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RARE FRAGMENTS OF A ROUND TAMBOURINE
IN THE ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, OXFORD¹

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Several types of musical instrument from ancient Egypt have found their way into museums all over the world. Clappers, sistra, flutes, pipes, and stringed instruments are not at all uncommon, whereas remains of drums and tambourines are more rare. At least five barrel-shaped drums have been found,² as well as one rectangular tambourine³ and a few other drums.⁴ Considering the large number of representations of the round tambourine from the New Kingdom to the Late Period, the extant specimens are very few. In the Cairo Museum there are two membranes belonging to one⁵ tambourine,⁶ and in the Louvre there is a second tambourine.⁷ The only other parts of a round tambourine known to the present writer are the fragments of two membranes now in the Ashmolean Museum.⁸

The diameter of this instrument was about 40 cm, the total diameter of the skin being slightly greater. It is apparently parchment and preserves a strip of papyrus round the edge. The

¹ Professor J. R. Harris drew my attention to this tambourine, and kindly obtained the information I needed. For permission to publish it I am indebted to the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, and to the Keeper, Mr. R. W. Hamilton.

² H. Hickmann, *Instruments de musique*, nos. 69350, 69353, and 69354; C. Boreux, *Musée du Louvre*, II, p. 612; W. Hayes, *Scepter of Egypt*, II, p. 198.

³ H. Hickmann, *op. cit.*, no. 69355.

⁴ C. Sachs, *Musikinstrumente des alten Ägyptens*, pl. II (no. 71); J. Passalacqua, *Catalogue raisonné*, p. 157.

⁵ See below, p. 34.

⁶ H. Hickmann, *op. cit.*, no. 69351-2.

⁷ C. Boreux, *op. cit.*, p. 613.

⁸ No. 1890.543.

decoration consists of a floral border and four horizontal registers, painted in red, green, and black. As on the Cairo membranes, the lines of the decoration are visible on the back.

The central part of one of the membranes ("A": Pl. I) has completely disappeared. In the top register there remain, on the right, fragments of two figures seated on thrones, the one to the right carrying short-handled fans and crowned with the sun's disc. Kneeling behind him there is a similar figure. At the extreme right there is a falcon with outstretched wings, carrying a fan and with the sun's disc. Of the corresponding left part of the scene only the lower part of the falcon and the kneeling figure remains.

The second register is decorated with gods playing the round tambourine. To the right, there is a god wearing the crown of Osiris, two goddesses with horns and sun's discs (and distinguished by fillets including the cobra and the vulture), a goddess with a feather head-dress like that of Anukis, and a goddess carrying a bird on her head. Above the group there is a winged disc. To the left, the corresponding group includes Thoth with the lunar disc, a goddess with horns and sun's disc, and another goddess with a tall head-dress consisting of feathers or plants. In between the figures there are square stands decorated with plants, and apparently supporting round objects much similar to tambourines.

Of the third register only the extreme right part remains, showing dancing figures playing tambourines. They are evidently female, and dressed in short aprons and head-dresses like that of Anukis. A stand and a tambourine (?) are to be seen, as well as a rectangular object at the extreme right, perhaps indicating a column.

The fourth register has disappeared except for a small fragment to the right including a bird squeezed into the corner.

Of the second membrane ("B": Pl. II) only one fragment⁹ is left to give a clue to the content of the scene. A goddess wearing horns and sun's disc stretches her wings, carrying an *cnḥ*-sign, towards the back of another figure wearing the double-crown,

⁹ This fragment was originally incorporated with "A", but when examined it proved to be in reverse (i.e., with the lines of the decoration to the front). Correctly turned, it could no longer be fitted in. It is of course possible that the two plain fragments of outer circumference placed with "A" are in fact from "B". (J.R.H.).

with a sceptre between, these two persons no doubt being Isis and Osiris. Turning her back to Isis there is to be seen part of a small female figure who seems somehow out of context, not only because of her small size but also by not facing the centre of the scene. On one of the Cairo membranes¹⁰ there is also a small figure who seems to have an equally subordinate position in the representation, being squeezed into the space left over between Isis and the woman playing the tambourine in front of her. On the second tambourine this small female figure is replaced by a dwarf. The question arises: what do the scenes on these instruments represent, and what occasion was it that was celebrated by the rhythmic beating of the tambourines?

To solve this problem it is worth while examining briefly the contexts in which the tambourines occur when represented on the monuments.

The round tambourines are found in ancient Egypt from the reign of Amenophis III until the time of the Roman emperors,¹¹ being particular popular in the Amarna period as an instrument of lay people¹² and in the Late Period as a religious instrument.¹³ Frequently the round tambourine occurs in the mammisi, the place of birth of the child-god. A close study of the Ashmolean and the Cairo membranes reveals that several parts of the decoration can be associated with the idea of birth.

The Cairo instrument is entirely devoted to Isis, mistress of heaven, mistress of the gods. She also occurs in the top register

¹⁰ H. Hickmann, *op. cit.*, pl. LXXX B.

¹¹ This tambourine continued into the Arab period and is still to be found in Egypt (called *tār*).

¹² *Ägyptische Kunst aus der Zeit des Königs Echnaton* (Exhibition catalogue, Hamburg 1965), nos. 61 and 65; *ASAE* XXXIX (1939), pl. CXXXVIII; H. Roeder, *Amarna-Reliefs aus Hermopolis*, pl. 178; N. de G. Davies, *El Amarna*, I, pl. XIII; II, pl. XVIII; III, pl. XV; VI, pls. XVIII and XX; cf. also Theban tomb no. 23 from the reign of Merneptah (Porter and Moss, *Topographical Bibliography*, I², i, p. 38) and Cairo Museum, Journal d'entrée 4872 (XIXth dynasty).

¹³ E. Naville, *Festival Hall*, pls. XI, XIV, and XVI; *ASAE* LV (1958), pl. II, 1; H. Hickmann, *45 siècles de musique*, pl. XXII a; E. Chassinat, *Dendara*, II, pl. CXV; IV, pl. CCCCLII; F. Daumas, *Mammisi de Dendara*, pls. LIX, XCII, XCII bis, and XCIII; E. Chassinat, *Edfou* X, pl. CXLII; XIII, pl. DIX; *Mammisi d'Edfou*, pl. LXXIV; K. Mikhalowsky, *Ägypten*, pl. 131; W. M. F. Petrie, *Athribis*, pl. XXVIII; R. Lepsius, *Denkmäler*, IV, 26 and 64 c; Porter and Moss, *op. cit.*, VII, p. 291 ((1) and (9)).

of one of the Ashmolean membranes ("B"), giving life to her husband Osiris. As mother of Horus she was inevitably connected with birth. In the minds of the people Bes was equally important as protector of a woman giving birth. The dancing figures in the third register of membrane "A" may very well be girls impersonating Bes, just as the dwarf-like figure on the Cairo membrane is either Bes or someone evoking the idea of him. The presence of Thoth on membrane "A" can be explained by the fact that he helped in restoring the breath of Osiris. By assimilation with Isis and Hathor, the presence of other goddesses can easily be explained, all of the figures thus evoking the idea of creating life and giving birth. The small female figure occurring on the Cairo membrane and on membrane "B" can be no other than the necessary instrument in the process, namely the midwife.

The date of the Ashmolean tambourine is not quite easy to establish. The style of the decoration would fit the later part of the New Kingdom as well as a later date. The Cairo membranes are fairly well dated to the Ptolemaic period, having been found in a Ptolemaic cemetery at Akhmim.¹⁴ The Ashmolean membranes are said to have come from Thebes. As they had clearly a religious function and were connected with the gods a late date would seem more probable. There is, however, in the Cairo Museum an unfinished XIXth dynasty relief from Medamud,¹⁵ the decoration of which shows certain similarities to that of the Ashmolean tambourine. Two seated goddesses are represented on each side of a naos, each with two women in front of them playing the round tambourine. In between the figures there are stands and papyrus-flowers. The musicians are wearing head-dresses not unlike that of Anukis or Bes. The text identifies these women as songstresses of Amūn, and the goddesses as Hathor and Mut. The setting seems to be similar to that of the Cairo and Ashmolean membranes,

¹⁴ L. Borchardt, in *Mélanges Maspero* I, 1, p. 1.

¹⁵ Journal d'entrée no. 32016, published only in a small drawing omitting the inscriptions, in H. Hickmann, *Musicologie pharaonique*, fig. 10 p. 25. The inscriptions were copied for me by Ramadān Saad. — The only other evidence for the use of the round tambourine as a religious instrument in the late New Kingdom is on the occasion of the procession of the sacred bark in the temple of Sethos I at Abydos (A. Caulfield, *Temple of the Kings*, pl. V) and in a similar scene in the waystation of Ramesses III at Karnak (*Ramesses III's Temple*, pls. 86 and 88).

goddesses seated on thrones and flowers playing a prominent part in the decoration. The relief is a proof that the round tambourine had a religious significance in the New Kingdom, and thus there is nothing against a contemporaneous date for the Ashmolean tambourine.

Most of the tambourines represented on the monuments seem to have been of similar size, approximately that of a human head. The Ashmolean tambourine is unusually large, the only other instruments to compare with it being those represented in the festival hall of Osorkon II at Bubastis.¹⁶ The Cairo tambourine is of average size,¹⁷ whereas the Louvre instrument is rather small.¹⁸ Big tambourines were known in Mesopotamia long before their introduction into Egypt. Thus the diameter of the instruments gives at present no clue as to their date.

It may be of interest to consider the question of whether all Egyptian tambourines were provided with two membranes like the Louvre tambourine, or whether tambourines with one membrane existed as well—the Cairo and Ashmolean membranes now separated from their frames having perhaps belonged to a pair of tambourines and not to a single instrument.

The tambourines represented on the monuments provide no answer to this question, but a close study of the extant specimens shows that all of these were of one and the same type in spite of their difference in size. A full description of the Louvre tambourine has never been published.¹⁹ It consists of a wooden frame, 3 mm thick, with an outer diameter of 15.5 cm and an inner diameter of 15 cm, its height being 4.7 cm, and the two ends of the bent piece of wood overlapping for some cm. Of the leather membranes not much is left. They were fixed to the frame by means of zig-zag lacing with a leather string. The lacing and the edges were ultimately covered with a leather strap, decorated with four horizontal strips of yellow leather, the two in the middle

¹⁶ E. Naville, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Diameter 25 cm, height of frame estimated at 7.5 cm.

¹⁸ C. Sachs, *op. cit.*, p. 43 considers it unusually small (16.5 cm (sic)); cf., however, the small tambourine represented in the temple of Sanam: *LAAA IX*, pl. 29).

¹⁹ The following information was kindly obtained for me by Ramadān Saad at the Antiquities Department of the Louvre.

being inserted in holes through the main piece, which was glued to the frame.

The Cairo membranes have at the edges small oblong holes, indicating that they were likewise fastened by means of lacing. The Ashmolean membranes show the same kind of oblong holes at regular intervals along the edge. This indicates that these membranes belonged to the same type of tambourine.

The Ashmolean membranes provide a further clue to the method of fastening the membranes. A strip of papyrus is left round the edge. The Louvre instrument had a strip of leather over the lacing. It seems probable that both served the purpose of strengthening the membranes, the papyrus strip contracting as it dried, and the leather strip acting similarly, thus improving adhesion around the edge and the holes through which the laces passed.

None of the tambourines represented shows any kind of lacing. Most of them are drawn as a circle with no decoration at all,²⁰ or with a small square in the centre,²¹ or, in one case, with a decoration dividing the membrane into quarters.²² Sometimes the tambourines are decorated with a line round the edge in a contrasting colour.²³ Only in one case does a tambourine show some detailed decoration, namely that played by one of the two Bes figures represented on a painting of a naos in the Ramessid tomb no. 217 at Thebes.²⁴ The tambourine in question (to the left) is white with a decoration in red consisting of two circles along the edge, with several transverse lines between these circles and the outline of the instrument. In view of the habit of Egyptian art of representing not only what was seen by the eye but also what was known to be there, it seems not unlikely that this was a way of representing the lacing (which would not in this case be zig-zag).

²⁰ Any painted decoration may have disappeared.

²¹ The tambourines represented on the Cairo membranes are green with a red border and yellow square; cf. also a representation from the chapel of Osorkon at Karnak (*ASAE* LV (1958), pl. II,1). Some of the tambourines on the Ashmolean membranes have a dot in the centre.

²² Theban tomb no. 19 (Ramessid): *MIFAO* LVII, pl. XXXII.

²³ In a representation in Theban tomb no. 23 from the reign of Merneptah (unpublished; cf. Porter and Moss, *op. cit.*, I², i, p. 38) the tambourines are red with blue outlines.

²⁴ N. de G. Davies, *Two Ramesside Tombs*, pl. XXXVII.



Plate I.



B



Plate II.