



BARBAṬ

BARBAṬ, the prototype of a family of short-necked lutes characterized by a rather flat, pear-shaped sound box which was carved with the neck out of a single piece of wood and covered by a wooden soundboard or table that came to have two holes either in the shape of a “3” or an “S.” Held in place on a bridge which was glued to the table, the strings of the *barbaṭ* were fastened to pegs placed on both sides of the head, which jutted out at right angles to the neck. The *barbaṭ*'s frets and four silk or gut strings (from three to seven in the Indian form; according to other sources [Mallāḥ, p. 94], the original had three strings to which a fourth was added) were plucked with a wooden plectrum and tuned in fourths, reaching a range of two octaves. During the Islamic period, the four strings were given the names *bam*, *maṭlan*, *maṭlat*, and *zīr*, which suggests that the prototype *barbaṭ*, perhaps inspired by the *ṭanbūr*, had only two strings (Pers. *bam* and *zīr*) and that two others were interposed between the original strings, later followed by a fifth string. The tuning, fretting, and fingering of the *barbaṭ* constitute the basics of what is known about musical theory in Islamic culture.

Ḳvārazmī (p. 238) derives *barbaṭ* from *bar* “chest” and *bat* “duck”; indeed the profile of the instrument resembles a duck, the back forming the belly and the neck the head. A debatable etymology considers *barbaṭ* (Pahl. *barbut* or *barbud*) to be derived from the Greek *barbitos*, but, apart from their both being stringed instruments, there is no significant resemblance between the two. It is also said that *ud* in *barbud* became Arabic *ūd* (wood), which term may refer to the evolution of the old types of lutes with skin sound board into the new



one with wooden sound table.

The *barbaṭ*, probably originated in central Asia (Marcel-Dubois, 1942, p. 205, Vyzgo, pl. XXVII). The oldest pictorial representations of this instrument are found at the first-century b.c. site (Vyzgo, pl. XIX; others date it to the first century a.d.) of Kaḷāyān in North Bactria (present-day South Uzbekistan). While doubts remain about the dating of the “bas-relief” representing a *barbaṭ* (ibid., pl. XXVII), the terra-cotta statuette from Dal’verzin Tepe (ibid., pl. XIX) seems to belong to the oldest strata (1st cent. b.c.) and is at the moment the oldest evidence of the existence of the *barbaṭ*. Farmer (*EI*¹ IV, p. 985) cites a *barbaṭ* in an Indian sculpture of the second century b.c., which seems to appear in northwest India only during the 1st century a.d. (ibid.); however, the dating is open to question. More clear-cut is the evidence provided by the existence of a very similar form of the *barbaṭ* (“luth échancré”), found in a Gandhara sculpture from the 2nd-4th centuries a.d. (Marcel-Dubois, p. 88). The instrument may well have been introduced by the Kushan aristocracy, whose influence is attested in Gandharan art. This form of *barbaṭ* was probably adopted in Persia a few decades later; it is said to have appeared during the reign of Bahrām Gōr, when, according to the *Šāh-nāma* (ed. Borūḳīm, VII-VIII, p. 2259), 10,000 Lōrīs arrived from India, “all excelling in the art of the *barbaṭ*.” (This suggests that the instrument was imported to Iran via north India.) Used widely throughout the Middle East and central Asia, the *barbaṭ* was adopted around 600 a.d. by the Arabs of Ḥīra, but was later supplanted by an improved modification, the *‘ūd* (attributed to Zaryāb, 8-9th cent.; Farmer, loc. cit.), which originally had four, then five double gut strings, a deeper and rounder sound box made of wood strips, and a neck that was independent from the body. For some time the new lute retained such features of the old *barbaṭ* as simple, as opposed to double, strings and seven frets that divided the fingerboard; nevertheless, double-stringed and non-fretted lutes also existed. It seems that the term *barbaṭ* disappeared sooner than the instrument itself, which was replaced by the *‘ūd*. While Kendī (p. 21) only mentions the five-string *‘ūd*, other early theoreticians (Kvārazmī, see Manik, p. 38, and Ebn Sīnā: *barbaṭ* in the *Najāt*, *‘ūd* in the *Šefā*; see Manik, p. 48) use the terms *barbaṭ* and *‘ūd* synonymously. Iranian iconography attests to the instrument’s use until the 4th/10th century, but the term *‘ūd-e qadīm* used by later authors (Marāḡī, p. 125) is probably a reference to the obsolete *barbaṭ* or to a variant with four double strings, smaller than the *‘ūd-e kāmel* with its five double strings. The *barbaṭ* survived for centuries in classical poetry as a trope that evoked Iranian music’s golden age, in which such artists as Bārbad, the famous *barbaṭ* player



and singer, performed for Ƙosrow II Parvĕz.

A *barbaṭ* is pictured in the 13th-century Spanish illustrated musical manuscript *Cantigas de Santa Maria* (Farmer, *EI*¹ IV, p. 986). A kind of *barbaṭ*, quite similar to the original form, is still found in China; legend has it that Emperor Wu-ti (140-87 b.c.) created it, but its use is only attested from the early third century under the sinicized Persian name *pi'pa* (referred to by Marāgī, p. 126). It has also been adopted in Japan as the *biwa* derived from the Persian, as well as in other Asian nations like Vietnam, Korea, and Cambodia.

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