

Christian Meyer, CNRS

“The Letter to Dardanus. The Text and its Tradition. Edition and Translation.”

English Translation by Barbara Hagg-Huglo

Published as: « L’Epistola ad Dardanum. Le texte et sa tradition. Édition et traduction », *Rivista internazionale di Musica Sacra* 39 (2018) : 9-49.

Online

at:

https://www.academia.edu/attachments/58532701/download_file?st=MTU3NTA0NzQ2NCw5MC40MC4xOTkuMTkwLDgyMzY5NDY4&st=MTU3NTA0NzQ2NCw5MC40MC4xOTkuMTkwLDgyMzY5NDY4&s=profile&ct=MTU3NTA0NzU0MiwXNTc1MDQ3NzQzLDgyMzY5NDY4

Consultation of Dr. Meyer’s article is necessary for the footnotes, manuscript catalogue, and his edition of the Latin text of the letter, with critical apparatus.

* * *

The letter to Dardanus, falsely attributed to St. Jerome, is a cento of glosses on musical instruments mentioned in the books of the Old Testament that is enhanced with allegorical commentaries in the same style and introduced by a short salutation to a certain Dardanus, which gives this ensemble of texts precisely the character of a letter. The origin and reason for this fake letter remain unknown to this day, and modern criticism, beginning with Erasmus, has definitively rejected this text from the corpus of St. Jerome’s writings. The letter has come down to us in 68 manuscripts, of which a good dozen give witness to its popularity in the Carolingian period. Often cited in scholarship on the musical instruments of Antiquity, this letter has nevertheless not yet retained all the attention that it merits. The edition made available by Reinhold Hammerstein (1959) that is generally cited today rests on the text of *Patrologia Latina*, but was revised, for the main part, in light of Munich, Bavarian State Library, Ms. Clm 14523. Even if it is nevertheless agreed that the descriptions of these biblical musical instruments could not have taken account of any antique or late antique organological reality, it remains no less true that this text, widely diffused through the Middle Ages, especially in Hieronymian florilegia, remains an essential text for the interpretation of the medieval imagery of musical instruments within the context of the religious culture of the Middle Ages.

Criticism today agrees that this false letter was a Carolingian product dating prior to the *De universo* of Rhaban Maur, the latter completed circa 843, which reproduced the text in a version that was lightly augmented and with some variants. The oldest source of the *Epistola*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Junius 25 (*Ox*, late 8th, early 9th c., from Murbach) – permits its redaction to be pushed back to the first quarter of the ninth century, that is around 800, and the definitive exclusion of the hypothesis that it would have been a reworked excerpt of the chapter on music in *De universo*. Finally, certain concordances of this text with Latin biblical glosses of St. Jerome that were recently revealed by Jacopo Bisagni suggest that the letter should be anchored in the eighth century, perhaps within the influence of Irish colonies on the Continent.

The study of some twenty witnesses dating until the twelfth century reveals three traditions of the text.

The main tradition (*alpha*), of which the oldest witness is *Ox*, is documented by a group of sources produced principally in south Germany and in the region of the upper Rhineland, secondarily in Lothringia, in northeastern France, and in southeast England. At the heart of this tradition it is appropriate to isolate a minor branch (*alpha 2*) (cf. Annexe 1), which is represented by three manuscripts copied during the years 850-875, the composite from the Abbey of St. Emmeram in Regensburg, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 14523 (*M'*), and two manuscripts from the second half of the tenth century, Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 358 (610) (*E*) and Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 50 (*W*), originally from southern Germany or the region of the upper Rhine. This recension is distinguished by several reworkings (see below) and a singular redaction of a text entitled *Incipit epistola Hieronymi de carminibus* brought together around the mid-eighth century: ‘Origenes: Cithara vero [...] et organum magnum carmen dicitur, id est, pellis elephantina magna extensa, et inflata ac consuta, et xv fistolis et xii uiris canitur, et mille passus numero sonus eius audietur’ (*Problemata* 228, 1 [p. 98]).

The expression ‘de carminibus’ at the beginning of some words about musical instruments is surprising, but becomes clearer in light of a gloss transmitted by the *Problemata de enigmatibus* (or *Bibelwerk*) that was compiled around the middle of the eighth century.

At the heart of the tradition *alpha 1* is a group of four witnesses, of which the oldest (*Ox*) is distinguished by an unusual title, ‘Epistola ... de generibus musicorum incipit cum sua interpretatione’ (*Ox*, *Fi* [Florence, Bib. Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 29.32, 1st third 9th c.], *R* [Bib. Apostolica Vaticana, Reg. lat. 1553, 2nd quarter 9th c.]); ‘Epistola ... de generibus musicorum incipit cum interrogatione sua’ (*Aust29* [Austin, TX, Univ. Texas, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Ms. 29, dated 1017-1041]), that gives the text as a whole the character of a supposed letter by St. Jerome that was enriched with a gloss. This branch of the tradition also seems to point to the south German region or the region of the upper Rhine as the epicenter of the redaction of the *Epistola*. The Junius 25 manuscript originated in upper Alsace, at Murbach, or the Reichenau on the shores of Lake Constance, two abbeys in a close relationship and where Irish influence was great, as was the case at the abbey of Luxeuil, with which Murbach was associated by common membership in a prayer community. The manuscripts *Fi* and *R* saw the day in the West or in southwest Germany, but no more precise localization can be proposed at this time. Finally, *Aust29* was copied not far from Regensburg on a manuscript from the abbey of St. Maurice of Niederaltaich that was founded circa 731 by the monks of Reichenau. The hypothesis of a production in southwestern Germany agrees with the existence of Fulda, Hessische Landesbibliothek, Aa2 (865 or last third of 9th c., from the region of Lake Constance) or even St. Gall, Stiftsbibliothek 299 (2nd half 9th c.). Among the oldest manuscripts of the tradition *alpha 1*, Laon, Bibliothèque municipale, 75 (first half 10th c.), where the *Epistola* is copied after a collection of the letters of St. Jerome, is, with Paris, BnF lat. 1871 (10th c.) having the *Epistola* in an identical context, one of the rare witnesses from western France or from lower or middle Lothringia. The copy of Canterbury of the last quarter of the tenth century (London, British Library, Royal 8.C.III, last quarter 10th c.) has a more peripheral character.

The version *beta* of the *Epistola* is a revision of the principal tradition of the text. The redaction translates a wish to clarify by seeking to set aside expressions undoubtedly judged to be obscure

while proceeding to a syntactical ‘cleansing.’ Moreover, the title *de carminibus* (M2 [Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 6369, beginning of 11th c., Mainz]; O¹[Oxford, Bodleian Library, D’Orville 77, beginning of 11th c., south Germany]), and some rare but significant variants attest that this version is derived from the tradition *alpha 2* (cf. Annexe 2). Furthermore, the witnesses to this version are characterized by a great clarity of their *mise-en-page*, with each new entry emphasized with an initial of overly large dimension. All of the witnesses except Prague, National Library, XIX.C.26 (*Pr*, circa 1100, region of Liège) include within the text the illustrations that follow the text in the three witnesses to the tradition *alpha 2* (*E*, *MI*, *W*). This filiation also suggests that this reworking was realized in a school of south Germany near the end of the tenth century at the latest. Beyond the illustrations, the traditions *alpha 2* and *beta* have another common point: in all of their witnesses, the *Epistola* is followed by an excerpt from the *Etymologiae* of Isidore on the classification and instruments of music (edited as Annexe 3). This excerpt, which a witness of the tradition *alpha 1* (St. Gall 299) already possesses, is otherwise unknown and seems thus indeed to have been written down to complete the *Epistola*.

The third state of the text *gamma* is a reworked abridged version in a witness of the tradition *alpha 1* that seems to have seen the light of day in Normandy and in the eleventh century, perhaps in St. Evroult or at Fécamp according to the oldest sources (Alençon, Bib. Mun., Ms. 2 [beginning of the 12th c., unknown origin], Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, 91 [end 12th c., Abbey of Trinity, Fécamp?]). It is characterized principally by numerous omissions: the beginning of the notice dedicated to the organ (4-8), numerous passages about the *fistula*, and finally, the complete absence of the notice concerning the *chorus*, which is the last instrument described in the *Epistola*. This tradition, which remains very homogeneous, ends with ‘et est minima sapientia legis veteris in manu Iudaeorum.’ The name of St. Jerome appears in all of the titles. Among the oldest sources, only the three witnesses of the *beta* tradition add the adjective ‘sanctus,’ but omit mention of the addressee *Ad Dardanum*, which is found everywhere else.

There remains the question of the origin of this false attribution. An examination of the captions that accompany the representations of musical instruments transmitted by five psalters, of which one is a fragment), brings some elements of a response to this point. These captions comprise a relatively stable corpus, whose primitive form was no doubt from a collection of biblical glosses attested for two of them since the fifth century in the biblical commentaries of Eucharis of Lyon to the attention of his son Salonius, bishop of Geneva. Two witnesses from this corpus of glosses also include the sections of the *Epistola* on the psalter, and attribute it explicitly to St. Jerome, commentator on the law. The presence of this text in the Psalter of Angers [Bib. Mun. 18] of circa 840-850, which was copied in northeastern France quite far from the presumed epicenter of the redaction of the *Epistola*, seems to exclude any borrowing from it, and in fact suggests instead the existence of a gloss there attributed to St. Jerome, an attribution that could have inspired the author of the *Epistola*. Yet it is necessary on this point to go back in time even further, because Cassiodore had already written in his Commentary on the Psalms: ‘Psalterium est, ut Hieronymus ait, in modum deltae litterae formati ligni sonora concavitas, obesum ventrem in superioribus habens, ubi chordarum fila religata disciplinabiliter plectro percussa, suavissimam dicuntur reddere cantilenam.’

Of this very colorful description of the instrument and of the learned manner of playing it, however, nothing passed either into the glossaries of psalters or into the *Epistola*, of which one or the other were opposed precisely to Cassiodore on the question of the shape of this instrument. To the latter, it is triangular by contrast with the glossator of the psalter and the author of the *Epistola*, who describe it as rectangular, like a buckle. If some indications shed light on the reasons for the attribution to St. Jerome, others that lead the author of the letter to address Dardanus remain obscure.

Some witnesses, among the oldest, of the main tradition of the text (*alpha* and *beta*) have a compilation of excerpts from the third book of the *Etymologiae* of Isidore, that is, chapters 15 to 23 on music, following the *Epistola*. After having reminded of the division of music into harmonic, organic, and rhythmic music, and of the difference between consonance and dissonance, symphonia, and diaphonia, the author of this compilation brings up in the order of the Isidorian text the ensemble of explanations related to musical instruments: tuba, fistula, lyra, tympanum, symphonia, cymbala. In doing this, he only kept some elements of the *Etymologiae* that were related to the term in question or to the making of the instruments and the characteristics of their timbre. The biblical or antique literary references and the anecdotes concerning the inventors and the use of these instruments were omitted. This brief cento thus presents itself like a glossary destined to complete the documentation of the *Epistola*, the latter which does not in fact evoke either the lyre or the symphonia. One notes, moreover, that this text seems not to have been gathered into the medieval collections written on music, except those including the *Epistola*, and thus presents a very singular character.

In some of the oldest sources of the *Epistola*, each notice is accompanied by an illustration of the instrument described. These are the witnesses of the tradition *beta* with the exception of the manuscript of Prague. In the three witnesses to the tradition *alpha 2* the same illustrations are given after the text. An analysis comparing these illustrations with those of illuminated psalters goes beyond the scope of this study, but one should note that the list of instruments and of their descriptions diverges considerably: the illustrations of the psalters ignore the organ and the *chorus*, but have instead the bell (*tintinnabulum*) and a strange *manus musica* called *canticum* and the descriptions of instruments that show the importance of an entirely different lexicological tradition.

Some remarks are nevertheless necessary about the images reproduced in the witnesses of the *Epistola* evoked higher, *alpha 2* and *beta*. First of all, it should be noted that the captions, generally very succinct, are borrowed except for light reworkings from the text of the *Epistola*. Moreover, the images of the organ permit two major traditions to be distinguished. In the first, the instrument has a rectangular form filled by twelve smith's bellows that are represented by a series of bands disposed like a fan. The central body of the instrument is topped with twelve small pipes of the same length. In the second tradition, the bellows are represented in the form of two series of descending pipes which remind of ranks of organ pipes. One should note that none of these witnesses has an illustration of a *sambuca*.

If close examination of the manuscripts predating the twelfth century nevertheless sheds some light on the history of this text and its diffusion, numerous shadowy areas remain. The first is that of the intellectual milieu in which the text saw the light of day, even if its emergence – or at least

its early diffusion – around 800 in the region of the upper Rhine nevertheless seems assured. The second is that of the intellectual project of its author and of the place of this false epistle in the context, despite its periphery, of the Carolingian reform. That this epistle should have been placed under the authority of St. Jerome is in fact not innocent. In this respect it is also not useless to remind of the importance of the organ as an instrument of acclamation in ceremonies, above all at the court of Pippin and then under Charlemagne, and finally of the flourishing of this instrument and of its construction north of the Alps from the ninth century on. This could have brought a certain intellectual milieu to campaign in favor of the instruments of music of which the *Epistola* would be in some way the manifesto.

But the central question remains finally and above all that of the sources of the author of this compilation and of the criteria of selection of the instruments. The number eight, because there is only question of eight instruments, retains our attention, but one should avoid associating it with the reform of Carolingian chant and of the canon of the eight modes which imposes itself, because this number reigns in scientific culture, art, and architecture of the Carolingian period. The list of biblical instruments is in fact singularly reduced, and there is no doubt that learned men had met in their reading at least the cymbalum, the lyre, the sistrum, the symphonia, the tibia or even the *tintinnabulum*, which are all cited in the Old Testament. This is surely the reason why the *Epistola* was sometimes complemented by an Isidorean cento, which in fact evokes all of those instruments.

There remains a last question, but which results instead from the history of the reception of this text, which is that of its introduction into the corpus of letters of St. Jerome and its place in the oldest Hieronymian corpus. This should give us a bit more to ponder ...

* * *

You urged me, Dardanus, to reply to you in a few words, as is appropriate and in all simplicity, on the subject of musical instruments, of which I can write because I saw or heard them. Of others in fact forgotten because they have disappeared, I cannot speak, because the competence of each one is of the measure of his intelligence (of the matter in question). Yet those that can be described will be willingly explained.

Of all of the instruments, I wish first of all to bring up the organ, because one thinks that it surpasses the others by its sonority and its extraordinary sonorous power. It is hollow and formed of two elephant skins. Nourished by twelve smiths' bellows, it is animated by means of twelve bronze pipes with a powerful noise in the manner of thunder. It is thus perfectly audible at a distance of about thousand steps and even beyond, just like the organs of the Hebrews of which the sound extends from Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives.

Many people affirm that there are two kinds of organ. The first is that of which we just spoke, and the other is that of which it is question in the exodus of the people of Israel to the Babylonians, when it is said 'on the shores of the rivers of Babylon' etc. This designates, in the figural and spiritual sense, the whole Gospel of Christ, because it is united by two (skins), that is the rigor of the two laws (and) by the twelve breaths of the forge, that is, of the patriarchs and the prophets. It gives out a powerful sound by means of the twelve bronze pipes, that is, the apostles, just as is written that their sound was spread throughout the entire earth etc., in the manner of thunder that

is the speech of the Gospel on the surface of the world, as is written ‘the speech of your thunder in the wheel.’ By one thousand footsteps, that is, by its sonority accomplished ‘in the willows,’ the perfect number of the Ten Commandments, that is, that the Gospel is proclaimed by the work of the lips of each of the doctors of the law.

II

The *tuba*, of which it is written in the book of Daniel where you hear the sound of the *tuba*, the flute, the cithara etc., is dressed in different appearances and shapes. Another, in fact, is the *tuba* that calls people to assemble, another is that of escort, another that of victory, another that of the persecution of enemies, another that of the city wall, etc. But see how the greatest experts in the matter understand what the *tuba* of current use is. It is blown into on the narrow side by means of three bronze flutes. On the large side, a great and powerful groaning is brought forth by four bronze megaphones, which transmit four sounds across a bronze body.

Thus the Gospel, blown into on the narrow side at the Nativity of Christ by the triune and divine confession of the three persons of the Holy Trinity, spreads by the four megaphones that are the four Evangelists, and a bronze body, that is the firm foundation of faith and works, with force and a powerful groaning, a sound that covers the entire world, but in the manner of the *tuba* that calls to assembly.

III

That the *fistula* is also a musical instrument is what Simonides affirms, the inventor of these things. See it here. It concerns a filled bronze reservoir, square and very large, almost shaped like a belt surrounding a pipe of bronze and of iron, which one agitates in its middle. This last [the pipe] is attached to wide bracket [of the shape of a T-square] of beautiful appearance. The lower extremity does not touch the ground, like many people think. On each side twelve air reservoirs with twelve pipes placed in their middle are suspended with chains, because of the three reservoirs respectively on each side, and when the main reservoir is put into motion, as well as the twelve pipes disposed in the middle of the reservoirs, all of that frees a powerful noise beyond all measure.¹

Thus, the reservoir with the pipes is the doctor in the middle of the Church with the Holy Spirit, which speaks through him. It is attached to a container of great dimension, that is, to Christ, whom the learned men compare to the wood of life by means of a chain that is the faith, and it does not touch the earth that is, carnal activity. The twelve reservoirs, that is, the twelve apostles, resonate by means of the pipes, that is, the sacred words.

IV

The cithara of which it is written in Psalm 42 ‘that I celebrate you on the cithara, God, my God,’ of common usage among the Hebrews, and in the form of a delta according to the most expert

¹ Cf. Christian Meyer, *Sebastian Virdung, Musica getutscht. Les instruments et la pratique musicale en Allemagne au début du XVIe siècle* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1980), p. 37, for an image of the *fistula* according to Virdung, who describes the contents of the letter to Dardanus in middle German; the image depicts only one suspended reservoir with twelve pipes.

opinions, possesses 24 strings in all. Under the fingers of Pindar, it makes melodies of varied sounds and mixed with sharp resonance heard.

The cithara of which it is question here represents the Church. With the dogmas of the 24 Wise Men, possessing a triune form, in the form of the delta, it undoubtedly symbolizes the faith in the Trinity. And in the hands of the apostle Peter, its preacher, it makes heard, at the same time in the letter and joy of the meanings, the melodies of the Old and New Testament.

V

The *sambuca* is one thing unknown to the most learned Hebrews. One thinks it existed with the Chaldeans and in very ancient times, since it is written: ‘When you will have heard the sound of the trumpet, the flute, the cithara, the sambuca etc.’ ‘Buca’ means ‘tuba’ to the Hebrews, and from it comes the diminutive *buccina*. *Sam* by the Hebrews is understood in the meaning of *soleis* because it is written ‘Samson, their sun,’ (and) see why he speaks of the sambuca. They are many who think that it is made of the bark of a certain tree, and because of it, something of wax, of honey, and of the fragility of wood can be used like a tuba made of a tree branch.

One thus speaks of the *sambuca*, because it cannot be made except in summer and can be kept maybe only until the time of the frost, because otherwise it dries out.

It is the symbol of those who praise the Lord in his good deeds, but cannot praise in the time of cold, that is, of troubles or of persecutions, because of their dissolute life and of the abundance of their richness.

VI

The psaltery which one calls *nablum* in Hebrew, in Greek ‘psaltery,’ and in Latin *laudatorium*, of which it is written in Psalm 54, ‘awake yourself, harps and citharas,’ is not shown to be like a cithara but like a square buckle with ten strings, as is written, ‘I will celebrate on the harp with ten strings.’ They are plucked on the *decachord* in order to represent – like the image of the ascending movement of the hands of the instrumental performer - the one who raises himself from Hell towards the heavenly kingdoms.

Thus, the *psalterium*, with its ten strings, is in the image of the Church of the Ten Commandments dressed against all heresy, and by its square form, of the four Gospels.

VII

It suffices to say a few words to explain what the *tympanum* is, because it concerns a very tiny instrument that a woman can hold in her hand, as it is said in Exodus, ‘Mary, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the tympanum in her hand.’

It resembles the tuba with a high pipe in its narrow part, by which it receives air. It represents the little wisdom that there was in the old law, which was in the hands of the Jews of the synagogue in ancient times.

VIII

The *chorus* is a simple skin with two bronze pipes. One blows in one end, and a sound comes out of the other. It is the symbol of the people of the Old Alliance, who had received a narrow knowledge of the law and who, by a narrow-minded wish to preach, preached all things feebly. Even if we study with wisdom and attention the things of this world, they must be understood symbolically and with (their) mystery.