

The Lyre Player in Roman Malta

Anna Borg Cardona

All knowledge we have of music-making in the Roman period is based on literary or iconographic sources, and occasionally on extant musical instruments. Evidence shows that music was an integral part of festivals, religious rituals, ceremonies, social occasions as well as military life and thus a very important part of a wide spectrum of Roman life.

Roman culture was transported to each of the Empire's conquered lands, and one would expect the same to have happened sooner or later in Malta.

Little is, in fact, known of musical life on the Maltese islands under Roman rule, a period spanning between 218B.C. and 535A.D. Large-scale theatres in which music would have played a major part, have not been discovered in Malta or in Gozo. However, this does not exclude the possibility of dramatic and musical performances taking place on the Islands either in some form of public theatre or in small private areas reserved for the purpose. We do find remains or iconographic evidence of various types of instruments, amongst them representatives of the string, wind and percussion type, indicating a local society with some degree of musical interest. This article concentrates on an archaeological find which sheds interesting light on one type of musical instrument which used to be heard in Roman Malta.

A monument to a comedian & lyre player

A funerary monument from the 2nd century A.D. was discovered in 1951 at an area of Rabat known as *Taċ-Ċagħaqi*.¹ The monument is preserved in the Museum of Roman Antiquities

in Rabat, now renamed The Roman Domus. The large gravestone 74cms high x 152cms long and 53cms broad (Plate 1), bears a Greek inscription which in translation² reads:

Dedicated to the Gods of the underworld
Hail
P[ublius] Aelius Hermolaos, a Comedian
And Lyre player from Pergamon
Lived 25 years, Farewell.

Above the inscription is a festoon. On the left we find a comic mask and a rolled scroll, and on the right, a lyre. It is not very frequent that one finds the name of an instrument together with a depiction of it as we do on this altar. We are indeed fortunate in this case to have both, leaving little or no doubt as to the instrument in question.

In the centre, beneath the inscription, there are two objects. The one on the right is an arrow-shaped plectrum used in playing the lyre. Regarding the object represented on the left, scholars are not entirely in agreement. It has been variously described as a 'plectrum' (J. G. Baldacchino) and as a 'hammer with which the lyre was played' (E. Coleiro). This will be discussed below.

The large, rather elaborate monument to the young musician suggests that the musical profession must have been held in high esteem here in Malta, as elsewhere in the Roman world. At this same time, talented musicians from various provenances such as Greece, Egypt, Spain, Syria, were arriving in Rome where they knew they would be treated respectfully, and where they were

also generally well remunerated. We do not know under what circumstances the Greek Publius Aelius Hermolaos reached Roman Malta. The Islands were then enjoying a flourishing economy and social stability offering fertile ground for cultural enjoyment. Before the arrival of the Romans, the islands had already succumbed to a degree of hellenization, through the Carthaginian colonisers who certainly appreciated Greek art and craftsmanship.³ This Greek culture was subsequently further strengthened with the arrival of the Romans.

Hermolaos may have arrived here as slave or servant and it has been suggested that he may very well have been a freedman, perhaps of the Emperor Hadrian⁴. It is interesting that with him Hermolaos brought his essentially Greek instrument, music, and presumably also Greek Comedy, which were all highly valued at the time in cultured Roman (or Romanised) society. The Emperor Hadrian (AD 117 - AD 138) himself boasted of being a skilful lyre player (*kitharode*) and singer and also patronised and supported musical study.⁵

The Greek lyre

The string instrument represented on the tombstone shows a box-shaped 'resonator' or sound box with two parallel carved arms supporting a cross-bar. Both arms and strings are symmetrically arranged, with the six strings of equal length running parallel (rather than fan-shaped). These are wound and wrapped upon the cross-bar and have small tuning sticks attached to each string.

By the characteristic feature of strings running from the yoke, over the resonator to the cross-bar, the instrument is classified by Hornbostel and Sachs as a lyre, as opposed to a harp⁶. The strings of a harp would run at an oblique angle from the resonator to the neck. The lyre was held vertically and was generally played with a metal or ebony plectrum held in the right hand. The left hand fingers were used to dampen the strings after they were plucked by the plectrum. However, the lyre could also be played with the fingers alone if desired, or with plectrum in the right hand and with the fingers of the left hand. As a common rule, singing was accompanied with the fingers, whilst solo intermezzi were played with the plectrum, which produced a brighter sound.

The plectrum represented on the right hand side beneath the tombstone inscription, was in use in ancient Greece, but was also adopted in Rome. Its distinctive arrow-shape may be seen on various iconographic sources. It is particularly clearly depicted in the hands of Orpheus, on a fresco found in the Catacomb of Petrus and Marcellinus in Rome.⁷

The other object beneath the inscription may be another type of plectrum or possibly a lever with which to tighten the whole set of strings. It is not a hammer, since the lyre was not struck with a hammer.

Lyra or Kithara?

Greek lyres existed in various shapes and sizes. There were two distinct types, one known as *kithara* and the other known as *lyra*, however, the term *lyra* was commonly used as a generic term for all types of lyre, including the *kithara*.

The *kithara* was the professional musician's instrument and was large with two wooden carved arms rising from the soundbox to the cross-bar. The wooden arms were often hollow. The sound of the *kithara* was louder and clearer and lent itself more easily to public performances. The *lyra* was a smaller, more loosely constructed instrument. It usually had a tortoise shell (*chelys*) resonator with animal skin stretched across it, and its yoke consisted of animal horns. Many depictions of lyras and kitharas have been preserved on Greek earthenware vases, a large number of which may be seen in neighbouring Syracuse's *Museo Paolo Orsi*. These vases show amazing detail of the instruments as well as of performing practices. Whereas the *kithara* became very popular in Roman society, the *lyra* was never actually adopted. Both types would normally have been more curved on the sides than the lyre represented on the tombstone. However, at a time when instruments were not mass produced and therefore not standardised in any way, it was not unusual to have discrepancies in shape and size as well as number of strings and tunings. The solid shape of this instrument and the fact that it belonged to a professional Greek musician suggest that it is more likely to be a *kithara*. A strikingly similar instrument to the one on Hermolaos' tombstone is to be found in the hands of Apollo, God of the Arts, in the Bardo Museum, Tunis (Plate 3). This mosaic from the 3rd century was originally retrieved from El Jem.

Tunings

At the top of the strings near the cross-bar we can clearly see six small sticks carefully carved into the limestone monument. A slight movement of these sticks (or possibly leather strips) could alter the tension of the strings and thus adjust tuning.

Musicologists, among them Curt Sachs, have gone to great pains to prove that customary tuning of the lyre was pentatonic.⁸ However, not all musicologists are in agreement with this hypothesis. Most will nevertheless agree that with strings made of animal gut or sinew of variable thickness and elasticity, there is no guarantee that the tuning was perfectly accurate or reliable. A perfect tuning of any sort on these instruments is considered to have been far out of reach.⁹ Though the basic system of Greek musical theory was the tetrachord (4 consecutive notes), in practice tunings would probably have varied from instrument to instrument and also according to the nature of the music played.

Comic actor and musician:

Considering the absence of any formal theatres discovered on the Islands, it seems very likely that Hermolaos would have been employed with a well-to-do family. At a time when poetry, song, dance and some form of acting were inseparable, his work would probably have included all of these. He is likely to have performed during the arrival of guests, during banquets, during visits to the baths, during acted comedy and during religious ritual. He might also have been instructed to teach his art to members of the family. A lovely mosaic in the Bardo Museum, depicting a Roman Banquet in the 4th century (plate 4) gives an idea of the importance of the musician in Roman culture.

We certainly know that Hermolaos played the role of comedian as well as musician. The tragic and comic masks found among Roman remains in Malta, the lovely *oscillum* found in Gozo,¹⁰ as well as the depictions on the mosaic floor of the Roman Domus in Rabat, Malta, all suggest a local theatrical interest in keeping with the rest of the Roman world (Plates 5,6,7). Music would have been a natural integral part of this. In view of the ostentatious houses such as those discovered in Rabat, Ghajn Tuffieha, and in Ramla, Gozo, it would not be amiss to

presume that there may have been other actors and musicians like Hermolaos on the Islands. No self-respecting Romanised family would have done without such services.

Fitting tombstone

At a time when it was not unusual for the poor to have no tomb at all, this large decorated tombstone in Malta leaves no doubt that the Greek Publius Aelius Hermolaos had acquired some local importance. He must have excelled enough in his art to earn the full respect of those he left behind. He was sent off on his final journey with a very befitting farewell which has preserved for us some tangible evidence of the musical culture in Malta during Roman times. (see plates pp. 29 & 30)

References

- 1 Report on the work of the Museum Department for 1951-52, 3-4
- 2 This translation is originally presented in the Museum report of 1951-52 by the Director J.G. Baldacchino, under whom the excavation took place. In 1957, Rev. Can. Prof. E. Coleiro translates "harp-player" in place of "lyre player".
- 3 A. Bonanno, *Roman Malta - The Archaeological Heritage of the Maltese Islands*. (Rome: World Confederation of Salesian Past Pupils of Don Bosco 1992): 14
- 4 E. Coleiro, "A Greek inscription found in Malta." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* LXXVII (1957): 312-313.
Prof. Coleiro believed that the name P. Aelius Hermolaos suggested a Greek freedman, perhaps of the Emperor Hadrian.
- 5 G. Comotti, *Music in Greek and Roman Culture* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 54; *Vita Hadrian* 15.9, 1:16 ed. E. Hohl
- 6 E.M. Hornbostel and C. Sachs, "Systematik der Musikinstrumente. Ein Versuch," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 46 (1914): 553-590. English translation by Anthony Baines and Klaus P. Wachsmann as "Classification of Musical Instruments," *The Galpin Society Journal* 14, (1961):3-29
- 7 *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (London: Macmillan, 1984), *sub voce* 'Lyre'.
- 8 C. Sachs, *History of Musical Instruments* (London, Dent & Sons, 1942), 131
The Pentatonic scale contains only 5 notes rather than the 7 notes of the better-known diatonic scale. For example, using white keys only and beginning on C, this would be C, D, E, G, A, (C). The fourth note F and the 7th note B are omitted. This scale is very widespread and commonly found in folk music.
- 9 Comotti, G. op. cit. 58-59
- 10 A. Bonanno, "Research on Prehistoric and Roman Gozo: past, present and future," Farrugia, J. & Briguglio, L. (ed.) *Focus on Gozo*. (1996): 41-57 in A. Bonanno, *Roman Malta - The Archaeological Heritage of the Maltese Islands*. (Rome: 1992).



Plate 1. Funerary monument, 2nd century A.D, Roman Domus, Rabat



Plate 2. Detail showing lyre with parallel carved arms and cross-bar.



Plate 3. Apollo holding a very similar lyre. 3rd Century mosaic, Bardo Museum, Tunis

Plate 4. A banquet scene - 4th century mosaic with female musician/dancers playing clappers and a male musician playing pan pipes. Bardo Museum, Tunis.

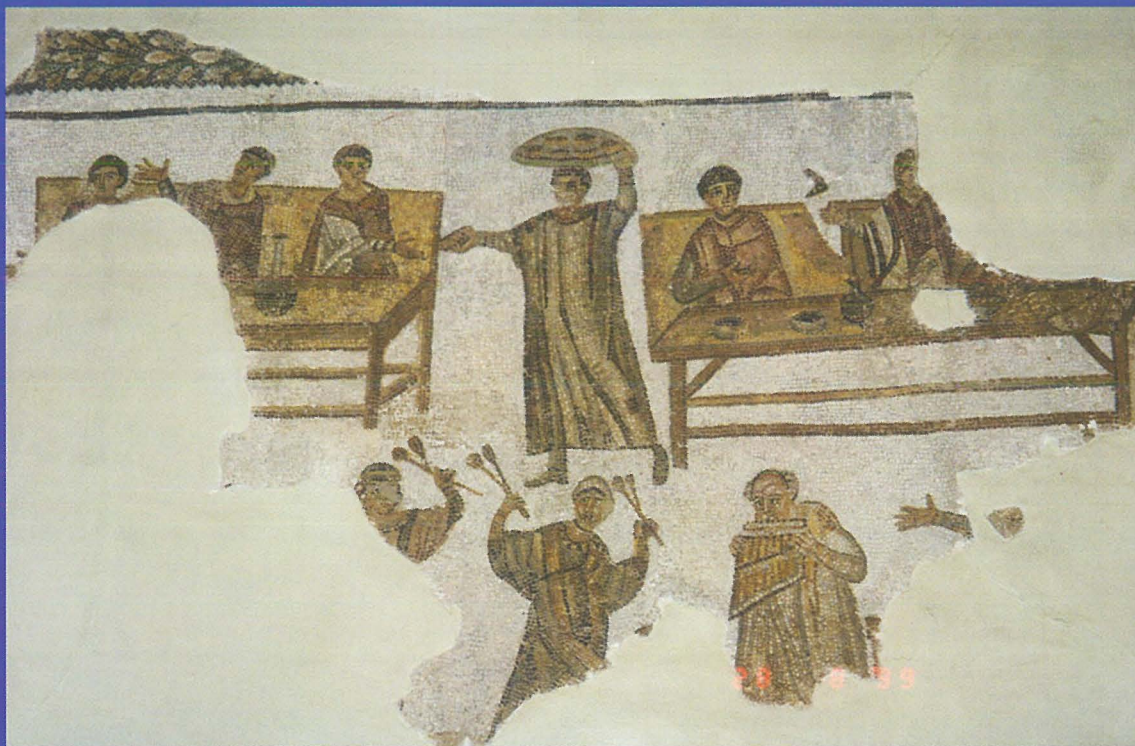


Plate 5. Terracotta theatrical masks, small versions of those used in comedy, Roman Domus Rabat.

Plates 6/7. Two theatrical masks depicted on the mosaic floor of the Roman Domus, Rabat.

