



BAM (MUSIC)

BAM (also written *bām*) “bass,” the lowest-pitched string in music. The seventeenth-century dictionary *Borhān-e qāṭeʿ* states s.v. *bām* that “people also say *tār-e bām* (the low string), which is the thick string set in musical instruments.” The New Persian word *bam* has been borrowed in Arabic as *bamm* and in Armenian as *bamb*. The contrary of *bam* is *zīr* (variant *zīl*) “treble.”

The explanation given by the present writer (and offered by him for discussion several years ago) is that the two terms refer to the way in which the performer’s fingers pluck the strings—from below for a high note and from above for a low note. NPers. *zīr* is derived from Mid. Pers. *az ēr* and OPers. **hača adari* “from below.” NPers. *bam* is from Mid. Pers. **apam* < OPers. **upama* “highest.” Likewise in ancient Greek music *hē hypatē* (*chordē*) “the highest (string)” designated the lowest-pitched string, and conversely *hē neatē* or *netē* “the last” or “deepest” designated the highest-pitched string (W. Eilers, *Die vergleichend-semasiologische Methode in der Orientalistik*, Abh. Mainzer Akad. Wiss., 1973, pp. 62f.).

There are grounds to suppose that *bam* keeps its original meaning of “high” or “highest” in many names of places in the southeast of Iran. The following list is taken from Razmārā, *Farhang* VIII and IX: Bam, Bampūr/Bambūr, Bambūyān, Bam-moḡān (see Eilers, *Das Volk der Makā*, AMI Ergänzungsband 10, Berlin, 1983, p. 114), Bamrūd, and, with *bam* as the suffix, Āhūbam, Dehnowbam, Salūbam. There are also some place-names with the lengthened form *bam*: Kalātabām, Bām-čenār, Bām(a)kān (in the province of Yazd). All are



settlements or localities in mountainous country.

NPers. *bām* “roof” is generally thought to be derived from OPers. **pāna* “shelter,” but the Mid. Pers. form *bān* “roof” (e.g., in the *Frahang ī Pahlavīk*) has initial *b* and could well be a variant of *bām* “high.” Just as *bam* “lowest-pitched string” has the attested variant *bām*, so might OPers. **upama* have had a lengthened form **upāma* (cf. OInd. *katama* “which” and NPers. *kodām*). The form *bān* found in Pahlavi and some dialects might thus be a secondary offshoot of *bām*.

The word *bām* under discussion here must not be confused with *bām* “radiance” found in NPers. *bāmdād* “dawn, morning,” in Mid. Pers. *bamī* “glowing” (root *bhā-*), and in geographical names such as Bāmīān “belonging to radiant (Balk)” and the widespread mountain name Kūh-e Bāmū, which (like Kūh-e Šabā) means “mountain in the sunrise,” i.e., in the east.

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