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# Whipping-Tops in Ancient Mesopotamia

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## Abstract

This contribution discusses the Mesopotamian (ešmen<sub>2</sub> =) *keppû*-game, often connected to the violent behaviour of the goddess Inanna / Ištar, and other (male) characters of Mesopotamian mythology, such as Enmerkar and Gilgamesh. Through a close review of all relevant attestations, we show that the (still) prevailing translation “skipping rope” as well as a recently proposed alternative “toy rope” are untenable and that the only acceptable meaning of the word is “whipping-top”. This equivalence has been tentatively advanced in the past but the lack of a systematic lexical assessment has so far hindered general acceptance.

## Keywords

*keppû* – Sumerian – Akkadian – Inanna/Ištar – game/war

## 1 Introduction

This paper discusses the meaning of the Akkadian word *keppû*, defending a semantic equivalence with English *whipping-top* (German *Peitschenkreisel*,

French *toupie à fouet*)\*. This equivalence, first proposed two decades ago by Stephanie Dalley but never adequately discussed, contradicts the current scholarly consensus, which favours instead an interpretation of *keppû* as “skipping rope”. Before reviewing the lexical evidence in detail, we clarify that a whipping-top is a spinning top that is set going and kept in motion by striking it repeatedly with a whip. Whipping-tops are toys known and appreciated across the globe and through the ages, with several variations in playing modes, including playing it as a solitary past-time (Fig. 1a) or in a group of players, as a competitive skill test (Fig. 1b) or in war-like battles. Whipping-tops require focus, control and concentration as well as physical stamina, since the whipping quickly leads to significant exertion. Mostly played by children as a classical outdoor game, whipping-tops can sometimes turn into a competitive sport, as in Maori New Zealand (Fig. 1c) and in the Chinese version *Da Tuoluo* (Fig. 1d). In several cases, the fascinating admixture of precision, violence and surprising, tilting motion which delights children inspires profound analogical ponderings in adults, as it is often the case with sports and games. Thus, whipping-tops may quickly morph into an allegory of war, submission, fate and destiny—or in their farcical double. In this allegorical and mimetic view, whipping-tops can also acquire special meanings as divination devices and symbols for religious initiates, as in Classical Greece and the Roman world (Giuman 2021). As we shall see, something similar has occurred in ancient Mesopotamia.

## 2 Current Interpretations of the Terminology

The (late) Sumerian-Akkadian lexical texts (cf. CAD K: 312a, s.v. *keppû*) provide two basic and semantically related equivalencies: *ešemen* (KI.E.NE.DI) = *keppû*, and *ešemen*<sub>2</sub> (KI.E.NE.DI.<sup>d</sup>INNIN) = *keppû* and *mēlultu ša Ištar* “play, game of Ištar”. A long debated and still open problem is ascertaining what kind of “play” (*mēlultu*) Inanna / Ištar use the *keppû* for.

The prevailing interpretations of the Akkadian word *keppû* are based on the lexical analyses of Landsberger (1960: 123, “Springschnur”) and are the following: AHW (1965: 467b): “Springseil”; CAD K (1971: 312a): “skipping rope”; CDA (2000: 155): “skipping rope”; Assyrian Dictionary (2007: 49): “skipping rope”;

\* Credit authorship contribution statement

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FIGURE 1 (a) Whipping-tops: in 14th-century Medieval England (bas-de-page from Royal MS 10 E IV, f. 97); (b) Whipping-tops: in the 16th-century Netherlands (detail from Pieter Bruegel the Elder's oil painting "Children's Games", 1560); (c) Whipping-tops: in early-20th-century New Zealand (line drawing from Reed (1963: 185)); (d) Whipping-tops: contemporary Chinese children playing a "gyrobattle" of Da Tuoluo (photograph by Cassidy Tse, retrieved online at <https://www.chinaexpeditiontours.com/blog/da-tuoluo-top-spinning-a-popular-street-game-for-children/>, accessed 08/10/2023)

etc. Regarding the Sumerian *ešemen*<sub>2</sub>, most recently, Attinger translates “corde à sauter” (Attinger 2023: 469, with fn. 1533 mentioning Ceravolo 2022: 63–65, discussed below).

### 3 Alternative Interpretations

Twice, by Dalley (2000: 130, fn. 80) and Lapinkivi (2010: 49–54, esp. 50), an alternative interpretation for *keppû* as “whipping-top” was proposed. These proposals have not found general consent. Most recently, Ceravolo (2022: 63–65) introduced a seeming compromise, suggesting that *ešemen*<sub>2</sub> / *keppû* does not designate a “rope” used for skipping but a “string” used to hit and spin a top.

3.1. Dalley’s proposal is expressed in a brief footnote to her widely received monography on “Myths from Mesopotamia”. It reads: “The old interpretation of *keppû* as a skipping rope was based on a misinterpretation of a glyptic scene and should be abandoned. It may be a whipping-top (a whipping-top lashed into faster gyrations with a cord), which is shown in the Carchemish relief of the early first millennium” (Dalley 2000: 130, fn. 80). Dalley did not provide any philological comment in support of her proposal. Also, her interpretation of *keppû* as “whipping-top” is not matched by her corresponding translations of the two passages that mention *keppû*—which she neutrally translates “*keppû*-toy”. Thus, her version of “Ištar’s descent”: 27 (Dalley 2000: 155) reads: “(Ištar) who holds the great *keppû*-toy” (*mukiltu ša keppê rabûti*);<sup>1</sup> and her translation of Gilgamesh VII: 21 (Dalley 2000: 89) reads: “I hit him and he jumped like a *keppû*-toy”.

3.2. A decade later, Lapinkivi (2010: 50) adhered to Dalley’s argument: “The word *keppû* usually [sic!] occurs with the verb *šutakpû* (cf. *kepû* Št), ‘to make bend, to make whirl around’, which appropriately describes motion that a ‘whipping-top’ would make”. The Author elaborates somewhat speculatively on the possible symbolic connotations of whipping-tops for the goddess but does not provide further philological discussion. Notice, however, that *šutakpû* is hapax (cf. CAD K: 313a, s.v. *kepû*; AHw: 467b, s.v. *kepû*) and that *keppû* also occurs with other verbs (*maḥāšu*, *šugarruru*). At any rate, Lapinkivi’s translation of “Ištar’s descent”: 27 (*mukiltu ša keppê rabûti*) is: “the holder of the great whipping-tops” (Lapinkivi 2010: 29).

3.3. After a further decade, Ceravolo (2022: 63–65), on the basis of Dalley, argues that Sumerian *ešemen*<sub>2</sub> (KI.E.NE.DI.<sup>d</sup>INANNA)—lit.: “the place of the

1 Cf. also Foster (2005: 499): “She who holds the gear play-rope”, with fn. 6: “Some sort of toy”.



FIGURE 2 Carchemish, Royal Buttress, bottom half of Slab B7b (c.800 BC): princes Kamani (?) and Sikara, throwing astragali on a board; right: princes Halpawari and Yahilatipa setting whipping tops in motion, probably engaging in a competitive battle (Gilibert 2022, fig. 8, line drawing by Elia Bettini)

game of Inanna” (“il luogo del gioco di Inanna”)—and its Akkadian equivalent *keppû* do not designate a jumping rope (“corda per saltare”), but a string (“cordicella”) used to strike and spin the top (“la cordicella utilizzata per far volteggiare la trottola”). According to Ceravolo, it is the same toy that a goddess holds in her hand in a first-millennium monumental stone relief from Carchemish (Ceravolo 2022: 64, with fn. 48). Based on two passages from the Sumerian compositions “Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta” and “Inanna and Ebih”, the Author further argues that *ešemen*<sub>2</sub> (= *keppû*) designates the “rope” used to hit and spin the tops (“corda della trottola”), as well as to trigger the rotation of warriors and enemies that whirl like whipping-tops (*ibid.*: 65).

Ceravolo’s reference to the Carchemish relief is wrong: whips and whipping-tops are not in the hand of Inanna / Ištar (or of her possible Luwian counterpart Kubaba) but in those of the young princes of the Carchemish royal family (Fig. 2; cf. Gilbert 2022: 10–12). This mistake notwithstanding, we assess as correct the association of Inanna / Ištar with fast-spinning whipping-tops, based on the Sumerian and Akkadian sources discussed below. However, Ceravolo’s seemingly Solomonic proposal to interpret the term *ešemen*<sub>2</sub> / *keppû* not as the spinning top but as the “whip” used to spin a “top” (Ceravolo 2022: 63–64: “la cordicella utilizzata per far volteggiare la trottola”) does not fully fit the passage in “Ištar’s descent”: 27, where the goddess is described as *mukiltu ša keppê rabûti*. Clearly, *keppê rabûti* is plural, which means that Ištar does not

hold “(one) whip” = “(una) cordicella” (singular) to strike and spin objects (so Ceravolo 2022: 64 with fn. 49) but two (or more) whipping-tops (“trottole”) which the goddess strikes and spins by hitting them with one whip.

#### 4 Analysis of Pertinent Sumerian Literary Passages

A full analysis and discussion of the vast semantic range of the Sumerian non-lexical occurrences of the substantives ešemen (KI.E.NE.DI), lit. “(place of the) game”, and ešemen<sub>2</sub> (KI.E.NE.DI.<sup>d</sup>INNIN), lit. “(the) game of Inanna”, is beyond the scope of this paper. Here, we only refer to three passages which doubtless allude to the fast, circular movements of ešemen<sub>2</sub>, thus supporting its equivalence with “whipping-top”.

4.1. The first passage is “Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta”: 289: <sup>d</sup>inana ur-sag me<sub>3</sub> saḥar-ra-ke<sub>4</sub> sag ešemen<sub>2</sub> di-dam, for which we favour a translation as “Inanna, the heroine who, on the battleground, makes the heads spin like whipping-top(s)”. Different renderings are proposed by Ceravolo (2022: 64, “Inanna, l’eroina del campo di battaglia, che fa volteggiare la testa (come) la corda da gioco”) and others (quoted *ibid.*: fn. 50), including Mittermayer (2009: 131), who translates “Springseil”: “Innana, die Heldin, die in der Schlacht auf Erden die Köpfe wie ein Springseil (*durch die Lüfte*) *schwingt*”, lit.: “... die Köpfe in der Art eines Springseils macht” (*ibid.*: fn. 341, and p. 258 for full commentary of line 289); and Attinger (2015b: 13), translating “corde à sauter”: “Innana, l’héroïne qui, sur *le champ de bataille, fait tourner les têtes* à la manière d’une corde à sauter”.

4.2. The second passage is “Inanna and Ebih”: 38. Among the various retaliations announced by Inanna against Mount Ebih for his outrageous behaviour, the goddess declares: ḥub<sub>2</sub> ga-mu-un-šu<sub>2</sub> ešemen<sub>2</sub> kug ga-mu-ni-in-sar. We propose to translate: “I shall assault him and will make (him) run / jump (like) the holy whipping-top”. Previous different interpretations include Ceravolo (2022: 65): “Lo assalirò e lo farò saltare alla pura corda da gioco”; Attinger (1998: 171): “*je veux y jouer à la splendide corde à sauter*”; Attinger (2015a: 40): “Dahin will ich mich beelen und mit dem leuchtenden Springseil hüpfen”.

4.3. Line 19 of the same composition provides further evidence to support our argument. According to Attinger (1998: 168–69, and cf. Attinger 2015a: 40), line 19 reads: mè-ba <sup>giš</sup>tukul ùr-ra-gin<sub>7</sub> sag gur<sub>4</sub>-gur<sub>4</sub>-za, to be translated as “(You, Inanna), in the battles you make roll the heads (of the people of Sumer) like a devastating weapon”. Evidently, heads roll if they are struck violently; thus, Inanna’s action consists of hitting human heads with a whip as if they were whipping-tops.

## 5 Analysis of Late Babylonian Bilingual Texts

In late Babylonian bilingual texts, two Akkadian occurrences of *keppû*, paralleled with different Sumerian equivalents, leave little doubt that the only meaning of the word is “whipping-top”, i.e. a (wooden or clay) round conical object which is thrown on the ground and lashed with a whip that makes it spin in what modern physics describe as the precessing and nutating motions of a gyroscope, and uninformed observers tend to perceive as quick and random tumbling.<sup>2</sup> Two passages from bilingual texts, “The exhaltation of Inanna / Ištar” and the balag-composition *úru-àm-ma-ir-ra-bi*, provide additional evidence on the specifics of the violent actions of the goddess.

5.1. “The exhaltation of Ištar”: 3–4:<sup>3</sup> “O Ištar, make war and battle whirl like a whipping-top” (*dinanna ti-suḫ<sub>3</sub> giš-la<sub>2</sub> ešemen<sub>2</sub> gin<sub>7</sub> u<sub>3</sub>-mi-ni-ib<sub>2</sub>-sar-sar // dIštar ananti u tuqunta kīma keppê šutakpima*); *ibid.*: 5–6: “O Lady of the battle, let the fight clash like ball and mallet”<sup>4</sup> (*e-lag giš<sup>se</sup>ellag(LAGAB) giš-du<sub>3</sub>-a-gin<sub>7</sub> nin-me<sub>3</sub>-a teš<sub>2</sub>-a-ra se<sub>2</sub>-se<sub>2</sub>-ga-ba-ni-ib<sub>2</sub> // kīma pukku u mekkê bēlet tāhazi šutamḥišu tamḥāru*). In the second passage, the dynamics of the fight are compared to a mallet that hits a ball (and makes it roll): an additional and revealing detail of the description of the battle in terms of struck enemies and rolling heads, as in a cruel sporting competition. In the following lines 7–10, Ištar’s war activities are compared to a play with “game-pieces” (*giš-bi-za // passu*) and “astragals” (*zi-in-gi // kišallu*): see below, sub “7. Association of *keppû* with other objects”.

5.2. balag *úru-àm-ma-ir-ra-bi* 21: 74:<sup>5</sup> “I (= Inanna / Ištar) make heads roll like heavy balls” (*qaqqadāti kīma pukki kubbūti uštanagrar // sag-du giš<sup>se</sup>ellag(LAGAB) gur<sub>4</sub>-ra-am<sub>3</sub> mi-ni-ib<sub>2</sub>-gur<sub>4</sub>-gur<sub>4</sub>-re-en*). This passage describes in graphic detail the action of Ištar, who hits the decapitated heads of the enemies with a mallet, making them roll like balls.

The following line 75 reads (Volk 1989: 200–1): “I play with my whipping-tops, whose strands are multicoloured” (*keppâ qû-ša bitrumu emmalilu // GIŠ.MEŠ*

2 In the following, it will be unnecessary to always quote the traditional translations of the term *keppû* (*ešemen<sub>2</sub>*) proposed by the various scholars for the passages listed below: “skipping rope”, “jumprope”, “Springschnur”, etc., as well as Ceravolo’s “corda da gioco”.

3 Cf. Ceravolo (2022: 62 with fn. 40) for bibliographic references; see also, previously, Draffkorn Kilmer (1991: 15): “Oh Inanna, make the battle and melee twist around like a jumprope”.

4 The meaning of the pair *pukku + mekkû*: “ball + mallet” seems to be the most appropriate to this and other passages, rather than the variant “hoop + driving stick” or—even less—the alternative interpretation “cylindrical drum + stick”. For an updated review of a long-standing question see Ceravolo (2022: 65–69), and Attinger (2023: 439, with fn. 1418, s.v. *se<sup>se</sup>ellag*, and 408 with fn. 1294, s.v. *se<sup>se</sup>e-ke<sub>4</sub>-ma*).

5 Volk (1989: 200–1) transcription, (205) translation, (243–44) commentary.

gu.NI gun<sub>3</sub>-nu-a mi-ni-ib<sub>2</sub>-sar-sar-re-en). In this line, Ištar's action is further described as a play with whipping-tops. The Sumerian equivalent to *keppû* (plural) is the hapax GIŠ.MEŠ, which shows that the object of the play is not a (skipping or other kind of) rope but a solid object which is hit and set in motion. However, if our interpretation is correct, what are the “multicoloured strands” of the “whipping-tops” of Ištar's play? They are the ropes of the whip with which Ištar hits and spins the tops. In this regard, we must underline that the Sumerian and Akkadian sources never explicitly mention the whip used to strike whipping-tops as a separate instrument. Considering that whipping-tops must always be whipped in order to start and continue rotating, we are led to the conclusion that the word *keppû* (“whipping-top”) *de facto* can also designate a set of two strictly related objects, i.e. the whipping-top and the whip.<sup>6</sup> We understand the “multicoloured strands” to be the terminal components of the whip, which are attached to the (wooden) handle and strike and twirl the tops. This interpretation is confirmed by both the already mentioned image of the Carchemish princes at play (Gilibert 2022) and the rich evidence provided by historical and ethnographic parallels (cf. the examples in Figs. 1a–d) which show that, in ancient Mesopotamia as elsewhere, top whips could be multi-stranded (and multi-coloured).

5.3. A remarkable parallel to balag: 75, quoted above, is provided by a passage of the Neo-Sumerian hymn celebrating the ceremony of Iddin-Dagan's sacred marriage, line 66:<sup>7</sup> “With whipping-tops (and) coloured cords they compete before her (i.e. the holy Inanna)” (ešemen<sub>2</sub> gu-du gun<sub>3</sub>-a a-da-min<sub>3</sub> mu-na-e). In our view, the text alludes to a competition in which “whipping-tops” are hit by “(whips with) coloured cords”, exactly as represented in the Carchemish relief.

## 6 Analysis of the Akkadian Occurrences of *keppû*

Akkadian occurrences of *keppû* are attested from the Old Babylonian period onwards. In all occurrences, the meaning “whipping-top” is the best fit. Below is a list of the pertinent passages.

6 Cf. the comparable case of the Sumerian <sup>giš</sup>LAGAB, in the lexical lists, which is the Akkadian equivalent of both *pukku* and *mekkû* (“ball” and “mallet”): cf. Ceravolo (2022: 66, fn. 59).

7 Cf. Römer (1965: 130, 138): “Mit Springschnuren (und) buntfarbigen Hupfseilen (?) eröffnen sie ihr den Wettkampf”; Reisman (1973: 18): “With jump ropes and colored cords they compete before her”; Attinger (2014: 19, 31): “Rivalisant par la corde à sauter aux fils multicolores”; Ceravolo (2022: 61, fn. 38): “Rivaleggiando con la corda-giocattolo (ešemen<sub>2</sub>), la corda colorata”.



6.1. “Ištar’s descent”, 27:<sup>8</sup> “(Ištar), who holds the great whipping-tops (*mukiltu ša keppê rabûti*), the one who stirs up the (waters of the) Apsû in front of Ea ...”.<sup>9</sup>

6.2. “Epic of Tukulti-Ninurta”, v (= A rev.) 40’ (Machinist 1978: 120–21, 357): “Ištar stroke her whipping-top (*imḥaš keppâša*), driving their warriors insane”. The correct understanding of this passage is of decisive importance for the present issue: *keppû* is the object *which* is struck (*maḥāšu*) by Ištar and not the instrument (i.e. a whip or a cord) *with which* Ištar hits other objects. See, e.g., Machinist (1978: 121): “And Ištar beat (with) her skipping rope”; Ceravolo (2022, 56): “E Ištar batté *con* [italics ours] la sua corda da gioco”; see instead Foster (2005: 313, however still adhering to the traditional interpretation of *keppû*): “Ištar flailed her jump rope”. As a side note, the passage introduces a similitude between a revolving top and a state of madness and emotional turmoil, which will have persistent Classical echoes (Rabel 1981).

6.3. Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh VII 172 (George 2003: 642–43, 849): “I struck him and he jumped (back) like a whipping-top (*amḥassuma kîma keppê išaḥḥit*)”. Notice the use of the verb *maḥāšu* “to strike, hit”: people hit (by a whip) jump or spring back like whipping-tops. Among previous translations, see George (2003: 643): “I struck him so he sprang back like a skipping-rope”; cf. Dalley (2000: 89), quoted above, sub 4.1: “I hit him, and he jumped like a *keppû*-toy”; previously CAD K: 312a, s.v. *keppû* (following Landsberger 1968: 130): “when I hit him, he jumped like a skipping rope”.

6.4. CT 46 49 I 8:<sup>10</sup> “[*ú*]bil pāšu kîma keppê iddašu[*ninni*]”. CAD K: 312b labels as “obscure”; previously Landsberger (1968: 130): “Unverstanden bleibt die Stelle”. We propose the following interpretation of this difficult passage: “I brought an axe (for battle) but they treated me with disrespect, as if I were a whipping-top”. In other words, differently from all other occurrences of *keppû*, in which the “game” of the whipping-tops is a synonym for violence and “war”,<sup>11</sup> this passage alludes to a derogative treatment, a feeling of being lashed at, treated like a toy, being mocked by peers. Curiously, similar undertones are also found in European cartoons dating back to when boys would usually play with whipping-tops (Fig. 3).

8 Cf. above, sub 4.3.

9 For the last part of l. 27 see Lapinkivi (2010: 51–52).

10 “Part of a Late Assyrian tablet containing a royal autobiography. Mention of ‘the Cassite king’”.

11 Cf. Ceravolo (2022: 62–63), with specific reference to “The exhaltation of Ištar”: 3–10.



FIGURE 3 “The Corsican whipping top in full spin!”, satirical print of a spinning top with the head of Napoleon lashed by representatives of the Allies, published April 11 1814 (British Museum, U.829)

## 7 Association of *keppû* with Other Objects

Akkadian *keppû* is mentioned in association with other objects in texts of various kinds. The associations concern the sphere of battle, clash and violence on the one hand and that of play and divination on the other. The objects associated with *keppû* are the pair *pukku u mekkû* (“ball and mallet”), *passu* (“game pieces”) and *kišallu* (“astragals”). The fast gyroscopic movements of whipping-tops lashed by whips and the rolling balls hit by mallets reproduce the dynamics of war and sport; the game pieces and the astragals that roll onto the game board allude to the dynamics of battle games and the war-like tactics of board games, but also pertain to the sphere of chance, fate and divination. The entire repertoire of the objects is provided by “The exaltation of Ištar”: 3–10 (Cf. Veldhuis 2018: 194).

7.1. “Balls and mallets” (*pukku u mekkû*) have been commented on above (sub 5.1 and 5.2): “The exaltation of Ištar”: 5–6, and balag úru-àm-ma-ir-ra-bi: 74.

7.2. “Game pieces” (*passu*). “The exaltation of Ištar”: 7–8: “O Goddess of fight, let the battle proceed like a play of game pieces” (*ilat tēšêti kîma mêlultu passî* (giš-bi-za) *redê qablu*). Also, “Dreambook”: 329 rev. II 10: “If (in a dream) he plays with a game piece of dirt” (*šumma passu SAḪAR immelil*).

7.3. “Astragals” (*kišallu*). “The exaltation of Ištar”: 9–10: “O Ištar, where weapons clash, and (in) the battle, play with the melee as if (with) astragals (*ašar tamhuš kakku u dabde kīma kišalla (zi-in-gi) mēlilī sahmaštu*). Astragals are paired with whipping-tops also in the “Dreambook”: 329 rev. II 9: “If (in a dream) he repeatedly throws the whipping-top or the astragals” (*šumma keppâ kisallēti ittanaššuk*).<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Šurpu III 118 (Reiner 1958: 22): “Oath by the whipping-top or the astragal” (*māmīt keppê u kišalli*).<sup>13</sup>

7.4. The joint mentions of whipping-tops and astragals in incantations (Šurpu III 118) and in the sequence: whipping-top—astragals—game pieces (“Dreambook”: 329 rev. II 9–10) find a close iconographic parallel in the reliefs of the Royal Buttress of Carchemish, as has been recently pointed out by Gilibert (2022: 10–12, and fig. 8 on p. 9).

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12 CAD K, 312 b, sub keppû: “if (in a dream) he repeatedly turns the rope (or throws) the astragals”.

13 CAD K, 312 b, sub keppû: “oath by the skipping rope or astragal”.

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