“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 ǧīš ŠUKUR (petûm šukurrām), 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 kakkîya 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-î “If an anomaly [...] the weapons of the king will be be laid open” (LEICHTY, E. 1970: 98).

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


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 מָמַת “open” periodically refers to weapons. Ezekiel’s prophecy against the Ammonites calls out: יָרֵב חֲרֵב פֹחַת הַלְּשׁוֹנָה מִלָּה לָבֶן בְּרוֹק “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 יָרֵב חֲרֵב פֹחַת הַלְָשׁוֹנָה יָדִיעֵי רַבְרֵמָה רֱצַח הַנִּבְרֵכָה “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) (מִלָּה)” (Ps 55:22). In each case, מָמַת means “to draw” a weapon. Though the Akkadian šukurrû “lance” has no cognate in Hebrew, the semantic equivalent רָמִים 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 תְוַעַד יְתוֹחָנִים 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 šukurrû “lance” was made of wood and had a metal “tongue,” as the author of an Old Babylonian letter tells us: _rsānam ša šukurrum 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.ŠE ka BA.AB.DuŠ miṭtu ana šadī pîšu pîti “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: *šukurrû ina birit tulēya ašakkanka* “I will place you between my breasts like a šukurrû.” The same text also mentions those who *la][bšša paṭ[r]t namšar [*šu][ku][r]ri “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.

ROTH, M. T. 1995 Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor. WAWSL 6, Atlanta.

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