

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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,<sup>2</sup> along with *AP* 6.165, do indeed, belong together and

<sup>1</sup> 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 . . .”

<sup>2</sup> *Cornutus, Theol. Graec.* 30; *Lucian, Trag.* 36; *Orph. fr.* 105, 152; *AP* 6.74; *Plut. Crass. 23*; see also *AP* 6.165.

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. *αἰδοῖον* (*LSJ, Supplement* [Oxford 1968] s.v. *ρόπτρον*), as well as another definition ignored by *LSJ* but authenticated by the lexicographers and probably *Eur. Hipp.* 1172, that of 'club' or 'hammer'.<sup>3</sup> These four other meanings suggest the possible form and function of *ρόπτρον* 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.<sup>4</sup>

Considering the other meanings of the word, its etymology and its use in the seven passages (listed in note 2), I suggest that *ρόπτρον* II was a 'noise-maker' or 'clapper',<sup>5</sup> somewhat similar in form and function to *κρόταλον* I, used primarily in orgiastic dancing to beat time, and struck against either another *ρόπτρον* 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: *Πάρθοι γὰρ οὐ κέρασιν οὐδὲ σάλπιγγιν ἐποτρύνουσιν ἑαυτοὺς εἰς μάχην, ἀλλὰ ρόπτρα βυρσοπαγῆ καὶ κοῖλα περιτείναντες ἠχείοις χαλκοῖς ἅμα πολλαχόθεν ἐπιδουποῦσι.*

Those who translate *ρόπτρα* as 'drums' and construe the word with *περιτείναντες ἠχείοις χαλκοῖς* and render it, e.g. 'attaching bronze resonators or bells to the drums', as do most translators of the passage,<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The tradition that *ρόπτρον* 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.

<sup>4</sup> H. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Lief. 17 (Heidelberg 1966) s.v. *ῥέπω*.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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 *ρόπτρα* '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 ἡχείοις with the active voice of περιτείνω, a construction contrary to other occurrences of this verb (Hdt. 1.194, 4.65, 4.73; Arist. *Mete.* 355b 28).<sup>7</sup> They must also explain why both ῥόπτρον and ἡχείον are rendered by meanings quite different from their usual ones, that is, why ῥόπτρον must here be not the striking rod but a drum, the object which is struck, and why ἡχείον must mean not a gong or metal plate which is struck, but a resonating jingle or bell. That an ἡχείον was a gong (see *LSJ*, s.v. ἡχείον ι) 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 *Vitr.* 5.5.2., this is hardly similar to resonating bells attached to a drum. Taking ῥόπτρον and ἡχείον in their usual meanings, the first as ‘club, rod, or striker’, and the latter as ‘gong’, and construing ἐπιδουποῦσι with its nearest noun, ἡχείοις (as does *LSJ*, see s.v. ἐπιδουπέω), it would be much more reasonable to render the passage thus: “Fashioning hollow (or pliant, curved<sup>8</sup>) 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 ῥόπτρον 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 ῥόπτρον occurs and is consonant with the other meanings of the word. The *LSJ* entry at ῥόπτρον ιι, 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 ῥόπτρον 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, quibus corium obtendebatur, quod semirotonda fuerint, tympanorum instar, quibus equites nostri utuntur, sed minora, atque adeo quadam ratione cymbalis similia”

<sup>7</sup> The examples of the use of the active voice of the verb show that one stretches something (acc.) around something (dat., or acc., or *περὶ* with the acc.). I doubt that one could say *περιτείνω ῥόπτρα ἡχείοις* to mean ‘I attach or stretch bells around drums’. It would be much better to take *ῥόπτρα βυρσοπαγῆ περιτείνω* as ‘I wrap ῥόπτρα in leather’, or ‘fashion ῥόπτρα out of leather’, or simply ‘fashion leather ῥόπτρα’.

<sup>8</sup> *κοῖλος* may here mean ‘hollow’; however, like a blackjack, the leather ῥόπτρα may have been pliant, bending, or simply hooked, such as (see *LSJ* s.v. *κοῖλος* ιι) *κλήθρα*, Soph. *OT* 1262; *σταθμὰ θυράων*, Theoc. 24.15. This curved or bent shape is substantiated by the word’s other meanings (ιιι and ιν in *LSJ*) as well as by the verb *περιτείνω*, which includes in its passive form the meaning ‘to become aduncate’, Hippoc. *Loc.Hom.* 14. Perhaps relevant is Hesychius’ entry, s.v. *ῥόπτρον*: *καμπύλον ξύλον*.

'noise maker, striker, or clapper, often used in orgiastic, ritual dancing'.

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