

Rediscovering the Sistrum

An ancient Egyptian percussion instrument re-emerges in the 21st century

By Tahya

Following a trip to Egypt in 2007, I was inspired to add a sistrum to my personal collection of percussion instruments, which I play and utilize for various public performances as well as for personal purposes. However, at that time, there was no sistrum in the “marketplace” that even remotely resembled what I’d seen engraved on the ancient temple walls. After that initial search I shrugged my shoulders and considered it a darn shame I could not find what I was looking for: Harumph!

Not long after, I felt inspired to initiate my own independent study/research, and possibly set about re-emerging the percussion instrument depicted in bas reliefs, tomb paintings, papyri, ancient temple wall carvings, and free-standing sculptures of queens and musician-priestesses of ancient Egyptian culture.

The sistrum was a sacred instrument used as rhythmical accompaniment to chanting in temple ritual as well festival processions, particularly in the worship of the goddess Hathor [pronounced Hat hōr (from ancient Egyptian hieroglyph Hwt-Hr)], the cow-eared goddess of love, joy, motherhood, music, and dance. Used by devotees of the Goddesses Hathor, Isis, and other deities in ancient Egyptian culture, the effect produced by the sistrum—when shaken in short, sharp, rhythmic pulses—was to arouse movement and activity, to clear and create sacred space, and to invoke or offer blessings. Musician-priestesses (a few of whom are mentioned herein) were responsible for chanting adorations and ritual incantations accompanied by the shimmering sounds of the sistrum in celebration and worship of the goddess Hathor.

In museums throughout the world housing artifacts from ancient Egyptian culture, two basic types of sistrum are found on display; the hooped one and the naos type. Both had close associations with the aforementioned cult of Hathor, whose face is often depicted on the handle.

The sistrum’s basic shape resembles the *ankh*, hieroglyph/symbol for life, thus, I believe, also carrying that hieroglyph’s meaning.

In the ancient Egyptian language this instrument’s name was *sesheshet* (šššt), an onomatopoeic

word derived from the sounds of the instrument—that is, a soft jangling sound that resembles a breeze rustling/blowing through papyrus. The word “sistrum” derives from the Greek verb “seistron,” meaning “that which is being shaken.” This sound was believed to please the deities of ancient Egypt, and it is believed that the use of the sistrum might have originated in the practice of shaking bundles of papyrus flowers, a symbol of Hathor. The papyrus marsh was an Egyptian symbol of creation and appears to be at the base of the mythology surrounding the sistrum. It is from a papyrus

Ankh



thicket that Hathor is first “seen” to emerge, and it is also in a papyrus thicket where Isis raised her infant son, Horus. (See Example 1.

This is the *sesheshet* (šššt) hieroglyph:



Example 1. A priestess with papyrus and sistrum.



In ancient Egypt women served as temple musicians or chantresses and, although they were not necessarily persons of royalty, these roles carried with them a distinction of prestige. The daughters of priests, relatives of the royal family, and influential nobles were prime candidates for these posts.

In the book *The Life of Meresamun: A Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt*, edited by Emily Teeter and Janet H. Johnson, the role of temple musician includes the following description:

A sistrum is a rattle that was played primarily by queens, princesses, and priestesses in the course of offering rituals and sacred processions. The goddess Hathor, who was known as the Mistress of Music, was so strongly associated with the sistrum that her face decorated the handle of most examples. The sistrum is also connected to the worship of Hathor through a ritual called “plucking papyrus for Hathor” apparently because the sound of the sistrum was equated with rustling sound that papyrus made in the marsh. This equation was further stressed by a pun, for both “sistrum” and “plucking” were *Sesheshet* (Šššt) in the ancient Egyptian language.¹

Meet Ahhotep I, meaning “the Moon is satisfied” (see Example 2). Ahhotep I is an Ancient Egyptian queen who lived circa 1560–1530 BCE, during the end of the Seventeenth dynasty of ancient Egypt. She was wife of Pharaoh Seqenenre Tao. She is believed to be a devotee of Hathor, signified by her Hathor wig, a wig with curls worn by queens and private women from the Middle Kingdom (circa 2050 BC and 1800 BC) to the early New Kingdom (between the 16th century BC and the 11th century BC, covering the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth Dynasties of Egypt).

I first was “introduced” to Ahhotep I as she was presented in her very own exhibit case in the wonderful exhibit commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Metropolitan Museum’s discovery of the tomb of Hatshepsut, the Queen who became Pharaoh in approx. 1478 BCE.

Duathathor Henuttawy or Henuttawy (“Adorer of Hathor; Mistress of the Two Lands”) was an ancient Egyptian princess and later queen (Approx. 11th century BCE). She is likely to have been the daughter of Ramesses XI, last king of the 20th dynasty who reigned from 1107 BC to 1078 BC (see Example 3).

Example 4 shows the sistrum attributed to belonging to Henuttawy (note the depiction of the wig with curls).

Buried by the sands of time for thousands of years, this historic instrument and ritual implement may have originally been made of wood and often depicted with an image of Hathor at the top of the handle. Transverse bars were set horizontally into the hoop frame with a number of metal disks, which produced a tinkling sound when the

Example 2. Ahhotep I



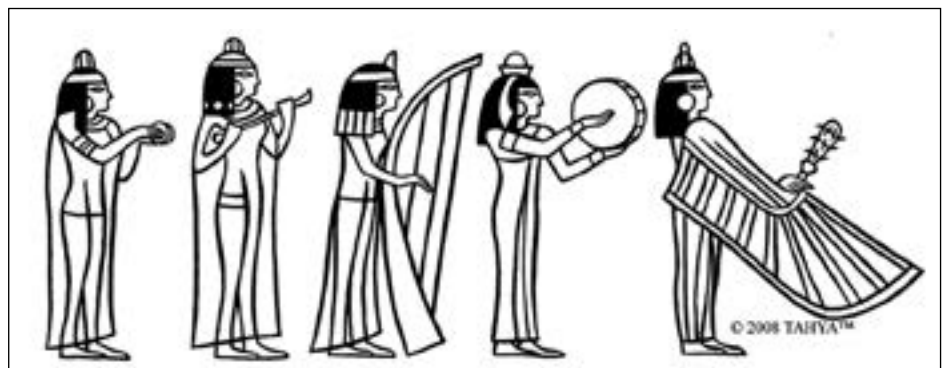
instrument was shaken. Most depictions of ancient hoop sistra reveal rods fashioned in a snake-like design, echoing the symbolism of the uraeus (Greek: cobra) ever-present in Ancient Egyptian artifacts—e.g., pharaohs’ crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt.

In open-air processions, the sistrum was used as rhythmical accompaniment (see Example 5). In ancient Egyptian culture, percussive instruments and rhythmic music were considered particularly imbued with spiritual or shamanistic power to influence and transform consciousness and therefore reality.²

Example 3. Henuttawy



Example 5. Processions led by a sistrum



Example 4. Sistrum belonging to Henuttawy



Royal wives, priests and priestesses, temple chantresses, queens, and pharaohs were often depicted shaking sistra in rituals and ceremonies. Many temple scenes depict processions of priestesses playing round and rectangular drums, sistra, cymbals, and clappers. These scenes are still visible at the temple complex dedicated to Hathor at Dendera, Hatshepsut’s Chappelle Rouge at Karnak (see Example 6) and other ancient Egyptian temple sites.

Among the most renowned pharaohs from the Eighteenth Dynasty is Hatshepsut (1479–1458 BCE). Generally regarded by Egyptologists as one of the most successful pharaohs, Hatshepsut reigned longer than any other woman of an indigenous Egyptian dynasty. According to Egyptologist James Henry Breasted, she is also known as “the first great woman in history of whom we are informed.” Hatshepsut was one of the most prolific builders in ancient

Egypt; her buildings were grander and more numerous than those of any of her Middle Kingdom predecessors (see Example 7).

Hatshepsut was the fifth pharaoh of the Eighteenth dynasty of Egypt, who came to the throne of Egypt in 1478 BCE and reigned for approx. 20 years until 1458. Hatshepsut commissioned hundreds of construction projects throughout both Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. During her reign, so many statu-

Example 6. The Red Chapel or Chappelle Rouge in Luxor constructed during the reign of Hatshepsut (Photo by Tahya © 2007)



Example 8 (Photo by Tahya © 2007)



Example 7. Hatshepsut



ary were produced that almost every major museum in the world has Hatshepsut statuary among their collections; for instance, there is an entire room dedicated to Hatshepsut in New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Examples 8 and 9 are images detailing a block on the outer wall of the Chappelle Rouge depicting the Opet Festival, an Ancient Egyptian festival, celebrated annually in Thebes (now known as Luxor). Statues of the gods and goddesses were escorted in a joyous procession that included playing frame drum and sistra along with harp and clackers. Note the sistrum players!

Example 10 is a gilded wood chair belonging to Princess Sitamun (1370 BCE–unknown), an Ancient Egyptian princess of the 18th dynasty, the eldest daughter of King Amenhotep III and Queen Tiye, decorated with scenes of the princess seated with sistrum in hand receiving gifts from Nubia. As the eldest daughter of a powerful queen, Sitamun would have been groomed for a political role, but she never fulfilled this potential, despite having her own property and her high position at court. One possibility is that she was married to an heir who never assumed the throne. Another possibility is that she died prematurely or went into seclusion after her brother Akhenaten became king. She was an aunt of Tutankhamun.

Tutankhamun (1333–1324 BCE) was made “famous” (as “King Tut”) by the discovery of the treasures in his tomb by Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon, an English aristocrat best known as the financial backer of the search for and the excavation of Tutankhamun’s tomb in the Valley of the Kings. Lord Carnarvon was an enthusiastic amateur Egyptologist who, in 1907, sponsored the excavation of nobles’ tombs in Deir el-Bahri (Thebes). Howard Carter joined him as his assistant in the excavations. In 1922, he and Howard Carter together opened the tomb of Tutankhamun in the Valley of the Kings, exposing treasures unsurpassed in the history of archaeology.

Example 9 (Photo by Tahya © 2007)



Personal note: I believe the pair of sistra (pl. sistrum) found among Tutankhamen's treasures illustrate his belief in the pantheon of Gods and Goddess prevalent in Egypt before his father attempted to "convert" the country to monotheism. However, it is also my belief that out of respect for his father's beliefs he, therefore, did not have an image of the Goddess Hathor inscribed on his sistrum (see Example 11).

Example 12 is a depiction on golden shrine box that was part of King Tut's treasures. His wife is depicted holding a sistrum and blessing the young King. The queen extends toward the king a sistrum and a necklace with an elaborate counterpoise. At the front of the counterpoise are the head and shoulders of a goddess, surmounted by cow's horns and the sun's disk and having the uraeus on her brow. Human hands project from beneath her collar, each hand holding a sign for "life" (ankh) toward the king.

Example 10. Princess Sitamun's chair



Example 11. Sistrum found among the treasures in Tutankhamun's tomb (Photo by Tahya ©2007)



The identity of the goddess is revealed as the Great Enchantress in the inscription beneath the necklace.

Addressing the king, the queen says³:

*Adoration in peace, receive the Great Enchantress,
O Ruler, beloved of Amun!*

Among the Nineteenth Dynasty pharaohs who ruled from 1292 to 1186 BCE was one of the "greatest" pharaohs, Ramesses II, also known as Ramesses the Great. He is often regarded as the most celebrated and most powerful pharaoh of the Egyptian Em-

Example 12: Tutankhamun shrine box



pire. (His successors and later Egyptians called him the “Great Ancestor.”) Ramesses II’s wife Nefertari is often depicted with a sistrum.

Nefertari was the first of the Great Royal Wives (or principal wives) of Ramesses the Great. Nefertari means “beautiful companion” and she is one of the best known Egyptian queens, next to Cleopatra, Nefertiti, and Hatshepsut. She was highly educated and able to read and write hieroglyphs, a very rare skill at the time. She used these skills in her diplomatic work, corresponding with other prominent royals of the time.

Nefertari’s lavishly decorated tomb is one of the largest and most spectacular in the Valley of the Queens. Ramesses also constructed a temple, also known as the Small Temple, for her at Abu Simbel next to his colossal monument there and it is at this site Nefertari is depicted offering sistra to Hathor (see Example 13).

Example 13. Nefertari



Example 14. A detail from the *Papyrus of Ani*



Example 14 is a detail from the *Papyrus of Ani*, the manuscript circa 1250 BCE compiled for the scribe Ani. In this scene Ani and his wife Tutu stand at the Weighing of their Hearts. Egyptians compiled an individualized book for certain people upon their death, called the *Book of Going Forth by Day*, more commonly known as the *Book of the Dead*, typically containing declarations and spells to help the deceased in their afterlife.

Example 15 shows Ani’s wife Tutu depicted with sistrum in hand.

The act of shaking a sistrum was also thought to

Example 15: Tutu with sistrum



protect the goddess and her subjects. This protection is made clear by scenes at the temple of Hathor at Dendera that are captioned:

*I have taken the Sesheshet sistrum,
I grasp the sistrum and
drive away the one who is hostile to Hathor, Mis-
tress of Heaven.
I dispel what is evil by means of the sistrum in my
hand.*⁴

In the 21st century, sistra are still used in the rites of Coptic and Ethiopian churches; however, representations of the hoop-top instrument—with close associations to the aforementioned cult of Hathor, whose face is often depicted on the handle as depicted in Egyptian art and as mentioned in Egyptian literature associated with dancing and expressions of joy—have been hard to find at best and quite simply unavailable. That is, until now thanks to the Mid-East Mfg., Inc. production of the *Ceremonial Sistrum™*, based on my design and specifications informed by years of research.

Thank you for allowing me to share some of the rich and magnificent history of this instrument while also inviting you to envision its sublime and splendid future.

ENDNOTES

1. Teeter, Emily. *The Life of Meresamun: A Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt*. Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2009, p. 30
2. Redmond, Layne. “When the Drummers Were Women.” *DRUM!* magazine, December 2000.
3. Dunn, Jimmy. www.touregypt.net Tut Exhibit – King Tutankhamun Exhibit, Collection: Basic Funeral Equipment – Golden Shrine
4. Teeter, Emily. *The Life of Meresamun: A Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt*. Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2009, p. 30

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- Teeter, Emily and Janet H. Johnson. *The Life of Meresamun: A Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt*. Chicago, 2009

Tahya is a leading Dance Orientale instructor and event producer, and an ACE-certified instructor specializing in North African, Middle Eastern, and Far Eastern arts. She has performed throughout the U.S. and worldwide, including England, Scotland, Crete, and Egypt. She was inspired to pursue these drumming and dance traditions when the hypnotic rhythms and intoxicating melodies first swept her away over 30 years ago. Her classes elevate each participant’s unique expression of beauty and originality. Her talent has led to collaborations with internationally acclaimed artists/musicians/composers including David Amram, Bakithi Kumalo, Paul Chou, Mimi Janislowski, Morocco, Paulo Mattioli, Grant Smith, and Glen Velez. For more info, visit www.HathorSistrum.com. **PN**

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