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Musical Practices and Instruments in Late Bronze Age Ugarit (Syria)

The Levantine kingdom of Ugarit, destroyed by the Sea Peoples ca. 1185, provides a wide range of evidence for the reconstruction of musical practice during the Late Bronze Age, at the time of New Kingdom Egypt, the Hittite Empire, Kassite Babylonia and the Amorite kingdoms of Syria and Palestine. Cultural associations with the eastern Mediterranean world may also be derived from it. Dated to the last centuries of the second millennium BCE, the evidence from Ugarit casts some light upon the poorly known history of ancient Near Eastern music in the span of time between third-millennium Sumer and the world of the Bible in the first millennium. The temptation to look for continuity or rupture over such a long period and across such a large geographic space, while difficult to resist, is open to frustration.¹

Excavations at the seat of the capital, Ras Shamra, have been taking place for more than 75 years, yielding a rich crop of material remains and cuneiform texts written in the two main languages used at Ugarit: Akkadian, the international lingua franca of the time and Ugaritic, the West Semitic language spoken in the kingdom of Ugarit (see Yon 1997, 2006; Michaud 2005; Galliano and Calvet 2004). Other sites have been excavated within the territory, such as Ras Ibn Hani (Lagarce and Lagarce 1987; Bounni et al. 1998) and the harbor town at Minet el-Beida, the material from which is included in this survey.

It was not until 1976 that the finds from Ugarit began to play an important part in the study of ancient music. In that year, Anne Draffkorn Kilmer published her interpretation of a musical tablet (Fig.1) found during the campaigns of 1953 and 1955.² From the ongoing excavations at the site, a number of new texts and musical instruments have been discovered since then, and earlier evidence have been reanalyzed or published. I have, on several occasions, assembled the evidence that can help to reconstruct the repertoire of instruments and identify the professionals associated with the performance of music, such as dancers, acrobats and jugglers; material from the palace has been paralleled with that from the

¹ I would like to thank Marguerite Yon, Dennis Pardee and Robert Merrillées for their help. This paper was written in 2008.

² Kilmer et al. 1976; Vitale 1982; Galliano and Calvet 2004: no. 338. No other written notation for music has been found since that time; one wonders if it was really a common practice at Ugarit. The fact that the tablet records a “foreign,” Hurrian hymn may account for the necessity of keeping a written record of it.

houses of specialists, such as a diviner (Caubet 1987, 1994, 1996, 1999; Caubet and Poplin 1987). In this paper, I would like to revisit some of these issues in the light of recent publications.³



Fig. 1: Cuneiform clay tablet inscribed with a hymn in Hurrian language and musical notation. H. 6 cm. Ugarit, royal palace, staircase 53 (RS 15.30 + 15. 49 + 17. 387). National Museum of Damascus.

The Repertoire of Instruments

To reconstruct the repertoire of musical instruments in use at Ugarit, one may tap different types of sources, ranging from the few actual musical instruments that have been preserved to figural representations and to written sources. Each source does not give exactly the same type of information; thus, the vocabulary for the names of instruments that appear in the texts does not exactly match the list of instruments attested as depictions or actual objects. There are instruments the names of which we do not know, and ancient names to which we can match no instruments or images (at least not at Ugarit). There are also artifacts whose identification as musical instruments is debated. Lastly, although this issue is outside my own field of expertise, it must be stressed that the etymological kinship between terms in use at Ugarit and the corresponding Hebrew words may be misleading owing to the differences across time and space.

Several instruments are mentioned in the Ugaritic language, four of which are listed in an Ugaritic poem (Pardee 1988: II, lines 3–5 (in French); Pardee 1997b):

³ Gachet-Bizollon 2007; Ziegler 2007 on the archives from the official musicians of the palace of Mari. I am also indebted to Dennis Pardee for early communications of his 2007 paper and fruitful discussions.

May Rapi'u king of eternity drink [...]

Who sings and gives voice

With the cithar and the flute

With the tambourine and cymbals

With ivory castanets

Among Kutaru's boon companions.

This is one of a group of texts known as “para-myths” or “historiolae” excavated in a private house, interpreted as a diviner's house because the texts were found in relation with terracotta liver and lung models, incense burners, musical instruments, an ivory magic wand/clapper and several vases with symbolic decorations.⁴ The poem describes a banquet, a symposium with musical accompaniment in honor of Rapi'u, who may have been a deified royal ancestor connected with the Underworld, as were the Hebrew Rephaim. The whole ceremony may have been funerary in function.

The term for cithar, *kinnaru*, appears in many textual sources at Ugarit. It is similar to the Hebrew term (*kinnor*) and is commonly identified as a “thin” lyre known from many depictions on painted vases, terracotta and ivory statuettes and cylinder seals (Lawergren 1998). This lyre, distinct from the third-millennium “thick” lyre, made its appearance in the Levant roughly at the same time as the Ugaritic poems were composed, and is distinguished by a small sound box, arms slightly curved outwards and an angle of play that varies with the string from 0° to 90°. A variant is rectangular instead of circular.

Thulbu ‘flute’, is possibly a generic term; there probably existed several types of reed or metal instruments — none of which were preserved — but a stone figure from Ugarit (Fig. 2) shows a double-piped instrument (Caubet 1987: Fig. 6), of a type popular on figurines and painted vases from the southern Levant (Braun 2002: Fig. IV: 13–20).

The next word, *tuppu*, is onomatopoeic and may refer to a large class of drums and tambourines, the shape and size of which we do not know. No clay drum of the type found at Tell Abu Hawam (Herrera 1990; Caubet 1996: Fig. 6) was found at Ugarit, and images of circular artifacts on figural representations tend to be ambiguous.⁵

⁴ The archaeological context presented by Courtois in Pardee 1988 was limited to the room where the texts were found. See Caubet 1999 for the finds from the rest of the diviner's house.

⁵ The flat discus held by an ivory figurine (Gachet-Bizollon 2007: no. 409) may be a tambourine or a pair of cymbals (*infra*).



Fig. 2: Statuette of a double-pipe player. Limestone. H. 20.2 cm. Ugarit, Acropole, point 36 (RS 4.464). National Museum of Damascus.

The term for cymbals, *masiltama*, is similar to the Hebrew one, and designates the metal instruments commonly in use in the Levant and on Cyprus, several of which have been found at Ugarit (Caubet 1987: Fig. 5; Galliano and Calvet 2004: no. 263). Cymbalists seem to have been important personages at Ugarit. They were the only professional musicians, apart from singers, to have been specifically listed in the written sources from Ugarit,⁶ and images of cymbal players (Fig. 3) may have served as offerings (Braun 2002; Gachet-Bizollon 2007: no. 409).

The last instrument listed in the poem, the ivory *marqadima*, had long baffled commentators until it was plausibly identified with a type of clappers in the shape of human hands and forearms (Fig. 4), several of which have been found at Ugarit (Gachet-Bizollon 2007: nos. 392–394). Clappers (a translation preferable to that of castanets) existed in wood, as well as ivory, and possibly bone.

⁶ Virolleaud 1957: text no. 26, from courtyard I: list of professions or corporations; the names are followed by an indication of their city. Cymbalists are listed just after *marianu*, a famous charioteer elite.



Fig. 3: Statuette of a cymbalist. Hippopotamus ivory. H. 9.4 cm. Ugarit, Sud-Acropole, tomb 3464 (RS 24.400). National Museum of Aleppo.



Fig. 4: Left half of a clapper/magic wand. Hippopotamus ivory. L. 9.4 cm. Ugarit, Sud-Acropole, tomb 3552 in the “diviner’s house” (RS 24.423 + 24.441). National Museum of Damascus.

Apart from this poem, there is little evidence, textual or other, of musical ensembles or instruments. No material or iconographic remains of a harp have so far been found at Ugarit. The term *niblu*, comparable to the Hebrew *nevel*, appears in a song to Astarte discovered at Ras Ibn Hani (Pardee 2007), where the bellicose goddess, “the lioness,” is honored *to the sound of the harp*. This instrument has a long history dating back to the third millennium and there are many images of harps from the Late Bronze Age Levant; it would not be surprising that it was in

use at Ugarit. In the new text, the association with the goddess Astarte denotes a ritual context other than that of the ensemble of four instruments related to Rapi'u and the Underworld.

The *rimt* is an instrument played by the goddess Anat in honor of the god Baal. The following passage appears several times in Ugaritic texts, including in another poem from the diviner's house:

She [Anat] takes cithar/lyre in hand

Pulls the harp to her breast

Sings the love of Mighty Baal.⁷

Pardee's translation is based on a similarity of the words for "harp" and "wild bull." I suggest that it is a lyre with outward-curved arms resembling the horns of a bull.⁸ While it is clear that this musical instrument was used to accompany a song, it is not clear whether the poet is referring to a single instrument, using poetic repetition with a synonymous word for cithar, as is often the case in lyrical compositions from Ugarit, or if it is a second, different instrument, perhaps played at a different moment of the event.

The case of the lute is puzzling. While images of a stringed instrument made of a small ovoid sound box and a long neck are fairly common in the Levant and Mesopotamia (Lawergren 1997: Figs. 22–23; Braun 2002: Fig. III, 4–6), none has been found at Ugarit so far. In early translations of the Ugaritic poem *Dawn and Dusk*, a term was identified as the ancestor of the Arabic *oud*, itself the origin of the modern, Western word "lute" (French *luth*) (Caquot et al. 1974: 370, line 12; taken as such in Caubet 1987, 1996). However, a recent study of the poem rejects the identification,⁹ leaving the archaeologists without a term to designate this instrument.

7 Pardee (1997a: 251) suggests that the word *rimt*, formally similar to the word for "wild bull," might designate a harp of which the leading arm would have been in the shape of a bull's head; Pardee 1988: III, lines 17–18, translated as "Harpe à tête de taureau," a well-known Sumerian instrument and, in this case, an anachronism.

8 See Lawergren 1987, for a discussion of previous attempts at identifying lyres and harps in Mesopotamian lexicographic texts.

9 According to Pardee (1997b: 278), other occurrences of the term $\text{c}D = ud$ designate a room in the palace or in the temple of Baal.

Both locally produced and imported terracotta rattles and whistles may have been fairly common at Ugarit; their corpus has not yet been assembled.¹⁰ Whether these were used as toys or for the accompaniment of music is also open to question.¹¹

Engraved scapulae appear regularly in excavations on Cyprus and in the Levant at the end of the Late Bronze Age, often in cultic contexts (Caubet 1987: Figs. 1–2; from Israel, see Braun 2002: Fig. IV 35–37). The fragments from Ugarit add no new arguments for their interpretation. However, even if they were not primarily designed as musical instruments, the possibility remains that they could have been used to produce rhythmical sounds for the accompaniment of ceremonies.

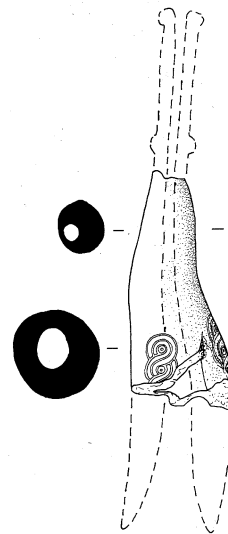


Fig. 5: Trumpet in the shape of a ram's horn. Hippopotamus ivory. H. 5.4 cm. Ugarit, Acropole; western extension of the House of the High Priest (RS 3.436). Louvre.

The question of horns remains open. While there is no philological evidence for the use of horns or trumpets by musicians at Ugarit, the existence of actual instruments cannot be denied. One is the fragment of a small twisted horn (Fig.

¹⁰ See Schaeffer 1949: 198–199, 6 for a bull-shaped rattle; Matoïan 2003 for an owl-shaped example in Cypriot pottery.

¹¹ See Braun 2002: 98 sqq. for a discussion of “mass music, mass cults, mass culture.”

5) carved out of a hippopotamus incisor, which was discovered in the cella of the temple of Dagan (Gachet-Bizollon 2007: no. 388 with previous bibliography). It has been safely identified as a trumpet by comparison with a complete piece discovered in the Uluburun shipwreck.¹² The fragment from Ugarit has lost its pavilion and mouthpiece but it displays the same distinctive engraved design of spirals; both instruments may have been produced by the same craftsman.

The second case for horns/trumpets at Ugarit is still hotly debated. I refer to a masterpiece of ancient Near Eastern ivory sculpture: an elephant tusk carved as the figure of a naked goddess with flowing hair, standing above a hunting scene, flanked by sphinxes (Fig. 6) (Gachet-Bizollon 2007: no. 386). The top of the goddess's head is cut away, forming a surface of ca. 5 cm in diameter, perforated by a central 2 cm diameter channel. The upper surface of the head was left unpolished, suggesting that originally another piece covered it, of ivory or of another material.

In her recent corpus of ivories from Ugarit, Gachet-Bizollon fairly states two opinions:¹³ One, forwarded by the excavator and supported here, takes it as an oliphant, a musical instrument in the shape of a horn.¹⁴ According to the second opinion, the carved tusk belonged to a series of bottles or flasks ending in the shape of a female head and designed to contain precious oils. The latter assumption has been supported by Fischer in a comprehensive study of the ivories from Megiddo and Lachish, where the argument for the Late Bronze Age pieces is based on Egyptian iconography.¹⁵

It is unfortunate that Gachet-Bizollon's and Fischer's studies appeared almost simultaneously and could not benefit from each other's arguments. Fischer's study of the Megiddo and Lachish examples presents them in photographs, but without a section drawing to aid in advancing the discussion.¹⁶ The elephant tusk from Ugarit, now housed in the National Museum of Damascus, was recently removed for X-ray examination (Fig. 7). It was shown thereby that there was a natural cavity at the tip of the naked goddess's head that was reworked and

12 A 24 cm long trumpet in the shape of a ram's horn: Pulak 1997: 245, Fig. 14; Lawergren 1997: Fig. 8, c.

13 Gachet-Bizollon 2007: 183–186.

14 A drawing of the section explaining how the artifact had been carved out of a large elephant tusk was published after examination of the piece by Poplin in 1985 (Caubet and Poplin 1987: Fig. 3). The upper part being much restored with plaster, Poplin expressed the wish that the piece be submitted to X-ray examination, which was made possible in 2006, with the help of the Italian Hospital in Damascus.

15 Fischer 2007. The flask interpretation for the Bronze Age artifact is based on the Egyptian iconography assembled by Lagarce 1983.

16 Fischer 2007: Pls. 51, 54–55, 58. Fischer was given access to the identifications of the material made by Poplin in The Israel Museum.

slightly enlarged to form a short cylindrical channel. Such a channel is compatible with the hypothesis of a musical instrument: the addition of a mouthpiece would reduce the width of the blowing table, rendering it more manageable. Whether such a large channel would be appropriate for the pouring of precious oils will remain open to question until section drawings of the comparable material from Israel are made available.



Fig. 6: Oliphant or flask decorated with a naked goddess. Elephant tusk. H. 60 cm. Ugarit, royal palace, portico 86 in courtyard III (RS 16.404). National Museum of Damascus museum.

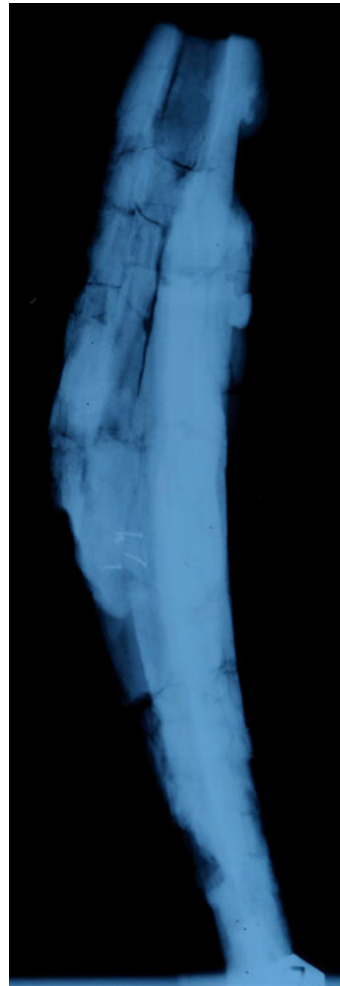


Fig. 7: X-ray of elephant tusk (Fig. 6) showing that the natural cavity has been reworked and enlarged at the tip.

Vocal Music

Vocal music was important at Ugarit. Indeed, singers are the only professional musicians recorded (with the exception of cymbalists) (Caubet 1987: Fig. 5; Galilano and Calvet 2004: no. 263). As in Hebrew, there are two distinct terms in Ugaritic expressing the action of singing, *shara* and *dhamara*. In the Ugaritic poems, are these verbs synonymous, allowing for the poetical device of repetition of sentences in a slightly different wording, or do they allude to different musical modes? Were they performed by different musicians? Tablets from the royal palace inscribed with lists of corporations or professions refer to singers using both terms interchangeably, but so far never in the same list, so there is no way to be sure whether the two terms represent two distinct categories of professionals.¹⁷

Singing was no mean performance and could be carried out by the gods themselves, as did Anat or Rapi'u. In the case of Rapi'u, both terms were used to describe the action, possibly referring to two musical modes(?) (Gachet-Bizollon 2007; Ziegler 2007). Mortals sang hymns in honor of the gods:

May the name of Astarte be sung

Let me sing the name of the lioness¹⁸

Here, the anonymous singer is possibly also the composer of the song. The identity of the singer-composer is rarely provided; a Hurrian hymn in honor of the goddess Nikkal composed by no less than king Ammurapi himself is a rare exception.¹⁹

Singers (male or female) are usually listed as an undifferentiated group; very few singers are listed individually. Thus, they may have belonged to a regular body of musicians working and, in some cases, living in the palace, where they slept and received garments or cloth.²⁰ In the lists of professions, the term for “singer” and “singers” is normally marked with a masculine determinative, though the masculine plural is used for groups that included females as well. There are, however, exceptions for both rules: A female singer is attested in a list that mentions a man “whose sister is among the singers” (of the palace) (Virol-

¹⁷ Summary in Caubet 1999: no. 10; Virolleaud 1957: texts nos. 24, 39, 107, from staircase 53 (tablets fallen from the upper story).

¹⁸ Braun 2002; Gachet-Bizollon 2007: no. 409; Pardee 2007.

¹⁹ On the musical tablet discussed by Dr Kilmer, see Lagarce and Lagarce 1987; Bounni et al. 1998.

²⁰ Virolleaud 1957: text no. 24: 15 singers; text no. 107: distribution of garments for the singers who sleep in the house of the king.

leaud 1965: text no. 80). A man, *Mnn*, listed together with other “king’s men,” bears the title of “singer of Ugarit” (Virolleaud 1965: text no. 11 from room 81). This title may be compared with the role of the “head of musicians” in the palace of Mari several centuries earlier, ca. 1900–1750 BCE (Ziegler 2007).

In Mari, one such senior official was appointed for each reign. He enjoyed a fair amount of wealth, was responsible for the training of young musicians of the palace and was in charge of the performance of various ceremonies. He was even, in some cases, entrusted with diplomatic missions. Textual evidence from Ugarit is by far not as informative as that from Mari, but perhaps the groups of anonymous singers were placed under the responsibility of a higher official answering to the king, perhaps the “singer of Ugarit.” Some musicians may have been specifically appointed to a deity, a cult or a temple. This is suggested by the title “singer (or singers) of Astarte.”²¹ Singular or plural — the text is, unfortunately, ambiguous.²² It is not clear whether this is another group of anonymous musicians attached to the cult of Astarte within the palace or if it is a single “singer of Astarte” that was entitled to a generous allotment of wool. Is he the same official who sings in honor of Astarte in the poem from Ras Ibn Hani? (Braun 2002; Gachet-Bizollon 2007: no. 409; Pardee 2007). Is he a high-ranking official like the “singer of Ugarit”? What may have been their respective roles and responsibilities, one toward the goddess (at least within the palace) and one toward the kingdom or the town, we are left to speculate.

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²¹ Virolleaud 1957: text no. 107: distribution of 130 shekels of wool to the singer (or singers) of Astarte.

²² The term for “singer” is not marked for singular or plural in the Ugaritic consonantal writing.

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Cypro-Archaic I period, 750–600 BCE.

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