



The Migration of the Arched Harp from India to Burma

Author(s): Judith Becker

Source: *The Galpin Society Journal*, Vol. 20, (Mar., 1967), pp. 17-23

Published by: Galpin Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/841500>

Accessed: 10/06/2008 14:58

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=gal>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We enable the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The Migration of the Arched Harp from India to Burma

WHILE the general route of the arched harp from Sumeria to India to Burma is widely accepted in its broad outline, the details are as yet uncertain. Specifically, no one has satisfactorily established the approximate time and point of departure of the harp from India to Burma. Claudie Marcel-Dubois in her book, *Les Instruments de Musique de L'Inde Ancienne*, states that the harp passed from Bengal to Burma sometime after the eighth century A.D.¹ As far as I know, this has never been disputed. While it is impossible to be dogmatic, the evidence, circumstantial and material, indicates the need for a revision of this theory. I believe that the harp came into Burma not from the north of India but from the south-eastern coast of India, and not after the eighth century A.D. but sometime before A.D. 500.

The theory that the arched harp came from Bengal to Burma after the eighth century A.D. is based upon two related sets of evidence. (a) The harps on temple reliefs of medieval Burma (A.D. 1000-1200) are like the harps found on temple reliefs of Bengal. The Bengal harps, the last to appear in India, have a characteristic elongated shape with the body merging imperceptibly into the neck (Pl. V, a). About a century later similar harps appear in Burma on temple reliefs at Pagan (Pl. V, b). (b) Various sorts of artistic influences are known to have passed from Bengal to Burma in the early years of the Pagan dynasties (A.D. 1000-1200). Therefore it has seemed logical to assume that the harps as seen on the Pagan temple reliefs are derived from the Bengal harps. The difficulty arises when it is automatically assumed that the Pagan harps are the immediate ancestors of today's Burmese harp. The shape of the Pagan harps is radically different from the shape of today's harp (Pl. VI). The neck of the contemporary harp curves in sharply toward the body. The slender neck is separate from the substantial body, which it penetrates. The curve of the Pagan harp is more gradual and the neck is not clearly distinct from the body. There is no known intermediate stage between these two forms, the medieval Pagan harp and the contemporary harp.

However, the evidence for an alternative hypothesis of the introduction of the harp into Burma can be found among the records of

the Pyu, the immediate predecessors of the Burmans in Lower Burma. Only one temple relief of a Pyu harp has yet been discovered by archaeological diggings (Fig. 1). But the general shape and playing position of this one example correlates with both today's harp and Indian harps from Amaravati in the period between A.D. 200-400. Other cultural connections between Lower Burma and south-eastern India from the first to the fifth centuries give credibility to the assumption that the harp could have passed into Burma at this time.

The first written account of the harp in Burma also dates from the period of the Pyu kingdom. This document comes not from Burma itself but from ninth-century China. In A.D. 802 a delegation, including thirty-five musicians, was sent by the Pyu king to the Tang dynasty capital, Yang-chao. Their unusual instruments and excellent performances astonished and delighted the Chinese court. The twelve songs sung by the Pyu musicians were on Buddhist themes. This event is recorded and described in the *New Tang History*.² The following Pyu instruments are listed by the Chinese chronicler:³

1. Bells with clappers fastened with leather.
2. Flat iron 'clacks' with leather handles.
3. Conch shells of various sizes.
4. Lizard-head zithers with nine strings.
5. A dragon-head lute with three tuning pegs and bridges.
6. Cloud-head 'guitar' with three strings and plectrum.
7. Two-stringed gourd lutes, large and small, the lute itself being of bamboo.
8. Another bamboo gourd lute with one string and four bridges.
9. Transverse flutes.
10. Double flutes.
11. Gourd mouth-organs, large and small, each with a bamboo tongue and sixteen pipes, the longest 4 feet 8 inches.
12. Small drums stretched with snake skin.
13. Two or three bull's horns.
14. Two harps.

Two different harps are mentioned in the chronicle. The first is carefully described, and gives the number of strings (fourteen) and the dimensions of the body and neck. The body was 60 cm. long and 20 cm. wide. The arched neck was 76 cm. long. The end of the neck was turned outward and the apex shaped like the head of a phoenix.⁴

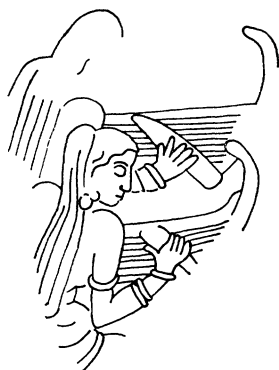
The first harp of the Pyu, as reported in the Chinese chronicle, had two distinct and unusual features: a neck which curved outward at the end, and a bird carved on the apex. Such a harp is found on temple reliefs in India only at Amaravati, on the eastern Indian coast, from the



I



2



3



4

FIG. I *Pyu Harp, Lower Burma, before A.D. 300 (see also Pl. VII (a)).*

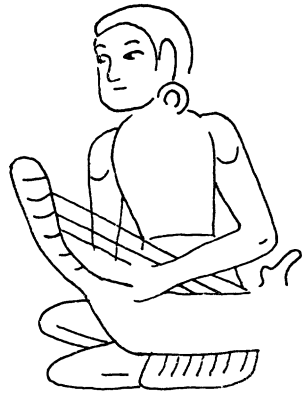
FIG. 2 *Drawing of a harp from a relief from Amaravati, India (Arch. Survey S. India: The Buddhist Stupas of Amaravati etc., Pl. XVII, 4).*

FIG. 3 *Drawing of harps from a relief from Amaravati, c. A.D. 200 (J. Kunst: The Cultural Background of Indonesian Music, Amsterdam, 1949, p. 31).*

FIG. 4 *Drawing of a harp from Amaravati (after Marcel-Dubois, op. cit., Pl. XL, 1).*



5



6



7

FIG. 5 Drawing of a harp from Nagarjunikonda, 'Visit of the Pancacikha to the Buddha', S. India (after Marcel-Dubois, op. cit., Pl. XL, 2).

FIG. 6 Drawing of a harp from a fresco in Lokahteikpan Temple, Pagan, Burma, A.D. 1113 (after Bohmu Ba Shin: The Lokahteikpan, Burma Historical Commission, Rangoon, 1962).

FIG. 7 Sumerian Harp, from Adab, c. 3200 B.C. (after F W Galpin: The Music of the Sumerians etc., 1937).

second to the fourth centuries A.D.⁵ (Fig. 2). This Amaravati harp is therefore the most probable ancestor of the Pyu bird-headed harp.

The second harp of the Pyus is mentioned only briefly, and the text of this portion of the *New Tang History* is too ambiguous to be useful. However, the earliest representation of the arched harp in Burma is found on a temple relief from Old Prome, the Pyu capital, dated sometime before A.D. 800 (Fig. 1). The harp from Old Prome is probably the second harp mentioned in the *New Tang History*. Like the bird-headed harp, the harp from Old Prome is similar to harps found at Amaravati from the second to the fourth centuries A.D. (Figs. 3, 4).

The relationship between the Pyu harps and those of Amaravati would be very tenuous were it not for the extensive cultural contacts between the two areas at this time. In the fifth century A.D., a great Buddhist centre arose at Conjeeveram, just south of Amaravati on the eastern Indian coast. This vigorous Buddhist kingdom was to have a profound influence on the cultural, social and religious traditions of lower Burma. One of the dynastic names of the Pyu rulers, Varman, is also a dynastic name of the Pallava kings who ruled at Conjeeveram.⁶ Among the earliest inscriptions discovered in Burma, dating from the seventh century A.D. or earlier, are those in the Pallava alphabet in use at Conjeeveram at this time. These inscriptions frequently mention the great Buddhist commentator of Conjeeveram, Dhammapala.⁷ Buddhist missionary activity was the primary vehicle for Indian cultural expansion in Burma at this time.

There is an intimate relation in India between the arched harp and Buddhism. The harp in India is seen in representations of the court orchestras of Buddhist dynasties (Sunga, Kanva, Andra, Pallava and Gupta). The harp is represented in the hands of Buddhist divinities (Fig. 5) and the harp disappeared in India at the same time that Hinduism became the dominant religion.⁸

This connection between the arched harp and Buddhism supports the assumption that the Pyu harps were exported to lower Burma along with the Pallava script and Buddhist scriptures from the Conjeeveram-Amaravati area sometime around the fifth century A.D.⁹ In A.D. 832 the Pyu capital was destroyed by tribes from Nanchao, the Pyus decimated and dispersed.¹⁰ The bird-headed harp disappeared. Perhaps its traces can be found in the phoenix which crowns the medieval Chinese angular harp, or even in the upward thrusting apex of the contemporary Burmese harp.

Although the bird-headed harp was lost forever, the second harp of the Pyus, the only harp represented in Burma before the eleventh century, continued to the present. On the temple relief from the Pyu

capital, the harpist is shown with a musician who seems to be keeping the rhythm either with small hand cymbals or by clapping his hands (Pl. VII, *a*). They both accompany a dancer. The combination of a harpist and a timekeeper, both accompanying a dancer, is common in Burma today. The shape of the harp, with its sharply incurved neck and carved apex, is also like the contemporary harp of the Burmans.

In A.D. 849, soon after the fall of the Pyu kingdom, the Burmans established their capital at Pagan.¹¹ This is the beginning of the 'Burmese' era of the history of Burma. There was racial and cultural continuity between the kingdom of the Pyus and the kingdom of the Burmans. The Burmans took pride in being the successors of the Pyu. In the Burmese temples of Pagan are found the best known representations of the harp. The Nagayon, A.D. 1084, and the Ananda, A.D. 1090, show the harp on predellas of stone reliefs of the Buddha. A later temple, the Lokahteikpan, A.D. 1113, contains a fresco of a Jataka story which includes a harp.

The Burmans believe that the Pagan harps are the direct ancestors of the present-day harp. These harps are also the evidence for the theory that the instrument came into Burma in this period from Bengal. And yet the striking thing about them is their dissimilarity to the modern harp. The necks of the Pagan harps are thick and blunt (Pls. V, *b*; VII, *b*, and Fig. 6). The curve of the neck is much less pronounced than that of the modern harp and there is no inturning at the apex or carving on the neck end. The delicate refinements of the Amaravati harps, the Pyu harps and the contemporary harp are absent.

Even more puzzling is the fact that all three Pagan harps differ from one another. The harp on the Ananda predella (Pl. V, *b*) is a perfect copy of the last stages of the arched harp as preserved in Bengal (Pl. V, *a*). The neck and the body are fused into a single elongated curve. The playing position is the same as that used in Bengal.

The Nagayon harp (Pl. VII, *b*) is similar in contour to the Ananda harp but the harp is reversed in the hands of the player. Also, the body of the harp sits on the floor beside the player instead of resting on the thighs.

The harp in the Lokahteikpan temple (Fig. 6) is nearest in general contour to the contemporary harp except for its coarse, unadorned neck. None of these harps bears more than a family resemblance to the modern harp. By contrast, though roughly executed, the Pyu harp has both the same shape and the same playing position as today's harp.

The 'Indian' look of the Ananda and Nagayon harps can be explained by the historical circumstances of the times. Indian Buddhists, fleeing persecution in their homeland, came to Pagan in great numbers

at this time. Inscriptions indicate that Indian artisans were imported to Pagan. Indian bas-reliefs were also brought to Pagan from Bengal in large numbers.¹² The 'Indian' harps of the Ananda and the Nagayon could be duplications of Bengal temple reliefs by Indian craftsmen, or possibly the reliefs were brought directly from India. In any case, it is doubtful that such harps were actually used at Pagan. It seems reasonable to assume continuity in the shape and playing position from the Pyu harp directly to the Burmese harp.

In conclusion, the Sumerian (Fig. 7), the early Indian and the Burmese harps share the characteristic of a substantial body into which a rather delicate neck is inserted. The incurved neck of the Burmese harp is more like the neck of the Sumerian harp than it is like the typical profile of a late Indian harp. The Burmese harp is an early form of the Indian harp, which left India sometime before A.D. 500. The harp first appears in lower Burma among the strongly Hinduized kingdom of the Pyus. From the Pyus it passed directly to the Burmans and remains essentially unchanged today.

NOTES

¹ Claudie Marcel-Dubois: *Les Instruments de Musique de L'Inde Ancienne*, Presses Universitaires De France, 1941, p. 216.

² *Hsin-t'ang-shu*, ch. 222 c., f. 17 vo., f. 44 ro.

³ G. H. Luce: 'The Ancient Pyu', 50th Anniversary Publication, *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Rangoon, 1960, p. 320.

⁴ Translated through the courtesy of Robert Ruhlman, Professor of Chinese, Ecole Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes, Paris, France.

⁵ Marcel-Dubois, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁶ *Handbook of Oriental History*, by members of the Department of Oriental History, SOAS, University of London, 1951, p. 85.

⁷ G. E. Harvey: *Outline of Burmese History*, Orient Longmans Ltd., Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, 1st printing 1926.

⁸ Marcel-Dubois, *op. cit.*, pps. 109-15.

⁹ The earliest Burmese inscription which mentions the harp, dated 1199 A.D., includes the phrase 'Buddhist monks who can play the harp', testifying again to the old association between the harp and Buddhism. *Epigraphica Birmanica*, Vol. I, Plate 21, line 11. Harp=Old Burmese 'con', Modern Burmese 'saung'.

¹⁰ Luce, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

¹¹ G. H. Luce: 'Economic Life of the Early Burman', 50th Anniversary Publication, *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Rangoon, 1960, p. 323.

¹² A. B. Griswold, Chewon Kim, P. H. Pott: *The Art of Burma, Korea, Tibet*, Crown Publishers Inc., New York, 1964, p. 40.



a



b

PLATE V (a) *Coin from Bengal.* (From Marcel-Dubois: *Les Instruments de Musique de l'Inde Ancienne.*) (b) *Harp from Pagan, Burma, c. A.D. 1090, Ananda Temple.* (Reproduced by courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of Burma.)



PLATE VI *Contemporary Burmese Harp. (Photo: W Earl Britton.)*



a



b

PLATE VII (a) *Pyu Harp from Lower Burma, before A.D. 800* (b) *Harp from Pagan, Burma, Naḡayon Temple, A.D. 1084* (Reproduced by courtesy of the Archaeological Survey of Burma.)