

72) “To Open a Lance’ in the *Epic of Zimri-Lim*” — In the Mariote *Epic of Zimri-Lim*, we twice find a curious description of the king as one who *pé-ti-iú* ^{giš}ŠUKUR (*petûm šukurram*), literally “opens the lance” (Col. i, ll. 8, 10). Usually, the idiom is understood to mean “removing a weapon from its sheath,” especially in reference to a sword. Thus, the *Hymn to Nanâ* speaks of [*nam*]šaru *petû* “unsheathing a sword.” This understanding has been applied even to texts that employ the general term for “weapons” *kakkû* (GIŠ.TUKUL). Thus, Martha Roth translates *pātiat kakkīya* in the *Code of Hammurapi* (in reference to Ishtar) as the one “who bares my weapon” (epilogue, 43:94) (ROTH 1995: 139). See similarly Earl Leichty’s

rendering of a fragmentary omen in the series *Šumma Izbu* (VII 121'): ...BE iz-bu... GIŠ.TUKUL LUGAL ip-pe-tu-ú "If an anomaly [...] the weapons of the king will be laid open" (LEICHTY, E. 1970: 98).

Nevertheless, since the *Epic of Zimri-Lim* applies the idiom to a *šukurru* "lance," Michaël Guichard suggested that it may be more appropriate to see it as referencing a ritual:

"Ouvrir les armes" rappelle en premier lieu le rituel du *pî pî* (ouverture de la bouche ou *mîs pî* "purification de la bouche", rite équivalent à la *dedicatio* des Latins) qui visait à rendre vivants les objets, tels des statues, des emblèmes (*šurinnum*), du mobilier sacré, et aussi des armes (GUICHARD 1999: 39).

This interpretation has been entertained in the main. Thus, in his recent treatment of the text, Adam Miglio notes: "The expression may allude to a ritual that consecrated the weapons for battle," citing Guichard, though still opting to render the phrase "*readies his lance*" (MIGLIO 2016: 231, n. 3). Herein I shall argue that there is good reason to retain the more mundane interpretation: "to draw, bare, ready" a weapon. My evidence is two-fold: cognate usage in the Hebrew Bible, and frequent references to sharp weapons (and tools) as having "tongues" and "mouths" that "devour."

I turn first to the Hebrew Bible, wherein the cognate verb פתח "open" periodically refers to weapons. Ezekiel's prophecy against the Ammonites calls out: חרב חרב פתוחה לטבח מרוטה להכיל למען ברק "O sword, O sword 'opened' for the slaughter, made bare to devour in order to flash (like lightning)" (Ezek 21:33). The Psalmist states that the wicked חרב פתחו רשעים ודרכו קשתם "open the sword and draw the bow" (Ps 37:14), and that the talk of his enemy "is smooth as butter, but war is in his heart. His words are more soothing than oil, yet they are open (weapons) (פתחות)" (Ps 55:22). In each case, פתח means "to draw" a weapon. Though the Akkadian *šukurru* "lance" has no cognate in Hebrew, the semantic equivalent רמה also appears alongside the sword as a hendiadys (e.g., 1 Kgs 18:28, Neh 4:7) or in lists of weapons (Joel 4:10, cf. Isa 2:4 which uses חניתותיהם for greater onomatopoeic effect) (see WATSON 1984/1986: 236). Thus, it naturally shares the same semantic parameters with other weapons that have sharp metal edges.

I contend that since sharp weapons, whether they be swords, spears, arrows, or lances, have "tongues" and "mouths" that can "devour" enemies, the use of the verb "open," usually used in reference to the mouth, naturally was applied to weapons generally. Indeed, the *šukurru* "lance" was made of wood and had a metal "tongue," as the author of an Old Babylonian letter tells us: *lišānam ša šukurrim ušeppiš* "I will have a tongue made for the lance." Even weapons without sharp edges can open their mouths, as we see in *Lugal-e* II 35 (= 79): GIŠ.TUKUL.AN KUR.ŠÈ KA BA.AB.DU₈ *miṭtu ana šadī pīšu piti* "the divine mace holds its mouth open toward the mountain region." Moreover, the lance also could be worn on the chest, and thus "drawn," as an oracle for Esarhaddon informs us: *giš šukurru ina birit tulēya ašakkanka* "I will place you between my breasts like a *šukurru*." The same text also mentions those who *[la]bšū pat[r]ī namšarī šu[ku]rrī* "wore daggers, swords, and lances."

Therefore, while there exists some evidence for the ritual treatment of weapons in the ancient Near East, a closer look at the idiom "to open a weapon" demonstrates that, regardless of the kind of weapon, it simply means to make it visible and ready for use. Thus, the description of Zimri-Lim as one who "opens the lance" merely characterizes him as battle ready.

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