

Review

Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine: Archaeological, Written, and Comparative Sources, by Joachim Braun. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2002.

If musicology is a relatively young discipline, having originated in the nineteenth century, the archaeology of music could be considered one of its younger offspring. For Israelis, archaeology is a national pastime. The late Professor Yigael Yadin even saw it as a substitute for religious belief, as Amos Eilon claimed in his book on the Israelis (1971). However, the knowledge of ancient music was traditionally based solely on the biblical text, wrapped in a network of myths, unscientific etymologies, and anachronistic interpretations.

Bible translations throughout the generations on the one hand and the modern revival of Hebrew as a spoken language on the other have only reinforced the terminological confusion. The first biblical mention of music (Gen. 4:21) presents Yuval as “the father of all such as handle the harp [Hebrew: *kinnôr*] and organ [Hebrew: *‘ugab*; Septuaginta translation: *organon*].” But what instruments do these names actually refer to? Hebrew speakers would have no doubt that *kinnôr* is the modern violin and *‘ugab* the present-day organ, but certainly the biblical author was not alluding to those instruments. Today, archaeologists agree that the *kinnôr* belongs to the lyre family; as for the biblical *‘ugab*, opinions are still divided. Was this a “long, wide, vertical flute,” as Curt Sachs surmised, mainly on the basis of “the dark color of the word” (Sachs 1940, 106); or might it have been a stringed instrument, as suggested in the apocryphal Psalm 151 in one of the Qumran scrolls, as claimed by Bathja Bayer (1968, 771)?

In 1963 Bayer published her pioneering archaeological study of music in ancient Israel (Bayer 1963), documenting about 250 archaeological finds and

iconographic items from “greater Canaan,” dated between 4500 B.C.E. and 550 C.E. Joachim Braun’s *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine* is more ambitious in its goals and more comprehensive in its scope. First published in German in 1999, it has recently appeared in a revised, updated, and enlarged English edition, translated by Douglas W. Stott.

It documents, describes, and interprets approximately 650 archaeological and iconographical finds, dating from the tenth century B.C.E. to the early Byzantine period (ca. fourth – fifth centuries C.E.), and found in the modern-day State of Israel, with a “spill over” to the eastern side of the Jordan River. They encompass local musical cultures, such as those of Canaan, Judah, Israel, Samaria, Edom, Ammon, Philistia, and Phoenicia. The finds themselves—mostly photographed and some schematically drawn—are described in detail, including their history, shape, typology, and function. The author sets them in the colorful musical mosaic of ancient Israel that his study attempts to construct.

The earliest musical archaeological finds discussed in Braun’s book are a female pelvic bone adorned with a chain belt made out of fox teeth, discovered in the *Yonim* Cave at Mugaret el-Hamam on Mount Carmel (11,000 – 9000 B.C.E.), which served apparently both as a decoration and as a rattle, and a group of pairs of perforated *dentalium* mussels in castanet form. Braun himself experimented with the latter find at the Archaeology Institute of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, knocking the mussels one against the other, and writes: “I tried out these Stone Age castanets for myself and found they were capable of producing a pure, transparent, but pitchless sound” (p. 53).

The latest finds are iconographical examples of the *shofar*, or, according to the book’s system of transliteration, the šôpār. It is a well known fact that this very

instrument, the *shofar*, which is the paradigmatic “Jewish” instrument, has not been found in archaeological excavations, and was recorded mainly on mosaic floors and pillar capitals, stone carvings and oil lamps. Even these depictions date no earlier than the third century C.E., i.e. the Late Roman and Early Byzantine periods. As often happens with symbols, its artistic design quickly settled into a schematic and stylized, less realistic form.

Braun does not stop with the mere documentation of finds. He wants to reconstruct a comprehensive picture of music in the Land of Israel: What did it sound like? Was it unique? What place did it hold in daily life and ritual practice? What were its sociological contexts and its symbolic function? Might one establish an outline of its history? The task is by no means a simple one; in spite of the wealth of finds presented and discussed in the book, the author is aware of the limitations of a musical reconstruction based on material relics alone. As he himself states, the archaeological-iconographic evidence may “clarify our understanding of the technical, socio-anthropological, and symbolic aspects of this lost musical culture. Indeed, thanks to archaeology, occasionally even the timbre of certain instruments has been preserved although the actual form of the music itself has disappeared forever”

(pp. 5-6).

By concentrating all the finds and their chronological and organological classification in a synchronic table (pp. xxviii-xxx), the author demonstrates both the advantages and the limitations of total dependence on the archaeological and iconographic finds. The table presents an interesting picture of the “rise and fall” of particular groups of instruments: for instance, the idiophones, mainly bells and clay rattles, are numerically the most widely distributed group and, despite alterations in their shape, seem to be the hardiest in all the periods discussed, while the aerophones

are represented mainly in the Hellenistic-Roman period, in the form of double pipes and *shofars*. It should be borne in mind, however, that the preservation of instruments is directly dependent on the survival of the material from which they are made; therefore the archaeologist of music must fall back on other research methods in order to reconstruct their possible sound.

In the Bronze Age (fourth millennium to 1200 B.C.E.; the author does not subdivide the periods), for example, we find evidence of a flourishing Canaanite musical culture that, although influenced by the Egyptian and Babylonian-Assyrian cultures, nevertheless had unique qualities. In one case, based on the careful analysis of one find—a player of an asymmetrical nine-stringed lyre on an ivory engraving found at Megiddo—and comparison with similar finds from other sites, the author concludes that in Canaan this instrument was held in a special way and had a unique function. Only in Canaan was this either a solo or an accompanying instrument; in Egypt and Assyria it was part of the orchestra. Moreover, the sophistication of the ivory engraving reflects the Egyptian influence on the upper echelon of Canaanite society. Braun's conclusion is that here the function of music has shifted “from [an earlier] context bound to nature and the cult to one associated with institutionalized ceremonies involving the ruler” (p. 98).

The Iron Age (1200 – 586 B.C.E.), which witnessed the creation of the Israelite kingdom and its separation into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judea, is rich in written references to music. The archaeological evidence (not necessarily paralleling the instruments mentioned in the biblical text) indicates that certain instruments, among them the lute and the harp, disappeared in this period, while others, for instance clay rattles, drums, and double pipes, and especially the lyre, “the dominant chordophone in ancient Israel” (p. 163) survived, the latter, though, with changes in its

shape and sound function (p. 117). From the archaeological finds, the author concludes that musical styles differed according to geographical and ethnic regions. For instance, the music of the coastal regions of Philistia and Phoenicia was orgiastic in nature—as can be deduced, among other things, from the large quantity of “noise” instruments (i.e. idiophones and membranophones), while in Edom, Moab and Ammon, the tendency was to a more balanced style, based on a combination of chordophones and aerophones. And what about in Israel? Here the author, usually very careful in his conclusions, allows his imagination free rein and speaks not only of the “widespread use of lyre and reed instruments” and a syncretistic musical style issuing from the “heterogeneity within homogeneity,” but also of a “widespread diapason of the overall musical ethos, and the principle of varied modulation between motifs and motif series.” He does, however, admit that his generalizations are based only partly on historically supported source material (p. 184).

If the period of the Israelite kingdom is rich in textual, archaeological, and iconographic musical documentation, the period that follows—the Babylonian-Persian period (587 – 333 B.C.E.)—is characterized by a serious discrepancy between the vast amount of written evidence and the small number of archaeological finds. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles abound with detailed lists of the Levite families and their musical functions, and even present a picture of prolific musical-religious practice in Israel at the beginning of the Second Temple period. And yet, surprisingly, there are few actual material finds. Nevertheless, all the historical studies of music in the Bible, none of which were based on archaeological evidence, have continued to nurture the myth that the Bible apparently wished to create—a picture of an impressive religious ritual accompanied by song and instrumental music, under the supervision of the Levite families. It appears that another difficulty facing music

archaeology, beyond that of deciphering the essence behind the biblical name of an instrument, is the discrepancy between the archaeological evidence and the biblical narrative.

Attempting to explain the heterogeneous nature of the musical culture of the Land of Israel, and the simultaneous existence of primitive and sophisticated instruments (for instance, Iron Age rattles and lyres), Braun uses the phrase coined by German archaeologist Helga Weippert, “non-simultaneity within simultaneity.” But this concept, taken from the writings of philosopher Ernst Bloch, originally referred to the class dialectic and to Bloch’s view of its positive potential; Weippert’s use of it was most probably metaphoric. I feel that Joachim Braun’s well-documented book is important not necessarily for its explanation of phenomena, but for its presentation of a broad archaeological and sociomusical map of the ancient Land of Israel, with its resultant understanding that music was a valuable component of its culture. It convincingly proves that only a comprehensive dialogue between general archaeology, biblical studies, social history, ethnology, and the archaeology of music will enable us to “see the voices” that enrich the cultural texture of the distant past and even possibly reproduce them in our musical imagination.

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