

ASSYRIAN BATTERING RAMS REVISITED¹

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One of the more intriguing elements to be found in Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs are representations of battering rams and other siege engines. Assyrian battering rams have long been studied by art historians and historians of ancient warfare². These were, as may be recognized from the relief representations, of the suspension type³.

The most commonly attested word for battering ram in Akkadian is *ašibu* (*ašubu*, *yašibu*, *yašubu*, *šubû*, *šupû*)⁴. For this term, HAR.RA = *hubullu* VIIA 86-95 contains the following entries:

- 86 G^{IS}GU₄ = *a-šu-bu*
87 G^{IS}GU₄.MAH = MIN
88 G^{IS}GU₄.SI.DIL = MIN
89 G^{IS}SAG.GU₄.SI.DIL = *qaq-qa-ad* MIN
90 G^{IS}ZÚ.GU₄.SI.DIL = *ši-in-ni* MIN
91 G^{IS}GÚ.MURGU.GU₄.SI.DIL = *e-še-en-še-ri* MIN
92 G^{IS}KI.A.GU₄.SI.DIL = *ú-maš* MIN
93 G^{IS}ANŠE.GU₄.SI.DIL = *i-me-ri* MIN
94 G^{IS}DU.DU.GU₄.SI.DIL = *mut-tal-li-kàt* MIN
95 G^{IS}DU.DU.GU₄.SI.DIL = *mu-ta-bi-lat* MIN

¹) This article has benefited from suggestions made by M. Gibson, R. Biggs, and R. Beal. Any mistakes which remain are, of course, my own.

²) Most notably by Y. Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands*, II, New York 1963, pp. 314-316, and by T.A. Madhloum, *Assyrian Siege-Engines*, Sumer 21 (1965), pp. 9-15. See also G. Rawlinson, *Five Great Monarchies*², I, New York 1870, pp. 470-472.

³) This is especially clear on the representations in L.W. King, *Bronze Reliefs from the Gates of Shalmaneser, King of Assyria B.C. 860-825*, London 1915, pls. 20, 50, and R.D. Barnett - M. Falkner, *The Sculptures of Aššur-našir-apli II (883-859 B.C.), Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 B.C.), Esarhaddon (681-669 B.C.) from the Central and South-West Palaces at Nimrud*, London 1962, pl. 39, and P.E. Botta - E. Flandin, *Monument de Ninive*, Paris 1849, pls. 77, 90, 145, 147. See also Yadin, *Warfare* II, p. 314. Madhloum, Sumer 21, p. 10, argues that one type of ram was “run bodily against the wall” on the basis of “handles” at the back in King, *Gates*, pl. 20, but note the clear depiction of the suspension mechanism at the front of the ram. It seems more likely that the “handles” were simply used to position the engine before the walls of a city, or to hitch it to mules for hauling between arenas of war.

⁴) Another word: *nappilu* is rarely attested; occasionally, rams are simply referred to as “siege engines” (*nēpišu*).

In sum, Mesopotamian battering rams consisted of a “head”, “tooth”, “backbone”, “*umāšu*”⁵, “donkey”, and a “moving/carrying part”. In the Ebla texts, the “tongue” (EME) of a battering ram (GU₄.DI.DIL) is also mentioned⁶.

E. Salonen, in his study of military *paraphernalia* made the obvious equation of the “tooth” with the biting edge of the ram, and went on to propose that the “donkey” was the ram proper (i.e., that part of the machine which actually bashed against the enemy wall by pendulum action), and that the “moving/carrying part” was a roadway for the ram to operate on⁷. However, the roadway should properly have been classified as a part of the siege ramp (*arammu*), not of the battering ram (*ašubu*). Moreover, there is a problem with the assignment of the term “donkey” to the ram proper. Our “ram” is named for the ram’s head which decorated its tactical end, and there is every reason to suppose that the Sumerian name for the “ram”: “one-horned wooden ox” refers to the fact that its “head” was in the form of a one-horned ox. Why, therefore, should the “one-horned ox” have been referred to as a “donkey”?

Some clarification is, I believe, to be obtained by trying to picture the internal workings of Mesopotamian battering rams. As it happens, we have information from Classical sources on the construction of suspension-type rams which looked (on the inside) as follows: a footed saw horse (A) with a metal-headed wooden ram (B) suspended from it by means of clamps and chains (C)⁸.

With this picture firmly in mind, let us attempt to reassign the Mesopotamian lexical terms. The footed saw horse from whose “backbone” the ram proper was suspended seems an obvious candidate for the “donkey”. The “*umāšu*”, conventionally translated “clamp”, could be the clamps and chains by which the ram was suspended. This leaves the “moving/carrying part” for the beam whose “head” ended in the “tooth” or “tongue” (i.e. the biting edge) of the ram⁹. The term “moving/carrying part” seems a not inappropriate designation for something which, by moving back and forth, literally carried the “head” of the ram to its destination.

⁵) This poorly understood term is otherwise attested only in the context of wrestling, where it seems to have been a part of a wrestler’s gear by which another wrestler sought to hold him (AHw. pp. 1412f.: “ein Klammerhaken für Ringer ... für Gürtelhaken-Ringkampf”). AHw. p. 412 translates the *umāšu* which is part of a battering ram as “Klammer”.

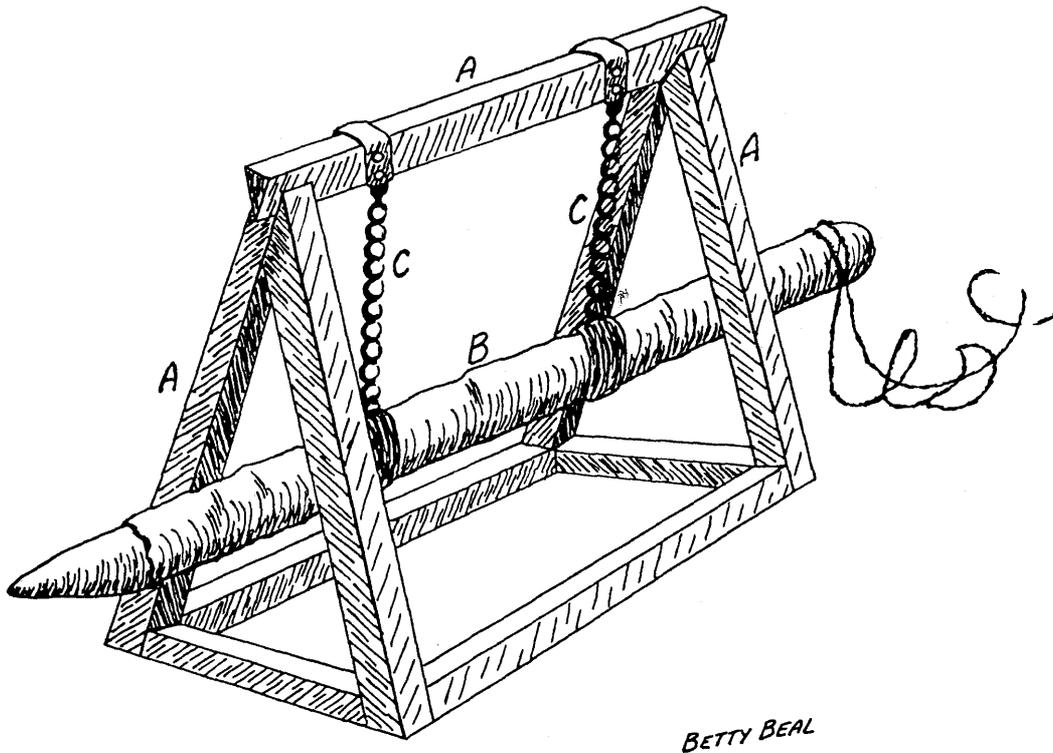
⁶) P. Steinkeller, *Battering Rams and Siege Engines at Ebla*, N.A.B.U. 1987 (no. 2 - June), p. 14, no. 27, 3.

⁷) E. Salonen, *Die Waffen der alten Mesopotamier*, StOr 33, Helsinki 1965, pp. 29-31.

⁸) The illustration is a drawing by B. Beal after P. Connolly, *The Greek Armies*, London 1977, p. 67.

⁹) The “tooth” was presumably a sharp spike such as that shown in R.D. Barnett - A. Lorenzini, *Assyrian Sculpture*, Toronto 1975, pl. 78. The “tongue”, on the other hand, may be the blunt head shown in E. A. W. Budge, *Assyrian Sculptures in the British Museum: Reign of Ashur-nasir-pal, 885-860 B.C.*, London 1914, pls. 13, 24. The tongue-head would have been more efficient at shaking down walls, whereas the spike was better suited to drilling holes in them.

In sum, I propose that the Mesopotamian battering ram consisted of a frame in the form of a footed saw horse (*imēru*: “donkey”) from whose transverse beam (*eṣeṣēru*: “backbone”) the ram proper (*muttalliktu/muttabbiltu*: “moving/carrying part”) was suspended by means of clamps and chains (*umāšu*)¹⁰. The head (*qaqqadu*) of the ram ended in a metal bit (*šinnu*: “tooth” or EME: “tongue”).



¹⁰) In addition, ropes would have been needed to pull the beam back and forth to build up momentum before releasing it against the wall. The cords made of goat hair mentioned in several Ur III texts (*BIN IX*, 197 and 463, *apud* M. Sigris, *Le travail des cuirs et peaux à Umma sous la dynastie d'Ur III*, JCS 33 [1981], p. 159) may have been intended to serve this purpose.