Music across Borders in the Ancient Mediterranean World

Report on a Round Table (Athens, Greece, 26 August 2022)

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Abstract

This report provides a conspectus of the round table organised by MOISA for the 21st IMS Quinquennial Congress (IMS 2022). In line with the theme of the congress, namely Music across Borders, the round table focused on the concept of ‘musical mobility’ in the Ancient Mediterranean World, starting from the assumption that the musical identity of the ancient Mediterranean peoples was significantly determined by the mobility of music, concerning dance as well as musicians and musical instruments. The papers presented touched on these different fields, showing how musicology needs to continue a dialogue with new methodologies and approaches of investigation to study and interpret ancient music, including an anthropological perspective.

Keywords

Graeco-Roman music – archaeomusicology – ancient musical instruments – epigraphy – musical iconography – musical mobility

1 The Round Table: Participants and Contents

In August 2022, the Quinquennial Congress of the International Musicological Society, entitled Music across Borders, was held in Athens, and hosted primarily
by the National and Kapodistrian University in the School of Philosophy. On 
August 26, MOISA: the International Society for the Study of Greek and Roman 
Music and Its Cultural Heritage, organised the round table devoted to Music 
across Borders in the Ancient Mediterranean World. The meeting focused on the 
interaction and cultural exchanges between the musical traditions of ancient 
Mediterranean peoples and the construction of their cultural identities. To do 
so, it was essential to stimulate dialogue between different disciplines such 
as archaeology, ancient Greek and Roman literature, epigraphy, iconography, 
music history, and musicology.

The round table began with a few words from the organiser and chair, Daniela 
Castaldo, Professor of Musicology and History of Music at the University of 
Salento and MOISA President, who briefly introduced the topics and the par-
ticipants. As Castaldo pointed out, the great mobility of musicians and musical 
instruments from the 8th century BC to the 6th century AD led to significant 
cultural exchanges and fostered the construction of different or new musical 
identities, which often shared the same principles. This report summarises the 
content of the papers presented, which dealt with different aspects of the cen-
tral theme of musical mobility.

The first paper to open the round table was by Stelios Psaroudakēs, 
Professor in Ancient Hellenic Music at the Kapodistrian University of Athens, 
who shared some results of a project carried out with his colleagues Andriana 
Papanikolaou and Spyros Zambelis. As can be deduced from the title, The 
Hellenic Idiophone Krotalon: Its Structure and Technique of Playing, the paper 
focused on the ancient musical instrument called krotalon, a percussion idio-
phone probably coming from eastern Mediterranean civilizations. Although 
there are numerous studies related to this type of instrument, and especially to 
its use within festive and ritual contexts, investigations relating to its structure, 
and consequently to its technique of playing are few. Psaroudakēs, therefore, 
started from an examination of the two descriptions of the krotalon provided 
by The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians and by Martin West’s Ancient 
Greek Music respectively, highlighting how the definitions offered an erro-
neous perspective on the structure of the instrument. West (1992, 123), how-
ever, also provides a further specification, mentioning that krotala sometimes 
appear “with a right-angled projection back from the head”. From this quota-
tion, by examining archaeological findings, especially the three-dimensional 
one (statuettes)\(^1\) and remains of musical instruments from Hellenistic and

\(^1\) Psaroudakēs mentioned 22 three-dimensional examples of the krotalon dated from the 5th 
to the 2nd century BC, the oldest of which is dated to the Late Archaic period (from 550 to 
500 BC) and comes from Isthmia, near Corinth. Still, some evidence testifies to the cultural
Roman Egypt, Psaroudakēs has shown other possible perspectives on the structure of the krotalon. Overall, the comparison involved up to twenty statuettes, a relief, some iconographic evidence on vessels (two-dimensional representations) and the realia. Moreover, using experimental archaeology, Psaroudakēs underlined that the instrument’s structure conditioned the technique of its execution. In this regard, the audience could enjoy Andriana Papanikolaou’s performance. At the end of the paper, inspired by the mention of a castanet player in a 206 AD contract signed by a gentleman from Philadelphia (one of the first urban settlements founded by the Ptolemies in Egypt), the dancer, choreographer, and researcher Papanikolaou impersonated this castanet dancer, Isidora, performing a choreography using the krotala. As Papanikolaou pointed out, although the performance is an artistic attempt at recreation, thus modern and naturally not an archaeological reconstruction, it was nevertheless based on the study of both the textual and the iconographic evidence, in order to understand the possibilities of using the instrument during the dance.

The second speaker was Sylvain Perrot, Researcher at CNRS and at UMR Archimède in Strasbourg, whose presentation was entitled *The Soundscape of Musicians Travellers in Roman Egypt and Nubia: The Evidence of Greek Adoration Formulas (proskynēmata)*, and thus focused on a small corpus of Greek inscriptions related to the so called proskynēmata. According to Gaëlle Tallet (2013, 5587f.), the proskynēmata (etymologically related to the act of prostration, the proskynēsis) corresponded to acts or written declarations of devotion to a god or his statue, in a sacred place or temple, to provide the dedicant with the god’s rewards. Such inscriptions have been uncovered in famous sites and on well-known monuments in Roman Egypt and Nubia, such as the Temple of Memphis, the northern colossus of Memnon in Thebes, the Tomb of Ramesses IV in the Valley of the Kings, the Temple of Mandulis in Kalabsha, and the Kiosk of Qertassi. Moreover, these examples often reveal the travellers’ origins, their reasons to travel, the level of their Greek education and the kind of activities in which they were involved. A variety of musical instruments is also mentioned in these texts, such as chordophones, considered as a cultural exchange that characterised the ancient world, such as the statuette (4th century BC) in the Hermitage Museum of Saint Petersburg, which comes from the Panagora area in the Sea of Azov.

2 The scholar pointed out that several original krotala have come down to us. He considered three krotala from Greco-Roman Egypt kept at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology at University College London, and mentioned some more kept at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

reference to Sappho’s poems, in Julia Balbilla’s poetry, or in the contexts of the syncretistic cult of Mandulis-Apollo, as attested in the Temple of Kalabsha. Moreover, the *salpinx* is mentioned both as an acoustic comparison for the frightening ‘voice’ of the colossus of Memnon, and as a war instrument, as testified by an inscription found in the Temple of Memphis, where it is opposed to the *aulos*, frequently used in banquets and sacrifices. Ultimately, the Egyptian texts show that most of the musicians were following military campaigns or belonged to the emperors’ courts, while the Nubian examples seem to reveal a relation with ritual events, such as the unusual involvement of an *aulos* player in a ritual related to the loading of stones. Although it is not possible to define whether the music was inspired by the Greek tradition, Perrot speculated that the *auloi* found in Meroë suggest that the instruments used may have been produced according to Greek and Roman techniques and models.

A collaborative paper entitled *Understanding the Cultural Heritage of the Ancient Mediterranean World through the Material Musical Evidence: The TeMA Project* closed the round table. It was presented by Giovanna Casali and Alessia Zangrando, research fellow and PhD student at the University of Bologna, respectively. The paper focused on the TeMA project (*Testimonianze Musicali dell’Antichità in Triveneto: censimento, repertorio e valorizzazione della loro eredità culturale/Musical Evidence of Antiquity in Triveneto: Census, Repertoire, and Valorization of Their Cultural Heritage*), carried out by the University of Padua (Department of Cultural Heritage) and whose Principal Investigator is Paola Dessì, Professor of Musicology and Music History.4

Casali opened the panel by first giving an overview of the project presented, which aims at mapping and enhancing the material musical evidence of the Egyptian, Greek, Pre-Roman and Roman cultural traditions preserved in the museums and collections of Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, and Friuli Venezia Giulia (i.e., Triveneto). In particular, the aim is to recognize the material and immaterial status for this underestimated cultural heritage, which is, nonetheless, widely disseminated in numerous archaeological museums, and other institutions in Italy and Europe. Therefore, the project intends to carry out an Italian mapping of the musical instruments and sound objects transmitted by the ancient peoples of the Mediterranean area to bring out, through these *realia*, the significance of the musical culture and practices of the ancient

4 The TeMA project was born out of the dialogue and meeting of musicologists, archaeologists, physicists and engineers within the Department of Cultural Heritage of the University of Padua, with the involvement and collaboration of national and international colleagues from other Universities and Research Institutions. In particular, the TeMA project dialogues and collaborates with the French-Italian project RIMAnt (*Repertorium Instrumentorum Musicorum Antiquorum*).
world. On the basis of their work on the TeMA project, Casali and Zangrando aimed to show how taking into account the materiality of the finds offers an essential contribution to the reconstruction of the immaterial aspect of the musical culture of the ancient world. Indeed, the museums of the Triveneto contain, above all, both Egyptian and Roman musical instruments, which show how the phenomenon of immigration and contamination was pivotal for the cultures of Antiquity and makes it possible to highlight anthropological aspects of these cultures, in addition to the musical ones. The value of the interchange and intertwining of cultures emerges particularly in the cultic sphere, namely in the funerary, domestic and public contexts. Casali introduced some examples of archaeological finds from the Veneto region, a territory that has always been a privileged site of human settlement, and a true crossroads of peoples and cultures. The first example related to the cultic sphere concerns a sound object (a rattle, the statuette of *Genius Cucullatus*) found in the Roman necropolis of Opitergium, today’s Oderzo, in the province of Treviso. However, exchanges with the Roman world are not the only ones of interest. Several finds of musical instruments have been linked to the Eastern world, testifying to the practice of Eastern cults, particularly the Egyptian ones, as attested by the discovery of a *sistrum* in the province of Altino, in the southwestern necropolis of the Via Annia. As a matter of fact, the practice of Eastern cults as part of private devotion is well attested in Altino, a port city open to Mediterranean trade.

Zangrando then dwelt on the traces of some oriental cults attested in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region, particularly in Aquileia and Trieste. These two Roman cities were multicultural *emporia* connected to the Mediterranean regions and especially to Greece and Asia Minor whether by rivers or sea routes. Here, the use of music in worshipping oriental gods such as Isis and Magna Mater is attested by many inscriptions, depictions and archaeological finds. Some of these, for instance the bronze fragment of a *sistrum’s* handle found in Aquileia, could be related to a domestic shrine, while some inscriptions prove that the cult of Isis was also public. Moreover, apart from the wide-ranging archaeological, epigraphic, and iconographic evidence that suggests the veneration of ‘Mater Magna’ (as the goddess is attested in Aquileia), the National Archaeological Museum of Aquileia houses two bronze cymbals and a bronze figure depicting Attis with cymbals, but due to the lack of archaeological data,

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5 The object is kept at the Archaeological Museum Eno Bellis, Fondazione Oderzo Cultura onlus, in Oderzo (TV).
6 The *sistrum* mentioned is kept at the National Museum and Archaeological Area of Altino, in Quarto d’Altino (VE).
it is impossible to determine whether these objects were used in religious or theatrical contexts. On the other hand, the use of music in the cult of Magna Mater in Trieste is not supported by musical instruments related to the rite, but the official metroac cult is widely attested by epigraphic evidence, and musical practices are confirmed by an altar (unfortunately lost) that bears a dedication to Magna Mater by a *sacerdos*, an *aedituus* and a *cymbalistria*. These finds can thus provide information about religious practices and beliefs and the social status and cultural identity of ancient musicians, but also about musical traditions and exchanges across geographical and cultural borders.

2 Conclusions

These papers highlighted how pregnant the concept of mobility was for music in the ancient world by dealing with both specific case studies and the results of recent projects related to archaeological evidence. Indeed, the topics addressed showed how music and musical tradition crossed the geographical and cultural boundaries of the ancient Mediterranean area, influencing those of different regions and civilisations and helping to create new ones. The round table therefore showed how important it is for musicology to cross its traditional boundaries, adopting a broad interdisciplinary approach and opening the field to new methods.

Bibliography


