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 Yazid b. Ḥāshim 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 thesis 2. While diverse episodes which he presented have been subjected to valid criticism by, among others H. L. Ginsburg 3, 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 passages 4.

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

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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, 57, 59. See also, Oppenheim, Or 17 (1948) 29-30.
3 TAOS 70 (1950) 158.
4 Von Soden, Akkadisches Handwörterbuch, 348 (sub ḫesmu(mma)); 362 (sub ḫuṣumma).
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. 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”. 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 David.

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 Ishâq 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 *Archives Royales 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 hayil*. 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)
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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 humašu for the humašu-(match) with Išme-Dagan, saying: 'In the humašu-(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 lord. 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 Šamši-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 Yamhad, 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...
struggle which pitted Assyria and Ešnunna against Zimri-Lim and his allies, Karanā and Kurda. From all outward evidence, Babylon was not willing to commit itself to either side.

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: bēlī ḫumāšam / ana Išme-Dagan ḫumāšam ʾiššima / umma ina ḫumāšim ʾeleʾika / šitpusum šitpāšma / ina šitpūšu ʾeleʾika”. Above, this was translated: “My lord has lifted the ḫumāšu for the ḫumāšu-(match) with Išme-Dagan, saying: ‘In the ḫumāšu-(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 sapāsum is widely attested in cuneiform literature, employed mostly in first millennium royal inscriptions. Until the publication of the Mari texts, however, the Gt form, šitpusum, 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’ This meaning suits very well the Mari epistolary contexts. The Gt participle mustapšum, also attested elsewhere in lexical texts only, occurs in ARM 1:5. This letter, which Šamši-Adad intended as a rebuke to his indolent son Yasmah-Adad, contains the following passage (11. 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”.

Ḫumāšum 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 humušu, is considered by lexicographers as equivalent to our ūmušu. In its recent volume L, sub leʾû (2, b), the CAD

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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.
also leaves our word untranslated. This is somewhat disconcerting since, in
volume A/I, ša abāri and ša ūmāšu are considered as synonymous for umāšu
and ša umāši/ša ṣumūši. The former set are rendered by ‘strength’ and ‘wrestle’
respectively. ūmāšu is given by Landsberger as ‘Ringkampf’\(^{14}\), and by the CAD,
sub ṣālu (2,b) as ‘wrestling’. Van Dijk baffles me with his translation ‘maillon’\(^{16}\).
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 ša] ū-ma-ši [MIN ša] MIN [MIN ša] 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 ṣumūšim. Whereas one
of these undoubtedly denotes a ‘wrestler’, the second is not as easily definable.
In a ritual, the ša ṣumūšim struts before the king, a member of a group that
included fire or sword swallowers, jugglers, acrobats, and female masqueraders\(^{17}\).
An administrative text published in ARM VII presents the second example.
In 161:10 are recorded “4 šimīš ša ṣumūšim”. CAD §, 197 (2), finds this pas-
sage, which is sandwiched between “10 pairs of ḫullu-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 ūmāšum/umušum may, in certain instances at least,
refer to a fabricated product, is a conclusion that one could derive from con-
sideration of YOSX: 31. An Old Babylonian omen pauses the following condition:
“If the tip of the gallbladder is like a ūmāšum (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
involved\(^{19}\).

To return to ARM X:4:13-14. In these lines, as was stated above, ūma-
šum occurs three times\(^{20}\). In the first two instances, this noun is in the accusa-
tive, while in the third, it is in the genitive. While the first of the two examples
of ūmāšam 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 “(ḥ)umāšu . . . must be
the concrete object [of the verb] rather than “strength”\(^{21}\). It is possible,
therefore, that the term ūmāšum originally denoted not just the art of wrest-
ling but the object which symbolised most appropriately the essence of the
sport. Hence the ‘wrestler’, is labeled a ša ṣumūšim, a possessor of a ūmāšum.

\(^{14}\) WZKM 56 (1960) 116-117.
\(^{15}\) La Sagesse suméro-accadienne, 1953, 116; Bottéro, ARM VII, 358 (h).
\(^{16}\) Nabnitu XXII: 41ff. See also CAD A/I, sub ša abāri, lexical section.
\(^{18}\) ARM VII, 358 (h).
\(^{19}\) Note also the liver omen K. 10775: šumma šu.t hīm. ū-ma-li (Geer’s
\(^{20}\) It may be that, with Moran, one of the two mentions of ūmāšu 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 *humasum* 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, *hømeš*, is linguistically related to the Akkadian *humasum*. 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 LVTL and HAL relate to Akkadian *emsuš* 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: *wayyakkêhû 'abnêr be'aharêy hahanît el-hahõmeé wattêsê' hahanît me'aharâyw wayyipol-šām wayyamôt tahlāw".

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

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: "*wayyakkêhû el-hahõmeš*", 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: "*waK amâsâh lo'-nišmar bahereb ašer beyad-yô' âb wayyakkêhû bah 'el-hahõmeš wayyiépõk mê'âyw 'ar sãh.,. wayyãmôt*".

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

1) All the attestations of *horneš*, including the difficult passage in 2 Sam 4:6, stem from the so-called Heroic-Age of Israel. Those struck in the *horneš* 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 *horneš* 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 *horneš* with the metal tipped butt of the *ḥantîlt*-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 "*waytêšê' hahanît me'ahorâyw*".

3) The *hî̂pî̂l* of *nâkâh*, "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 *mèsah*, the 'forehead'. It is to be observed, however, that v. 6 of the same chapter contains the *hapax legomenon misâh*, 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 mishāh 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 ḫomeš could also explain a martial term, ḫamūšim, 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 ḫomeš 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, ḫumašu, 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 ḫomeš and ḫumašu. Given the number of representations of belted combatants that have been uncovered in the Near East, 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, Altimesopotamische Weihplatten, 1971, pl. X (CN2); XI (CN2 – CN3 – CN4); IX (CS7/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.