ρόπτρον as a Musical Instrument

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One of the meanings of ρόπτρον given by LSJ (s.v. ρόπτρον II), "a musical instrument of the Corybantes, tambourine or kettledrum", is at fault. First, a minor point, there is no reason why this 'musical instrument' is to be attributed solely or chiefly to the Corybantes; rather, according to the very passages cited in LSJ, it was used in orgiastic ritual dancing among both Greek and non-Greek peoples, as well as in martial excitation by the Parthians. Second, also minor, this definition seems to ignore the important distinction between a tambourine and a kettledrum. The former, τύμπανον, is a small cylindrical, one- or two-headed, hand-beaten drum, and appears frequently in literature and in vase paintings. The kettledrum, on the other hand, is a semi-spherical, one-headed, stick-beaten drum, and though possible antecedents of our contemporary kettledrum have been attested among the Sumerians and Egyptians, there is no definite evidence that the Greeks used it or even knew about it.¹

But much more important, none of the passages cited by LSJ under ρόπτρον II explicitly supports the interpretation of 'tambourine or kettledrum' or any other type of drum. In one of these passages, Plut. Crass. 23, ρόπτρον has usually been translated 'drum', often as 'kettledrum', and this apparently has been the significant locus for determining the meaning of the word in the other passages. I believe the passage has been misunderstood, as I shall explain below.

What, then, is the definition of ρόπτρον II? The six passages which LSJ cites,² along with AP 6.165, do indeed, belong together and

¹ On the Sumerian and Egyptian kettledrum, see New Oxford History of Music I (1954) 233 and 240. The only attempt to show that the "Greeks were at least acquainted with the kettledrum" has been made by C. Titcomb, The Kettledrums in Western Europe (Diss. Harvard 1952) 4, whose only evidence is Plut. Crass. 23; but cf. A. Schaeffner in Encyclopédie de la musique III (Paris 1961) s.v. TIMBALE; C. Sachs, Real-Lexicon der Musikinstrumente (Berlin 1913, repr. New York 1964) s.v. PAUKE. The confusion of these two drums is repeated by E. Dodds (ed. Bacchae [Oxford 1944]) at Bacch. 126–29: "... they mingled it [the kettledrum] with the sweetly calling breath of Phrygian flutes ...".

² Cornutus, Theol.Graec. 30; Lucian, Trag. 36; Orph. fr. 105, 152; AP 6.74; Plut. Crass. 23; see also AP 6.165.
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illustrate a particular meaning of the word distinct from its other meanings, viz. those of i. 'part of a trap which falls', iii. 'a knocker on a door', iv. αἰδοίον (LSJ, Supplement [Oxford 1968] s.v. ῥόπτρων), as well as another definition ignored by LSJ but authenticated by the lexicographers and probably Eur. Hipp. 1172, that of 'club' or 'hammer'. These four other meanings suggest the possible form and function of ῥόπτρων II: it would have the shape of a small club or rod, perhaps curved or bent or hooked, metallic or wooden, and primarily used for striking. The etymology of the word corroborates this general definition, for it suggests something which falls or moves downward.4

Considering the other meanings of the word, its etymology and its use in the seven passages (listed in note 2), I suggest that ῥόπτρων II was a 'noise-maker' or 'clapper',5 somewhat similar in form and function to κρόταλον I, used primarily in orgiastic dancing to beat time, and struck against either another ῥόπτρων or some kind of gong (e.g. an ἠχεῖον, as in Plut. Crass. 23, or a similar instrument). Such a definition fits the context of all the passages in which the word occurs.

The only passage which affords any sort of description of this instrument in action is Plut. Crass. 23, where the word has usually been translated 'drum'. The passage describes the military preparations of the Parthians at the battle of Carrhae: Πάρθων γὰρ οὐ κέρασιν οὐδὲ σάλπιγξ ἐποτρύνουσαν ἐαυτοὺς εἰς μάχην, ἀλλὰ ῥόπτρα βυρσοπαγῆ καὶ κούλα περτείναντες ἠχεῖον χαλκοῖς ἀμα πολλὰχοθεν ἑπιδουποῦσιν.

Those who translate ῥόπτρα as 'drums' and construe the word with περτείναντες ἠχεῖοι χαλκοῖς and render it, e.g. 'attaching bronze resonators or bells to the drums', as do most translators of the passage,6

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4 The tradition that ῥόπτρων at Eur. Hipp. 1172 meant 'club' is followed by edd. Witzschel (1843), Wecklein (1885), Weil (1913) and Méridier (1927). But cf. edd. Valckenaer (1768), Paley (1857), Freeland (1876), Hadley (1889) and Barrett (1964) for an opposing view.

5 H. Frisk, Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch, Lief. 17 (Heidelberg 1966) s.v. ῥέπτω.

6 For an historic account of such an instrument, see Sachs, The History of Musical Instruments (New York 1940) 88-89 and 149; also H. Besseler and M. Schneider, Musikgeschichte in Bildern II.4 (Leipzig 1961) p.50 and plates 25, 62, 63.

Of the fourteen translations I have examined, thirteen of them (North, Amyot, Amhurst, Langhorne, Reiske, Doehner, Stewart and Long, Perrin, Riba, Romanillos, Latzarus, Ziegler, and Petukhova) so construe the passage syntactically. Three of these (Langhorne, Stewart and Long, and Petukhova) do indeed translate ῥόπτρα 'instruments' and two (Reiske and Romanillos) 'clubs'. The only exception is that of P. A. Pierron, Vies des hommes illustres II (Paris 1870) 645 ("... mais ils font un grand bruit de tous côtés, en frappant sur les vases d'airain avec des marteaux creux couverts de cuir"), with whose translation I
must explain the use of the dative ηχείος with the active voice of περπεινώ, a construction contrary to other occurrences of this verb (Hdt. 1.194, 4.65, 4.73; Arist. Mete. 355b 28). They must also explain why both ρόστρον and ηχείον are rendered by meanings quite different from their usual ones, that is, why ρόστρον must here be not the striking rod but a drum, the object which is struck, and why ηχείον must mean not a gong or metal plate which is struck, but a resonating jingle or bell. That an ηχείον was a gong (see LSJ, s.v. ηχείον 1) is attested by Apollod. ap. schol. Theoc. 2.36, the schol. ad Ar. Nub. 292, and Procop. Gaz. Ecphr. p.153b. Though the word was used for ‘sounding board’ at Vitro. 5.5.2, this is hardly similar to resonating bells attached to a drum. Taking ρόστρον and ηχείον in their usual meanings, the first as ‘club, rod, or striker’, and the latter as ‘gong’, and construing ἔπισις with its nearest noun, ηχείος (as does LSJ, see s.v. ἔπισις), it would be much more reasonable to render the passage thus: “Fashioning hollow (or pliant, curved8) rods strapped with (or made of) leather, they beat in unison throughout the camp on bronze gongs and raise a terrible din.”

There is no need, then, to assume a radical change of meaning of ρόστρον from ‘striker’ to ‘drum’, solely on a rather forced interpretation of an admittedly obscure passage in Plutarch. The interpretation presented here fits the context of all the passages in which ρόστρον occurs and is consonant with the other meanings of the word. The LSJ entry at ρόστρον 11, then, should be revised to read.

fully agree. F. A. Lampe, De cymbalis veterum libri tres (Utrecht 1703) 91–92, citing Nonnus, Dion. 33.228, 45.18, 47.275, 47.731, believed that ρόστρον denoted a crepitaculum similar to a cymbal. But in treating the Plut. passage in his addenda, he agrees with the ‘drum’ interpretation and concludes: “addo tantum rhoptra potuisse haec dici vascula, quibis corium obtendebatur, quod semirotunda fuerint, tympanorum instar, quibus equites nostri utuntur, sed minora, atque adeo quadam ratione cymbalis similia”

7 The examples of the use of the active voice of the verb show that one stretches something (acc.) around something (dat., or acc., or περι with the acc.). I doubt that one could say περπεινώ ρόστρα ηχείοις to mean ‘I attach or stretch bells around drums’. It would be much better to take ρόστρα βιοσπανίερον περπεινώ as ‘I wrap ρόστρα in leather’, or ‘fashion ρόστρα out of leather’, or simply ‘fashion leather ρόστρα’.

8 κόλος may here mean ‘hollow’; however, like a blackjack, the leather ρόστρα may have been pliant, bending, or simply hooked, such as (see LSJ s.v. κόλος 1) κλήθρα, Soph. OT 1262; σταθμὰ θυράων, Theoc. 24.15. This curved or bent shape is substantiated by the word’s other meanings (μ and ν in LSJ) as well as by the verb περπεινώ, which includes in its passive form the meaning ‘to become aduncate’, Hippoc. Loc. Hom. 14. Perhaps relevant is Hesychius’ entry, s.v. ρόστρων κοπύθλον ξύλων.
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'noise maker, striker, or clapper, often used in orgiastic, ritual dancing'.