

A Note on Words for “shield” in Akkadian

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Abstract: The two main terms discussed here are Akk. *g/kabābu* and Akk. *šinnatu*, with some reference to Akk. *arītu* and Bab. *tukšu*, all of which have the meaning “shield”. The focus is on their possible etymology or cognates.

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There are several words for “shield” in Akkadian (Assyrian/Babylonian), although curiously, not so many as there are in Greek.¹ Here, possible cognates and etymologies are proposed for two of these terms,² while for the other two there is little that can be said, but they are included for the sake of completeness.³

1. Akk. *g/kabābu*

While the meaning of Akk. *kabābu(m)* or *gabābu(m)* is now undoubtedly accepted as being “shield” (CAD K, 1-2; AHw, 1565a⁴ and CDA, 139a), its etymology is uncertain. It may correspond to Ugaritic *kbb*, “shield” (KTU 1.81:10), but that word occurs in a broken context (cf. DUL, 419).⁵

Evidently these terms are related to Common Semitic *GBB*, “to be round”: cf. Syr. *gbyb*, “curved, humped” (SL, 200a); Aram. *gbb*, “to bend, bend over” (DJBA, 256a); Man. *gbb*, *gub*, “to bend, curve” (DM, 79b) and Ge'ez *gabbaba*

¹ E.g. ἄσπις, γέρον, ἵτα, κυρία, λαισῆια, πέλιτη, ῥινός, σάκος; cf. EDG *ad loc.* Gk σάκος is a loan from Semitic (cf. Noonan 2019, 353).

² For a brief discussion of these two words see Millard 1978. Landsberger (1957-58, 379b) noted: “Wie längst bemerkt, war es ein Irrtum, die Synonyme *arītu*, *kubābu*, *tukšu* anstelle des traditionellen «Schild» mit «Schleuder» wiederzugeben”. See next note.

³ My thanks to Aaron Butts and Giovanni Mazzini for discussing some of these terms with me.

⁴ Correcting the previous meaning of “Schleuder” (AHw, 414a).

⁵ This word was not included in Watson 2017 as it is uncertain; correct the misprint: read “Akk. ^{kuš}*gabābu*” for “Akk. ^{kuš}*gubābu*” (*ibid.*, 710).

“(to) be bent” (CDG, 177b) as well as to Common Semitic *KBB* with a similar meaning: cf. Geez *kabāb*, *k^ebāb*, “circle, sphere, round, circlet” (CDG, 273a) and Cushitic (Kambata) *kubbubu*, “be round” (HECD, 126) as well as Arab. *kabba*, II: “to roll or form into a ball” (DMWA, 808b) and *mikabb*, “spool, reel” (DMWA, 809a).⁶ It is interesting that the fluctuation between /g/ and /k/ in the spellings of Akk. *gabābu* and *kabābu* is also reflected in these cognates.⁷

In fact, there are very much closer cognates. These are Jibb. *gub/egbēt*, “shield” (JL, 80 under *gwb*), Mehri *gawb/gəwēbət*, “shield of hippopotamus hide”, and Eastern and Central Jibbāli *gub*, “shield” (ML, 127). It is particularly significant that Jibb. *gub* is “us[ually] made of hippopotamus hide and very heavy, though the diameter is only about 2ft.” (JL, 80), i.e. 61 cm. approximately. This corresponds closely to the description of shields used in Assyria: “Ass. Soldaten tragen meist Bronzerund-S[childe] von ca. 70 cm.”⁸

2. Akk. *šinnatu*

Many years ago, the meaning of Akk. *šinnatu* had been established as “shield”, corresponding to Heb. *šinnā*, “(large) shield”, by G. R. Driver.⁹ As J.-M. Durand notes: “Le *šinnatu*, lu régulièrement à tort *šinnatum* ou *zinnatum*, a mis lui aussi longtemps avant d’être identifié : il s’agit en fait de façon sûre de l’équivalent de l’hébreu *šinnāh*. On ne doit donc plus le considérer comme une « trompette » ... ni comme une « lance » ...”¹⁰

There are three possible etymologies for both words:

(a) Arab. *šinnu*, “panier à couvercle dans lequel on met le pain” (BK II, 1373b); Arab. *šannu*, “[a kind of basket]” (AEL, 1730) and Aram. *šannā*, *š n’*, *sn’*, “basket” (DJBA, 967-968).¹¹ The meaning “basket” for Heb. *šēn*¹² is not certain (cf. HALOT, 1037a).

⁶ Note also Akk. *šabāru*, “to bend, twist”; Štn: “(to) shape” shield “by repeated bending” (CDA, 330a). Similarly, Gk ἄρουα, metaphorical for “shield”, derives from a verb meaning to bend or curve (EDG I, 605).

⁷ One could also mention Chadic **kubb-/kubh-*, “to cover, close” as well as Cushitic: Oromo *kab-*, “(to) cover a house with a roof” and Bedauwe *gubi-*, “cover” (CED, 199 §415).

⁸ Schrakamp 2009-2011, 178. As shown by the determinative KUŠ, such shields were often similarly made of leather. See also Llop 2016, 203. Gk ῥινόζ, “hide, esp. cow skin/hide” also denotes a “shield made of cow skin” (EDG II, 1287).

⁹ Driver 1954a, 20-21; cf. HALOT, 1037b; the Akk. word is not mentioned in KAHAL, 480b. According to Driver (1954b, 156) “As a weapon of attack the Hebr. צנה must be something of the same sort as the Lat. *testudo*, a covering of interlocked shields beneath which the attacker can approach the walls of a fortified city in comparative safety”.

¹⁰ Durand 1998, 391.

¹¹ Similar is Gk κούρτια, “wicker shield” from κόρυς, “lobster pot” (EDG I, 808).

¹² Cited by Driver 1951, 186 (for Prov. 22:5) and 1954a, 21.

(b) Amharic *ʃn*, “firm, solid, strong” (Isenberg 1841, 189b), is perhaps another plausible cognate.¹³

(c) However, preferable cognates are Ge’ez *ʃanana*, “to bend”; *’aʃnana*, “to turn aside (trans.)” (ConcDG, 228-229); Ge’ez *ʃnn*, “(to) turn aside”; *ʃannāne*, “turning aside” (CDG, 560b) and Eth. *ʃn(n)*, “declinare, deflectere” (LLA, 1287a). Rather than referring to the shape of the shield, though, these verbs have the meaning of deflecting attack, which, of course, is the function of a shield.

3. Akk. *arītu* and Bab. *tukšu*

There are two other words for “shield”. One is Akk. *arītu(m)* (CDA, 23a), corresponding to Ug. *ārt* or *hrt*, “shield, buckler” (DUL, 106, 342), although otherwise it has no etymology.¹⁴ The other is Bab. *tukšu(m)*, “(leather) shield” (CDA, 409a), “shield” (CAD T, 460), “(Schutz-)Schild” (AHw, 1368a), which also has no etymology.¹⁵

4. Table with Cognates

All these terms, with their cognates, where available, can now be set out as a table:

Akk.	Ugar.	Heb.	MSA	Arabic	Syr.	Aram.	Ethiop.	Ge’ez	Amh.	AA
<i>arītu</i>	<i>ārt</i> <i>hrt</i>	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>gabābu</i>	—	—	<i>gub</i> , <i>gawb</i>		<i>gbyb</i>	—	—	<i>gabbaba</i>	—	<i>gubi</i>
<i>kabābu</i>	<i>kbb</i>	—		√ <i>kabba</i> <i>mikabb</i>		—	—	<i>kabāb</i>	—	<i>kubb</i>
<i>ʃinnatu</i>	—	<i>ʃinnā</i>	—	<i>ʃannu</i>	—	<i>ʃannā’</i>	—	—	—	—
			—	—	—	—	—	—	<i>ʃn</i>	—
			—	—	—	—	√ <i>ʃn(n)</i>	<i>ʃanana</i>	—	—
<i>tukšu</i>	—	—	—	—	(√ <i>tkš</i>)	—	—	—	—	

¹³ Arab. *ʃnn* and Eth. *ʃnn* are verbs apparently meaning “beschützen, bewahren” (KAHAL, 480b), although they cannot be found in any available dictionary. Arab. *ʃnn*, “he persevered, persisted” (AEL, 1730), is somewhat remote. However, cf. Arab. *ʃwn*, “he preserved it, kept it” (e.g. honour; AEL, 1750) and Ge’ez *ʃawwana*, “(to) protect, defend, preserve” (ConcDG, 231a).

¹⁴ It cannot be related to Akk. *āru*, “hide(?)”, since the meaning of that word is based on Heb. “*ōr*, “hide” (CAD A/2, 318a).

¹⁵ Semantically remote is, perhaps, Syr. *tkš*, Pe. “to hold back, restrain, hinder”; Pa. “to hold back, to hinder” (SL, 1645), possibly a secondary root from *kss*, “to reproach” (SL, 640-641). Examples of Akk. /š/ as Syr. /s/ are Akk. *šebû* – Syr. *sbʿ*, “to be full” and Akk. *šēni* – Syr. *sūnī*, “sandal”.

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Abbreviations

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- AHw W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, vols. I-III (Wiesbaden 1965-1981).
- BK A. de Biber-Kammerstein, *Dictionnaire arabe-français*, vols. 1-2 (Paris 1980).
- CAD I. J. Gelb et al. (eds.), *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, vols. 1-21 (Chicago 1956-2010).

- CDA J. Black / A. George / N. Postgate (eds), *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (SANTAG Arbeiten und Untersuchungen zur Keilschriftkunde 5; Wiesbaden 2000²).
- CDG W. Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge^eez* (Wiesbaden 1987).
- CED O. Stolbova, *Chadic Etymological Dictionary* (Moscow 2016).
- ConcDG W. Leslau, *Concise Dictionary of Ge^eez (Classical Ethiopic)* (Wiesbaden 1989).
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- EDH W. Leslau, *Etymological Dictionary of Harari* (Los Angeles 1963).
- HECD G. Hudson, *Highland East Cushitic Dictionary* (Hamburg 1989).
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- KAHAL W. Dietrich / S. Arnet (eds.), *Konzise und Aktualisierte Ausgabe des Hebräischen und Aramäischen Lexikons zum Alten Testament* (Leiden / Boston 2013).
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