

CHAPTER I

Percussion Instruments

DRUMS, TIMBRELS AND RATTLES

IN treating of the arts of the Sumerians we must bear in mind that, although we are speaking of days nigh five thousand years ago, we are not face to face with a “primitive” race in the accepted meaning of that word. When the curtain rises during the fourth millennium B.C. we are introduced to a highly cultured and artistic people: centuries must have elapsed in their pre-history, wherever that was lived out, to have enabled them to attain to the standards of social amenity, skilled handicraft and ordered existence, which are the prominent features of their earliest appearance. In fact, we may truly say that the period, in which they now for the first time take their place in world history and progress, was for them their golden age—the culmination of unknown years of racial development. For, within a thousand years or so of their recognized appearance, decadence is beginning to set in, and, amid the strife of internal factions and external invasions, the curtain falls at last to rise again on other scenes and other ways.

Their cultural efficiency, however, was by no means lost to the world in which they had so ably played their part: their very speech became the religious tongue of many later centuries. In tracing therefore the history of their art there must be included in our survey many of the achievements of their immediate successors—Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians and Persians.

Dealing as we are in this opening chapter with what may be termed the simplest forms of sound-production—the instruments of percussion—we must not expect to find much trace of man’s earliest attempts to soothe his savage breast by music’s charm. Yet, as in all nations, even in our own, there are survivals still in evidence, so here too we may observe how rhythmic expression preceded the tonal art.

At Kish and at Ur, among some of the earliest remains of these dwellers in Mesopotamia, certain curiously curved blades of thin copper have been found, generally in pairs: at first they were considered to have been weapons of war but they are now recognized as “dancing sticks”, the metal blade having been fixed to a wooden handle.

In one instance, at Ur, they were discovered in connection with the remains of a lyre, and on a gold cylinder-seal also found at Ur, as well as in mother-of-pearl inlay at Kish, their real use is shown. On the seal (Pl. II, 1), which dates from about the year 2700 B.C., a dancer to the strains of the lyre is depicted and, on either side, attendants clapping the curved sticks together in measured cadence.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18063-4 - The Music of the Sumerians: And their Immediate Successors the Babylonians and Assyrians

Francis W. Galpin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

DRUMS, TIMBRELS AND RATTLES

On another seal (Pl. V, 5) we have the counterpart of the well-known *crotala*, as shown on predynastic vases in Egypt and illustrated by Loret in Lavignac's *Encyclopédie de la Musique* (Part I), while they also remind us of the boomerang-like clappers or the mere rib-bones of cattle—not to say of slain foes—which still figure in the rituals and war-dances of primitive African tribes. Perhaps we can hardly class them as musical instruments: but what is music without rhythm? Our regret is that their Sumerian name is not at present known.⁽¹⁾

(a) DRUMS

In the drums, however, to which we now turn, there is a much higher form of art: the hollow log of wood or the empty gourd has been developed into an instrument not only rhythmic but tonal by the addition of a stretched skin. For, whereas to the ordinary ear the sound of the drum is accounted as mere noise, to the delicate appreciation of the Oriental the “note” of the instrument is not only a source of pleasure but distinctly tunable.

The common Sumerian name for the drum was UB—in Akkadian *uppu*, probably used generically: in order to distinguish it from other meanings of the same word, it generally bears the determinative prefix for “skin” or “leather”, SU UB. The word itself originally implied either something “hollowed out” or “enclosed”, and it corresponds to the Greek word *lephes* or *lepis*, a cup or limpet-shell. If we may judge by the cuneiform ideogram or sign used in the archaic period (Pl. X, 2), it was at that time a single-headed drum, while a later form of sign suggests that it then had straight sides (Pl. X, 17), the head being tapped by the fingers like the old Indian *Tabla* and many of the East African instruments. There seems to have also been a smaller representative with a bowl-shaped shell or body, the UB-TUR or “little drum”, corresponding, according to the ideogram (Pl. X, 2), to the Syrian *Tabil* (Pl. X, 10) and the *Baz* used by the Dervishes (Pl. X, 14). At the Temple of Enki at Eridu there was an UB-ZABAR, i.e. of bronze. We read also of an ancient Chinese drum called *happu*, but it had two heads of skin and was carried on a pole or hung in a frame. The UB was used in solemn processions together with the double reed-pipe, timbrel and other drums.⁽²⁾

A still more interesting type of Sumerian instrument is the BALAG, which also had a smaller form, the BALAG-TUR.

Dr Yetts in his preface to the second volume of the *Eumorfopoulos Collection Catalogue* (1930) states, from his own experience in dealing with Chinese specimens, that “ancient script may often be found to yield clues towards the solution of archaeological problems, especially when things of everyday life are in question. The drum is a simple object fitly represented with a pictorial sign”. Accordingly the archaic ideogram for BALAG (Pl. X, 1) shows us in the third millennium B.C. a sand-glass- or hour-glass-shaped instrument with two heads; even the suspending

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18063-4 - The Music of the Sumerians: And their Immediate Successors the Babylonians and Assyrians

Francis W. Galpin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

DRUMS, TIMBRELS AND RATTLES

3

strap is hinted at: for this drum was played horizontally with both hands, not with sticks, as depicted in the seal impression from Ur (Pl. II, 5), where the broad collar of the carrying strap is prominent on the neck of the hindermost player. This was especially the Temple Ritual Drum and Ea or Enki, whose name is sometimes written with the BALAG sign, is the God of the Drum and patron of the chanting priest (*Kalu*). Its very shape links it with primitive worship, for in its barbaric form it was probably made of two human *crania*, like the Tibetan *Čang Teu* (Pl. X, 7) of the present day, taken from the skulls of slain enemies or of holy men. In substitution for such gruesome material half-gourds could be used, as in Malabar, and, in order to secure a surer fixing between the two hemispherical portions, a ring-shaped piece of bamboo stem was inserted: this still appears in the little Indian *Damaru* known as Šiva's Drum (Pl. X, 8) and in some of the African examples. The instrument is seen in its lengthened form in the Indian *Huruk*, in the Soudanese type (Pl. X, 9), and in the Chinese *Čang Ku* (Pl. X, 6), which is by them acknowledged to be an importation from "the western barbarians" of the second millennium B.C. and is held and played like the BALAG. As early as 2600 B.C. the Indus Valley Culture possessed it.

The Akkadian and Assyrian name was *balaggu*, *balangu*, *palagga* or *pelaggu* (cf. the Aramaic *palgah* and Syriac *pelagga*, a drum). The body was usually made of wood—cedar-wood is mentioned—and, as there are no traces of bracing cords as in later specimens, the skin heads were probably attached to the circular frame by wooden pegs.⁽³⁾

Several of the earlier Assyriologists considered that the BALAG was a lyre, because it was used to accompany the voice of the temple psalmist or chanter: but the ancient and still popular accompaniment to Asiatic song is the drum, and the word *nabaġu* used in connection with the BALAG means "to hit or strike a blow". The art of drumming, however, which has received such minute attention in India, as Mr Fox Strangways has shown in his *Music of Hindostan*, is something far more than mere tapping; under the touch of a skilful player it can add intense meaning to the words sung. So we are told on the ancient tablets that the BALAG completed the song and joined in "the full music"; the singer to its accompaniment could "assuage the tears" and could "soften the sighing"; when used in joyous procession its sound "calmed and uplifted the men of the city". On the other hand it could be struck to attract the divine attention; for a Hittite ritual tablet (c. 1300) tells us that the *katraš*-woman (the cymbal player) took the drum (BALAG) and "thereupon summoned the gods".⁽⁴⁾

It was this mystic voice of the drum which led the Sumerians to link its sounds with the utterance of the Deity.

In the description of the restored Temple of Ningirsu at Lagash, which the IŠAG or priest-king, Gudea, beautified about the year 2400 B.C., we find great

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18063-4 - The Music of the Sumerians: And their Immediate Successors the Babylonians and Assyrians

Francis W. Galpin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

reverence paid to the BALAG. In the dream which he had previous to the commencement of the great work, he was told to make the sacred emblem, the divine sword and chariot, and also “the drum beloved by Ningirsu; its name UŠUMGAL KALAMMA (Great Ruler of the Land); the instrument which speaks with auspicious voice, which gives counsel unto the hero, who loves to make gifts”. The time of its making provided a name-date for the year. The drum was entrusted to the care and use of a special officer, who also bore the honorific title of the instrument.⁽⁵⁾ In Miss Densmore’s description of the *Drum Religion of the American Indians* we find a somewhat parallel arrangement. Certain specified men may sing the Songs of the Drum, but only one may “speak” to it, and he is the chief, who keeps the instrument. In describing the ritual the chief said “sometimes my wife and I will have a little feast of our own beside the Drum and ask it to strengthen us in our faith and resolution to live justly and to wrong no one”. In the same way Gudea’s Drum was said “to confirm his counsels”. This divine attribute is reflected also in the cult of the Sumerian kettledrum, the LILIS, which will be described later: to it was given a special place among the hierarchy of the gods. Even to this day the “Drum speech” is recognized by many primitive peoples; in Mandingo Land the natives imitate their own language by pressing the skin head or side-cords of the drum and so varying pitch and tone: or, by certain rhythmic beats, any desired message can be conveyed Morse-like. Among the Swedish Laplanders the Wizard’s Drum was till the last century a fetish, and was used for divination in their old religious worship. In this connection it will be noticed that in the seal impression of the Agade Period (c. 2500 B.C.), illustrated on Plate II, 3, there is an altar of hour-glass shape standing in front of the Goddess (Ishtar). This altar is exactly like the BALAG Drum and is believed to have borne the same name: on it are placed offerings, which suggest an earlier time when the actual drum was so used. It may be that its shape acquired some special significance in relation to the worship of the Mother Goddess, for on an omen tablet of late date we read that the appearance in the *viscera* of the shape of “the *timbātu* (BALAG-DI, a similar kind of drum) before my Goddess Ishtar” was to be considered a propitious sign “for the heart of my army will, with the help of the gods, be a rampart”. A further account of this curious tablet is given on subsequent pages.

The BALAG must often have been of considerable size, for its sonorous note is compared to the bellowing of a bull and rightly described as “not conducive to sleep”. In Europe it appears in Spanish MSS. of the eleventh and twelfth centuries of our era, probably through Oriental introduction.⁽⁶⁾

It assumed however another form, already mentioned, called the BALAG-DI (the Akkadian *timbātu* or *timbpātu*), no doubt smaller, which probably was “the singer’s drum”: but as its general shape was similar to that of the BALAG, it

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18063-4 - The Music of the Sumerians: And their Immediate Successors the Babylonians and Assyrians

Francis W. Galpin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

DRUMS, TIMBRELS AND RATTLES

5

shared the same ideogram. An illustration on an Elamite seal (*c.* 1200 B.C.) shows it in the paws of a lion and accompanying the harp and double pipe in an animal orchestra.

This identification of the BALAG class of instruments with the drum is corroborated in an interesting way. The name *timbúttu* was given by the Akkadians to a species of cricket common in their country. Professor Landsberger, in *Die Fauna des alten Mesopotamiens* (1934), using the old idea that the drum was unworthy of the prominence given to the BALAG (which is, as we have shown, a mistake), translates the appellation *timbúttu egli* as “the Harp (?) of the Field”. But the sound-producing principle of the cricket is not connected with any stringed instrument; it is of the drum type—in fact, it is a friction drum of original and beautiful design. The taut membranes (known as *tympána*), which underlie the leathery fore-wings are, through the lateral motion of the wings, set in vibration by a file-like nerve rubbing against the hardened surface which adjoins them. This principle, though it has been developed in various ways, remains the same whether a rosined hair is attached to the membrane or a roughened stick used. In these forms it has existed for long ages in India and in Africa, and has worked its way into Europe; the little friction drum found in Spain is actually called *Chicharra* (field cricket). Whilst we would not infer from this that the more developed forms were known in Babylonia, it certainly suggests that the friction-stroke, assiduously practised by the old Indian drummers and employed in our own day by tambourine players, was also used on the BALAG-DI. The ball of the thumb, swept across the drum-head with a slight pressure, raises the pitch of the note and produces the characteristic “cri” (*rigmu*) of the insect.

We find that the BALAG-DI or *timbúttu* was not only employed in the liturgies for which explicit directions are given, but was also used at feasts. It is also observed in the hands of women, for the grand-daughter of King Naram-Sin, Lipushiau, was appointed player of the BALAG-DI in the Moon God’s Temple at Ur (*c.* 2380 B.C.). Probably the illustration, taken from a figurine found near Ur and now in the British Museum, represents this instrument (Pl. III, 7). The name BALAG-LUL, which is also connected with singing, seems to have been sometimes given to it.(7)

Another form of drum, which admits the use of the BALAG sign, is the DUB, and, bearing the determinative *erú*, it must have had “copper” in its construction; no doubt its shell was made of metal, an alternative use which we find also in the Indian *Damaru* (Pl. X, 8). The name seems to survive in the *Dudi* and *Budbudika* of India, with their metal bodies, and it may be compared with the Arab *Dabdab*, the Georgian *Dubdabi*, and the temple drum of Sanskrit days, the *Dundubhi*. Even the Hungarian drum-name *Dob* reflects the same idea, for it is

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18063-4 - The Music of the Sumerians: And their Immediate Successors the
Babylonians and Assyrians

Francis W. Galpin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 DRUMS, TIMBRELS AND RATTLES

evident that it is onomatopœic and derived from the sound of the instrument, which was probably small and with little resonance.

It is interesting to notice that, in the same way, the Old English pipe and tabor were popularly known as the whittle and dub. Moreover, the ancient Sumerian instrument was also used with the flute, for the word DUB or *eru-DUB* is associated with LUB or TI-GI-LUB which, as will be explained in the next chapter, denotes the vertical flute. Similarly, in the account of the musical instruments used in the Temple of Enki at Eridu, we find the BALAG and “the seven-note” flute coupled together; while a footnote at the end of a Babylonian liturgy informs us that it is “a litany for the BALAG and TI-GI”—drum and flute. At the present day the ritual dance of the Dervishes is accompanied by the vertical flute (*Nay*) and drum (*Baz*).⁽⁸⁾

We may here remark that, in harmony with the genius of the language, “BALAG” and “DUB” (without determinatives) are used to express also such abstract ideas as “lamentation” and “wailing”, incident to the association of the drum with these observances: in the same way the name of the cross-strung harp, ZAG-SAL, is employed (without a determinative) to express the idea of “praise”, in which it took its part.⁽⁹⁾

Very different from the BALAG and much larger was the A-LA, or, with its determinative, SU A-LA. The derivation of the name from LAL would imply that this big drum was “suspended” from a pole or post, or “hung” on an ornamental stand, like the Chinese drums. In the Carchemish relief (Pl. III, 1) it is seen supported by a man. It stood in the temple forecourt and was five or six feet in diameter: it was struck by two players either with the open hand or with a stick. In the poem, written about the year 2200 B.C. and already quoted, which deals with the temple music at Eridu, the fact is mentioned that at one time there was no SU A-LA, but one had now been “installed in its proper place”.

In the Temple of Ningirsu at Lagash the combination of the A-LA with the TI-GI (flute) sounded, we are told, like “the raging of the storm”; and it may be that the so-called BALAG, to which on its being “set up in the forecourt” of the Temple of Baba on a New Year’s Day was given the name of NIN-AN-DA-GAL-KI (Mistress of wide heaven and earth), was also a large drum, like that pictured on a fragment of Gudea’s stele or column. This instrument is also well illustrated on two other relics of the third millennium B.C., viz. on the stele of Ur-Nammu (Pl. III, 6), now in the University Museum at Philadelphia, and on part of a steatite vase preserved in the Louvre at Paris: in the latter example the instrument is surmounted by a figure of Ea or Enki, the God of Music. The skin head, probably varnished, like that of the Chinese drums, to resist the weather, was attached to the frame when wet by wooden pegs: it dried taut; the peg-heads are visible on the circumference, as on the LILIS or kettledrum

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18063-4 - The Music of the Sumerians: And their Immediate Successors the Babylonians and Assyrians

Francis W. Galpin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

DRUMS, TIMBRELS AND RATTLES

7

described later. Its sound is said to have filled with joy the forecourt of Eninnu, the Lagash Temple, and, when the *īšAG*, Gudea, performed the lustrations and divine petitions were offered, the *A-LA* with the horn (*šîm-DA*) and the sacred drum (*BALAG*) “made the music perfect”. No wonder that it could be said of the Enki Temple at Eridu that “to its lord by night it reverberates with thunderous sound”. We know that the *NAR A-LA*—the drummer—was considered an important person, for he is particularly mentioned. Another large drum appears to be alluded to on a Kassite cult tablet (c. 1500 B.C.) under the name *SU GU-GALU* (the great bull’s hide).

At present we have no indication that these large instruments were employed in processions, although, in an Egyptian wall-painting at Bubastis of the XXIInd Dynasty, a very similar drum is shown on the shoulder of an attendant walking before the player, and a large drum appears in Hittite sculpture (Pl. III, 1) borne by a man. As with the *BALAG*, the making and setting up of an *A-LA* gave a name-date to the year in which it occurred: on a list of offerings made to a temple in the IIIrd Ur Dynasty (c. 2200 B.C.) ten measures of meal are credited to the *A-LA* and only two measures to “the great well”.⁽¹⁰⁾

The last type of drum about which we have reliable information is the *LILIS* (*lilissu*). It evidently had two forms, large and small—the former stationary, the latter carried in processions (Pl. X, 11). From the illustration of the larger form, with the name placed over it, which a scribe has given to us on a late Babylonian tablet (Pl. III, 4), we should infer that one kind of *LILIS* was of the “goblet” shape, so generally found in Asiatic countries—or, to use Dr Yetts’ terms, they were “footed” drums as distinct from “hanging” or “pillared” drums. If so, this type of portable instrument would have resembled the Arab *Darabukke* (Pl. X, 13) or the Telugu *Ghutru* (Pl. X, 12), both of which are made of wood or clay in goblet shape with a skin head at the larger end. A Theban painting of the XVIIIth Egyptian Dynasty gives us a picture of its place in joyous processions, and it was used at entertainments with the timbrel or tambourine called *ME-ZE*. A clay figure of the XVIIIth Dynasty, found at Dêr el Bahri by the Egyptian Exploration Society, apparently shows a seated Asiatic with a turban on his head beating with his hand a little “footed” drum which is held under the left arm. This probable example of the portable *lilissu* is in the British Museum. Of the larger form, made in bronze, we have minute details given to us in the Babylonian tablets found at Erech, and in the line-drawing on a tablet of priestly instructions, illustrated on Plate III, 4. It was a true kettledrum, its goblet-shaped shell resting on a short foot and low base, very similar in many respects to the modern Persian *Donbek* (Pl. X, 15). At the end of Chapter v are transcribed the more important details of its construction and consecration as given on the tablets, and it will be sufficient here to say that it was beaten

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18063-4 - The Music of the Sumerians: And their Immediate Successors the Babylonians and Assyrians

Francis W. Galpin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

with two sticks and, together with the bull from which its skin-head had been taken, was accorded divine honours. The skin-head was attached to the metal body by pins of hard wood driven through the skin when wet, into holes already prepared in the shell; the large heads of these pins were wrapped round with coloured wools and varnished; they are prominently shown in the illustration of the A-LA (Pl. III, 6).

Many African lake-district drums preserve the same method of affixing the head with wooden pegs and continue the like goblet shape (Pl. X, 16): in fact, this particular type of instrument appears among races of very early times, for Professor Kosinna in *Die Deutsche Vorgeschichte* has illustrated a Stone Age drum of similar shape which he dates about 2500 B.C.: here, however, the skin-head was affixed by cords passed through ear-shaped projections with eyelet holes: it must have been used in worship, for it is decorated with sacred signs. The Chinese "footed" drums, *Lei*, *Ling* and *Lu*, are used respectively to accompany the sacrifices to the spirits, to the gods of the soil, and to the shades of the ancestors: they are also beaten to ward off calamities, and the archaic script presents a sign-picture of them very like the standing LILIS (Pl. X, 5).

In the ritual used at Erech for the observance of an eclipse the copper LILIS had to be used with the double pipe and the single pipe: they raised a lamentation of grief and weeping for the darkened moon. The appearance too of the shape of this footed drum in the *viscera* at divinations is said, in a tablet of the Seleucid era, to denote peace and unity, for "according to one mouth the land will dwell". A representation (Pl. III, 2) of this kettledrum occurs on a Babylonian plaque of c. 1100 B.C. in the British Museum(11).

(b) TIMBRELS

Leaving the drums we pass to their near relatives, the timbrels or tambourines, with shallow frames and usually with one head only. Amongst the Sumerians there were two types: The A-DA-PA (*adapu*) had a rectangular frame and perhaps skin-heads on both sides. A grain-measure of similar shape was called by the same name. The instrument was employed in the temples to accompany certain hymns and liturgies called after it. Dr Langdon in his paper on *Babylonian and Hebrew Musical Terms* gives the names of five psalms so to be sung, and mentions an entire liturgy, to the God Anu, described as an A-DĀP. On a tablet of the Ur-Isin Period (c. 2100 B.C.) is preserved a hymn to Enlil in honour of King Dungi with this subscription "a psalm of the High Priest, a song on the A-DĀP to Enlil".

It is evidently shown with the sistrum on the harp inlay of Ur (Pl. VIII, 2), where it is laid on the knees of a jackal-headed creature and tapped with the fingers as an accompaniment to the lyre. It is also just discernible on the lap of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18063-4 - The Music of the Sumerians: And their Immediate Successors the
Babylonians and Assyrians

Francis W. Galpin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PLATE III. DRUMS, TIMBRELS AND BELLS

- | | | |
|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. | Large Drum and Horn
Carchemish Relief; <i>c.</i> 1250 B.C. | British Museum (portion) |
| 2. | Kettle-Drum and Cymbals
Babylonian Plaque; <i>c.</i> 1100 B.C. | British Museum |
| 3. | Large Timbrel
Nippur Figurine; <i>c.</i> 2000 B.C. | University Museum, Philadelphia |
| 4. | Tablet showing Kettle-Drum
From Erech; <i>c.</i> 300 B.C. | Brussels Museum |
| 5. | Small Timbrel
Babylonian Figurine; <i>c.</i> 2000 B.C. | British Museum |
| 6. | Large Drum
Stele of Ur-Nammu; <i>c.</i> 2270 B.C. | University Museum, Philadelphia |
| 7. | Hour-glass-shaped Drum
Babylonian Figurine; <i>c.</i> 2000 B.C. | British Museum |
| 8. | Horse Bell
From Nineveh; <i>c.</i> 700 B.C. | British Museum |
| 9. | Incantation Bell
From Babylonia; <i>c.</i> 600 B.C. | Berlin Museum |

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-18063-4 - The Music of the Sumerians: And their Immediate Successors the
Babylonians and Assyrians
Francis W. Galpin
Excerpt
[More information](#)

PLATE III



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9