

XXXIII ESEM - GEORGIA
Ethnomusicology in the 21st Century

Polyphonic traditions in the Greco-Roman World

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Panel (2) Echoes from Greco-Roman Past: Polyphony in the Classical World

ABSTRACT:

A number of carriers of the most ancient layers of European polyphonic traditions, apart from their own history and traditional culture, show links to the peoples of classical times. Similarly, their languages show even older possible linguistic roots (ancient Mesopotamian languages in the Caucasus, or pre-Hellenic languages in the Balkans). This is the case, among others, for Svans and other regional groups from Georgia (peoples of the ancient states of Colchis and Iberia), for Farsheroti and Epirotas in the Balkans (Epirus), and for the Sardinians (Barbagia): all these peoples are known for their rich traditions of vocal polyphony.

Polyphonic practices prior to the Classical World are attested by "triple" instruments from Sardinian folklore in times of the foundation of the city of Rome (launeddas). We have identified a new source about this instrument. This source fills the huge gap of 1500 years between the first and second known representations of the instrument. The earliest known launedda comes from Ittiri (Barbagia, 8th century BC), just before the establishment of Rome. The second source appears 1000 years later, before Constantinian times (the newly found source is drawn from Francesco di Ficoroni). The next sources come from 600 years later, from the Pict monks of Ireland and Scotland (9th century AD), being the last of the 14 known sources, an illustration from Cantigas de Santa Maria (Spain, 13th century). After this moment, the instrument disappears again from the registers until today. There are no historical literary references to launeddas.

The existence of countless choirs and festivals in classical cities, along with concert halls, musical circuits, and the number of polyphonic instruments all around the ancient Roman Empire is also taken into account. As a result of a new wider approach based on ethnomusicological materials and the perspectives of both comparative and historical musicology, we are proposing to include Greeks and Romans in the family of people who practiced vocal polyphony.

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