

Capsule. 'Music in the Ancient Near East'.

The first Sumerian documents (c.3200) attest that music-making was integral to the temple economies around which the earliest cities developed. Celebration singers (*nar*) hymned the gods with harps, lyres, and double-pipes, and a variety of percussion. Lamentation-singers (*gala*) soothed and forestalled their wrath. Most temple musicians had non-musical duties too. As kingship developed, music was incorporated into palace life, producing numerous musical representations and the magnificent instrument remains from the royal cemetery of Ur (c.2600). As to the music of ordinary people, we have little information for any period.

The Sumerian tradition was widely influential. At Mari on the middle Euphrates, temple singers adopted Sumerian names and priestly costume c. 2300. In contemporary Ebla in North Syria, the Sumerian model of musical management was also current, though a distinctive local character was maintained. The Babylonians and Assyrians in turn adopted the offices of *nar* and *gala*, and continued to cultivate Sumerian liturgical repertoire down through the first millennium, long after Sumerian itself had died (c.1800).

The Sumerian system of diatonic scales (see Side Bar) was translated into Akkadian (probably c.2300 but no later than c.1800), and scribes learned it throughout the second-millennium Near East. At Ugarit, a Canaanite city on the Syrian coast in close cultural contact with Mycenaean Greece, a schematic musical notation (still undeciphered) was based on it c.1400. But musicians were even more important for spreading the tradition. Palace and temple records throughout the Bronze Age, including second-millennium Egypt and Hittite Anatolia, reveal musicians traveling far and wide between courts and temples. They were bought, sold, and traded by kings who craved variety (like collecting CDs). Female performers, specifically trained as a commodity for royal gift-exchange, were much prized. They normally performed other less savory services too. But even royal women were trained in music, with an eye towards diplomatic marriages, as well as general cultivation.

When David and Solomon organized the First Temple in the tenth century, they adopted a system of hereditary musicians' guilds which are strongly reminiscent of those at Ugarit, and ultimately reflect standards of royal attainment established by the Sumerian and Akkadian monarchs (the Hebrew words for 'palace' and 'throne' were both Mesopotamian loanwords). Solomon allegedly commissioned forty thousands lyres and harps of precious woods, stones and electrum so the Levites could sing the Lord's praises. He clearly desired a royal apparatus equal to that of his peers (tradition numbers his harem at 1000; many must have been musical).

The Neo-Assyrian emperors (c.912-609) replaced royal reciprocity with a conscious program of centralization. Their archives and reliefs attest the frequent transfer of musicians to the Assyrian palaces as booty or tribute. They exploited music to symbolize the *pax Assyriaca*, proclaiming 'a feast of music' for the 'princes of the four regions who had submitted to the yoke'. The Assyrian Peace was a cosmopolis in which music served as a common language in the banquet halls of The Willing. The best evidence for this comes from Lydia, a client-state in western Anatolia with which the Greeks had close contact c.675-547, where Mesopotamian harps and concert ensembles make a sudden appearance under the local dynasty.

SIDE BAR: THE DIATONIC CYCLE

Cuneiform tablets published in the 1960s prove that the Sumerians knew a cyclical system of diatonic tunings by c.2100 BCE. This conception, the ancestor of our own 'circle of fifths' and heptatonic scales, was previously credited to the ancient Greeks of the fourth century BCE. It reflects the high musical development achieved in the early Mesopotamian temples and palaces. The system was certainly transmitted to Greece, probably in the Mycenaean period. It may also lie beneath the Persian, Arabic, and even Indian modal traditions. But this is an area that has received little attention since the system's discovery.

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