INCONGRUOUS MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS ON AN ALLEGED ASSYRIAN BEAKER

Bo Lawergren

The previous article in this issue[1] used art-historical methods to cast doubt on the authenticity of a recently published beaker belonging to the Miho Museum, Japan.[2] A large area of its surface is covered with figurative scenes, including a band of musicians. Their instruments possess crucial details at odds with ancient representations, and the disparity adds further doubts about the authenticity of the beaker. Two features—the presence of tassels on the lyres and the depiction of the wrong posture of the harp players—present the clearest evidence, but several minor points will also be noted.

The musicians appear in the second register in procession behind two chariots. Most of the nineteen musicians march in a single file, each visible with little overlap—apart from a pair of horizontal harpists (numbers 8 and 9 in Fig. 1A, and Muscarella, Figs. 2–4) who walk abreast. For the shape of the instruments, I refer to the photos in the previous article; however, three crucial instruments (numbers 3, 13, and 14) have been drawn in Figure 1A from these photos.

Figure 1 also shows several authentic—that is, excavated—Assyrian musical scenes. The instruments in them resemble those on the Miho beaker, but close examination reveals crucial differences. The first scene (Fig. 1B) comes from the relief of Ashurbanipal's victory banquet. Only some of the instruments originally present have survived, but many more are known from Boutcher's drawings recorded at the excavation. All harpists face right here, and, most important, all harps are held in place between the players' left arm and body.[3] Indeed, nearly all Assyrian vertical (Figs. 1B and 1C) and horizontal harps (Fig. 1D) are depicted in that position, a custom widespread across the Near East and Egypt between at least 2500 to 500 B.C.E.

However, the ensemble marching out of the Elamite city of Madaktu (Fig. 1C) presents a minor complication. We see nine harpists facing left. Numbers 1, 4–6, 8, 9, and 11 play vertical harps and numbers 3 and 10 (obscured) horizontal ones. All but number 1's are held between the player's left arm and body. If realistically rendered, the faces of the vertical harp players should have been drawn on the far side of the harp boxes. To avoid obscuring faces, the artists rendered them in the anatomically impossible position on the near side of the harp boxes. But apart from the unrealistic face position, other parts are portrayed consistently—that is, all vertical boxes and tassels cover the near side of the players' bodies, and left arms are still closer to the viewer. Even harpist number 1 has tassels on his left side, although the top of the harp appears on his right side. This single inconsistency in a highly complex execution may have been caused by the conjunction of many lines marking the arm, the chest, the harp body, and strings.

Only one lyre is shown in Figure 1E, but a recent review by the author included more than one hundred Near Eastern, Egyptian, and Aegean lyres (thin, thick, and round-bottomed types) dated 2500–100 B.C.E.[4] None had tassels hanging from the yoke of the instrument.

Let us now examine the Miho beaker.

(1) Lyre: presence of tassels. The lyre on the Miho beaker (Fig. 1A, number 3; Muscarella, Fig. 2) has tassels hanging from the yoke, a circumstance that provides a devastating argument against its authenticity. More than fifty lyres are known on authentic Near Eastern art, and many hundreds from the Aegean (if we include black- and red-figured vases). Since none is ever shown with tassels, we may safely conclude that no genuine monument shows instruments with tassels.

One may wonder why the artisan drew tassels on the Miho lyre. Surely, he got it mixed up with the ancient horizontal harp (Figs. 1C, number 3, and 1D, numbers 3 and 4), which had strings tied to a vertical rod and many tassels hanging loosely underneath. The vertical yoke of the ancient lyre bears some resemblance to the horizontal harp rod, but the lyre always lacked tassels. This circumstance suggests that lyres, small and easily movable, were played in a variety of postures[5] where tassels might interfere with the strings. Harps, on the other hand, were larger and probably held in a steady posture, where the tassels avoided the strings.

(2) Lyre: peg on lower arm. Another part of the Miho lyre also seems wrong—that is, the prominent peg that projects perpendicularly downward from the lyre's lower arm (situated just above the player's right hand). It is drawn as an integral, seamless part of the arm. A vaguely similar detail is present on the genuine Assyrian lyre[6] in Figure 1E (placed near the thumb of the player's right hand), but here it is not fused to the lower arm. Rather, the genuine Assyrian lyre arm consists of two crescent-shaped pieces joined at a right angle. This composite arm is, in turn, fastened to the yoke and box. This particular detail is shown more clearly in Figure 1E, where the lyre is drawn free-standing and magnified. For visual clarification, the yoke is colored black and the arms gray. Most likely, the peg of the Miho lyre is based on this Assyrian detail, but the Miho peg is too big and lacks structural logic.

(3) Vertical harp: wrong playing position. The harps on the beaker provide an argument nearly as potent. Four vertical harps are shown (Fig. 1A, numbers 7, 13, 14, and 19), and the first three are held under the players' right arm. This position is contrary to the custom of genuine Assyrian harpists.

The upper ends of the strings were attached to a resonator box, which was a wooden trough with an opening covered by a thin leather membrane nailed to the sides. Two Madaktu harps have tiny circles on the sides (Fig. 1C, numbers 1 and 5), which represent the heads of these nails. Poorly drawn circles are shown on Miho harp number 14, but the diameters seem unnecessarily large—surely misunderstood as circles, not nails. In the same place, number 13 has slits, probably another indication of the confused nails.

(4) Pairs of horizontal harps: too exact copies? Two horizontal harp players march side by side on the Miho beaker (Fig. 1A, numbers 8 and 9; Muscarella, Fig. 3). Identical instruments, postures, and dress appear on a scene in Sennacherib's palace (Fig. 1D). The similarities are extraordinary. In both scenes, the most distant harp is hidden

A (Miho beaker)
Tassles
1. Double pipes
2. Lyre
3. Lyre
4. Lute
5. Double pipes
6. Drum
7. Vertical harp
8. Horizontal harp
9. Horizontal harp
10. Double pipes
11. Lute
12. Drum
13. Vertical harp
14. Vertical harp
15. Lyre
16. Double pipes
17. Lyre
18. Drum
19. Vertical harp
B
1. Vertical harp
2. Double pipes
3. Lute
4. Vertical harp
5. Vertical harp
6. Drum
7. Vertical harp
10. Double pipes
11. Vertical harp
12. Double pipes
13. Vertical harp
14. Lyre
15. Double pipes?
16. Double pipes?
C
1. Vertical harp
2. Double pipes
3. Horizontal harp
4. Vertical harp
5. Vertical harp
6. Vertical harp
7. Double pipes
8. Vertical harp
9. Vertical harp
10. Horizontal harp
11. Vertical harp
D
1. Horizontal harp
2. Horizontal harp
3. Horizontal harp
4. Horizontal harp
E
x 2
1. Thin lyre

by the near companion at identical spots, and corresponding players wear similar headdresses. But the Miho hat ends in a fishtail, "a very rare design."[7] Its appearance heaps further suspicions on the beaker.

Apparently, the producer of the scene intended to copy the instruments in Figure 1D, but a small and crucial difference crept in. The shoulder of player number 2 in Figure 1D supports a broad band that descends to the bottom of the harp, holding it aloft. The beaker scene also has a band, but it does not reach the bottom of the harp, which, thus, hangs in thin air.

(5) Vertical harp: no sound holes. Some of the ancient harps in the banquet scene (Fig. 1B) have elaborate sound holes[8] carved into the sides of the resonator boxes.[9] Some Elamite harps in Figure 1C (numbers 1 and 4) also have such holes, and those without holes seem generally less carefully drawn. But sound holes are entirely lacking on the Miho harps.

Summary

Given the very unusual musical imagery discussed in the two first points, the Miho beaker seems unlikely to be authentic. Points 3 and 4 add further doubts.

Judgments based on the general sloppiness in the execution are more impressionistic. Authentic Assyrian art (for example, palace wall reliefs) is usually precise, with consistently rendered details. As an example, consider harp strings. Extant angular harps from the first millennium B.C.E. have survived in Egypt, and they numbered twenty to thirty strings per instrument. Assyrian palace relief representations are the sole ancient-art examples that show such large string numbers accurately. Other ancient monuments give only a small fraction of strings.[10]

By comparison, the Miho beaker exhibits sloppy draftsmanship. One example is the rendering of the lyre and its player (Fig. 1A,

Fig. 1 (A) Musical scene from the Miho beaker: musicians marching behind each other, except the two bracketed harpists, who walk side by side. (Line drawings: author.) (B) Wall relief from Ashurbanipal's North Palace at Nineveh showing instruments present at the king's victory banquet (c. 645 B.C.), BM 124 920. (Based on P. Albenda, "Landscape Bas-Reliefs in the Bit-Hilani of Ashurbanipal," *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research* 224 [1976]:49–72, esp. pl. 1; R. D. Barnett, *Sculptures of the North Palace of Assurbanipal at Nineveh (668–627 B.C.)* [London: 1976], pl. 63.) Many of the players are only known from Boutcher's on-site drawings. Only number 7 is extant. (C) Wall relief in Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh showing the battle of the river Ulai (660–650 B.C.), where Ashurbanipal defeated the Elamites (BM 124 802). Elamite musicians leave the Elamite city of Madaktu. The complete scene is extant. (R. D. Barnett, E. Bleibtreu, and G. Turner, *Sculptures from the Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh* [London: 1998], esp. pls. 313 and 318.) (D) Fragment of a wall relief from Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh (704–681 B.C.), BM 124 948. (Barnett *et al.*, pls. 494–495.) (E) Detail of lyre number 14 in part A. (See also B. Lawergren, "Distinctions among Canaanite, Philistine, and Israelite Lyres, and Their Global Lyrical Contexts," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 309 [1998]:fig. 1, hh.) The lyre itself, drawn at the right, shows the arm structure in detail.

number 3): the top edge of the instrument covers the player's left side, while the bottom proceeds to the right side. Another is the lackluster drawing of the harp tassels.

On the wall reliefs, vertical harps are about 17 to 18 cm. high,[10] but on the beaker only 15 to 17 mm. The poor drawing is probably not due to the small size of the Miho beaker since the beaker maker is also capable of considerable precision—that is, the peg on the lower arm of lyre number 3 is detailed but, alas, wrong.[12]

NOTES

1. Oscar White Muscarella, "Excavated in the Bazaar: Ashurbanipal's Beaker," *SOURCE: Notes in the History of Art* 20, no. 1 (Fall 2000):29–37.

2. E. Bleibtreu, "Ein Vergoldeter Silberbecher des Zeit Assurbanipals in Miho Museum: Historische Darstellung des 7. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.," *Archiv für Orientforschung,* Beiheft 28 (1999); *id.,* "Ein vergoldeter Silberbecher Assurbanipals (669–627)," in *Schätze des Orients: Meisterwerke aus dem Miho Museum,* ed. W. Seipel (Milan and Vienna: 1999), pp. 21–30; E. Bleibtreu and H. D. Schneider, *Ritueel en schoonheid: antike meesterwerken uit het Miho Museum* (Japan and Leiden: 1999).

3. For definitions of the harps, see B. Lawergren, "Harfe," *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 4 (1996):39–62.

4. *Id.,* "Distinctions among Canaanite, Philistine, and Israelite Lyres, and Their Global Lyrical Contexts," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 309 (1998):41–68.

5. Cf. the energetic movements of a modern pop guitarist.

6. More clearly on a Cypriote metal bowl; Lawergren, "Distinctions," fig. 1, x.

7. Hats shaped like a fishtail are worn by three men in another relief scene (R. D. Barnett, *Sculptures of the North Palace of Assurbanipal at Nineveh (668–627 B.C.)* (London: 1976), esp. pl. 62e), but none carries an instrument. A trapezoidal hat, vaguely similar to the fishtail shape, is worn by a man at Nimrud, and the inscription calls him a *kalu*-priest; M. E. L. Mallowan, *Nimrud and Its Remains* (London: 1966), esp. fig. 251, pp. 269–270. Dr. P. Albenda kindly supplied these references.

8. The function of these holes is discussed in B. Lawergren and O. R. Gurney, "Sound Holes and Geometrical Figures: Clues to the Terminology of Ancient Mesopotamian Harps," *Iraq* 49 (1987):37–52, esp. 37–40.

9. Only the well-preserved harps show the holes (numbers 7 and 13). The others (numbers 1, 5, and 11), which are severely eroded, probably originally had them, too.

10. For a comparison of extant and represented string counts, see B. Lawergren, "Counting Strings on Ancient Egyptian Chordophones," in *La pluridisciplinarité en archéologie musicale*, ed. C. Homo-Lechner and A. Bélis (Paris: 1994), pp. 519–533.

11. From the top to the horizontal rod. It is 25.6 cm. from the top to the lower end of the tassels.

12. On this and the previous issue, see Muscarella, n. 1.