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THE EROTIC OBOE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

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Herodotus, the Greek historian who lived and wrote in the 5th century B.C., has become a household name in the history of the ancient world—particularly, through Book II of his *History*, in the history of Ancient Egypt. Herodotus travelled in Egypt at a time when pharaonic civilization was no longer in its pure, original state. Foreigners—including Herodotus himself—had infiltrated the country and brought their own customs with them, and many more were to come. During this period of transition Herodotus was a keen observer, airing his opinion on almost any imaginable subject. Of particular interest are his comments on the intimate life of the native Egyptians, partly based on what he was told by his informants, partly on what he himself had witnessed. Herodotus heard about one of the great annual festivals, that of the cat goddess Bastet, which was celebrated in her home town of Bubastis in the Delta. He described in some detail what he was told about the event, which took place on the 13th day of the 2nd month of the inundation season.

> When people are on their way to Bubastis they go by river, men and women together, a great number of each in every boat. Some of the women make a noise with *krotala*[1], others play *auloi* all the way, while the rest of the women, and the men, sing and clap their hands. As they journey down the river to Bubastis, whenever they come near any other town they bring their boat near the bank; then some of the women do as I have said, while some shout mockery of the women of the town, others dance, and others stand up and expose their sex. This they do whenever they come beside any river side town. But when they have reached Bubastis they make a festival with great sacrifices, and more wine is drunk at this feast than in the whole year beside. [Godley 1946:II.60]

Thus in order to voice their feelings and to emphasize the erotic atmosphere of the festival of the feline goddess the women clicked their krotala and blew their oboes, the auloi. The oboe being one of the themes for this conference, I have chosen to follow up this observation by Herodotus and to demonstrate the part played by this instrument in an erotic context in ancient Egypt. It is interesting that although Herodotus equates the goddess Bastet with the Greek Artemis, other writers name the Egyptian goddess Aphrodite. In Egyptian mythology Bastet and her cult have numerous traits in common with the goddess Hathor, one of whose areas of interest was love.

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[1] Unlike the Greek *krotala* which were made entirely of wood, instruments found in Egypt consist of small cymbals attached to wooden handles. See Hickmann 1950.

Herodotus would have been in an excellent position to appreciate the sound of the oboe, for in Greece the auloi were an established part of musical life, being played at functions as diverse as funeral processions; sporting events; at home, in the theatre and in the temple; in the army and in the field. A favorite topic of the vase painters was silenoi (woodland spirits with equine ears and tails) engaged in erotic pursuits to the sound of music, and in particular to the shrill notes of the double oboe (cf. e.g. Wegner 1963:passim).

In Egypt, as I believe in many societies, music and erotic activities belonged together. The Egyptians appear to have been very discreet in the way in which they depicted erotic matters in an official context. Indeed, it is only during the past decade or so that the erotic language of the ancient Egyptians has been decoded (cf. Derchain 1975a, 1975b, 1976; Desroches-Noblecourt 1954; Westendorf 1967; Manniche 1978). Previously one found only the occasional explicitly erotic drawing or a reference in a text, as for example in love poems or mythological tales. Needless to say, however, sexual life was as important in Egypt as elsewhere. Moreover, the Egyptians felt very strongly about the idea of rebirth and living forever in some way or other. In order to achieve rebirth, an act of creation had to take place once more, and that meant a physical, sexual force being present to provoke the stage of rebirth in the cycle of birth-life-death-rebirth.

On the walls of their tombs the Egyptians sought to create the appropriate surroundings for this event. Being firm believers in the magic of pictorial representation, i.e. that representing an object or an act brought it into being, they devised a coded pictorial language expressing this sexual concept. Although understood by those who had been taught, on the surface it was clad in the guise of scenes of daily life, e.g. banquet scenes.[2] To all intents and purposes they depict an ideal occasion at the home of a high official. But examining the details reveals one common denominator. The lotus flowers the guests hold in their hands or wear as necklaces or stuck in their wigs; the lumps of sweet scented unguent on their heads; the mandrake fruits the ladies play with; the very elaborate wigs and the semi-transparent garments; the pouring of wine and beer—all these details in one way or another express the idea of rebirth and sexual activity (as explained in the sources listed in the previous paragraph).

Whenever there is a banquet, there is music. The musicians are placed in immediate proximity to the main characters, the tomb owner and his wife, and to the food offerings which are being presented to them. Music played an essential part in transmitting the offerings. Perhaps the Egyptians saw a tangible object (the item of food/the musical instrument) turning into something intangible, spiritual (the nourishment of the deceased in the Hereafter/the sound of the music). Thus a picture of the instrument, and the musician playing it, may very well have symbolized the

[2]For Egyptian funerary beliefs and the way these were expressed in the decoration of their tombs, and for the symbolic significance of certain scenes, see Manniche 1987, especially pp. 6-11 and 30ff.

transformed state and qualities of the offering, the essential and perpetual nourishment of deceased human beings as well as of gods.

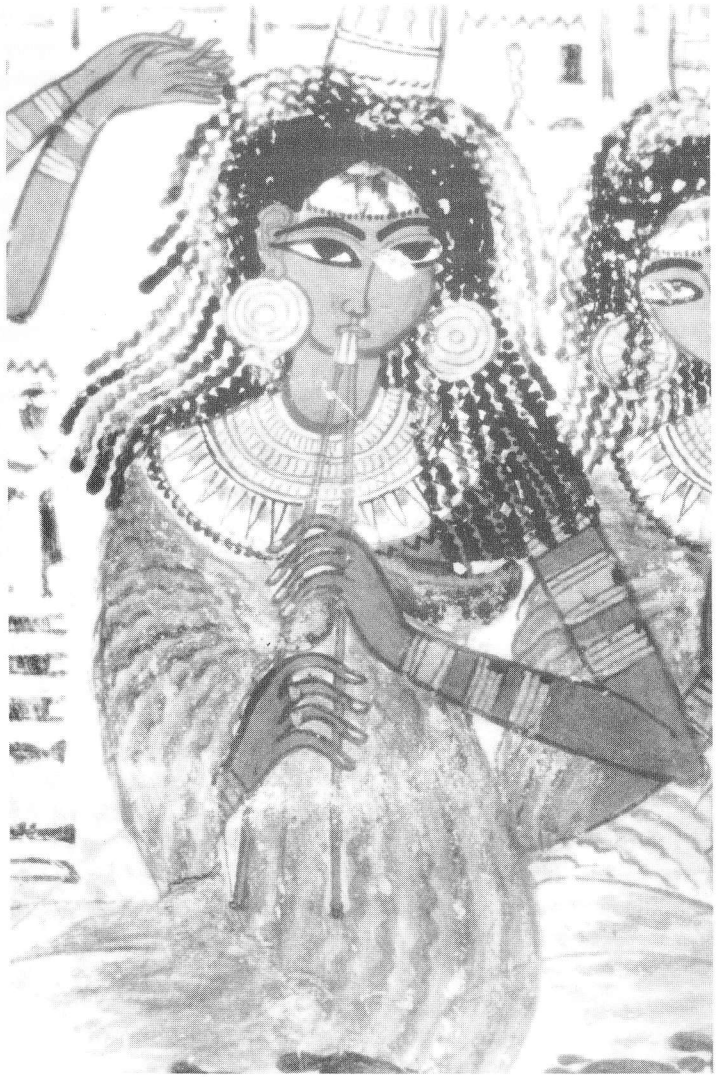
Some music, exemplified by the instrument that produced it, was so significant that in some instances the instrument and the representation of it were even more important than the sound emerging from it. The sistrum is a case in point, being of limited melodic but great symbolic value, the symbolism being very largely erotic. The sistrum was the emblem of Hathor, goddess of love and music among other things at a rather sophisticated level. To express love in more earthly terms it would seem that we have to look elsewhere. A tomb owner's wife may play the harp to her husband while seated on the conjugal bed. A lyre is waved about by a lady in a quite explicitly erotic scene. Or a lute is held by another lady during even more acrobatic activities. But perhaps more than any other instrument the oboe expressed feelings of lust and desire.

We heard earlier how the women in Herodotus' days used the oboe in an erotic, aggressive fashion. In pharaonic times the sound of the oboe could be a menace to an impressionable schoolboy. In a text instructing young men or boys in the art of being a scribe and the benefits these qualifications would bring, the author describes the disgraceful life of those who are not dedicated to their careers and spend their time in bad company. "Wine is an abomination. Take an other never to touch it" (Papyrus Anastasi IV 12.2, transl. in Erman 1924:191). The text goes on to describe how a debauched person sits in a house surrounded by girls, drenched in fragrant oils, with floral garlands around his neck, drumming on his paunch or reeling in drunken stupor. Moreover, he is "taught to sing to the oboe and recite to the lyre" (ibid.). We have already met the lyre in a setting that fits this description. Now the oboe has joined in. (For the oboe in ancient Egypt, cf. Hickmann 1951, 1957, 1961:114-6; Manniche 1975.)

The sound of the Egyptian oboe was produced by the vibrations of a double reed inserted in or fixed over the upper end of a tube of reed. Surviving reeds are 5-8 cm long, flattened near the tip for about 5 mm, and are held together by a piece of string (cf. Manniche 1975:24). The tubes vary in length from 17-50 cm, the inner diameter of the cylindrical tube being 5-10 mm. There are finger holes of equal size along the front and sometimes thumb holes on the back. The holes were pierced by the only safe way of doing so without cracking the tube, namely by burning.

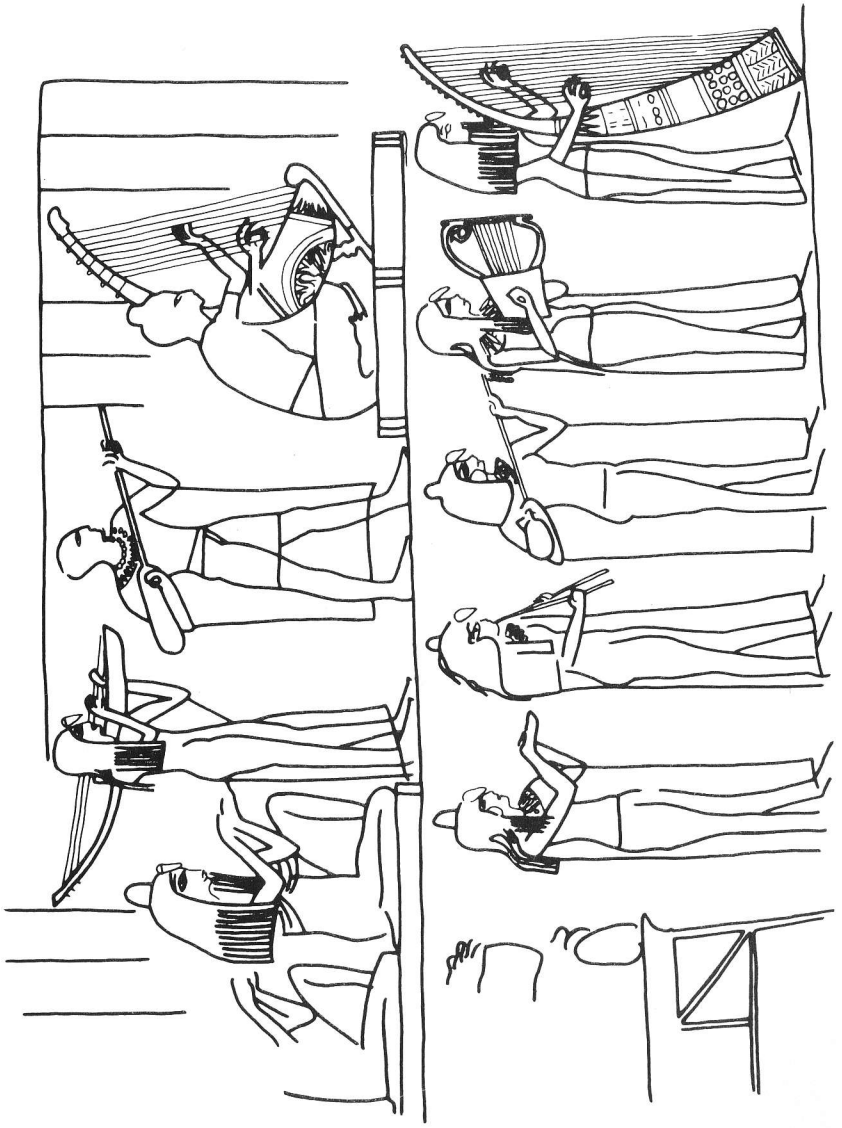
Oboes were played in pairs. Most representations show the tubes being held at an angle to each other (Fig. 1), though sometimes they are almost parallel, being held together with one hand at the upper end while the other hand does all the fingering. It would seem that one tube formed a drone while the other played the melody. On some of the extant instruments (e.g. Cairo Museum no. 69836c, in Hickmann 1949) one or more fingerholes are blocked with a resinous paste, which explains how instruments with more than four holes at the front and more than one at the back could have been played. The resulting scales on extant instruments all appear to be different.

Fig. 1. Oboe player at the funerary banquet of Nebamun, scribe of the accounts of grain (ca. 1400 B.C.). Fragment of wall-painting from a tomb at Thebes, now in the British Museum.



reversed

Fig. 2. Musicians in Theban tomb no. 161 of Nakht, bearer of floral offerings (ca. 1400 B.C.). Upper register: girls singing and clapping; portable boat-shaped harp; lute; ladle-shaped harp; lower register: clapper; double oboe; lute; lyre; large boat-shaped harp. From a drawing in Hay MSS 29822,100 in the British Library.



The oboe first appears in Egypt at the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty, around 1580 B.C. The long name of the instrument as recorded in the Egyptian texts,  , *w;ḏnj*, suggests a foreign origin. Oboes have been found in the city of Ur in Mesopotamia, dating from about 2000 B.C., and this is very likely where the origin of the instrument should be sought.

Soon after its introduction into the musical life of the Egyptians it became a favorite instrument in the small ensembles entertaining at the banquets of the Eighteenth Dynasty (Fig. 2). A frequent combination of instruments was a trio consisting of the oboe, a long-necked lute and a boat-shaped harp so large that in spite of the fact that the lutenist and oboe player are often shown moving their feet as if dancing, the musicians must have remained in one place during their performance. They were sometimes joined by other participants playing a smaller portable harp, a ladle-shaped harp, a lyre, and by girls clapping their hands and singing. In the Nineteenth Dynasty the subject matter of tomb decoration changes, the concept of the

Fig. 3. Nebmehyt, priestess of Hathor, playing the oboe during an offering ceremony (Theban tomb no. 219, ca. 1250 B.C.).

banquet scenes and their symbolism alter, and few musical ensembles appear on the tomb walls. However, the oboe continues to appear on its own, particularly in connection with offerings (Fig. 3).

When the Egyptian draftsmen amused themselves by drawing animals behaving like human beings, the oboe was placed in the paws of a fox or—significantly for our purposes—in the hands of a monkey or baboon (Fig. 4). Monkeys tend to appear in erotic situations, either in those with a hidden symbolic meaning or more obviously, replacing women. So we should perhaps not be surprised to find numerous little figurines of monkeys or baboons playing the double oboe.

The oboe is also seen in the hands of Bes (Fig. 5), the dwarf god, who had a special affinity with the world of women and in particular with their intimate life. The figure of Bes decorated beds; Bes amulets hung around the necks of servant girls; and Bes protected women in labor. At Sakkara near Cairo a series of rooms were excavated at the beginning of the century with large figures of Bes along the walls.

Fig. 4. Monkey with oboe. Ostrakon in Medelhavsmuseet, Stockholm, no. 14050 (ca. 1300 B.C.).

The purpose of these Bes chambers has not yet been established beyond doubt, but it is tempting to imagine that some sort of sexual activity took place there. The figure of Bes was tattooed on the bodies of certain ladies, and not just anywhere, but on the upper thigh of a lyre player or oboe player.

The picture of a particular lady (Fig. 6) was painted on the wall of a house in the village of Deir el-Medina which was inhabited by the workmen who cut and decorated the splendid tombs in the Valley of the Kings on the other side of the mountain on the west bank of the river of ancient Thebes (modern Luxor). The lady is surrounded by a plant which is often if not always present in intimate scenes: in the "Wochenlaube" where women sat to give birth; on a chariot in a scene from a brothel; at the funeral of a royal princess who had apparently died in childbirth; decorating ladies' coffins and carried by ladies of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties undoubtedly as a symbol of rebirth.

The Deir el-Medina lady wears a red garment, or part of a garment, which

Fig. 5. Bes with double oboe. Decoration on a vase found at Deir el-Medina (ca. 1300 B.C.).

reminds us that young men in Greece preferred their concubines to have "curly hair, short nails and a red dress" (Paulus Silentiarius, quoted in Licht 1971:357). The Egyptians usually dressed in plain white, the reason being very probably that linen does not accept dye easily and not without a mordant. The red color of this garment must therefore be significant in some way. The girl has a Bes tattoo on either thigh and plays the double oboe while she dances around or almost floats through space. In view of the fact that her private parts are exposed and that the picture was painted above the brick bench of the house which served as a bed, the erotic significance of the scene seems beyond doubt.

Making a connection once more to the world of the Greeks, there too the oboe occurs in explicitly erotic contexts. For instance, the men participating in a theatrical

Fig. 6. The Deir el-Medina lady with a Bes tattoo on either thigh (ca. 1300 B.C.). (Color reproduction in *Revue d'Egyptologie* 1938:Pl. 3.)

performance wear fur kilts with affixed male parts while another plays the oboe; the silenoi prepare for a feast while harvesting grapes, playing the oboe and obviously being in a state of anticipation of what is to follow; or, in a more direct confrontation, an oboe player arouses the characteristic feature of a Hermes pillar (Wegner 1963:Figs. 35, 75, 14).

The lady from Deir el-Medina, the warnings to the schoolboys, and the people on the boating excursion to celebrate the festival of Bastet all suggest that the sound of the oboe had an erotic effect on those who lived on the banks of the river Nile. This throws some light on an aspect of the interesting and varied musical life of the ancient Egyptians.

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