

The Shofar and The Ancient Near East¹

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Sing praises unto the Lord with the harp, the harp and voice of song,
With trumpets and the voice of the shofar, shout out before the king, the Lord.
Psalms 98: 5-6

The Jewish practice of blowing the shofar emerges out of a long history of blowing on animal horns in the Bible Lands of the Ancient Near East and Anatolia. Long before the emergence of Ancient Israel, bull horns were sounded in Ancient Sumer of the third millennium as a call to mobilize the army, meet in the assembly, and as a prelude to public announcements. The earliest attested use of something akin to a Jewish shofar goes back to Early Dynastic period Sumer of the mid-third millennium BCE, where the Sumerian compound verb, **si gù – ra**, “to blow the horn,”² occurs six times in a literary fragment from Tell Abu-Salabikh, and in a parallel from Fara (Ancient Šuruppak).³ Roughly contemporary to these first textual examples is a steatite vase from Early Dynastic period Adab (Bismaya) where one can see a small quartet of musicians who play the harp, lyre, drums, and what appears to be a bull’s horn, accompanied by a vocalist in song.⁴

¹. This article provides background information for The Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem exhibition ‘Sound the Shofar’ which opened at the museum on September 7, 2011. For a brief summary and overview of the horn in cuneiform texts and Ancient Near Eastern archaeology see previously *Reallexicon der Assyriologie* 4 469-471: Horn (Musikinstrument).

². Sumerian compound verbs consist of a noun and verb (N and V). It is modern convention to represent such pairs as N – V. In forms corresponding to our perfect and imperfect, prefixes, and most often infixes, stand between N and V. For example, a form of the type N ba.ni.V. For more on the Sumerian compound verb see the excursus below.

³. Biggs 1974 pl. 129, no. 282 with six examples of the form **si gù ba₄.ra** in col. viii. A short discussion of both the Abu Salabikh and Fara examples is available in Biggs 1966: 81. See also the 2000 Ph.D. thesis of F. Karahashi, *Sumerian Compound Verbs with Body-Part Terms*, p. 42.

⁴. Frankfort 1954: 19, pl. 11. Note also a statuette from third millennium Mari with two

By the end of the third millennium, further textual evidence for blowing the bull's horn emerges in both literature and administrative contexts. An interesting example in an administrative text, ca. 2000 BCE, is the sounding of a horn in the streets to announce the loss of cylinder seal by a merchant of the city of Nippur:

dub.mu.sar.ra ur.šul dam.gàr.ra ú.gu ba.an.dé
inim.pu.úh.ru.um.ma.ta
nimgir.e sila.sila.a si gù ba.ni.in.ra

A seal with the name of Urshul the merchant has been lost.
In accordance with the decision of the city-assembly
the bailiff blew the horn in the streets . . . ⁵

This event was considered so interesting and significant that it came to be included in a set of standard practice texts for students of Sumerian that are today called exam texts.⁶

In Sumerian literature, one finds the compound verb **si gù – ra** in military contexts. In the Sumerian Gilgamesh tale *Gilgamesh and Huwawa*, Gilgamesh himself blows the horn (**si gù ba.ni.in.ra**) to call the troops of Uruk to arms for his campaign to the Cedar Forest against the giant Huwawa.⁷ Heralds (nimgir) are said to blow horns (**si gù um.mi.in.ra**) for a similar purpose in both *The Hendursaga-Hymn*,⁸ and in

figures holding what appear to be shofar like horns (Parrot 1969: 309, fig. 390, with further information on p. 392). For music in The Ancient Near East see most recently the catalogue of the 2007 Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem exhibition *Sounds of Ancient Music* = Goodnick-Westenholz 2007.

⁵. Lines 1-3 of the document published in Ali 1960: 66-67, Ali 1964: 113-116.

⁶. These are published in Ali 1964.

⁷. Gilgamesh and Huwawa A: 48-49. See Edzard 1990: 185, 1991: 183, George 1999: 152. Gilgamesh and Huwawa B: 51-52. See Edzard 1993: 22, George 1999: 163.

⁸. Edzard D and C. Wilcke 1976: 160: 265'-267'.

Lugalbanda in The Mountain Cave 24 (**si gù ba.ni.ra**).⁹ Likewise, in *The Death of Gilgamesh*, the blowing of the horn (**si gù ba.[n]i.ra**) is used to mobilize levee workers to build the masoleum of Gilgamesh.¹⁰

The Sumerian horn, like the Jewish shofar, also found its place in the temple as part of the liturgy. A wild bull's horn (**si am.ma**) is listed among a group of musical instruments in the Kesh Temple Hymn,¹¹ and one finds an ibex horn as a musical instrument in a ceremony in a hymn of Gudea of Lagash to the goddess Nanše (ca. 2100):¹²

39. gù.dé.a énsi lagaš^{ki}.a.ke₄
40. áb hé.nun tigi.a mu.ni.gub
41. balağ.kù da.ba mu.ni.gub
42. šìr.kù šìr ha.mun.na mu.un.na.du₁₂.a
43. ^{urudu}kin.tur.re é im.mi.i.i
44. á.dàra nar.gal.e šu mu.na.tag.ge

Gudea, the governor of Lagash placed the Lyre, *Cow of Abundance*, among the drums, placed the sacred harp besides it.

⁹. Verbal form from the edition of the text in ETCSL (*The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*). This work is also known as *Lugalbanda and Hurumkurra*, *Lugalbanda A* and *Lugalbanda Epic 1*.

¹⁰. Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000: 34: 240.

¹¹. Sjöberg and Bergmann 1969: 174: 115.

¹². Heimpel 1981 with the passage quoted on pp. 84-85.

While the sacred song, the harmonious song, is performed before her (the goddess),
small copper ringers¹³ praise the temple,
the chief musician plays the ibex horn before her.

In this last example, the ritual context of the chief musician playing the ibex horn, rather than a bull's horn, brings us closer to Jewish practice where use of a bull's horn for the shofar is forbidden. Further, the fact that it is the chief musician who plays the ibex horn may remind us of the special skill required to blow the shofar well. In any case, animal horns are used as musical instruments in Sumer in much the same way as in the Bible: to mobilize the troops, as a prelude to public announcements, and in the temple cult.¹⁴

In the second millennium BCE, textual evidence for such practices is found in the Hittite realm in Anatolia where blowing on animal horns continues to be part of the ritual tradition.¹⁵ This forms the background for the discovery of a musical instrument made from an antelope horn in a temple at Emar in Syria, then part of the Hittite Empire, where the find site of a temple suggests a ritual use. Similar objects made from elephant tusk, and an object made from hippopotamus tusk, but resembling a ram's horn, was found together with cymbals in a ship wreck off the coast of Turkey.¹⁶

Sporadic pictorial evidence for blowing what may be a shofar like horn is also to be found in the second millennium BCE on a wall-painting at Mari in Syria (ca. 1750 BCE),¹⁷ and at Alaca Höyük in north central Anatolia (ca. 1350 BCE).¹⁸ Around the turn of the

¹³. Sumerian ^{urudu}kin = Akkadian *niggallu*, literally 'copper/bronze sickles.' See Heimpel 1981: 104, n. 40-44.

¹⁴ See e.g. the catalogue for The BLMJ exhibit, Vukosavović 2011.

¹⁵. See *Reallexicon der Assyriologie* 8 487: sub Musik, and *ibid* 4: 470-471 cited above in n. 1.

¹⁶. For these objects see the discussion *sub* Goodnik-Westenholz 2007 (*Sounds of Ancient Music*): 154, no. 118 (a hornlike wind instrument made of Hippopotamus ivory from Tell Abu Hawam).

¹⁷. Parrot 1969: 308, no. 389 with further information on p. 392.

¹⁸. Bossert 1942: 114 no. 508.

millennium, one can find evidence for blowing the shofar in a tiny figurine (height 6.9 cm., width 2.1 cm.), also from somewhere in Syria or Anatolia, now in the collections of The Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem (see fig. I).¹⁹ Interestingly, this male shofar blower holds a second implement, apparently a hearing device of some type, to his ear. It has been suggested that this piece be understood as a man who offers prayer to his god by means of the voice of the shofar, while at the same time waiting to receive, or receiving, his god's answer to his prayer.



BLMJ 0761, Male Figure Blowing Shofar, Bronze, Neo-Hittite period (?). Courtesy of the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem. Photographer: Moshe Caine

Later, in the 8th century BCE, at the palace in Carchamesh on the Euphrates in Northern Syria, one finds a drawing of a royal attendant blowing the shofar,²⁰ bringing the Ancient Near Eastern practice down to a time and place not far from the world of First Temple Israel.



¹⁹. BLMJ 0761. Goodnik-Westenholz 2007 (*Sounds of Ancient Music*): 72 no. 27.

²⁰. Woolley 1921: Plate B 18b (fig. II).

Excursus: The Sumerian Compound Verb: **si gù – ra**²¹

Sumerian compound verbs are typically comprised of two basic elements: a nominal element followed by a verbal root, which together form expressions of a type not unfamiliar from our own languages, for example, “to give voice,” “to take heart,” “to open one’s arms” (= to welcome someone). In Sumerian we have likewise, **gù – dé**, “to pour out voice” = to speak; **igi – bad**, “to open the eye” = to look, and **šà tuku**, “to take heart” = to be encouraged. Our compound verb, **si gù – ra**, is more complex, consisting of two nouns and a verbal root with the common meanings: **si** = animal horn, **gù** = voice, and **ra** = “to beat, to hit.” From the contexts given above, the verb clearly has a basic meaning of “to make the horn make a sound.” Thus, one seems bound to understand **si gù – ra** to mean literally something like: “to beat the horn to make it give voice.”

Although at first glance this may seem far from our “blowing of the shofar,” the Sumerian compound is in actuality very close in semantic sense to the original biblical Hebrew and modern English for this act. “To hit, to beat” in English can be related to “blow,” as in “they were angry and came to blows,” but in music, of course, one does “blow the trumpet,” and “carry a beat.” So too in Hebrew, where the common verb for “blowing” the shofar, תקע (as in a “blow” of the shofar תקיעה), is also a verb that suggests physical, often violent acts. For example, the injury caused to Jacob’s thigh in Genesis 31: 26, the thrust of a sword in Judges 3: 21, Yael hammering the tent-pin into the head of Sisera in Judges 4: 21, and Yoav’s murder of Absalom in 2nd Samuel 18: 14. In Sumerian, the verbal root **ra** too is a verb of violence, “to beat, to kill, to break, to crush.”²² So **ra** in another compound verb with the noun **giš**, “wood:” **giš – ra**, has the plain meaning “to beat the wood,” *i.e.* “to beat someone,” most literally with a wooden stick, but more generally “to come to blows with a person.”

For the “voice” of the “horn,” one need not look any further than “the voice of the

²¹. For an overview of Sumerian see Michalowski 2004 with some discussion of compound verbs on pp. 38-39. A recent full monograph on some aspects of the Sumerian compound verb is Johnson 2010. See also the Ph.D. thesis of F. Karahashi cited above in n. 3..

²². So the meanings supplied by the on-line Sumerian dictionary EPSD for the verb **ra**, which also has a long value **ráh**.

shofar” (קול שופר) itself.²³ Thus, the Sumerian compound verb **si gù – ra** actually echoes our own terminology for blowing the shofar. In fact, it is possible that the Hebrew term is actually an indirect calque of the original Sumerian term which arrived in Hebrew, perhaps, by way of an intermediary.²⁴ Thus, when one today “blows the shofar,” one not only carries on an ancient practice that goes back in art and writing more than 4,500 to the Sumerians of the Early Dynastic Period, but one also indirectly brings back to life the Sumerian compound verb for this very act.

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²³. See e.g. Joshua 6: 5, 2nd Samuel 6: 15, and Psalms 47: 6 and 98: 6 (above).

²⁴. Unfortunately, no Akkadian translation of Sumerian **si gù – ra** has survived intact. The closest example one finds is in the cuneiform dictionary/lexical tradition where the partially preserved entries *Nabnitu* B 156-157 (MSL 16: 260) may be restored **si gù – [ra]**, **si gù – [ra.ra]**, both equated with the Akkadian verb *ṣagāmu*, a verb of sound, with the meaning, “to roar, to buzz, to thunder, to resound.”

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