

*Philippe Guillaume & Noga Blockman*

## **By my God, I bull leap (Psalm 18:30 // 2 Samuel 22:30)**

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Zusammenfassung:

Im Vergleich zu den Stiersprungszenen der Ägais, Syriens, Anatoliens und Ägyptens müsste das Wort שׁוֹר im Psalm 18,30 sowie in 2Samuel 20,30 nicht mit „Mauer“ übersetzt werden sondern einfach mit „Stier“. Dies gilt auch für alle anderen Bibelstellen, an denen das Wort שׁוֹר vorkommt wie in Genesis 49:22; Psalm 92:12. Psalm 18 sollte eindeutig zu den Stiersprungszenen gezählt werden.

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Psalm 18:30 and its parallel in 2 Samuel 22:30 are considered obscure<sup>1</sup> and exegetes have performed acrobatics over them. The general trend is to put the two parts of the verse in synonymous parallel<sup>2</sup> and change גִּדּוֹר into גְּדוֹר “wall” in light of שׁוֹר “wall” at the end of the verse.

### **Bull Leaping in the Bible?**

However, the meaning “wall” for שׁוֹר is rare; besides Psalm 18:30 and its parallel in 2 Samuel 22:30, it occurs in two other obscure passages (Genesis 49:22; Psalm 92:12) that have nothing to do with walls. However, Thijs Booij translates Psalm 92:12 without referring to any wall: ‘And my horn is exalted like that of the wild ox, I shine with fresh oil’<sup>3</sup>. As for Joseph’s blessing, it takes a lot of ingenuity<sup>4</sup> to avoid the bovine metaphor of a mounting bull. A literal translation of the unpointed text reads: ‘Joseph is a cow’s son, on me the source of daughters advanced, on me a bull’. Therefore שׁוֹר (80 times) is always a “bull” or “mature bovine”. It remains unclear whether גִּדּוֹר needs to be changed into גְּדוֹר “enclosed place”, the arena where the leaping is practiced, or whether it makes sense as it is, deriving it from גִּיד “sinew” (Genesis 32:33) or גוּד “attack” (Genesis 49:19). גִּדּוֹר would be a kind of anatomic designation of part of the bull.

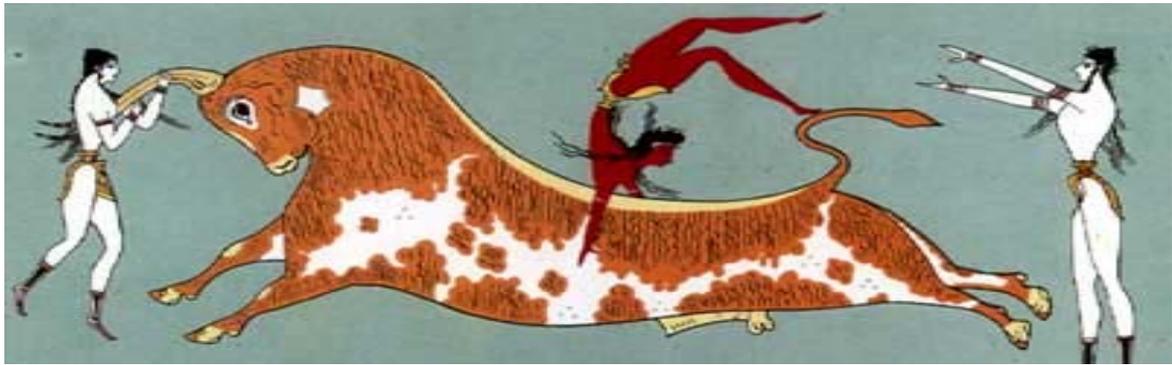
In any case, Psalm 18:30 reads:

כִּי־בַךְ אֶרֶץ גְּדוֹר      וּבְאֵלֵהי אֲדַלֵּג־שׁוֹר

*Because by you I run (in) the enclosure and by my god I leap a bull.*

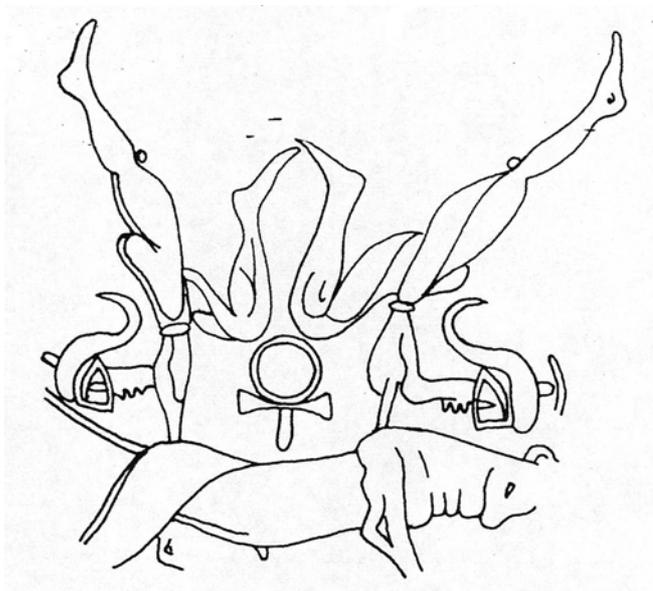
The translation of שׁוֹר by wall is only substantiated by the LXX which renders it with τείχος “wall”. Obviously, the Alexandrian translators never had a chance marvel in front of the breath-taking frescos in Knossos (Illustration 1) and Tell el-Dab‘a<sup>5</sup> since

the buildings that they adorned had been ruined for a millennium when the Psalm was translated into Greek.



*Illustration 1: Fresco from the palace of Knossos, Late Minoic time, about 1500 BCE<sup>6</sup>*

A reference to bull-leaping in Hebrew literature is not as exotic as it seems since it is well-attested across the Bronze-Age Orient, from the Aegean, Hittite, Syrian and Egyptian worlds<sup>7</sup>. Wolfgang Decker has conveniently gathered all the evidence; we will only mention a few examples to illustrate Psalm 18.



*Illustration 2: Fragmentary ancient impression of a cylinder seal on a clay envelope found in the archive room of a palace in Alalakh in northern Syria, about 1700 BCE<sup>8</sup>*

In Syria, a cylinder seal impression from Alalakh (ca. 1700 BCE) bears a bull-leaping scene (Illustration 2), reproduced almost identically on a seal (Illustration 3):



*Illustration 3: Haematite cylinder seal, former Erlenmeyer collection Basle, about 1700 BCE<sup>9</sup>*

Another seal depicts a bull raising its head with a person between its horns (Illustration 4). If it is a bull leaping scene, then the acrobat is being raised by the bull, ready to leap on its back. However, the seal may also depict the killing of the heavenly bull by Gilgamesh and Enkidu, since a human figure stands above the bull, spearing it<sup>10</sup>. The leaper would thus be Enkidu who ‘leaped and seized the bull of heaven by its horns’<sup>11</sup> to master the animal.



*Illustration 4 (with detail): Haematite cylinder seal, Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, about 1700 BCE<sup>12</sup>*

## Bull Leaping, Sacrifice and Fertility

The ambiguity of the scene that makes it hard to decide between leaping and killing the bull, sport or sacrifice, may actually reflect the overall setting of the ritual. The leaping may have been the prelude to a ritual that culminated in the sacrifice of the bull as suggested by Younger<sup>13</sup>. Leaping over a sacrificed lamb or more rarely a cow is still practiced in the Lebanese Beqa' by women affected with sterility. This jumping is said to “blow up the blood” (*taffyr al-dam*). The ritual is also performed by persons affected by the evil eye or during the inauguration of a new home or a new shop<sup>14</sup>.

The same ambiguity is also found in Psalm 18. The bull leaping at verse 30 occurs within a violent contest that ends up with the massacre of the opponents (verses 38.42).

The scene from Kahun (Illustration 5) also suggests that leaping over the bull was only a part of a wider ritual. The figure on the back of the bull is lying almost flat on the bull's back rather than leaping, probably for reasons of space. But note the other figure under the bull. Unless it is meant to represent a missed leap, we may see there another component of the ritual involving the passing *under* the bull. Not only the bull was leaped over, but the bull could also leaped over the participant, as was still the case during a ritual that was still practiced in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century CE in the Lebanese Beqa'. The Thursday preceding the Greek Orthodox Easter was called the Thursday-of-the-Jumping; horse races were organized ‘wherein women lie prone on the ground, the horses jumping over them, thereby enhancing female fertility’<sup>15</sup>. This seems to be the part of the ritual that is referred to in Joseph's blessing (Genesis 49:22, see above).

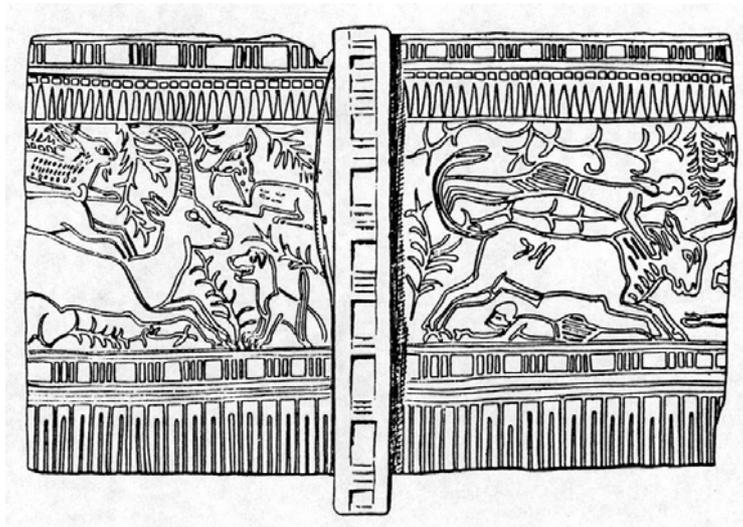
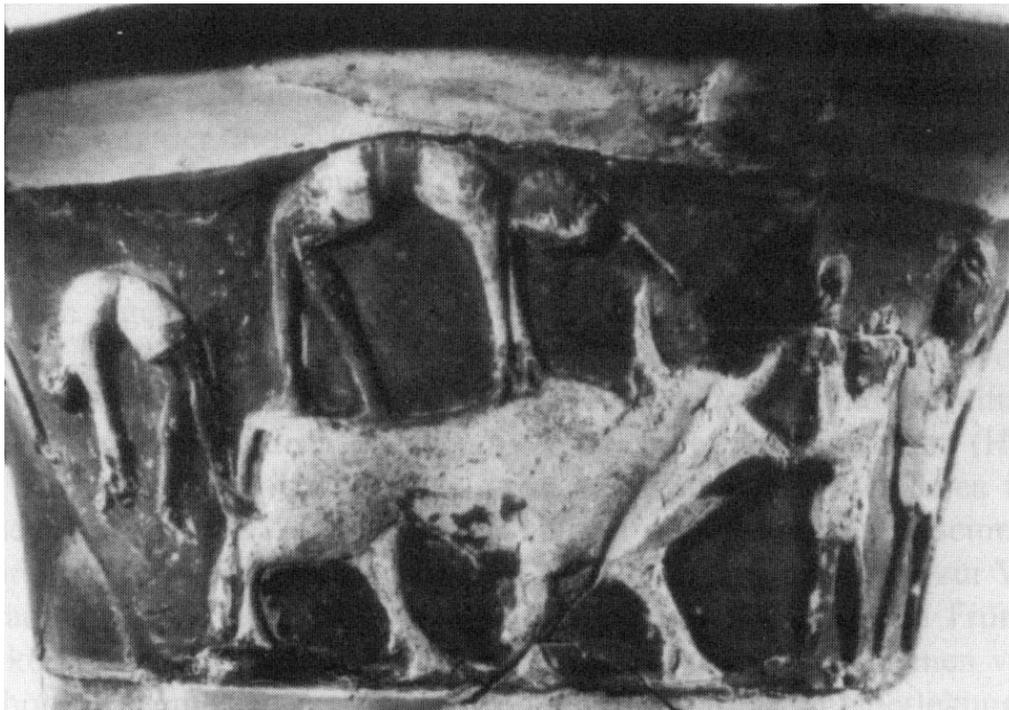


Illustration 5: Engraving on a wooden box from Kahun/Licht, Egypt, 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty<sup>16</sup>

## Leaping over Charging Bulls?

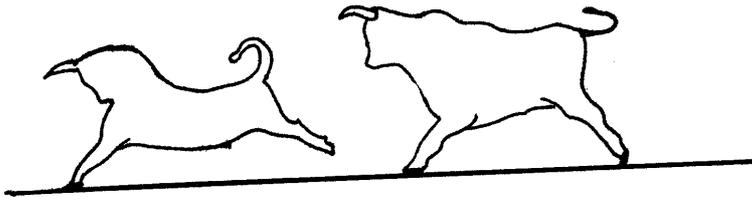
The dangers involved are often referred to cast doubt on the likeliness of bull-leaping and bringing bulls in a confined area in a temple or palace court<sup>17</sup>. However, the size of the animal does not necessarily indicate an equivalent level of wildness and fierceness. Among modern domestic breeds, the biggest sizes are the tamest and quietest, as much among equid than bovid, and even when not castrated, males are often calmer than females. Moreover, the ancient artists represented the bulls as standing with both their hind legs widely stretched backwards<sup>18</sup>, which has the important effect of curving the back of the animal. This posture immobilizes the animal and thus allows dealing with it safely, only allowing it to move its head and propel the leaper in the air<sup>19</sup>. Decker is right to emphasize the fact that compared to the Tanagra scenes<sup>20</sup> and the Hittite vase (Illustration 6) the bulls on the Aegean pictures seems to behave wildly (compare Illustrations 1 and 6).



*Illustration 6: Bull leaping scene on a vase from Huseyindede Tepesi, 1565-1540 BCE<sup>21</sup>*

However, the difference is due to stylistic variations. The Aegean artists exaggerated the overall curve of the bull's body and the position of the legs, rendering a bull that is almost flying. The reality behind all the scenes remains nevertheless the same: dancers leaping over a bull standing still with its four hooves flat on the ground,

contrarily to the schematic figures elaborated by Evans, Younger and Popplow who have the bull's hind legs either standing on points like a ballet dancer or kicking backwards like a horse (Illustration 7). However, bulls are morphologically unable to perform these figures; bovines only kick sideways, with one foot at the time while the other one rests on the floor, and they certainly cannot run when both their legs are extended backwards. This means that bull leaping was not performed on charging bulls.



*Illustration 7: Impossible positions: bull kicking backwards or standing on points<sup>22</sup>*

We have thus discovered another instance of bull-leaping, a Biblical one from the Iron Age. It is consistent with the bovine imagery in verse 16, where Yhwh is bellowing (גער) and breathing deeply (נשם). Reading Psalm 18 in the context of bull leaping may help clarify a few more of obscure words. The perfect way תמים דרך (verses 31.33) can be perfect acrobatic figures rather than ethical conducts, thanks to feet that are made swift as those of the deer (verse 34). Yhwh's obscure אמרת (verse 31), his promise according to the RSV, could be his horns if they refer to Naphtali's antlers in Genesis 49:21<sup>23</sup>. Admittedly, this is very conjectural, but it would fit better with צרופה at the end of the cola, 'Yhwh's horn is smelted'. Is this a reference to some kind of bronze horns of consecration as those found at the entrance of Minoan sanctuaries? In any case, the במות rendered as 'heights' rather than the usual high-places could be the back of the bull or more likely the place where the performance is taking place.

Riddled with theological scruples, the translators shy away from the obvious: the Psalmist wants to somersault on the back of the sacred bull to celebrate Yhwh in the court-yard of the Bethel temple.

- <sup>1</sup> Donald K. Berry, *The Psalms and their Readers. Interpretive Strategies for Psalm 18* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); Alfred Marx, “Note sur la traduction et la fonction de II Samuel 22,30 // Psaume 18,30”, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 110,2 (1998), 240-243.
- <sup>2</sup> Herrmann Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 71.
- <sup>3</sup> Thijs Booij, “The Hebrew Text of Psalm XCII 11”, *Vetus Testamentum* 38 (1988), 210-214.
- <sup>4</sup> See Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 8-50* (Grand Rapids: B. Eerdmans, 1995), 678-679: although he favours the animal analogy, he translates רֶשֶׁת as ‘rocky rim’!
- <sup>5</sup> Cairo, Egyptian Museum, TD-7996-7998; cf. Manfred Bietak, *Die Wandmalereien aus Tell el-Dab‘a ‘Ezbet Helmi, erste Eindrücke: Ägypten und Levante* 4 (1993) 44-58, Pl.15A-B.16.
- <sup>6</sup> Spyridos Marinatos/Max Hirmer, *Kreta, Thera und das mykenische Hellas*, Hirmer Verlag München 1986, Pl. XVII.
- <sup>7</sup> For a full discussion, see Wolfgang Decker, “Zum Stand der Erforschung des ‘Stierspiels’ in der Alten Welt”, in Reinhard Dittmann *et al.*(eds) (2003), *Altertumswissenschaften im Dialog. Festschrift für Wolfram Nagel zur Vollendung seines 80. Lebensjahres* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament, 306; Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2003), 31-79.
- <sup>8</sup> Dominique Collon, *First Impressions, Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University Press, 1987): no 708; drawing from Dominique Collon, “Dance in Ancient Mesopotamia”, *Near Eastern Archaeology* 66:3 (2003), 96-102, page 100. See also Dominique Collon, “Bull-Leaping in Syria”, *Ägypten und Levante* 4 (1994), 81-88.
- <sup>9</sup> Dominique Collon, *First Impressions, Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University Press, 1987): no. 707.
- <sup>10</sup> Ludwig.D. Morenz, “Stierspringen und die Sitte des Stierspieles im altmediterranen Raum”, *Ägypten und Levante* 10 (2000), 201-202.
- <sup>11</sup> Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1949), 54 (VI.132).
- <sup>12</sup> Collon 1987 no. 710.
- <sup>13</sup> John G. Younger, “Bronze Age Representations of Aegean Bull-Games III”, in Robert Laffineur & Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier (eds), *Politeia – Society and State in the Aegean Bronze Age, Proceedings of the 5<sup>th</sup> International Aegean Conference, University of Heidelberg, Archäologisches Institut 10-13 April 1994* (Liège: Université de Liège, 1995), 507-545 (521-523).

<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Kassis Nabil and Sylvie Maamarbashi, Aanjar.

<sup>15</sup> Anne N. Fuller, *Buairij, Portrait of a Lebanese Muslim Village* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 85. This Thursday-of-the-Jumping was the last of a series of springtime rituals taking: Thursday-of-the-Animals, followed by the Thursday-of-the-Plants, the Thursday-of-the-Dead and finally the Thursday-of-the-Jumping.

<sup>16</sup> William Stevenson Smith, *Interconnections in the Ancient Near East: A Study of the Relationships between the Arts of Egypt, the Aegean, and Western Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), Fig. 139.

<sup>17</sup> Bibliography in Decker, “Stand”, 39-40.

<sup>18</sup> Except for the Tanagra larnax: see Decker, “Stand”, Abb. 10ab.

<sup>19</sup> This method is used on restive heifers at the time of the first milkings following calving. It is always a difficult moment for both heifer and milker since the animal kicks as soon as its congested udder is touched. Forcing it to curve the back with a rope or a special kick-bar “miraculously” prevents the animal to raise a foot and thus allows the milking to proceed safely.

<sup>20</sup> Decker, “Stand”, Abb. 10a-b.

<sup>21</sup> Decker, “Stand”, Abb. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Decker, “Stand”, Abb. 4-7. I am unable to check whether or not these postures go back to the original state of the Knossos frescos before their restoration by Sir Arthur Evans and his team.

<sup>23</sup> Albert Emil Rüthy, *Die Pflanze und ihre Teile im biblisch-hebräischen Sprachgebrauch* (Bern: 1942) 76.

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