

Layne Redmond

World Clinic

Friday, 9:00 a.m.

Music City Ballroom

Bring Middle Eastern
tambourines; some will be provided

Percussion Instruments of Ancient Greece

BY LAYNE REDMOND

Greek music was influenced by Anatolian (ancient Turkey), Minoan Crete, Phoenician Cyprus, and Egyptian cultures. My research began by examining the percussion from these earlier surrounding cultures, then focused on Greek images and texts from the 6th to 1st century BCE and followed the Greek musical influence into later Roman culture. The percussion instruments—frame drum (*tympanon*), cymbals, krotalas, sistrums and clappers—are the same percussion instruments found in these earlier and later cultures.

In Ancient Greece music played an essential role in religious festivals, marriage ceremonies, funeral rites, and banquet gatherings. Many of these musical events appear in Greek vase paintings. Sir John Beazley assembled a comprehensive collection of nearly 70,000 records of photographs, drawings, and notes on these vases, which has been preserved at the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford. This collection is online and useful in helping to determine the frequency of the representations of musical instruments, how the instruments were played, and in what contexts.¹

There is a tendency among scholars to dismiss the importance of percussion. “The percussion instruments may be dealt with briefly, and last, which exactly reflects the unimportance of their role in Greek music.... The only function of a percussion instrument was to emphasize the rhythm which was already inherent in a melody, usually being played on an aulos or *barbitos*, or being sung or chanted; the percussion sounds did not form part of the music in their own right.”²

I believe that this is an inaccurate understanding of the role percussion played in the development of the music, dance, and religious rites of ancient Greece. Players of frame drums are familiar with the melodic interplay created by the overtones of the strokes on the drum. The great Nubian musician Hamsa El Din teaches that traditional Nubian folk songs evolved from the melodies created by the sequence of overtones inherent in the specific rhythm associated with the song. It is clear in his mind that rhythm comes first and the melody develops in part from the sounds created by the rhythm. This can be particularly true when the primary percussion instrument is the frame drum, as it is in Nubian Egypt and was in ancient Greece.

As in most ancient cultures, Greek percussion instruments are thought to predate the melodic instruments. Rhythmic music

was at the oldest core of religious rituals, festivals, and processions. Dance, poetry, rite, and music were considered inseparable. Strabo states that music is “dancing as well as rhythm and melody, at the same time...”³

Religious dances, especially those honoring Dionysos, the god of intoxication and creative ecstasy, are believed to be the origin of the dance in Greek drama. Initiates of a cult could participate in the yearly festival of dramatic rites reenacting divine mythological events in elaborately staged productions. Classical Greek drama eventually developed out of these religious traditions, in particular from the music, dances, and *dithyrambs* (rhythmic verses) of Dionysian worship. The god Dionysos is shown playing the frame drum and the women and men who participated in his rites were highly identified with the frame drum, krotalas, and cymbals along with the double flute. The military pyrrhic war dances set to frame drumming were also incorporated into the religious festivals and dramatic theater. This puts percussion at the root of the development of western theater. Knowing the widespread and ancient connection between drumming and dance forms, and that Greek dancers were highly identified with the frame drum, cymbals, and krotalas, it is hard to visualize Greek



Greek Vase painting, Circa 5th century BCE, Eros, Dionysos and Ariadne

dance developing first to melodic instruments with percussion added later.

Percussion instruments were considered to be particularly imbued with spiritual or shamanistic power that could influence and transform consciousness and therefore reality. Percussion played a key role in the sacred mystery rites at Eleusis dedicated to the goddesses Demeter and Persephone, that drew participants from the entire Greek world for over a thousand years. Persephone, kidnapped by Hades, the ruler of the underworld, is forced to spend half of the year in the realm of the dead. She sits on her throne in the nether world while her frame drum hangs overhead. This recalls the ancient shamanistic function of the frame drum that enables the initiate to descend into the underworld, experience a symbolic death, and return reborn to the living. Persephone is recalled to the world of the living through the sound of cymbals, gongs, frame drums, and bullroarers. “They called Demeter (the noisy) from the noise of the cymbals and drums which was made in searching for Kore (Persephone).”⁴

The importance of the frame drum and cymbal in these rites is indicated in this ancient ritual based on the Eleusinian formula:

"I have eaten from the drum (*tympanon*, *tambourien*); I have drunk from the cymbal (*kymbalon*); I have carried the sacred dish; I have stolen into the inner chamber."⁵

The goddesses Cybele, Aphrodite, Artemis, Demeter, and Persephone are associated with round frame drums, gongs, cymbals, and clappers. The Muses, the goddesses of music, dance, and inspiration, are often depicted with frame drums and krotalas along with flutes, kitharas, and lyres. Catullus has left a vivid description of Cybele's worship: "Come, follow me to the house of the Phrygian Cybele, to the grove of the Phrygian goddess! There sounds the clang of the cymbals, there echo the *tympanons* (frame drums), there the Phrygian flutist plays upon his deep-sounding, twisted reed. There the Maenads, adorned with ivy, toss their heads wildly."⁶

Aristophanes opens his play *Lysistrata* with her complaint on the lack of women responding to her call to gather: "Ah! if only they had been invited to a Dionysian reveling, or a feast of Pan or Aphrodite or Genetyllis, why! the streets would have been impassable for the thronging *tympanons* (frame drums)!"⁷ This gives us a vivid picture of how these festival processions filled the streets with dancing and drumming.

The priestesses at the famous oracles of Delphi and Dodona were also associated with the frame drum and gongs. The rhythms and sounds of these instruments played a key role in inducing the prophetic trance of the priestesses who functioned as the oracle. The oracles were as important to the political and private lives of the ancient Greeks as are contemporary polling services in the United States. Before any major military, governmental, or political decision was made, the oracles were consulted.

The Greek word for frame drum, *tympanon*, is often translated as tambourine (frame drum with jingles), which is not necessarily accurate. It is not until approximately 250 C.E. that jingles are clearly depicted on the frame drum in Roman sculptures of Dionysian rites. *Tympanon* has also been translated as timpani,



Greek Vase painting, Circa 5th century BCE, Maenad with Krotalas

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leading some scholars to assert that the Greeks had kettle drums.

The average frame drum was approximately 12 to 16 inches in diameter and the shells appear to be two to three inches wide. Most appear to have skin heads (goat or cow skin) on one side of the frame only. Many of the drums' heads are painted with elaborate designs, and often the drums are decorated with ribbons attached to the outer frame. Pellet bells may have been attached to the frame, but it is impossible to be certain from the depictions. Some historians suggest that some of the drums depicted on the vase paintings have bowl-shaped frames and call these kettle drums. The frames of these drums appear very narrow, in the range of a normal frame drum of two to three inches. It is impossible to tell if this is an accurate understanding of the illustration or a distortion of the perspective of the frame drum by the artist. I am unfamiliar with any bowl-shaped frame drums found in excavations from the ancient Mediterranean world or made currently.

I have found no representations of drums being played with sticks. Different hand positions are depicted on the frame drums, possibly indicating various styles. Most often the drums are played by dancing priestesses and priests of Dionysos holding the drum vertically and from below with their left hand and playing the dominant strokes with the right hand. Some drums clearly have handles at the bottom and are being held by the handle. There are a few representations of the Muse shown playing the frame drum in a seated position with the drum on one knee and played with the opposite hand and arm. The goddess Cybele is often shown seated on a throne, holding the frame drum and a libation bowl. In one very clear instance she is shown playing the drum in a style that resembles many contemporary techniques used on the North African and Middle Eastern

tar (frame drum) or the gaval from Azerbaijan.

A majority of the frame drummers from ancient Greece appear to have been women, although there are more representations of male frame drummers on the vases than in any other ancient Mediterranean culture. The sculptural representations have primarily been of goddesses prominently holding or playing the frame drum. The frame drum appears to be the only drum of the ancient Greeks.

The percussion instrument appearing most often in the vase paintings is identified as the *Krotalon*. However this term is used by writers to indicate a number of different percussion instruments. To add to the confusion, it is also spelled *krotalum*, *krotalas*, and *crotals*. Some writers indicate that these are castanets—two small pieces of metal or wood clicked together in one hand like contemporary castanets. Some say the *krotalas* were constructed of two small cymbals on the ends of joined wooden clappers, and instruments like this have been found in Egyptian excavations.

There are vase paintings that could represent both of these types of instruments. The type of *krotala* most often represented is probably a split reed or cane, which clacked together when shaken with the hand. According to the writer Eustathius it was made of shell and brass attached to wood.⁸ Although there is a depiction of the goddess Artemis playing the *krotalas*, these clackers most frequently appear in Dionysian dance scenes. In these scenes they are played by male *satyrs* and women *maenads* and often accompanied by double flute players.

In the Beazley Vase Collection, the *krotalas* appear on 569 Greek vases from the Black figured (app. 610–510 BCE) and Red figured (app. 530–400 BCE) periods, which means they appear earlier than the frame drums, which do not appear until the Red-figured period. They are played by both men and women, but there are noticeably more women players than men. Most often the performer is dancing and plays a set of *krotalas* in each hand, but sometimes they play only one set in one hand. In some symposium scenes male youths are shown lounging on couches while playing the *krotalas*. Although the *krotalas* appear more frequently than any other percussion instrument on the vases, deities are most often depicted in sculptural form holding the frame drum.

The *kymbala*, *kymbalon*, or *krembala* were sets of small hand cymbals (approximately six inches in diameter). One was held in each hand by the performer and struck against each other. Cymbals appear most often in combination with frame drums.

The *krupezion*, used by flute players, is possibly a metal instrument attached to the shoe to keep time.

The *xylophon* is an unusual instrument (also referred to as an Apulian rattle) played by women. It is held in the left hand and played with the right fingertips. It appears that it could be similar to a scraper percussion instrument like the Latin guiro, but there is much uncertainty about this instrument.

The *xeistron* or sistrum (metal rattle) was usually played with



Greek Vase painting, Circa 5th century BCE, Maenad with Frame Drum

the right hand. The sistrum is not a prominently depicted instrument and was probably more associated with the Egyptian rites of Isis that were finding their way into Greece.

Viewing the images of the ancient percussionists is powerful and inspiring. I will be showing several hundred images at my PASIC paper presentation, and afterwards I will post many of the images on my Website,

www.layneredmond.com During the presentation I will also briefly demonstrate a number of these instruments. I'll conclude this brief overview of ancient Greek percussion with the words of the 5th-century playwright, Aeschylus, describing the music of Dionysian worshippers:

One on the fair-turned pipe fulfills
His song, with the warble of fingered trills
The soul to frenzy awakening.
From another the brazen cymbals ring.
The aulos blares out, but beneath is the moan
Of the bull-voiced mimes, unseen, unknown,
And in deep diapason the shuddering sound
Of drums, like thunder, beneath the ground.

ENDNOTES

1. <http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/BeazleyAdmin/Script2/TheArchive.htm> Musical instruments depicted on Greek vases in the Beazley collection: aulos (pipes, double flutes), 2366 records; lyre, 2078 records; kithara, 1033 records; krotala, 569 records; tympanon (frame drum), 355 records; tympana (frame drum), 44 records; cymbals, 6 records; and syrinx (panpipes), 4 records. No sistrums show up in the Beazley vase collection.
2. Landels, John G. *Music in Ancient Greece and Rome*. Pg. 81. London and New York, Routledge, 2001.
3. Strabo 10.3.9, *Greek Geography C1st BC–C1st AD*
4. From The Ravenna scholiast on Aristoph. Ach. 709; quoted in "The Gong at Donona," A.B. Cook, J.H.S., vol. xxii, 1902.
5. Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks*, trs. by G.W. Butterworth, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960, c. 1919.
6. Catullus: Latin poet (84 BCE (?)-54 BCE) fragment quoted in Quasten, Johannes translated by J. Kroll. *Music & Worship in Pagan & Christian Antiquity*.
7. Aristophanes. *Lysistrata*. 410 BCE. Anonymous translator. Online at <http://eserver.org/drama/aristophanes/lysistrata.txt>
8. 12th-century Byzantine Greek scholar Eustathius.

Layne Redmond was voted Percussionist of the Year in *Drum!* magazine's 2002 Readers Poll, and her instructional video *Rhythmic Wisdom* was voted Percussion Video of the Year. In both 2002 and 2003 *Drum!* readers voted *Trance Union*, her CD with Tommy Brunjes, Percussion Album of the Year. Redmond is the author of *When the Drummers Were Women*, the ancient history of the frame drum. Her latest recording is *Invoking the Muse* and she has a signature series of frame drums with Remo Inc. **PN**