

Tympanum tuum Cybele: Pagan Use and Christian Transformation of a Cultic Greco-Roman Percussion Instrument

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One of the most important musical instruments used by the Greeks and Romans was a hand-held percussion device consisting of a membrane made of cured animal skin stretched over a round wooden shell [Fig. 1]. In some cases, devices such as jingles or little bells were added to the frame, probably for the purpose of increasing its resonance. According to the modern categorization system, this instrument can be classified as a frame drum since the visual sources show the depth of its shell to be equal to or less than the radius of its membrane.¹

This type of instrument, described in literature as a “leather stretching circle,”² was known in Greek as Τύμπανον (*tympanon*, pl. *tympana*) and in Latin as *tympanum* (pl. *tympana*). Iconographic sources show that it was played with bare hands and held at chest or head level, grasping directly the bottom of the shell or a handle attached to the shell’s exterior. In both cases, the *tympanon/tympanum* appears to have had membranes on both sides of its shell [Figs. 1-2].³

1. In this article I have chosen to follow the popular classification proposed by Erich M. von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs. For their theory, see “Systematik der Musikinstrumente” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 56 (1914): 553-590. For a criticism of the Hornbostel-Sachs classification in relation to frame drums, see Heide NIXDORFF, *Zur Typologie und Geschichte der Rahmentrommeln: Kritische Betrachtung zur Traditionellen Instrumententerminologie*, Baessler-Archiv, Beiträge zur Völkerkunde Neue Folge-Beiheft 7, Berlin 1971.

2. βυσσότονον κύκλωμα τόδε μοι Κορύβαντες ἦδρον: Euripides, *Bacchae* 124ff. The translation is from John G. LANDENS, *Music in Ancient Greece and Rome*, London 1999, pp. 81ff.

3. Scholars have suggested that the different ways in which the instrument appears to be held in its depictions show that there were two types of *tympana*: one with skin covering only one side of the shell and another with membranes stretched on both sides. This idea stems from the fact that in some cases the instrument is shown grasped by a single hand on the bottom of the shell. Since this type of grip is only comfortable and stable when the thumb is positioned inside the instrument’s frame, it may be concluded that there was a membrane on

While some data appear to indicate that this percussion instrument was used in the Greco-Roman world to play secular music on the street or in the theatre,⁴ its main association in literary and iconographic sources is with paraliturgical music performed in the rituals of fertility deities.

The connection between frame drums and fertility cults was not restricted to Greco-Roman culture. Middle Eastern and Mediterranean sources reveal that the main function of this type of drums in other cultures of antiquity was to provide music for temple worship, religious processions or sacred dances, which were rituals performed primarily to ensure fertility and regeneration. For example, depictions of frame drums in the hands of figures identified as priestesses of the goddess Inanna/Ishtar and the shepherd god Dumuzi/Tammuz which have been found throughout the Middle East show that in ancient Mesopotamia, Assyria and Anatolia the instrument was used in connection with the cults of these deities.⁵ Perhaps one of the best examples may

only one of its sides. In other cases, handles were attached to the frame to make it easier to hold instruments with skin on both sides of the shell. I do not agree with this interpretation since even if an instrument has skin on both sides of its shell, it is possible to hold it on the bottom of its body without using handles. This can be seen in the representation from Pompeii [Fig. 1], in which the drum clearly has skins on both sides of the frame, and it may also be observed today in the double-headed Portuguese square frame drum called the *adufe*. Thus, the fact that an instrument had skin on both sides of the shell did not make the use of a handle indispensable. Perhaps the association of the instrument with sieves is a better indicator of the use of only one skin. For the above conclusions, see Thomas J. MATHIESEN, *Apollo's Lyre: Greek Music and Music Theory in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Lincoln 2000, pp. 174ff.; Curt SACHS, *The History of Musical Instruments*. New York 1940, pp. 148ff.; and James BLADES, *Percussion Instruments and Their History*, Westport, Conn. 1992, p. 177.

4. This use is especially suggested by a depiction from Pompeii [Fig. 1]. Here one sees a man playing the *tympanum* together with a woman playing a double pipe and a man playing a pair of small cymbals. Scholars have suggested that this scene represents performers playing music between the acts of a play since the musicians appear to be wearing masks. However, since the scene looks like it is taking place in front of a house, it is also possible that the musicians are street performers. For further information about this depiction, see G. FLEISCHHAUER, *Etrurien und Rom*, Musikgeschichte in Bildern, II/5, Leipzig 1964, pp. 96ff.

5. It was Inanna who renewed vegetation, caused crops to grow and propagated man and beast. She was known as the celestial mother, the lady of the granary and wine, and the goddess of love. Her marriage (the "Sacred Marriage") with the shepherd god Dumuzi was understood to represent and affect the renewal of life at the turn of the year. Her nuptials, celebrated each spring, consisted of a festival in which the king and high priestess reenacted amid processions the goddess's sexual union with Dumuzi for the purpose of summoning the vital forces in the dormant soil and the fecundity process everywhere. For further information about the cult of Inanna and Dumuzi and their "Sacred Marriage", see E. O. JAMES, *Myth and*



FIGURE 1: Male street musician playing a *tympanum*. Mosaic from Pompeii, 2nd century BC. Naples, Museo Nazionale. NR 9985.



FIGURE 2: Krater with a maenad playing a tympanum with a handle, circa 440-430 BC. Harvard University Art Museum. No. 1960.343.

be seen in a Mesopotamian terracotta relief dating from the old Babylonian period (circa 1950-1530 BC), in which a nude male lute player and a female frame drum player, the clothing of the latter gathered in front of her body, are depicted as simultaneously playing music and having sexual intercourse [Fig. 3]. It has been suggested that this iconography either represents the “Sacred Marriage” or sacred temple prostitution, a Near and Middle Eastern fertility cult practice in which women who lived in temples had the task of engaging sexually with those who visited the sacred places to worship the deities.⁶



FIGURE 3: Lute and frame drum players engaging in sexual intercourse. Mesopotamia, Babylonian period, circa 1950-1530 BC. Paris, Louvre Museum. AO 16924.

Ritual in the Ancient Near East, London 1958, pp. 55-57; Joachim BRAUN, *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine: Archeological, Written and Comparative Sources*, Grand Rapids 2002, pp. 71-75; and Subhi Anwar RASHID, *Mesopotamien. Musikgeschichte in Bildern II: Musik des Altertums*, Lieferung 2, Leipzig 1984, p. 96.

6. For information about temple prostitution, see Diane WOLKSTEIN, and Samuel Noah KRAMER. *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*, New York 1983, p. 129; and RASHID, *Ibid*, p. 76. These scholars suggest the possibility that the people in the scene are performing an acrobatic dance for cultic festivities.

Similarly, a Sumerian text written circa 2280 BC states that King Maram-Sin's granddaughter was appointed to play a round frame drum, known as *balag-di*, in the temple of the Moon in Ur.⁷ Sumerian tablets from the Ur-Sin period (circa 2100 BC), for their part, record that some hymns performed in the liturgy of Enlil, a god who separated heaven and earth, were accompanied by round frame drums known as *meze* and *balag-di*.⁸

In Egypt, the round frame drum appears to have been introduced during the New Kingdom. It is labeled in tombs as *s'r* and it is also represented in temples in the hands of nude or semi-nude deities and priestesses,⁹ particularly Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of love and fertility.¹⁰ Further examples of the association and use of the *s'r* in Hathor's cult are found in inscriptions from her temple in Dendera, which state that in that sacred place or its surroundings a statue of the goddess was carried and presented to the people to

7. See BLADES, *Percussion Instruments...* cit. (n. 87), p. 153; and Sibyl MARCUSE, *A Survey of Musical Instruments*, New York 1975, p. 131. For rites using frame drums in connection with the worship of the moon, see SACHS, *The History of Musical Instruments...* cit. (n. 87), p. 76.

8. The *meze* is also considered by H.G. Farmer to be a small round frame drum. With respect to the *balag-di*, Curt Sachs explains that the word *balag* comes from the verb *bal*, meaning "to beat." Its Akkadian equivalent was *balaggu*. This word may have described a round frame drum since the etymology of the word *timbutu* or *tibbu*, the equivalent name of *balag-di* in Akkadian, was "ring." See SACHS, *The History of Musical Instruments...* cit. (n. 87), pp. 73-76; BLADES, *Percussion Instruments...* cit. (n. 87), pp. 153, 156ff.; MARCUSE, *A Survey...* cit. (n. 91), pp. 123, 147ff.; Francis W. GALPIN, *The Music of the Sumerians and their Immediate Successors the Babylonians and Assyrians*, Cambridge 1937, p. 8; and Anne DRAFFKORN KILMER, "Continuity and Change in Ancient Mesopotamian Terminology for Music and Musical Instruments" in E. HICKMAN; R. EICHMANN (edd.), *Studien zur Musikarchäologie II: Vorträge des 1. Symposiums der International Study Group on Music Archeology im Kloster Michaelstein*, Mai 1998, Berlin 2000, p. 115.

9. See Hans HICKMANN, *Musicologie Pharaonique: Études sur l'évolution de l'art musical dans l'Égypte ancienne*, Kehl 1956, pp. 25, 45. There appears to be evidence that foreigners such as Phoenician and Canaanite tradesmen and merchants introduced different kinds of drums to the Middle Kingdom in the 12th century BC. For more information about this subject see Lise MANNICHE, *Music and Musicians in Ancient Egypt*, London 1991, p. 39; Emily TEETER, "Female Musicians in Pharaonic Egypt" in K. MARSHAL (ed.), *Rediscovering the Muses: Women's Musical Traditions*, Boston 1994, pp. 79ff.; and Bo LAWERGREN, "Music in Ancient Egypt" in D. B. REDFORD (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, New York 2001, Vol. 2, pp. 450-454.

10. The participation of female musicians in temple music, especially in the cult of Hathor, is well documented in the New Kingdom. See TEETER, cit. (n. 93), pp. 84-86.

the sound of cymbals and frame drums.¹¹ In Egypt, the use of the round frame drum *s'ṛ* as a ritualistic instrument that enhanced communication with the goddess Hathor led artists to place it in the hands of the deity herself. In this way, it also became one of her identifying symbols.¹²

Finally, it should be mentioned that the ancient Hebrews, though monotheistic and lacking fertility rituals, also followed the traditions of their neighbors and used percussion instruments to accompany the worship of God. In the Old Testament, the drum *tof* (plural *tuppin*), identified by some scholars as a round frame drum,¹³ is mentioned especially in the Psalms as an instrument used for temple worship and religious processions (Ps. 68, Ps. 80, Ps. 149 and Ps. 150).¹⁴

In Greece and Rome, fertility rites similar to those practiced by other Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cultures were performed as part of the mystery cults of Cybele and Bacchus/Dionysius.¹⁵ We know little about

11. In the same temple there are also representations of thirty-two identical females wearing some of Hathor's headdresses (cow horns and sun discs) and playing frame drums in a procession to the goddess's shrine. See MANNICHE, *Music and Musicians...* cit. (n. 93), p. 65.

12. For various depictions and a discussion of Hathor holding frame drums, see Layne REDMOND, *When the Drummers Were Women*, New York 1997.

13. See SACHS, *The History of Musical Instruments...* cit. (n. 87), pp. 108ff.; BRAUN, *Music in Ancient...* cit. (n. 89), pp. 125 f.; Jeremy MONTAGU, *Musical Instruments of the Bible*, London 2002, p. 131; and Carol MEYERS, "The Drum Dance Song Ensemble: Women's Performance in Biblical Israel" in K. MARSHALL (ed.), *Rediscovering the Muses: Women's Musical Traditions*, Boston 1993, pp. 58-62. On the other hand, it is also possible that the instrument was square in shape. See Alfred SENDREY, *Music in Ancient Israel*, New York 1969, p. 64. The denominative *tof*, probably onomatopoeic in origin, appeared first in Ugaritic writings of the 14th century BC and since it comes from a widespread root, there are related forms in almost all Middle Eastern languages. Thus, in Sumerian we find the names *dup* or *adappa*, in Assyrian *tuppu*, in Aramaic *tuppa*, in Akkadian *dadpu*, in Egyptian *tbu*, and in Arabic *duff*. More information about this instrument is found in the post-Biblical texts of the *Mishnah* (Qinnim iii.6), in which it is said that the *tof's* vibrating membrane was made of ram's hide. See Joachim BRAUN, "Biblical Instruments" in S. SADIE & J. TYRRELL (edd.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., London 2001, Vol. III, pp. 530f.

14. See SENDREY, *Ibid*, pp. 74-76, 84-86, 372-375.

15. Cybele was a Phrygian Mother Goddess who appears to have come to Greece via Ionia and was assimilated with the Greek deity known as the "Great Mother," whose myth involved the seasons, life and death, and fertility. Bacchus, known as Dionysius in Rome, was the son of Demeter, the goddess of agriculture. He was the Greek god of fertility, ecstasy, and wine. His cult was associated with intoxicated frenzy from wine drinking and his followers were ecstatic women known as *maenads* (mad women), who apparently roamed the mountains performing frenetic dances in the company of satyrs. See Matthew DILLON, *Girls and*

the rituals of these cults since they were practiced by closed societies that demanded secrecy from their members. However, information extrapolated from artistic representations of ritual scenes and written descriptions of worship has helped scholars to reconstruct these religious events. It is clear from the study of these sources that, as in the case of the other fertility rituals performed throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean, frame drums were also central to the worship of the fertility deities.

References to the use of *tympana* in connection with fertility rituals dedicated to Cybele and Bacchus/Dionysius appear in Greek art after the 5th century BC, when their cults were reportedly introduced from the East into Greece. Iconographic sources commonly show clothed and semi-nude women playing these instruments to accompany ecstatic dances, solemn processions and libations performed in honor of these deities.¹⁶ Good examples can be found in many red-figured kraters produced in the 5th century BC, which show groups of women dancing ecstatically to the sound of the *tympanon* and the *aulos* before Cybele and Dionysius [Fig. 2].¹⁷ Similarly, a subdued processional dance is depicted on a gate to a sanctuary dedicated to Cybele in Samothrace that dates from 340 BC. In this representation one sees a group of young women holding each others' hands and dancing in two single lines to the music of a *kithara*, an *aulos* and *tympana*.¹⁸

Literary sources also mention the use of *tympana*, sometimes in great numbers, to worship fertility deities other than Cybele and Bacchus. For example, a passage from Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (written circa 411 BC), in which the heroine laments the Athenian women's tardiness in assembling to discuss how to end the Peloponnesian War, reads: "if the women were summoned to some rite of Bacchus, or shrine of Pan, or of Koliass, or of Genetyl-

Women in Classical Greek Religion, London 2002, p. 154. Scholars believe that these cults, which promised the personal salvation of the individual's soul, were welcome because of the people's need for a personalized religion. See Mircea ELIADE, *A History of Religious Ideas: From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Chicago 1982, Vol. II, p. 184.

16. See Sue BLUNDELL, *Women in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge 1995, pp. 165-169; Solon MICHAELIDES, *The Music of Ancient Greece: An Encyclopaedia*, London 1978, pp. 344ff.; MATHIESEN, *Apollo's Lyre...* cit. (n. 27), pp. 174-176; ; Matthew DILLON, *Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion*, London 2002, pp. 2, 67ff., 155, 160, 298ff.; and Johannes QUASTEN, *Music and Worship in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*, Washington 1983, pp. 3-7, 14-18, 33-38.

17. Other examples are studied in Dillon, *Ibid.*, p. 160; and Redmond, *When the Drummers...* cit. (n. 96).

18. For a study of this work, see DILLON, *Girls and Women...* cit. (n. 100), pp. 67f.

lis, you wouldn't be able to get through, what for the number of frame drums."¹⁹

Roman writers state that at least in the 1st century BC, the *tympanum* also became associated in Rome with the cults of Cybele and Dionysius. An example is given by the Roman poet Catullus (84-54 BC), who records the use of *tympana* to accompany religious dances in temples dedicated to Cybele: "There sounds the clang of the *cymbalum*, there echoes the *tympana*, there the Phrygian flutist plays upon his deep-sounding, twisted reed. There the Maenads [...] celebrate their holy rites to the sound of shrill screams [...] There we would also hurry with quickening dance-step!"²⁰ To our knowledge, most extant Roman representations showing frame drums in connection with fertility deities were produced in the opening centuries of our era. An example is found in a frieze produced circa AD 100, housed today at the British Museum, which shows a maenad playing a *tympanum* while leading two satyrs, one of them playing the reed blown pipe *aulos*, in an ecstatic procession.²¹

Similarly, a depiction of a frame drum played in connection with Dionysius can be seen in a sarcophagus produced circa AD 190 that is housed in the Walters Art Gallery (Masserati Collection. 1902 23-31). In this representation one sees yet another maenad playing a round frame drum with jingles inserted in its shell.

19. ἀλλ' εἴ τις ἐς Βακχεῖον αὐτὰς ἐκάλεσεν, ἢ πὶ Κωλιάδ' ἢς Γενετυλλίδος, οὐδ' ἂν διελθεῖν ἦν ἂν ὑπὸ τῶν τυμπάνων ARISTOPHANES, *Lysistrata* 1-3. I have taken this translation from DILLON, *Girls and Women...* cit. (n. 100), p. 2. This author also explains the identity of the deities and places mentioned in the passage: Bacchus is the same as Dionysius, Pan was a god with marriage connotations, Kolia was a place where there was a shrine dedicated to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and Genetyllis was a goddess with child-bearing attributes. Other examples in literature can be found in the Homeric hymns composed in honor of the Great Mother in the 7th century BC, which mention the goddess's predilection for frame drums, clappers, and pipes, as well as in the *Dithyramb* 2 of Pindar (522-443 BC), which contains a description of how the Great Mother was honored at night by the beating of frame drums and clappers. For information about this passage, see DILLON, *Girls and Women...* cit. (n. 100), p. 155.

20. "Phrygiam ad domun Cybeles, Phrygiam ad nemora deae, ubi cymbalum sonat vox, ubi tympana reboant, tibicen ubi canit Phryx curvo grave calamo, ubi capita Maenades vi iaciunt hederigerae, ubi sacra sancta acutis ululatus agitant, ubi suevit illa divae volitare vaga cohors, quo nos decet citatis celerare tripudiis. Simul haec comitibus Attis cecinit notha mulier, thiasus repente linguis trepidantibus ululat, leve tympanum remugit, cava cymbala crepant." CATULLUS 63, 19 ff. The translation is taken from QUASTEN, *Music and Worship...* cit. (n. 100), p. 36.

21. For this image see REDMOND, *When the Drummers...* cit. (n. 96), p. 126.

The customary use of the *tympanon-tympanum* in rituals dedicated to Cybele throughout the Greco-Roman period explains the popular representation of the goddess holding a frame drum by her side [Fig. 4], a practice already observed in some depictions of the Egyptian goddess Hathor.²² This identification is also found in literature, where the *tympanum* is described as Cybele's instrument: *tympanum tuum Cybele*.²³



FIGURE 4: Enthroned Cybele holding a *tympanum*. Terracotta figurine, circa 350 BC. Louvre Museum (photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen).

Since the frame drum appears to have been used as a symbol for the goddess's cult or even for the deity herself, some scholars have concluded that representations of a deceased female holding a *tympanum* on a tombstone identify the dead person as someone involved in the Great Mother's cult.²⁴ An example of this possibility can be seen on the gravestone carving of a

22. For a collection of these types of representations, see REDMOND, *Ibid.*

23. CATULLUS 63, 9.

24. See DILLON, *Girls and Women...* cit. (n. 100), pp. 155ff.

Greek woman named Nicomache, who lived in the 4th century BC. The carving depicts her seated on a chair and holding an unconventionally large frame drum while bidding farewell to her husband [Fig. 5]. Nicomache's sitting posture and the way she holds the instrument on her gravestone are both reminiscent of the representations of Cybele holding a *tympanum* [Fig. 4].²⁵



FIGURE 5: Tombstone relief of the Athenian Nicomache, circa 360 BC. Athens, Piraeus Museum.

25. For this interpretation and further information about this piece, see DILLON, *Ibid*, 155-7. Other scholars see the representation of a dead person holding a musical instrument as symbolic of the passage from earthly life to the other world. A good analogy could be our modern custom of identifying or representing the dead as going to heaven with wings and halo while playing the harp. See QUASTEN, *Music and Worship...* cit. (n. 100), p. 155.

THE NEGATIVE VIEW OF WORSHIP WITH MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS BEFORE THE ADVENT OF CHRISTIANITY

Although mystery cults were very popular in Greco-Roman antiquity, their rituals were criticized by philosophers and writers who disapproved of a religious cult in which the connection with the divinity was achieved through ecstasy produced by external elements such as alcohol and the performance of music.²⁶ These critics advocated a spiritual connection with a deity that came from within the individual.

The idea of inner devotion as opposed to externally produced ecstasy is first hinted in the *Leges* 669e of Plato in which the philosopher criticizes the popular concept of sacrifice and refers to ritualistic instrumental music as “music without words [that] contains no more of the spirit than the sound which an animal makes.”²⁷ This kind of criticism in which instrumental music is seen as empty and powerless to produce spiritual communion with a deity appears to have developed later into the rejection of musical instruments. Thus, Philodemus of Gadara (circa 100-28 BC) in his *De musica* explains that the ritualistic music of *tympana* and cymbals performed by worshippers is nothing but “a disturbance of the spirit” since it generates pleasure alone.²⁸

26. This idea of rejecting the externals of empty rituals and their replacement with inner worship develops out of the philosophers’ rejection of rituals with bloody sacrifices. See O. CASEL, “Ein orientalische Kultwort in abendländischer Umschmelzung” *Jahrbuch fur Liturgiewissenschaft* 11, 1939, pp. 1-19. Mystery cults were also persecuted at times because of the secrecy with which they were conducted and the number of people that they mobilized – issues that were considered dangerous by the political establishment. In Rome, their greatest popularity was reached in the 1st century AD after Claudius proclaimed them part of the official Roman religious cult. This decision a reversal of an earlier pronouncement made by the senate to prosecute these cults, which led to the imprisonment and execution of many of their followers. See ELIADE, *A History...* cit (n. 99), pp. 134-6.

27. ἀλλὰ ὑπολαβεῖν ἀναγκαῖον, ὅτι τὸ τοιοῦτόν γε πολλῆς ἀγροικίας μεστὸν πᾶν, ὅποσον τάχους τε καὶ ἀπταισίας καὶ φωνῆς θηριώδους σφόδρα φίλον, ὥστ’ ἀυλήσει γε χρῆσθαι καὶ κθαρίσει πλὴν ὅσον ὑπὸ ὄρχησίν τε καὶ ᾠδῆν, ψιλῶ δ’ ἐκατέρῳ πᾶσά τις ἀμουσία καὶ θαυματουργία γίγνοιτ’ ἂν τῆς χρήσεως. The translation is taken from QUASTEN, *Music and Worship...* cit. (n. 100), p. 51. Other important pagan authors who deal with the subject of spirituality and who spoke out against the cultic use of external elements such as music are Philodemus of Gadara (circa 100-28 BC) in his *De musica* 7,1; Cleanthes of Assos (AD 331-223), quoted by Philodemus in *De musica* 28,16; and Diogenes of Babylon (circa AD 240-152), also quoted by Philodemus in *De musica* 20, 28ff. For further information on this subject, see QUASTEN, *Ibid.*, pp. 51ff.

28. αἱ δὲ τῶν τυμπάνων καὶ ρόμβων καὶ κυμβάλων καὶ μελῶν τινῶν καὶ ρυθμῶν ιδιότη-
τες καὶ διὰ ποιῶν ὀργάνων τὸ πᾶν συμπλοκῆ μοχθηρῶν ὑπολήψεων ἐξοργιάζουσι καὶ πρὸς

The author sees this induction of mere pleasure as the reason why primarily women and effeminate men performed this type of worship.²⁹ This association of external pleasure with the worship of deities was clearly mentioned by the pagan Celsus (2nd century AD) who, as quoted by the Christian Origen (185-254 AD), stated that “the demons of earth take too great a delight in fleshy pleasures; they have too great a desire for blood, the smell of fat, sweet sounds [of musical instruments], and other such things.”³⁰

The reaction against the use of musical instruments in religious rituals because they induced lust instead of promoting spiritual communion had been earlier embraced by the Hellenistically-educated Jewish philosopher Philo (circa 20 BC-AD 50), who transferred the yearning for religious inner spirituality expressed by the pagan writers to the worship of God. Philo indicates with displeasure that instead of appropriate spiritual exaltation, pagan religious feasts were comprised of physical satisfaction created by “carousing and overeating [...] flutes and *citharas*, the sound of *timpanoi* and cymbals and other effeminate and frivolous music of every kind, enkindling unbridled lust, with the help of the sense of hearing.”³¹ As will be seen further on, Philo’s position on this as well as other subjects had an important influence on the writings of the Christians Ambrose, Origen and Clement of

βακχεῖαν ἄγρουσι, καὶ ταῦτα γυναικάς ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ καὶ γυναικώδεις ἄνδρας (“[...] the music of the frame drums, *rombos* and cymbals and all other instruments that have the property of rhythm produce despicable pleasure and lead to bacchanals, activities proper of women and feminine men [...])” *De musica* 18, 24. For the author’s judgment of cultic music, see QUASTEN, “Greek Philosophy and Sacred Music,” *The New Scholasticism* 15, 1941, pp. 225-260.

29. Ibid.

30. χρῆ γὰρ ἴσως οὐκ ἀπιστεῖν ἀνδράσι σοφοῖς, οἱ δὴ φασι διότι τῶν μὲν περιγείων δαιμόνων τὸ πλεῖστον γενέσει συντετηκός καὶ προσηλωμένος αἵματι καὶ κνίσση καὶ μελωδίας καὶ ἄλλοις τισὶ τοιοῦτοις. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8, 60. The translation is taken from QUASTEN, *Music and Worship...* cit. (n. 100), p. 53.

31. *De specialibus legibus* 2:193. The translation has been taken from QUASTEN, *Music and Worship...* cit. (n. 100), p. 52. See also James W. MCKINNON, “The Exclusion of Musical Instruments from the Ancient Synagogue,” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 106, 1980, pp. 78-81; and Alfred SENDREY, *Music...* cit. (n. 97), p. 182. This association of musical instruments with mere pleasure and therefore their perception as being antagonistic to piety was not new in Jewish culture. We already find in the Old Testament that the prophet Isaiah had scourged those who indulged in luxury, gluttony, and debauchery when at feasts where musical instruments, including frame drums, were played: “Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that tarry late into night, till wine inflamed them. And the Harp, and the psaltery, the timbrel [*tof/tympanum*], and the pipe, and wine, are in their feasts.” Isa. 5:11,12.

Alexandria, some of the most prominent spiritual leaders of a new religion based on the teachings of Christ.³²

THE *TYMPANUM* AND THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

As we have seen, *tympana* were used, particularly by women, throughout the Roman Empire to accompany ecstatic dances and processions that were performed as part of mystery cult rituals dedicated to fertility deities. The role of frame drums and other instruments in these rites prompted their condemnation by the leaders of Christianity.³³ These leaders, however, some of them known to us as the Fathers of the Church because their writings became doctrinal, encounter one problem: musical instruments, including frame drums, were not only part of pagan rituals but, as we have seen, they were also mentioned in the Scriptures as being employed in the worship of God. The contradiction was addressed by imaginative explanations that were to taint the manner in which musical instruments would be viewed in the Middle Ages.³⁴

Frame drums, along with other instruments, were violently condemned by the spiritual leaders of the Christian religion for various reasons. On the one hand, they were associated with the orgiastic and ecstatic cults of pagan divinities, whose worship the early Christians were striving to suppress. On the other hand, the early Church Fathers adopted from pagan philosophy and Jewish asceticism the notion that musical instruments promoted sensuous experience during liturgy instead of pure spiritual communion with the divinity. On top of that, frame drums also carried a century-old connection with fertility and, therefore, with sexual desire, a concept that was now tainted by an aura of sin under the Church Fathers' ascetic religion.

Since musical instruments, particularly frame drums, had been fundamental elements of religious rituals for centuries, the pagans who converted to Christianity at the beginning probably tended to incorporate their old

32. See John BOWKER (ed.), "Philo" in *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, Oxford 1997, p. 750.

33. See Reinhold HAMMERSTEIN, *Diabolus in musica: Studien zur Ikonographie der Musik des Mittelalters*. Munich 1974, pp. 22-25, 29; and Daniela COSTA, "Sant'Agostino e le allegorie degli strumenti musicali", *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia* 28, 1993, p. 207.

34. Helmut GIESEL, *Studien zur Symbolik der Musikinstrumente im Schrifttum der alten und mittelalterlichen Kirche: von den Anfängen bis zum 13. Jahrhundert*, Kölner Beiträge zur Musikforschung 94, Regensburg 1978, p. 46.

cultic instruments into their new Christian worship out of tradition, even after their repudiation by the Christian leaders. This is indicated, for example, in the *Paidagogos* of Clement of Alexandria (d. 215), in which he tells the faithful about the inappropriate use of frame drums and other musical instruments in the Christian ritual because of their connection with pagan cults:

When a man occupies his time with flutes, stringed instruments, choirs, dancing, Egyptian *crotala* and other such improper frivolities, he will find that indecency and rudeness are the consequences. Such a man creates a din with cymbals and [frame drums (*tympanoi*)]; he rages about with instruments of an insane cult.³⁵

Another example can be found in the writings of Gregory of Nazianzus (330-390), in which one finds constant reminders about the prohibition of musical instruments in Christian liturgy and their replacement with a *cappella* singing of hymns and Psalms.³⁶

Thus, the leaders of the Christian religion condemned the *tympana* because of their connection with the fertility cults that they were struggling to banish. This undertaking was not easy at first because the ancient customs were deeply ingrained in Mediterranean culture. Trying to cope with the problem, the Fathers offered new followers other alternatives of worship that included the *a cappella* singing of Psalms.

But while frame drums and other musical instruments were rejected in Christian ritual, the Fathers of the Church had to deal with the fact that those same musical instruments were mentioned in the Old Testament, particularly in the Psalms, as suitable for the worship of God.³⁷ A good example is found in the text of Psalm 150 in which God is praised with trumpet, psaltery, harp, frame drum, stringed instruments, organs, cymbals, and even dances.³⁸ The Fathers in their rumination and commentary of the Old Testament addressed this contradiction.

35. οἱ δὲ ἐν αὐλοῖς καὶ ψαλτηρίοις καὶ χοροῖς καὶ ὀρχήμασιν καὶ κροτάλοις Αἰγυπτίων καὶ τοιαύταις ῥαθυμίαις σάλοιο ἄτακτοι καὶ ἀπρεπεῖς καὶ ἀπαίδευτοι κομιδῇ γίνονται ἂν κυμβάλοις καὶ τυμπάνοις ἐξηχούμενοι καὶ τοῖς τῆς ἀπάτης ὄργανοις περιψοφούμενοι: *Paidagogos* 2. 4, 40. The translation is taken from QUASTEN, *Music and Worship...* cit. (n. 100), p. 61.

36. See QUASTEN, *Music and Worship...* cit. (n. 100), p. 62.

37. James W. MCKINNON, "Musical Instruments in Medieval Psalm Commentaries and Psalters", *Journal of American Musicological Society* 21/1, 1968, pp. 3-20.

38. Psalm 150: "Sono tubae, psalterio et cithara [...] tympano et choro, chordis et organo [...] cymbalis bene sonantibus, cymbalis iubilationis."

Two schools of interpretation arose. One of them, originating in Alexandria, rejected the idea that the musical instruments mentioned in the Bible were real objects, preferring to see them as allegorical symbols.³⁹ This school, well represented by the work of Origen (185-254), demonstrated little interest in the historical or literal meaning of the Bible and established a principle in which the information contained in the Old Testament had to be deciphered to find its mystical content.⁴⁰ This approach to the Scriptures is known today as allegorical exegesis.

The second school, established in Antioch, rejected the allegorical interpretation of the Alexandrians, preferring to see the musical instruments mentioned in the Bible as real historical objects that were in fact used by the ancient Hebrews in the worship of the Lord.⁴¹ This approach is well exemplified by John Chrysostom (d. 407), who offers a solution for the appearance of musical instruments in Psalm 149 by explaining that “the Ancients [Hebrews] used these instruments because of the slowness of their understanding and to keep themselves from idols. Just as he [God] received sacrifices he allowed those things because of their weakness.”⁴² To this Theodoret of Cyrhus (d. circa 460) added that God tolerated the use of musical instruments by the Jews because “they were fond of play and laughter, and since all this sort of thing took place in the temples of idols, he [God] allowed it, thus to lead them, and by the smaller evil avoid the greater and through the incomplete prepare for the complete.”⁴³

39. This approach was not new and was inherited from Jewish as well as pagan tradition, which already exercised great freedom in interpreting their sacred texts. See MCKINNON, “Musical Instruments...” cit. (n. 121), p. 5. For an extensive discussion of Origen’s approach, see GIESEL, *Studien zur Symbolik...* cit. (n. 118), pp. 50-55.

40. Origen had an immense influence because he was the first to compose a psalm commentary for every existing psalm. Before the Psalm commentary was elevated to a literary form by this writer and turned into a tradition by the subsequent Fathers, allegorical interpretations of musical instruments appear scattered throughout the works of Clement of Alexandria. For more information about this and Origen’s contribution, see GIESEL, *Studien zur Symbolik...* cit (n. 118), pp. 39-55; HAMMERSTEIN, *Diabolus in musica...* cit. (n. 117), pp. 22-25, 29; COSTA, “Sant’Agostino...” cit (n. 117), p. 207; and MCKINNON, “Musical Instruments...” cit. (n. 121), pp. 4ff.

41. This school of thought explaining the wrongful use of musical instruments as literal objects was a feature of the school of Antioch, which was more restrained about the search for allegories in the Scriptures than other Church Fathers. See MCKINNON, “Musical Instruments...” cit. (n. 121), pp. 7 f.

42. *Patrologia Graeca (PG)* 55, col. 494. The translation is taken from MCKINNON, *Ibid*, 8.

43. *PG* 80, col. 1996. See also COSTA, “Sant’Agostino...” cit. (n. 117), p. 208.

In the West, the allegorical school of Alexandria took root. Origen's approach was perpetuated and expanded by writers such as Hilarius of Poitiers (315-367), St Augustine (354-430), Cassiodorus (490-580), and Gregory the Great, among many others.⁴⁴ In turn, the scriptural commentaries of these early Western writers became authentic theological pillars of the medieval Christian tradition.

Since the *tympanum* was cited in the Scriptures, it was yet another musical instrument to be interpreted by the Fathers' allegorical exegesis. This instrument, called *tof* in Hebrew and translated as *tympanon/tympanum* in the Greek and Latin versions of the Old Testament, is mentioned in the Bible fifteen times, mostly in connection with the worship of the Lord. The following chart shows the recurrence of the term in the Torah, the Septuagint and the Vulgate or Latin Bible.⁴⁵

<i>Tof</i> in the Torah	Τύμπανον (<i>Tympanon</i>) in the Septuagint	<i>Tympanum</i> in the Vulgate
Gn 31,27	Gn 31,27	Gn 31,27
Ex 15,20	Ex 15,20	Ex 15,20
Idc 11,34	Idc 11,34	Idc 11,34
I Sm 10,05 18,06	I Sm 10,05 18,06	I Sm 10,05 18,06
II Sm 06,05	II Sm 06,05	II Sm 06,05
Is 05,12 24,08 30,32	Is 05,12 24,08 30,32	Is 05,12 24,08 30,32

44. For a list of Latin Fathers who practiced the allegorical exegesis of musical instruments in the Scriptures, see GIESEL, *Studien zur Symbolik...* cit. (n. 118), pp. 68-99.

45. The collections of text that are known to us as the Old Testament were originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic. These texts were not fully compiled and codified in Hebrew until after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. However, a translation of these texts into Greek, called the Septuagint, was made prior to this time, around 250 BC, for the Jews of Alexandria. The Vulgate (from the Latin *vulgo*: common) is the name of the Latin translation of the Bible that was completed around AD 405 by Eusebius Hieronymus, known as St Jerome. This work became the official text used in Christendom in the Middle Ages.

<i>Tof</i> in the Torah	Τύμπανον (<i>Tympanon</i>) in the Septuagint	<i>Tympanum</i> in the Vulgate
I Par 13,08	I Par 13,08 I"ΕσδϞ 05,02	I Par 13,08
	Idt 3,07 16,02	Idt 3,10 16,02
Ier 31,04	Ier 38,04	Ier 31,04
Iob 21,12		Iob 21,12
Ps 81,03 149,03 150,04	Ps 81,03 149,03 150,04	Ps 67,26 80,03 149,03 150,04
	I Mcc 09,39 II Mcc 06,19 06,28	I Mcc 09,39

TABLE 1. *References to the frame drum in the various versions of the Bible.*⁴⁶

Particularly in the Psalms, the frame drum is mentioned in association with religious ritual. In Psalm 67:26 one finds a description of a religious pageant: “[...] singers ahead, musicians behind, in the middle come young female frame drum players.”⁴⁷ Psalm 80:3-4 reads: “Strike up the music, beat the *tympanum*, play the melodious *psalterium*, and the *cithara* [...] for our feast day.”⁴⁸ And at the end of the collection, Psalm 149:1-3 exhorts: “Sing a new song to Yahweh [...] play to him on *tympano* and *psalterio*,” and in Psalm 150:3-4, as we have seen above, among other instruments God is worshiped with: “[...] *tympano* [...] *cordis et organo*.”⁴⁹

46. I have taken this chart from GIESEL, *Studien zur Symbolik...* cit. (n. 118), p. 160.

47. “[...] praevenierunt principes coniuncti psallentibus in medio iuvenularum tympanistriarum.”

48. “psumite psalmum et date tympanum psalterium iucundum cum cithara [...] die sollemnitatis nostrae.”

49. “Cantate Domino canticum novum [...] laudent nomen eius in choro in tympano et psalterio psallant ei.”

Diverse allegorical interpretations, particularly in the Psalms, were given to this instrument by the Church Fathers. Some of them were prompted by the instruments' connection with pagan rites. Along these lines, in his commentary on Psalm 150 associating the frame drum with women and fertility rituals, Origen (185-254) describes the *tympanum* as a symbol of desire.⁵⁰ This association similarly prompted St Augustine to use the *tympanum* as a symbol of the old religious order. In his commentary about the opening Psalm 81, "Adsumite carmen et date tympanum," he interprets this text as a request to the faithful to break with the old pagan tradition, symbolized by the frame drum, and to embrace the new order of the Christian Church in which the new followers of Christ worship with spiritual chants.⁵¹

Other interpretations were the result of the instrument's materials: a frame made of wood and a vibrating membrane made of animal skin.⁵² For example, Eusebius of Caesarea (246-340) explains that the instrument refers to worldly things because it is made of the skin of dead animals, while St John Chrysostom (347-407) identifies it with the death of the flesh.⁵³ Following their example, St Augustine comments that "the *tympanum*, since it is made of hide, relates to the flesh."⁵⁴ Because the skin stretched over the drum's body conveyed an association with worldly things, sin and death, a further association with the torments of hell was suggested.⁵⁵

The wood of the drum's frame also triggered the exegetical imagination of the Fathers. In their search for allegorical exegesis and a typological connection between events of the Old and New Testaments, the commentators gave a powerful interpretation to the nailing of the animal hide to the wood of the instrument's frame. In this common manner of keeping the instrument's membrane in position, the Church Fathers saw the flesh of Christ himself nailed to the wood of the cross. Good examples of this interpretation are found in St Augustine's commentary on Psalm 149: "In the *tympanum* [there is] the crucified flesh," and in Psalm 150 "[Christ] played the frame

50. PG 12.

51. Psalm 80:1-2 "Acquire a song and give the frame drum." See COSTA, "Sant'Agostino..." cit. (n. 117), p. 218.

52. See HAMMERSTEIN, *Diabolus in musica...* cit. (n. 117), p. 29ff.

53. Eusebius PG 23, 710, Chrysostomus, PG 55, 494, 1862.

54. Tympanum, quod de corio fit, ad carnem pertinent." PL 37, 1035. The translation is mine.

55. See HAMMERSTEIN, *Diabolus in musica...* cit. (n. 117), p. 30 f.

drum as he was crucified, extended on wood [of the Cross].”⁵⁶ Thus, despite its being banished from religious music practice, in the interpretation of some of the Church Fathers as from late Antiquity the *tympanum* became a messianic symbol representing the culmination of Christ’s life and the forgiveness of human sins, a powerful emblem that was perpetuated and supplemented by later medieval commentators and artists.⁵⁷

Thus, literary and iconographic sources reveal that a round frame drum known as *tympanon/tympanum* was widely used by Greeks and Romans to perform music for rituals dedicated to Cybele and Dionysius. This use, inherited from other cultures of Antiquity, was forbidden by the early Christians who wished to abolish all traces of pagan worship in their new forms of liturgy. Despite its pagan connections, the instrument was also considered an important element of Hebrew religion and the theologians were forced to excuse its use in the ancient Biblical worship of God by constructing the *tympanum* as a symbol detached from its original cultic function. Through this process the instrument became associated with Christ himself, his figure being molded by the early Christians upon that of a fertility deity: Dionysius. From this point of view it may be concluded that, in the Middle Ages, the *tympanum* as a symbol of Christ on the cross continued to possess an implicit association with ideas of regeneration and rebirth, an association that would probably have felt familiar to the followers of the then extinct cults of Cybele and Dionysius.

56. “Tympanizabat id est crucifigebatur, in ligno extendebatur.” *ML* 36, 306.

57. See Mauricio MOLINA, *Frame Drums in the Medieval Iberian Peninsula*, Kassel 2010, pp. 122-126.