”, the borders.

### 3 Crossing Borders

Some movements that seemed to be voluntary were actually due to external circumstances. The decision to mobilize can be attributed, in many cases, to the fear of the worsening of material life conditions. As an example,

we can mention the situations of scarcity suffered by diverse communities as a result of bad harvests, invasions of locusts or military confrontations launched by political powers. All these, among many others, used to be recurring motivations for the movements of people. We take an extract of the document ARMT XIV 50 as an example:

“Dis à mon Seigneur: ainsi parle Yaqqim-Addu, ton serviteur. Un individu du nom d’Ami-ibal de Našer, étant arrivé d’Ilan-šura, quelqu’un de la citadelle qui avait été en garnison à Ilan-šura et était venu ici pour accompagner des déserteurs, l’a pris à partie, disant: ‘C’est un déserteur!’ et Ami-ibal lui a répondu ceci: ‘J’avais émigré depuis quatre ans au pays de Šubartu. Lorsque Atamrum est monté depuis Ešnunna, par peur de la guerre je m’étais réfugié à Ilan-šura où j’ai logé chez mes frères. Je n’ai absolument en rien été versé à la troupe régulière et, précédemment, jamais je n’ai été un fugitif. (...)”

Movements can be seen as decisions that had been taken on their own but the causes that lied beneath may surpass the personal or the group will and they can be established as external causes. Another letter says:

“Dis à Addâ: ainsi parle Yasmah-Addu, ton fils: Les gens du Suhûm sont dans une grande famine. Il faut absolument que j’aïlle les trouver. . . [...] Il faut que je les sauve afin que ceux de leurs frères qui s’étaient enfuis reviennent au Pays (...) (ARMT IV 16)

Another example to be considered is the case of weddings. If we assume that marriages were generally set by the families, the transfer of women who had to move and settle in the houses of the new in-laws may also have been a movement against their will. It can be taken as an example among many the cases of the daughters of King Zimrî-Lîm (Lafont 1996; Ziegler 1999; Rovira 2009). At least seven of all them were given away in marriage to the different neighboring kinglets. One of them, Inib-šarri, who married Ibâl-Addu king of Ašlakkâ, made clear that she found herself in a foreign country even when this country was one of the subordinate kingdoms of her father’s realm. She expressed her feelings in this way:

“(...) N’est-ce-pas dans un pays étranger que j’habitée?(...)”  
(ARMT X 78)



The daughters of the last king of Mari may have been forced to move as a consequence of their matrimonies. These bonds reinforced those political ones and this is why these women were put into circulation. In general, they were not well received in their new homes and, in most cases, the letters written by these ladies that we conserve included claims and complaints<sup>4</sup>. As they crossed the borders –both objectively and subjectively-, these women embodied the *otherness* and they were also tied in with the perception of what it was external and foreign (*ahû* and *ûbaru* in Akkadian, **bar** in Sumerian)<sup>5</sup>. By contrast, these women also represented the dominating power, the "lord" and the vigilant and suspicious "father" with whom the ever fragile alliance was contracted through them.

Refugees represent another case involving the crossing of borders. Refugees are born from a forced movement: the flight. During the reign of Zimrî-Lîm, the fugitives<sup>6</sup> that came into Mari were under the protection of a great goddess thus the king had the duty to give shelter to them (Charpin 2009, Durand 1990: 64, n.137 and LAPO 16: 390, n. i). As an example, we can take the following letter that Zimrî-Lîm sent to Yarîm-Lîm:

“(...) mon Père m’a écrit à son sujet réclamant le renvoi d’un homme qui s’est présent en suppliant chez moi, à l’endroit même (où va) l’oiseau fugitif qui cherche refuge devant l’oiseau de proie! Abandonnerai-je cet homme? Mais si je l’abandonne et qu’ensuite, on l’apprenne, comment se présentera-t-on en suppliant chez la déesse bénisante?(...)” (TH 72-16)

This refusal in delivering the fugitive man had to be understood by Yarîm-Lîm because in the realm of Aleppo, fugitives also had the protection of the god Addu. This can be clearly seen in a letter that Dâriš-libûr, a Mari

<sup>4</sup>We could suggest that, besides this personal alien status, there could be an extra alien condition: that one resulting from gender. In this sense, these women could be seen as the “dangerous half” in the words of Georges Balandier (1975: 38). Even when Balandier’s reflections are set in another historical context, we believe that they are also valid in a comparative perspective since they provide a critical approach towards social processes that we can trace in ancient societies and that are –unfortunately- still alive in our times.

<sup>5</sup>This picture was often linked to the idea of the enemy: the one who was at the other side of the border. That enemy and its territory must be conquered and it also represented the unknown, something that usually inspired fear.

<sup>6</sup>In relation to the figure of fugitives (*hapiru* and *munabtu*) see, among many others, Bottéro 1954; Buccellati 1977; Durand 2004-2005; Guichard 2011 and Rovira 2016. About extradition and asylum, see: Charpin 2016, 2009 and Sasson 2002.

official residing in Yamḥad, sent to Zimrî-Lîm. In this letter, the official transmits to Zimrî-Lîm the words of Yarîm-Lîm regarding a request of the king of Mari in relation to the extradition of certain Benjaminite princes who had run away to the land of the Syrian king after the events known as the “Benjaminite revolts” (Durand 1993; Luciani-Molla 2010):

“Zimri-Lim a-t-il donc oublié la volonté d’Addu? Assurément, j’ai bien peur que Zimri-Lim ne sache pas que dans le pays d’Addu des fugitifs ne doivent pas être livrés de force!” (A.4251+M.14689+M.14800+M.14856+M.14857= FM VII 8)

The fugitives that became refugees can be analyzed by being divided into two categories: political refugees -who crossed material borders- and social refugees -being his peers those who crossed a symbolic border by protecting him from state power<sup>7</sup>-.

On the first hand, political refugees were those people that might have had certain status within the upper echelons of power such as it had been shown in the letter quoted before related to the Benjaminite princes (LAPO 18: 206; Durand 2002) or they could also have a significant profession, such as being specialists (*mâr ummênim*).

In general, the specialized workforce was scarce and sometimes they were moved about due to different situations: they could be exchanged between certain kingdoms, they could be captured as war booty or they could run away. Due to all these reasons, there was a great control upon the movements of the specialized workers (Zaccagnini 1983; Charpin 2004). A letter coming from the times of the kingdom of Upper Mesopotamia shows us the situation of certain musicians that were escaping and trying to reach the land of Yamḥad or Qaṭna:

“Dis à Y[asmah-Addu]: ainsi (parle) [Samsi-Addu], ton père.  
Ahum, Tir-E[a et Lipit-Enl]il, fils d’Ili-E[ar], qui viennent de

<sup>7</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, it is impossible to stop thinking about the present day problems and project them into the past. In this sense, it is important to take into account the cases of the captains Carola Rackete <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/29/europe/italy-migrant-ship-arrest-intl/index.html>; <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/203379-arrestaron-en-italia-a-la-capitana-que-desafio-la-xenofobia> and Pia Klemp <https://www.dw.com/en/german-boat-captain-pia-klemp-faces-prison-protect-discretionary{\char\hyphenchar\font}{\char\hyphenchar\font}-rescues/a-49112348>; <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/199779-al-banquillo-por-rescatar\protect-discretionary{\char\hyphenchar\font}{\char\hyphenchar\font}-migrantes>

prendre des instruments de musique-lê'um et qui se sont enfuis: si c'est vers chez toi qu'ils sont partis, ligote-les et fais-les conduire chez moi. S'ils ne sont pas allés chez toi: sans doute sont-ils allés au pays du Yamhad ou bien au pays de Qatna. Donne des ordres stricts aux patrouilles afin qu'on s'em-pare de ces gens et fais-les conduire chez moi." (ARMT I 63+M11322= FM IX 57)

We can imagine that when reaching Yamhad, these men were protected since they became refugees of this kingdom and they were under the protection of the god Addu. Furthermore, considering the period from which this letter comes, the king of Yamhad was Sûmû-êpuḫ, father of Yarîm-Lîm and sworn enemy of Samsî-Addu. This situation would give even more guaranties to the fugitives. As regards Qatna, we know that this kingdom was an ally of the kings of Upper Mesopotamia but we have no information about how they handle the situations involving fugitives that crossed borders, between these two realms.

On the other hand, social refugees could not move from their place<sup>8</sup> and as we said above, those who crossed "symbolic" borders to protect them were local people and not the political power. One letter sent by Kibrî-Dagan to Zimrî-Lîm tells us about the search of a man and how the inhabitants of the region swore to the god that they had not seen them. The letter says:

"Dis à mon Seigneur : ainsi parle Kibri-Dagan, ton serviteur. À propos de Yaddih-Abum, le Sahréen, sujet d'un courrier de mon Seigneur, j'ai aussitôt écrit à Yaqqim-Addu. Comme je l'avais fait en termes énergiques, Yaqqim-Addu a écrit à Yapah-Lim, le scheich Sahréen, et on a traqué cet homme en faisant le tour des différents villages. À chaque village, on a fait prêter serment par le dieu : cet homme n'a pas été vu. En outre, voilà que Yaqqim-Addu a fait porter chez moi rapidement une tablette que Yapah-Lim lui a envoyée, disant: "Fais porter cette tablette chez mon Seigneur pour qu'il en prenne connaissance." Que mon Seigneur prenne donc connaissance de cette tablette. Cet individu n'a pas été vu chez les Sahréens." (ARMT III 68)

Thanks to a later letter, we know that there was a mistake in the name of the man what was being searched.

<sup>8</sup>Liverani (1995:495) suggested that an entire village could become a *hapirum* without moving from its place, as a way to shake off fiscal and political oppression.

“Dis à mon seigneur : ainsi (parle) ton serviteur [Yaqqim-Addu]. Mon seigneur m’a écrit en ces termes: “Moi, je t’ai écrit à propos de Yahadum [habitant de Sahri], mais toi, tu m’as écrit à propos de Yadih-abum!” Voilà ce que mon seigneur m’a écrit.

Aucun courrier n’est venu ici ! Deux hommes de Terqa sont venus et ils m’ont dit ceci: “Kibri-Dagan nous a envoyés chez toi rapidement pour dire: ‘Ecris à Sahri, afin qu’on y recherche Yadih-abum et [envoie-le moi]!’ “ Voilà ce qu’ils m’ont dit et aussitôt j’ai envoyé deux serviteurs à moi chez Yapah-Lim, le cheikh de Sahri. Cet homme m’a écrit en ces termes: ‘J’ai fait le tour de la circonscription, mais il n’y a pas de Yadih-abum’. J’ai respecté l’ordre sacro-saint de mon seigneur: [mais ceux qui connaissent] Yahadum ne l’ont pas respecté. (...)” (A.2435)<sup>9</sup>

As we can see, Zimrî-Lîm reproached Yaqqim-Addu, governor of the district of Saggarrâtum, his mistake on the identity of the man he was seeking. The governor excused himself calling on the supposed error in the oral transmission of the message he received, but also in the fact that the people that had been questioned about the fugitive remained passive about the order of finding the man. Notwithstanding the confusion in the names, we can assume that the people may have known how the man was (Charpin 1995; Sasson 2002). This puts us on the track that the oath to the gods that this people took was not understood as a falsehood because of which they could be punished by the god himself; instead, the misunderstanding in the names sheltered them because, in this way, they did not know the wanted man because he did not exist.

Since every person had the obligation to inform the king about any issue that could provoke instability or any other problem (ARMT XXVI/1: 411; Durand 1991; 1995: 364). The mere fact of failing to fulfill this duty can be understood as some sort of social resistance –or crossing a symbolic border, as we said above. By not obeying these obligations, common people were putting themselves at risk and in the case they were unveiled, they could be punished by the king. In this light, we can assume that if the inhabitants were aware of the misunderstanding in the names and did not inform about this, the wanted man may have been protected by the local people. Thereupon, social solidarity was activated and it evolved into social resistance. This was a surreptitious resistance activated by the means of experiencing always the realm’s violent oppression.

<sup>9</sup>In: Chapin 1995a: 53-54. Also: Sasson 2002: 225.

## 4 Final Remarks

During the Old Babylonian period, in the kingdom of Mari material and symbolic borders were demarcated and they were also in constant mutation and movement.

When studying the borders, we wanted to understand the richness of the deployment of their fissures by analyzing the actors who were forced to cross them. As we approached such borders and their actors, we could see the cracks they contained since their constitution. As an example, we can take the case of the daughters of Zimri-Lim or that of the social refugee who was protected by their peers. This inquiry also allowed us to understand that not every movement that was considered voluntary was actually so. Unsatisfied basic needs were one of these cruel spurs that exceeded the will of individuals or groups of them and can be placed under the orbit of bad administrations or redistributions made by the state to safeguard its people. In this light, in the kingdom of Mari we find that the movement of people was generally prompted or forced -implicitly or explicitly- from the palace and its power of domination and at the same time, very much controlled by it.

The intrinsic danger to cross a border established by the state power, both in ancient times and also nowadays, should keep us alert and empathic towards those who risked and still risk their lives to have a better future and also towards those who were forced to abandon their homeland and their ideals in pursuit of a life that could be taken from them.

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