

## Introduction.

# Percussion Instruments in the Ancient World: Towards an Archaeology of Musical Performance

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Percussion instruments are spread across a broad geographical space and a wide chronological spectrum in the ancient world. Yet it is only recently that percussion instruments have been considered in connection with the contexts of their discovery and their use in performance places and spaces in order to understand their functions in sacred, domestic, and funerary spheres. The difficulty in treating the question of location arises from the fact that, in many cases, it is complicated to establish the precise dating and location of instruments in a given space and this specific location's particular meaning. However, when percussion instruments survive in an archaeological context along with images, inscriptions, and possibly other written sources, it is possible to outline the aspects of the occasion for which they were played and offered within a ritual performance; they serve as valuable pieces of evidence not only for reconstruction of their function in religious and social practices, but also for enriching our understanding of music and dance performances in daily life of the past. Thus, through an archaeomusicological approach to performance which places musical and choral activities within an actual or symbolic space, the study of percussion instruments constitutes a valuable subject of investigation to shed light on the ritual meaning and social function of sonic events, as well as on the role of musicians and dancers in antiquity.

This volume, which consists of the proceedings of a workshop held at the University of Toulouse II Jean Jaurès in January 2019, shows how the study of percussion instruments has involved a wide variety of specialists within and beyond the boundaries of anthropology and archaeology, sound studies and archaeomusicology (including, among others, ethnoarchaeomusicologists), as well as history of religion, classics, and history.

In organising the workshop, Arnaud Saura-Ziegelmeyer was particularly concerned with approaching the subject from as global a perspective as possible, and was therefore eager to focus on work outside his own particular area of expertise, namely, the Greek and Roman worlds. Thus, the essays included in this publication represent a significant number of geographical areas and cultures of the ancient world, including the Mediterranean, the

Near East, and Central America. India and China are among the most glaring gaps; we are therefore keen to publish work from contributors representing those areas in the future.

Nevertheless, the range of different contexts presented in this publication allows for a couple of observations with regards to not only the nature of the evidence and the different forms of documentation and sources related to percussion instruments and representations of musicians and dancers, but also in terms of how sound contributed to giving a contextualised sense of ritual and social place<sup>1</sup>.

The first observation concerns the function of percussive sounds produced in a ritual and performative context. Investigating the role of percussion instruments as more than a mere accompaniment or a means of entertainment, this publication is particularly revealing in terms of how musical and ritual performances appear intertwined and inseparable aspects, each serving as a structure and framework for the other and providing set forms of action that are related to religious and social beliefs of a given culture. Indeed, we can assume that the percussive and repetitious soundmaking of instruments served, as cross-cultural evidence suggests, to bond the social and worshipping group closely together, deepening perceptual experiences between members and heightening collective feelings of euphoria, ecstasy or trance, catharsis and enthusiasm<sup>2</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, percussive sounds strengthen the power of performances, which relies in great part on the effect of the heightened multisensory experience: communicating on multiple sensory levels, performance usually involves highly visual imagery, dramatic sounds (Rozen Michel), and other tactile, olfactory, and gustatory stimulus<sup>3</sup>. Taking this multisensory approach<sup>4</sup> to performance into account is indispensable to the investigation of musical and dancing activities as sonic experiences involving special behaviours and a set of blueprints for specific occasions in antiquity, some of which were public events; in the majority of cases, they were religious occasions, generally called festivals, recurrent or non-recurrent, cycles or non-cycles, of which rhythm and movement were an important part.

A second consideration concerns how rhythm provides the guidelines for the consecutive introduction of different sounds and action in time. Indeed, the sound of percussion instruments produced in communal celebrations and festivals as well as at important life events – such as rites of passage, end of career, death and birth is a broad and diachronic phenomenon: during ritual performance, as well as in everyday life, the rhythmical sounds, timbre (Alexandre Pinto) and volume of tambourines, cymbals, clappers, rattles, bells, gongs and scapers act as a catalyst, heightening emotions, sensory perception, and even rousing fear (Valeria Bellomia). Percussion instruments marked time and underlined rhythmical patterns connected with cult: producing different sounds, rich acoustic effects, and a wide range of sonorities (Daniel Sánchez Muñoz), percussion instruments as well as sound tools were suited to the diverse ritual phases and dancing activities, contributing to the creation of the dancescape<sup>5</sup> of a particular performative context. For this reason, the depiction of

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1 Vincent, 2015, p. 28.

2 Power, 2019, p. 26-27.

3 Bell, 1997, p. 159-164.

4 Betts, 2017.

5 Naerebout, 2017, p. 39-40.

musical and dancing activities involving percussion players accompanying dancers must be connected to the widespread function of music and sound, closely related to ritualised movements in worship (Angeliki Liveri).

According to the results from many of the papers of this volume, the deep connection between percussion instruments and rituals is enhanced by rhythm: it is an essential sonic element of performance and a favourite aspect of communication not only between music and dance performers but also of the community of worshippers celebrating the gods.

Tracing the pathway for the worshippers involved in the ritual action, percussion instruments and their sounds served not only as an announcement of the events at hand (Arnaud Saura-Zieglmeyer) and the events to come, but also an invitation to the audience to engage with rituals within a well-defined place: music and sound contributed to the enactment of rituals, which would have included various acts of worship, such as processions, performances of songs and dances, and sacrifices to induce a sense of the numinous in the participants.

An example is provided by sounds produced by percussion instruments as suitable means to accompany the epiphany of divinity, creating a vibrant atmosphere. As a founding act of the cult itself, epiphany in a sacred space is usually established in places where divinities have chosen to reveal themselves:<sup>6</sup> rhythmical sounds and ritualised movements as well as invocations give great prominence to their appearances (Sylvain Perrot). Rhythm has the role of underlining the presence of the god or the goddesses, creating a particular sacred soundscape and a peculiar performative *soundmark* belonging to his or her ritual sphere and the related religious experience.

It is worth noting that the desire to retain a tangible memento of these celebrations could have brought worshippers to offer particular dedications in the form of percussion instruments and sound tools, as well as vases and terracottas representing musical activities recalling rituals and resounding images<sup>7</sup>. Thus, as the papers of this volume highlight, each instrument is not an isolated unit, but a component of ritual activity considered as an offering to the divinity within the framework of the ceremony. The dedication of percussion instruments acquires further specificity when it was set up at a particular location: therefore, an ideal interpretation of the role and function of the presence of percussion instruments in a sacred context would consider the relationship between these instruments and their settings.

As special votive gifts which contributed to the effort of ritual performance, percussion instruments and sound objects, as well as terracotta figurines representing percussion players deposited in shrines and sacred places, could have contributed to evoking the presence of the gods and goddesses in the worshippers, recalling sounds (Naïs Virenque) related to their epiphany and their soundscape in a sacred setting (as in the case of models of percussion instruments found in sanctuaries dedicated to female divinities near the altars, or of clay rattles in the form of fruits, toys and animals, most of which have been found in sanctuaries dedicated to the goddesses of motherhood and protectoresses of childhood)<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, in these spaces the presence of sacred images of mythological figures (sometimes also identified

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6 Platt, 2011, p. 120-121.

7 Bellia-Bundrick, 2018.

8 Bellia, 2012.

with priestesses or devotees) holding or playing percussion instruments, such as the *protomai* found at Assos (modern Behramkale in Turkey) representing female figures holding *krotala* (Fig. 1)<sup>9</sup> in their hands, is best regarded as a direct reference to the cultic soundmark and actual performance during sonic events performed in those spaces, within the context of local rituals.



**Fig. 1.** Çanakke Museum, inv. no. 6630. Terracotta protome representing a goddess or a priestess playing krotala. From Tolun, 2015, p. 383, fig. 17.

As the collected essays in this volume point out, the phenomenon of musical instruments as votive gifts, sometimes in the form of sonic jewellery (Heidi Köpp-Junk), stood at the

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9 Çanakke Museum, inv. no. 6630. Tolun, 2015, 378 and 383, fig. 17.

intersection of different forms of communication, representing the initial performances at which they had been used – if they had actually been used – as well as the ritual offering: votive objects that portrayed percussion players or musical and sonic events operated in a similar fashion. Keeping this perspective in mind, the presence of percussion instruments as well as depictions of musical and dancing activities could commemorate the devotion of worshippers and musicians: their dedicatory act was associated not only with a specific idea of music and dance performances, but also to an explicit preservation of their memory.

As Alexandre Vincent highlighted in his important and valuable work *Tuning into the Past: Methodological Perspectives in the Contextualised Study of the Sounds in Roman Antiquity*, for the study of phenomena related to the past, the combining of sources and methods seems to be the best way to extract the maximum amount of information regarding subjects such as sound – and music and dance – traces of which are fragile. This new publication offers a valuable of such a method.

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