

Behzad Mofidi-Nasrabadi (Editor)

Elamica

Contributions on History and Culture of
Elam and its Neighbouring Regions

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CONTENTS

Álvarez-Mon, J. <i>The Elamite Royal Orchestra from Madaktu (653 BC)</i>	1
Krebernik, M. <i>Ein Ziegel mit Inschrift des Königs Šutruk-Nahhunte I. in der Hilprecht-Sammlung Jena</i>	35
Mofidi-Nasrabadi, B. <i>Die Siegelungen aus den Ausgrabungen in Haft Tappeh zwischen 2005 und 2012</i>	41
Wicks, Y. <i>Late Neo-Elamite Ceremonial (?) “Rings”</i>	149

The Elamite Royal Orchestra from Madaktu (653 BC)

Javier Álvarez-Mon¹

Passing now from the instruments of the Assyrians to the general features and character of their music, we may observe, in the first place, that while it is fair to suppose them acquainted with each form of the triple symphony, there is only evidence that they knew of two forms out of the three—viz., the harmony of instruments, and that of instruments and voices in combination. Of these two they seem greatly to have preferred the concert of instruments without voices; indeed, one instance alone shows that they were not wholly ignorant of the more complex harmony. Even this leaves it doubtful whether they themselves practised it; for the singers and musicians represented as uniting their efforts are not Assyrians, but Susianians, who come out to greet their conquerors, and do honor to the new sovereign who has been imposed on them, with singing, playing, and dancing.

(G. Rawlinson, *The Seven Great Monarchies*)²

Contents: §1. Prelude; §2. The Royal Elamite Orchestra from Madaktu; §2.1. Instruments: horizontal harps, angular harps, double pipes, a drum, hand clapping and singing; §2.2. People: Musicians and Singers; §3. *Allegro ma non troppo*: Madaktu 653 BC, the Royal Orchestra in Historical Context. §4. From Madaktu to Assyria: Cacophonies at the Heartland of the Empire; §4.1. The Assyrian Royal Orchestras from Nineveh (Room S¹); §4.2. Foreign Orchestras in Assyria; §5. Requiem 612 BC: Royal Orchestras and the Fall of Nineveh.

§1. Prelude

Music plays a critical role in the definition of culture and, like culture, it is many things: a form of entertainment, and a source of uplifting, aesthetic and intellectual pleasure. It has the power to elicit and sway our emotions and, above all, can be a powerful marker of the historical pulse between continuity and change. Eulogized, manipulated and feared, music can be a source of prestige and the

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² Rawlinson 1873, 310.

ultimate tool of sedition. Music is also a living thing and, one could argue, more intimate, immediate and collectively shared than any other art form such as architecture, painting, or sculpture.

The ancient cultures of the Near East cultivated rich musical expressions whose manifestations have reached us primarily in the form of fragmented visual representations and, to a much lesser degree, through textual evidence unveiling aspects of the formalization and standardization of musical instruments and vocal compositions³. This evidence intimates a cultural legacy that, in the words of L. Oppenheim, “we cannot even imagine”⁴.

The existence of Elamite orchestras has been known since 1853 when A.H. Layard published drawings from Ashurbanipal’s palace at Nimrud representing, as G. Rawlinson put it in 1873, the “Susian” royal orchestra and choir from Madaktu [Pl. 3]⁵. The study of Elamite orchestras was born formally with the 1989 publication of E. De Waele’s line-drawings and photographs of three orchestras from the highland reliefs of Kul-e Farah [Pl. 1a,b,c]⁶. Another orchestra, performing in a banquet scene, was more recently added to this small corpus with the chance discovery in 1982 of a large 43.5cm diameter bronze bowl inside a stone-lined tomb in the vicinity of the ancient city of Arjan [Pl. 1d]⁷. Generally neglected by studies of musical history, the depiction of first millennium BC Elamite orchestras offers some of the earliest and most detailed evidence of musical ensembles in the historical record⁸. These musical ensembles did not materialize out of a cultural vacuum; by the time the stone reliefs and the bowl were carved, Elam had tallied a millenary musical tradition reaching back to the third millennium BC with some of the earliest representations of music playing in the visual record of the ancient world⁹. Considered together, this tradition broadcasts important insights into the evolution of music and Elamite socio-cultural complexity; addressing types of instruments, the gender and age of the musicians and the participation of formalized sound in Elamite ceremonial practices involving community processions, sacrifice of animals and feasting¹⁰.

§2. The Royal Elamite Orchestra from Madaktu

The royal Elamite orchestra from Madaktu was carved around 650 BC on two stone slabs in the Southwest palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh [Pls. 2 and 3]¹¹. It was part of a cycle of visual narratives developed at the time of Ashurbanipal—first in his grandfather’s palace and then in his own Northern

³ Rashid 1984; Kilmer 1997; 1998; 2014a; 2014b.

⁴ Oppenheim 1960, 147.

⁵ Layard 1853, Pls. 48-49; Rawlinson 1873, 310.

⁶ De Waele 1976; 1989.

⁷ Álvarez-Mon 2004. For a comparative study of these orchestras see Álvarez-Mon forthcoming.

⁸ Note that the terms “musical ensemble” and “orchestra” are used here interchangeably as a group of people performing music together; a “choir” is understood as an ensemble of singers.

⁹ Duchesne-Guillemin 1969; Delougaz/Kantor, 1996, Pls. 45N and 155A; Lawergren 2009 and forthcoming.

¹⁰ De Waele 1989; Lawergren 2009; Henkelman/Khaksar 2014; Lawergren, forthcoming; Álvarez-Mon, forthcoming.

¹¹ Room XXXIII (BB) slab reliefs 5 and 6; Barnett et al. 1998, 96ff, 384-386, Pls. 300-320.