

Reflections on an Unusual Practice Reported in ARM X:4

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The great Muslim biographer Ibn Ishāq relates the following tradition: "Rukāna b. 'Abdu Yazīd b. Hāshim B. 'Abdu'l-Muṭṭalib b. 'Abdu Manāf was the strongest man among Quraysh, and one day he met the apostle in one of the passes of Mecca alone: 'Rukāna', said he, 'why won't you fear God and accept my preaching?' 'If I knew that what you say is true I would follow you', he said. The apostle then asked him if he would recognize that he spoke the truth if he threw him, and when he said Yes they began to wrestle, and when the apostle got a firm grip on him he threw him to the ground, he being unable to offer any effective resistance. 'Do it again, Muhammad', he said, and he did it again, 'This is extraordinary', he said, 'can you really throw me?' 'I can show you something more wonderful than that if you wish. I will call this tree that you see and it will come to me'. 'Call it', he said. He called it and it advanced until it stood before the apostle. Then he said, 'Retire to your place', and it did so"¹.

As with most traditions concerning the early life of Muhammad serious objections could be presented to question this passage's authenticity. But this would go beyond the scope and relevance of this paper. Let it just be noted that amidst a plethora of signs and wonders aimed at convincing Quraysh of its futile stand against the prophet of Islam muslim biographers recalled a motif whose antecedents could be pursued well into the first and second millennia B.C.

On two occasions, C. H. Gordon developed a theme that a type of sport, known as belt-wrestling, obtained in the Old Testament as well as in the Aegean and Near Eastern world. A variety of sculptural and other artistic evidence bolstered this thesis². While diverse episodes which he presented have been subjected to valid criticism by, among others H. L. Ginsburg³, Gordon's stance has neither been rejected nor refuted. Interestingly enough, the Nuzu text which occasioned him to draw his material together remains obscure and unyielding in the crucial passages⁴.

Otto Eissfeldt and Yigail Yadin (then Sukenik) independently concluded that the fight between men chosen from the armies of Joab and Abner was a

¹ Ibn Ishāq, *Sirat Rasūl Allah* (tr. A. Guillaume), 1955, 178-179.

² *JNES* 7 (1948) 264; *HUCA* 23 (1950-51) 131-137. (In particular, note the reproduction (p. 137) of the famous Khafadje belted wrestlers, reproduced from *OIP* 60, pl. 540). See also his *Ugaritic Literature*, 1949, 57³, 59. See also, Oppenheim, *Or* 17 (1948) 29-30.

³ *JAOS* 70 (1950) 158.

⁴ Von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, 348 (sub *hesmu(mma)*); 362 (sub *hušumma*).

combat of champions⁵. Roland de Vaux discussed this theme and furnished examples from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece. Further, he touched upon various elements which, taken together, would constitute the *combats singuliers topos*⁶. In a short but important paper, Harry Hoffner developed de Vaux's ideas further and distinguished between contests of champions and what he labelled as 'duels'. "The purpose of the duel", he stated, "was not to resolve an issue which would otherwise have demanded an engagement of rival armies but rather the settlement of personal rivalry"⁷. Furthermore, he promoted a Hittite text, the *Apology of Hattusilis*, as furnishing another example of this combat of champions. In 1970, F. Charles Fensham invoked the same Hittite document to suggest that the Abner/Joab incident may have to be regarded as an ordeal in which Yahweh is asked to judge between Saul and David⁸.

In this preamble, it might be beneficial to propose that Hoffner's distinction between 'single combat' and 'duel' requires further elaboration. Beyond establishing the nature and form of the combat, it is also necessary to investigate whether the narrator conceived his description to be 'historical' or, however realistically, to be imagined. One should also attempt to ascertain whether or not the outcome of the struggle is to be determined by means of divine interference. With these categories in mind, the Ibn Ishāq episode quoted above could be analyzed as a "duel" in which Allah is involved only in the most general, dogmatic, terms. Given the genre in which it is preserved, this tradition was, doubtlessly, considered as 'historical'.

With the publication of *A(rchives) R(oyales) de M(ari) X:4*, a text dated to the 18th century BC, further contributes to our theme. Although it is set within a martial context, the scene of combat could nevertheless be considered a 'duel'. In an admittedly curious fashion, owing no doubt to the fact that our document is a letter with a prophetic content, the events are to be considered as 'historical'. In the single episode which will gather our attention, the gods are involved, even if marginally. This episode, in turn, will be focused and clarified with the help of a passage in 2 Samuel in which, again, a duel is described, one that the narrator considered as 'historical'. Here however the deity in question, Yahweh, does not directly interfere on the behalf of the victor.

Letter No. 4 in the tenth volume of the ARM series was sent to King Zimri-Lim. This text has been treated by Moran in *Biblica* 50 (1969) 46-50, and by Römer, on pages 51-53 of his *Frauenbriefe über Religion, Politik und Privatleben in Māri* (AOAT, 12). Its sender was the queen of Mari whose dossier reveals her as a true *'ešet ḥayil*. At the outset, it should be admitted, in translating this document, that it is not always clear who is speaking, who is being quoted, indeed even the parameters of any given quotation. Šibtu writes as follows:

I have waited for the signs by consulting everyone (lit. male and female) concerning tidings from the campaign which my lord is undergoing (as follows): "Is the (verbal) report favorable to my lord?". Similarly, I consulted everyone (lit. male and female) (with regard) to Išme-Dagan (as follows): "Is the (verbal)

⁵ *Kleine Schriften*, III, 140-141; Y. Sukenik, *JPOS* 21 (1948) 110-116. Cf., also Y. Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands*, II, 266-267.

⁶ *Bible et Orient*, 217-230.

⁷ *CBQ* 30 (1968) 220-225.

⁸ *VT* 20 (1970) 356-357.

report about him not favorable? Consequently, the report about him is (now) placed at my lord's feet''.

1. 13 They (individually answered) as follows: "My lord has lifted the *ḥumašu* for the *ḥumašu*-(match) with Išme-Dagan, saying: 'In the *ḥumašu*-(match), I will overpower you. Come on, wrestle and I will overpower in wrestling'".
1. 18 I said: "Is my lord approaching a battle?".
1. 19 They said: "There will not be a battle. As it nears, his [Išme-Dagan's] auxiliary troops will disintegrate (be scattered). Additionally, they will cut off Išme-Dagan's head and place it at my lord's feet".
1. 27 (My lord might say) as follows: "The troops of Išme-Dagan are numerous. But even if I succeed [in the match (?)], will his auxiliary troops disintegrate from under him, and become allies of mine"?
1. 31 (I say): "It is Dagan, Adad, Itūr-Mer, Bēlet-ekallim — Adad being the Lord of Decision — who march alongside my lord⁹. Heaven forbid that my lord speak as follows: 'With vile intents, will he [Išme-Dagan] not convince them (to remain loyal)'".
1. 38 (I say): "They will plot; they will fight among each other".
1. 40 They [the soothsayers] (said) as follows: "The auxiliary troops of Išme-Dagan are (nothing but) prisoners. They will remain in his camp by means of lies and treachery. They will not take up weapons"¹⁰.
1. 44 (I say): "Before my lord, his troops will be scattered".

The only indication that would permit assigning this letter to an historical event is the mention of Išme-Dagan. We know that Zimri-Lim waged battles against Šamsi-Adad's son and heir to the throne of Assyria on at least two different occasions, occasions which, however, sandwiched moments of peaceful exchanges of gifts and embassies (cf., e.g. VI:23:14; 27:16'; VII:173:7; X:60:19(?)). The first hostile acts occurred not much after Šamsi-Adad's death, when Zimri-Lim successfully regained his father's throne. Not surprisingly, in view of the confused conditions which prevailed during this period, our documentation from that era is scarce. Albeit not precisely datable, the second period of hostilities is better attested. This occurred at a time when Mari, apparently backed by Yamḥad, made a major effort to secure territory in the 'Upper Country'. Letters sent by a number of Zimri-Lim's vassals and officials speak of a

⁹ Lines 27-34 present many difficulties. Perhaps one could understand these line in the following manner: "(My lord might say) as follows: 'The troops of Išme-Dagan are numerous. But even if I succeed [in the match (?)] will his auxiliary troops be dispersed from him? (After all), Dagan, Adad, Itūr-Mer, (and) Bēlet-ekallim are allies of mine'.

(I [Šibtu] add): '(Indeed,) it is Adad, Lord of Decision, who march alongside my lord'.

¹⁰ Dr. Marten Stol, who was gracious enough to offer criticism on this paper, offers a very plausible rendering of the fragmented lines 35-43. "Heaven forbid that my lord speak as follows: 'She [the Queen!] lets them say so with vile intents'. [But, no] they [the soothsayers] say so; they agree with each other (on that). Thus they say: 'The auxiliary troops of Išme-Dagan are (only) prisoners. They go along with him by means of lies and pressures! Will they not despise him?'".

The following are his readings:

1. 36-37: *i-na nu-la-ni... [u-š]a-ad-ba-[ab-š]u-nu-ti* [So also Römer].

1. 39. (with Moran) *im-ta-ḥa[-ru]*.

1. 43. [*ši-tu-]sú ú-ul i-le-ḡú-ú*. For *šetūtam leḡum*, see CAD L, 145 (5,c); Add ARM X:95:rev. 10'; AbBr V, 160: rev.10'.

struggle which pitted Assyria and Ešnunna against Zimri-Lim and his allies, Karañā and Kurda. From all outward evidence, Babylon was not willing to commit itself to either side¹¹.

The situation was complicated and the outcome, apparently, in doubt. This might explain the style, unique to Mari's epistolary archives, in which ARM X:4 is forged. In this letter, Šibtu displays deep understanding of her husband's mind and shows fine appreciation of the value of encouragement. Hers is an active approach that attempts in two ways to bolster Zimri-Lim's spirits. On one level, she extracts divine reassurances that ultimate victory is her husband's. By posing unequivocal questions through local oracles, she provokes the gods into committing themselves to a clear position on the issue. Somewhat inconsistently, she secures and communicates the information that a battle will not even take place.

On the other level, the queen anticipates that her husband, facing a large army, might be less than blindly trusting, if not downright cynical. She assures him, therefore, that the gods of Mari will stand squarely by his side; that if Išme-Dagan's troops will not defect to Mari, they will certainly abandon Aššur's cause. Should Zimri-Lim remain doubtful, Šibtu offers the clinching argument that Išme-Dagan's army is composed of vagabonds known for their deceits, lies, and treacheries.

It would not be an overexaggeration, however, to imagine Zimri-Lim as deriving great satisfaction and comfort from the combat scene so realistically sketched by the royal visionaries. The Akkadian of lines 13-17 reads as follows: *bēli ḥumašam | ana Išme-Dagan ḥumašam iššima | umma ina ḥumašim ele'ika | šitpušum šitpašma | ina šitpušu ele'ika*". Above, this was translated: "My lord has lifted the *ḥumašu* for the *ḥumašu*-(match) with Išme-Dagan, saying: 'In the *ḥumašu*-(match), I will overpower you. Come on, wrestle, and I will overpower you in wrestling' ". For our purposes, the following grammatical notes will be sufficient.

The verb *šapāšum* is widely attested in cuneiform literature, employed mostly in first millennium royal inscriptions. Until the publication of the Mari texts, however, the *Gt* form, *šitpušum*, has appeared only in lexical documents. Most of these have been gathered by Goetze, in *JAOS* 65 (1945) 231, who arrived at a meaning 'to grapple with each other'¹². This meaning suits very well the Mari epistolary contexts. The *Gt* participle *muštapšum*, also attested elsewhere in lexical texts only, occurs in ARM I:5. This letter, which Šamši-Adad intended as a rebuke to his indolent son Yasmaḥ-Adad, contains the following passage (ll. 4-9): "(You and your ally) think up tricks to beat your enemy and to manoeuvre for position against him; but the enemy similarly tries to think up tricks to manoeuvre for position against you, just as wrestlers use tricks against each other".

Ḥumašum is mentioned three times in our passage. In his treatment of this segment, Moran does not translate, but refers his readers to a bibliography on the word *umāšu*, which together with *ḥumušu*, is considered by lexicographers as equivalent to our *ḥumašu*¹³. In its recent volume I, *sub le'û* (2, b), the CAD

¹¹ Rouault, *RA* 64 (1970) 117-118. The letters in question are: II: 39; 4-43; 49-50; 119. *RA* 42 (1948) 75; 66 (1972) 129; Dossin, *CRAI* (1958) 389.

¹² See also *JCS* 23 (1971), 23.

¹³ *Bib* 50 (1969) 47⁴.

also leaves our word untranslated. This is somewhat disconcerting since, in volume A/1, *abāru B* and *ša abāri* are considered as synonymous for *umāšu* and *ša umāši/ša ḥumūši*. The former set are rendered by 'strength' and 'wrestle' respectively. *umāšu* is given by Landsberger as '*Ringkampf*'¹⁴, and by the CAD, *sub eflu* (2,b) as 'wrestling'. Van Dijk baffles me with his translation '*maillon*'¹⁵. The CAD's translation, 'wrestler', for *ša umāši* is repeated in volume K, *sub kiššuru* and *kannu B*. The last entry, *sub c*, 3., quotes a lexical text as containing the following: "[*kan-nu šá ú-ma-ši* [MIN *šá*] MIN [MIN *šá*] *a-ba-ri*, 'belt of the wrestler, ditto of ditto, ditto of the fighter'"¹⁶. To be noted at this point is that the texts know of belts worn by wrestlers and fighters.

The Mari records contain two attestations of *ša ḥumušim*. Whereas one of these undoubtedly denotes a 'wrestler', the second is not as easily definable. In a ritual, the *ša ḥumušim* struts before the king, a member of a group that included fire or sword swallows, jugglers, acrobats, and female masqueraders¹⁷. An administrative text published in ARM VII presents the second example. In 161:10 are recorded "*4 šimdū ša ḥumušim*". CAD Š, 197 (2), finds this passage, which is sandwiched between "10 pairs of *ḥullu*-rings", and "15 donkey harnesses", to be obscure. Hence, it does not offer a translation. Given the context, one would expect a manufactured object to be in question, rather than an occupation. This might be the line of reasoning that led Bottéro to suggest: "il s'agirait donc tout simplement de harnachements 'renforcés', ou peut-être 'à chaînes'"¹⁸. That *ḥumašum* / *ḥumušum* may, in certain instances at least, refer to a fabricated product, is a conclusion that one could derive from consideration of YOS X: 31. An Old Babylonian omen pauses the following condition: "If the tip of the gallbladder is like a *ḥumašum* (x:1)". Since this is found in a context where the tip of the gallbladder is described as being "like a lizard", or as "pointed thorns", it is unlikely that an abstract term such as 'wrestling' is involved¹⁹.

To return to ARM X:4:13-14. In these lines, as was stated above, *ḥumašum* occurs three times²⁰. In the first two instances, this noun is in the accusative, while in the third, it is in the genitive. While the first of the two examples of *ḥumašam* could, if one is forced, be explained as an accusative of condition or of means, the second should be only understood as standing in direct object to the verb *našum*. For this reason, Moran noted that "(*h*)*umašu*... must be the concrete object [of the verb] rather than "strength"²¹. It is possible, therefore, that the term *ḥumašum* originally denoted not just the art of wrestling but the object which symbolised most appropriately the essence of the sport. Hence the 'wrestler', is labeled a *ša ḥumašim*, a possessor of a *ḥumašum*.

¹⁴ WZKM 56 (1960) 116-117.

¹⁵ *La Sagesse suméro-accadienne*, 1953, 116; Bottéro, ARMT VII, 358 (h).

¹⁶ Nabnitu XXII: 41ff. See also CAD A/1, *sub ša abāri*, lexical section.

¹⁷ Dossin, *RA* 35 (1938) 3:iii:15-23; Birot, TEABA, 48:4.

¹⁸ ARMT VII, 358 (h).

¹⁹ Note also the liver omen K. 10775: *šumma šu.si ḥīma ú-ma-ši* (Geer's copy – courtesy E. Reiner, Oriental Institute).

²⁰ It may be that, with Moran, one of the two mentions of *ḥumašu* in the accusative is to be deleted. Probably, the one in l. 13. It would, however, be difficult to explain such a scribal error.

²¹ *op. cit.*, 47⁴.

By now, it should be obvious that his paper proposes to define *ḥumašum* as a 'wrestling-belt', or, perhaps more generally, a 'warrior's belt'. The cuneiform evidence for this stance is, at best, circumstantial. I would like, therefore, to link this substantive to one which appears in Biblical Hebrew. This noun, *ḥōmeš*, is linguistically related to the Akkadian *ḥumašum*. Unfortunately, despite the fact that it appears four times in the Old Testament, this vocable has not been given a satisfactory rendering. BDB offers 'belly', while LVTI and HAL relate to Akkadian *emšum* and render 'Mutterleib'. Generally, however, it is acknowledged that uncertainties and difficulties abound. The four passages are as follows:

a) 2 Sam 2:23. Asahel, youngest son of Zeruyah, David's sister, was a swift-footed warrior who insisted on challenging Abner to a duel. His end is related thusly: *wayyakkēhū 'abnēr be'aḥarēy haḥanīt el-ḥaḥōmeš wattēšē' haḥanīt me'aḥarāyw wayyipol-šām wayyamōt taḥtāw*".

b) 2 Sam 3:27. Invited to Hebron, Abner is approached by Joab, brother of Asahel. At an appropriate moment, as it is stated; "*wayyakkēhū šām haḥōmeš*".

c) 2 Sam 4:6. The assassination of Išba'al, Saul's son, occurred while the latter was taking his siesta. The text is clearly disjointed so that the statement: "*wayyakkēhū 'el-ḥaḥōmeš*", is deleted by most modern commentators. A variety of substitutes are offered.

d) 2 Sam 20:10. Another of David's nephews, Amasah, was the object of Joab's murderous ire. The latter bore a sword when he approached Amasah: "*wa'amāsāh lō-nišmar baḥereb 'ašer beyad-yō'āb wayyakkēhū bah 'el-ḥaḥōmeš wayyīšpōk mē'āyw 'aršāh... wayyamōt*".

Rather than an extended commentary, the following remarks are offered:

1) All the attestations of *ḥomeš*, including the difficult passage in 2 Sam 4:6, stem from the so-called Heroic-Age of Israel. Those struck in the *ḥomeš* were notables, and, even in the case of Išba'al, possessed a warlike reputation.

2) The parts of the body affected are the lower segments of the trunk. Thus a translation such as the 'fifth-rib' for *ḥomeš* would ignore anatomical possibilities. Nor would a translation such as 'belly, stomach' be likely, for Hebrew is rich in its vocabulary of commonly used terms for the abdomen and its internal organs.

In the case of Asahel, he was struck on the *ḥomeš* with the metal tipped butt of the *ḥanīt*-pike. Should one imagine the writer of this episode to have indulged in boisterous word-play, it is possible to suppose that the weapon came out of Asahel's posterior. If need be, one may vocalize "*wattēšē' haḥanīt mē'aḥorāyw*".

3) The *hiph'il* of *nākāh*, "to strike, smite," construes the object of the action either directly or indirectly. In the former case, the accusative particle 'et may or may not be employed. In the latter instance, there seems to be, generally, a preference for the preposition *b*. But, at times, 'al and 'el are also used. In the examples in which the two prepositions are employed, 'al is but once (Ex. 7:17) succeeded by a noun denoting an anatomical feature. On the other hand, 'el, the preposition found in our passages, precedes material objects. The only exception, found in 1 Sam 17:49, deserves a few tangential words. David is about to slay Goliath, the latter having been struck on the *mēšaḥ*, the 'forehead'. It is to be observed, however, that v. 6 of the same chapter contains the *hapax legomenon mišḥāh*, usually translated as "greaves", which is

described as placed on Goliath's *raglayim*. Since this noun is given in the feminine *singular* construct, and since *raglayim* is a well-attested euphemism for the genitals, it might well be that *miṣḥāh* presented a 'codpiece'. If so, one could understand the use of the preposition 'el in v. 49 as a deliberate attempt at a *jeu-de-mots*.

A rendering such as the one we propose for *ḥōmeš* could also explain a martial term, *ḥamūšim*, which is attested in the OT only in the masculine plural absolute of the *Qal* passive participle (Ex 13:18; Josh 1:14; 4:12; Jud 7:11). The usual translation such as 'in battle array', or 'by (units) of five' could now be made more precise: the warriors are described as 'girded for battle'.

All this does not mean, of course, that the meaning of *ḥōmeš* has been definitely fixed. But the indications are that we are dealing with an object which fighters had on the lower part of their torso. In akkadian, we have a linguistically related term, *ḥumašu*, denoting an object that was sported by worthy individuals. Both ARM X:4 and 2 Sam 2:23 describe a scene in which a duel unfolded. It would seem possible, therefore, to propose an equation between *ḥōmeš* and *ḥumašu*. Given the number of representations of belted combatants that have been uncovered in the Near East²², it might also seem possible to offer a meaning for these terms. The language in which these proposals are advanced is consciously hypothetical. To do otherwise would, doubtless, be too daring.

²² Cf., J. Boese, *Altmesopotamische Weihplatten*, 1971, pl. X (CN2); XI (CN2 - CN3 - CN4); IX (CŠ7/K7); XL (K7). Note also his "Ringkampf-Darstellungen in Frühdynastischer Zeit", AfO 22 (168-69) 30-37. As reconstructed by Boese, these athletic displays form part of a ritual rather than a martial scene. The belts are prominently worn on an otherwise naked body. The mode of combat, it is obvious from the sequences of CN2, is that of wrestling with the purpose of throwing, if not tripping, the opponent to the ground.

Consult also, M.-Th. Barrelet, *Figurines et reliefs en terre cuite de la Mésopotamie antique*, I (BAH, 85), 1968, pls. LXXXII-LXXXIII, No. 827-830; pp. 409-410.