

UNDERSTANDING THE PAST FROM THE PRESENT: EXPLORING SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE SARDINIAN LAUNEDDAS AND THE ANCIENT GREEK AULOS

Juan Sebastián Correa Cáceres

Abstract

This paper explores the similarities between the extant Sardinian *launeddas* and the extinct Greek *aulos*. Therefore, it presents parallels between contemporary and past music related practices. It also examines the origins of the *launeddas* by focusing on a Nuragic statuette, as well as its possible associations with a figurine from the Aegean.

Keywords: Sardinia, Greece, *launeddas*, *aulos*, comparative

INTRODUCTION

My fieldwork trip to the Mediterranean island of Sardinia took place during January 2017. Sardinia is situated to the West coast of Italy and measures 270 km on the north-south axis and 145 km east to west. The island is abundant in natural resources which favoured the development of complex societies such as the Nuragic. This particular culture emerged in the mid second millennium BC (Early Bronze Age) (Dyson and Rowland, 2007: 54). The name Nuragic comes from a particular type of architecture, namely to large circular towers known as Nuraghi (Melis, 2003: 7). It is believed that Nuragic people originated from indigenous Sardinians who shaped pre-Nuragic cultures during the Neolithic and the Chalcolithic periods (ibid: 7). The Nuragic, apart from being builders, were skilled in the use of metals, one of their main activities being bronze working (Dyson and Rowland, 2007: 73). Owing to its central position in the Mediterranean, Sardinia has never been isolated, as a matter of fact, the island has historically been the recipient of external influences which have contributed to its identity (ibid: 54).

During this fieldwork trip, I visited Pitano Perra, a *launeddas* maker, in his workshop in Maracalagonis. Prior to my trip, I became acquainted with my informant through Facebook. This social networking site has study groups in which members interact through discussion threads. I joined the music archaeology study group where my Sardinian informant is a member. I contacted him through private messaging where I introduced myself and explained my project. I found our correspondence very interesting and asked if I could interview him further. He gladly accepted and we decided to meet in Sardinia on the 2nd of January 2017. My approach to these interviews was mainly based on informal conversations during which I let my informant speak freely. Nevertheless, my informant was very disposed to answer my questions some of which I had prepared in advance.

TALKING WITH PITANO PERRA

I met Perra in Maracalagonis, a commune in the city of Cagliari situated twelve kilometres northeast of Cagliari. We agreed to meet by the church of Maracalagonis and while waiting for Perra to arrive, I bought a coffee from a nearby café. The waitress at the bar realised that I was a foreigner and asked what I was doing in Maracalagonis. I told her that I was there to meet Pitano Perra, a local *launeddas* maker and player. She kindly informed me that he works in his family's tobacco shop, just a few doors down from the café. On entering the tobacco shop, he immediately recognised me and was very happy to see me. We left the shop together and walked through the streets until we reached a traditional Sardinian house where Perra had his workshop. At the entrance of the house, there were a few citrus trees

and surprisingly different types of cane reeds of which he explained the differences between them (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The entrance of Perra's house (photograph reproduced by courtesy of Pitano Perra).

In the workshop (Pitano's pride), there were several tools on the left-hand side corner. The adjacent wall had two shelves, in which Perra keeps pre-cut cane in plastic containers. He also has a collection of figurines representing musicians and other motifs. One of the most fascinating objects was a hanging cabinet on the right-hand side. This cabinet contained various types of reeds of different sizes, some outstandingly big. On his desk, he had two lamps: one of them with a magnifying lens, some pieces of cane for future projects, a tuner, as well as a cardboard knife and a few papers with designs for *launeddas* (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2: The present writer and Pitano Perra at his workshop, Maracalagonis; Figure 3: Perra in his workshop (photograph by the author).

Perra has mastered the *launeddas* very well thus, apart from being a performer, he is also a *launeddas* maker. During our conversation, he gave credit to his master, Attilio Scroccu, with whom he studied for ten years (Figure 4). Attilio left everything in Pitano's hands due to his old age. My meetings with Perra consisted of compiling data which may serve to establish parallels, or connections between the contemporary *launeddas*, the Nuragic traditions, and the extinct *aulos*. Perra clearly understood the purpose of my studies and was of invaluable help.



Figure 4. R-L: Attilio Scroccu and Pitano Perra (photograph reproduced by kind permission of Pitano Perra).

Perra explained that the *launeddas* consists of three canes,¹ a drone (*su tumbu*) and two melodic canes (chanters). Thus, the instrument consists basically of two parts. The left-hand part (*makossa manna*)

¹ The word *launeddas* is plural so it encompasses the three pipes, the drone and both chanters (Weis Bentzon 1969).

consists of the drone (*su tumbu*) which is tied to a chanter with a string.² The right-hand part (*mankosedda*) is made up of another chanter (*sa mankosedda*) (Figure 5). Each part of the *launeddas* is made out of a different type of cane. For example, the drone is made from female cane (*kanna femina*). This type of cane is thick (about 50 mm in diameter), light and has great resonance. When harvesting cane, *launeddas* makers search for these features. The drone is often made out of two or three parts mounted together by means of tenons and sockets. For the chanters, male cane (*kanna masku*) is used. This type of cane is thin; therefore, it has a narrow inner diameter of about 18 to 20 mm. Male cane is ideal for fingering, that is to say, the narrower the diameter, the shorter the distance between the fingers. This also allows the manufacturer to produce more notes, that is, finger-holes in short lengths of cane. Another characteristic of this cane is that it maintains the air pressure.



Figure 5: Launeddas player (photograph by the author).

Perra insisted that the cane which serves for *launeddas* making must be cut between December and March (Autumn-Winter season), if possible, during the full moon. *Launeddas* makers believe that the intense moonlight provided during that lunar phase, has an effect on the cane which makes it last for a long time.³ This corresponds to what the ancient Greek author Theophrastus had observed⁴ (IV. XI. 3-5)⁵ who asserted that the cane used for making *auloi*⁶ should be harvested between the months of Boedromion (September-October) and the months of Skirrophorion (June-July) or, Hekatombaion (July-August). That is to say, the cane must be cut between the last month of Spring (Skirrophorion) and the end of Summer (Boedromion). The difference between the Sardinian tradition and that of ancient Greece is that *launeddas* makers harvest the cane when it is green. However, they do not make use of it

² This section is known as *sa loba* in Campidano (south-western of Sardinia), and as *sa kroba* in Sarrabus (south-eastern of Sardinia) (Weis Bentzon 1969).

³ For more information on this, compare Weis Bentzon 1969: 16.

⁴ Theophrastus (c.371-c.287 BC) was born in Eresus, Lesbos. He was an associate and successor of Aristotle. He became the head of the Lyceum of Athens after Aristotle's departure from that city on the death of Alexander the Great. Theophrastus is renowned by his work *Enquiry into Plants* which survives intact (Roberts 2005: 702).

⁵ Hort, Arthur. 1916. *Theophrastus Enquiry into Plants Volume I*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 371.

⁶ The word '*auloi*' is the plural of *aulos*.

until it is dry (the drier the better). According to Perra (2017), this process takes about six months. This may suggest that the ancient Greeks used to cut the cane when it was neither too green nor too dry. This practice may have shortened the process of drying. Theophrastus also notes that in Orchomenos (modern Boetia, Greece) cane grows by the lakes. Such cane was evidently waterlogged, especially in seasons when the lakes were full. Thus, it is very likely that the drying process took longer but nevertheless depended very much on the time of year.

Perra (2017) distinguished between different types of *launeddas*. The most common types are known as *puntu di organo*, *fiorassio*, and *mediana*. These aerophones have their own tuning (*puntus*) and can only reproduce a part of a major scale. Therefore, a *launeddas* player is able to perform a restricted number of melodies on each model. The specific range of each *launeddas* makes them suitable for certain contexts. According to Perra (2017), in the past, the *launeddas* were made to measure. The first thing that a *launeddas* maker did was to make a drone which sounded good. This was followed by the notes (finger-holes). Nowadays, *launeddas* makers are able to make small instruments which, according to Perra, these are used to attract tourist attention. In the past, there were standard instruments tuned in SOL or FA (*puntu di organo*). Such *launeddas* had a low register and served to be played in the Catholic Church. In contrast, small instruments such as the *mediana* and the *fiorassio* reproduce a high-pitched sound which encourages people to dance. As a result, such instruments were forbidden in church. The priest would stop anyone from entering the temple with such instruments because this incited pleasure rather than composure.

Perra's distinction brought to my mind the fact that like the *launeddas*, different types of *aulos* existed. The most common types of *aulos* were the *parthenius* (lit. young woman or, of young girls), the *paedicus* (lit. belonging to children), the *perfect*, and the *superperfect* (these may stand for male voices) (Athenaeus B. XIV. c.36).⁷ The above-mentioned terms suggest a possible classification by range where the *parthenius* is the highest voice, the *paedicus* is the middle range, and both *perfect* and *superperfect* are the lowest voices. The terminology also alludes to a variety of *aulos* of different sizes which may have been intended for people of diverse ages and levels of competence and, perhaps, different contexts. In contrast to the Sardinian tradition, the dramatists of the fifth century made use of a small *aulos* (*gingras*) to accompany their theatrical set-ups and religious ceremonies (Ath. B. IV. c.76).⁸

Perra seemed very enthusiastic and passionate as well to provide me with information about the reconstruction of ancient *auloi*. He made his first replica of the *aulos* fifteen years ago. The project was for a university student who had a photocopy with the measurements of the *aulos* of the Louvre. It took him one month to complete the reconstruction. Pitano's talent as an artist, maker, and researcher makes him the best person to interview in Sardinia (Figure 6).

While referring to the *aulos*, Perra, remarked that the cane which serves to make *auloi* has to be at least 1 cm in diameter. This type of cane is rare and difficult to find. This could be the reason why people in Antiquity turned to other types of materials such as wood, and bone, materials which were able to be carved into hollow tubes with a number of finger-holes.⁹ Before Diodorus of Thebes (Pollux *Onomasticon* IV.80)¹⁰ increased the number of holes of the *aulos*, this instrument had four finger-holes (*trupemata*) on each pipe (*bombyx*). Therefore, one could reproduce a limited number of notes, that is, between four or five notes. Perra (2017) suggests that the distance between finger-holes may have been significant because of the wide diameter of the tube. Therefore, one can say that on this type of *aulos*, a performer was able to play only melodies composed of five tones (pentatonic). It is very likely that two melodies, one on each pipe, were performed simultaneously. The practice of employing two tubes was

⁷ Athenaeus of Naucratis, *Deipnosophistae*, English *The Deipnosophists or, Banquet of the Learned, of Athenaeus* trans. by Charles Duke Yonge, 3 vols (London: H.G. Bohn, 1853-54), III, 1013. (Hereafter, Ath.).

⁸ Ath., I, 279.

⁹ It is worth-noting here that Euripides suggests that in North Africa, particularly in Libya, people used the stems of the nettle-tree, the Libyan lotus (*Celtis Australis*) to make *auloi* (Eur. Hel. 167). In view of this, one may put forward the possibility that the task of acquiring reed was difficult in the Libyan region. As a matter of fact, in modern Libya, cane only grows in the Saharan dessert around salt-water lakes, specifically in a volcanic area known as Wau Namus.

¹⁰ Pollux Julius, *Onomasticon cum Annotationibus Interpretum: Curavit Guilielmus Dindorfius*, ed. by Guilielmus Dindorfius (Karl Wilhelm Dindorf), 5 vols (Lipsiae (Leipzig): In Libraria Kuehniana, 1824), I, 203. (Hereafter, Pollux).

mainly intended to achieve intensity of sound. This is very possible because cylindrical bored instruments do not have much sound projection.



Figure 6: Pitano Perra playing one of his *aulos*' reconstructions (photograph by the author).

It is very likely that the practice of manufacturing and playing double-pipes instruments developed in the Aegean as early as the second millennium BC.¹¹ At least this is what is indicated by a marble figurine discovered in the island of Keros which depicts a man playing the *aulos* (Figure 7). In Sardinia, this practice may have started during the Nuragic period (c.1700 BC-c.AD 476). This is suggested by the discovery of a bronze statuette at Ittiri (province of Sassari) in 1900. The figurine represents a human figure playing an archaic aerophone which resembles an *aulos*.¹²

OTHER ENCOUNTERS AND OBSERVATIONS

During my fieldwork, I also visited The National Archaeological Museum of Cagliari, where this cast bronze statuette is exhibited (Figure 8). I have to highlight the assistance which I received from the museum staff. The moment I told the guard I was researching the 'Suonatore di launeddas itifallico' (ithyphallic launeddas (flute) player) he allowed me to take detailed photographs of this figurine. Then, he advised me that a local craftsman makes replicas of all the figurines on display and that they are available at the museum shop. Unfortunately, this particular replica was out of stock because it is somewhat demanded as a souvenir. However, the salesgirl offered to call the craftsman to bring one for me. After a few hours, I returned to the museum shop to collect the replica.

¹¹ Although the silver pipes from the royal cemetery of Ur date from c.2500 BC, we cannot be ascertained that these were played simultaneously, moreover, few are the depictions of pipes from early Mesopotamia that predate the Iron Age. The stela of Ur-Nammu (c.2334-2000 BC) is one example, however, it shows a figure playing some sort of pipe. For more information on this, see Canby 2001: 22-3; on the silver pipes from Ur, see Wolley 1934 and Rimmer 1969.

¹² Some scholars date this artefact to the seventh or eighth century BC (Lortat-Jacob 2001: 284). However, this may not be accurate because of a lack of archaeological context (Dyson and Rowland 2007: 76). According to Melis (2003: 52) small cast-bronze figurines were already circulating in Sardinia as early as the ninth century BC. It is very likely that these objects were brought to the island from the Middle East and used as models for local production. This latter interpretation stems from the *Lux et Oriente* paradigm of Diffusionism. This theory claims that new ideas developed first in the eastern Mediterranean and were carried westward by merchants (Trigger 1989: 150-55).



Figure 7: Marble figurine of a double-pipe player from the Cycladic island of Keros; 2800-2300 BC (photograph by the author); Figure 8: The author at the National Archaeology Museum of Cagliari.

The original cast bronze statuette is 120 mm tall, and depicts a hermaphrodite human being who is holding two pipes in his left hand and one in his right. The individual has breasts and prominent male genitals. The body is completely naked, except for the head which is covered by some sort of helmet (Taramelli, 1982: 287). The presence of overemphasized sexual attributes, namely prominent breasts and genitalia, suggests that this figure may be connected to some sort of fertility ritual which, undoubtedly, included musical manifestations. Many interpretations attempt to clarify why this figurine is depicted with an erect phallus. When discussing this with Perra during another meeting that I had with him he brought forth the idea that the sexual attributes on this figurine were done on purpose by the artist to represent moments of ecstasy that this musician was experiencing when playing this instrument. In this regard, Rouget (1985: 7) notes that ecstasy is only attained in silence, immobility, and solitude while trance, that is to say, an altered state of consciousness is obtained by means of sounds, agitation, and in the presence of people. Consequently, it is very likely that the erect phallus was mainly intended to symbolise trance which, according to Plato, is directly associated with melody, and, by implication, with melodic instruments. Plato (B.III. 398c-399e) ¹³ claimed that the whole *harmoniai* in songs and melodies were not suitable for the education of man. In fact, like Socrates, Plato maintained that the Phrygian and the Dorian were the most appropriate modes to instruct people. The *aulos* from the Hellenistic period was an instrument in which the performer could play the whole *harmoniai*. Therefore, it was the most melodic [melodious] of ancient Greek instruments. In light of this information, the *aulos* definitely incited trance, and this may be one of the reasons why it was sporadically banned in ancient Greece. The Nuragic statuette recalls the figure of the satyr and the silen which are often portrayed in classical art with an erect oversized phallus. Like the Sardinian bronze, these mythological beings are depicted naked while playing the pipes; same case with the Cycladic figurine. All this suggests a diffusion of music related practices from the Aegean (Cyclades) to Sardinia.

¹³ Plato, *Plato The Republic*, trans. by Paul Shorey, 2 vols (Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, William Heinemann Ltd, 1937), I, 245-51. (Hereafter, Pl. Rep.).



Figure 9: Frontal and profile view of the ‘Ithyphallic launeddas (flute) player’, Nuragic bronze statuette, National Archaeology Museum of Cagliari; c.700-800 BC (photographs by the author).

The statuette has distinctive features. For example, the partial squatting position of the body may be interpreted as a dance step (Taramelli, 1982: 7), possibly part of some sort of choreography. In view of this, the figurine may be considered as an idol who is taking part in a procession, which would certainly have included dancing and marching. Such processions may have had military or religious purposes, as well as to celebrate special events. This could be related to a number of bronze figurines discovered across the island which portray Nuragic people during different activities. The most frequent subjects are warriors, archers, and boats. Accordingly, it is very likely that Nuragic people played the pipes in military contexts, such as the one described by Plutarch (26 F)¹⁴ where Spartan soldiers (Lacedaemonians) march to the sound of the double-pipe (*aulos*) to engage the enemy. However, whether Nuragic people were war-oriented is not clear. Whatever the case may be, similar artefacts representing religious individuals, musicians, dancers, as well as women holding children and mythological beings suggest other contexts (Lilliu, 1956). According to Melis (2003: 54), the statuettes were used as votive offerings and deposited at sanctuaries in wells as requests or thanks for divine assistance in battles, abundant harvest, illness, and so on.¹⁵ Some cast figurines were also retrieved from graves and domestic contexts (Ferrarese Ceruti, 1985).

SUMMARY

In summary, one may say that parallels do exist between contemporary *launeddas* and the ancient *aulos*. Indeed, it is possible that we are speaking of the same instrument. The fact that the Nuragic statuette has strong similarities to the one from the Aegean lead us to think on to the possibility that a cultural flow originating in the Aegean relocated the *aulos* in other parts of the Mediterranean, such as in Sardinia. Historically, Sardinia has been part of trading networks since the Stone Age, and this indicates that there are still many points to be addressed. For example, the exchange of goods and influences between Sardinia and the Minoan-Mycenaean cultures, as well as with Cyprus. Clearly, the possible contacts that

¹⁴ Plutarch. 1822. *The Peri Mousikes of Plutarch*, trans. by John Healy Bromby. Chiswick: Press of C. Whittingham: 65. (Hereafter, Plut. On Mus.).

¹⁵ For more information on this compare Pinza 1901: 150-156.

existed between the above-mentioned cultures may bring new insights to this matter. These may also lead us to rethink all of the above and to search for other different possibilities and connections.

REFERENCES

- Barker, Andrew. 1984. *Greek Musical Writings Volume I The Musician and his Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bélis, Annie. 1986. La Phorbeia. *Bulletin the Correspondance Hellenique*, 110: 205-218.
- Bélis, Annie. 2001. 'Aulos'. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edition. Edited by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell. London: Macmillan, 2: 178-184.
- Bithell, Caroline. 2006. The Past in Music: Introduction. *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 15 (1): 3-16.
- Bohlman, Philip V. 1997. Fieldwork in the Ethnomusicological Past. *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*. Edited by Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley. New York: Oxford University Press: 139-162.
- Canby, Jeanny Vorys. 2001. *The "Ur-nammu" Stela*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.
- Comotti, Giovanni. 1989. *Music in Greek and Roman Culture*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Dyson, Stephen L. and Robert J. Rowland. 2007. *Shepherds, Sailors, and Conquerors: Archaeology and History in Sardinia from the Stone Age to the Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.
- Ferrarese Ceruti, Maria Luisa. 1985. Un Bronzetto Nuragico da Ossi (Sassari). *Studi in onore di Giovanni Lilliu per il suo settantesimo compleanno*. Edited by Giovanna Sotgiu. Cagliari: Istituto di Antichità e Archeologia e Arte.
- Howard, Albert A. 1893. The Aulos or Tibia, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 4: 1-60.
- Lilliu, Giovanni. 1956. *Sculture della Sardegna Nuragica*. Cagliari: Edizione della Zattera.
- Lortat-Jacob, Bernard. 2001. 'Sardinia'. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edition. Edited by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell. London: Macmillan, 22: 284-287.
- Melis, Paolo. 2003. *The Nuragic Civilization*. Sassari: Carlo Delfino editore.
- Perra, Pitano. 2017. interviewed by Juan Sebastian Correa Caceres, 2nd January.
- Pinza, Giovanni. 1901. Monumenti Primitivi della Sardegna. *Monumenti Antichi*, 11: 5-280.
- Rimmer, Joan. 1969. *Ancient Musical Instruments of Western Asia in the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities, The British Museum*. London: Published by the Trustees of The British Museum.
- Roberts, John (ed.). 2005. *The Oxford Dictionary of The Classical World*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rouget, Gilbert. 1985. *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Taramelli, Antonio. 1982. *Scavi e Scoperte 1903-1910*. Sassari: Carlo Delfino, 1: 283-290.
- Trigger, Bruce G. 1989. *A History of Archaeological Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weis Bentzon, Andreas Fridolin. 1969. *The Launeddas: A Sardinian Folk-Instrument*. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1: 11-158.
- West, Martin Litchfield. 1992. *Ancient Greek Music*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press.

- Widdess, Richard. 1992. Historical Ethnomusicology. *Ethnomusicology: An Introduction*. Edited by Helen Myers. London: Macmillan Press: 219-237.
- Woolley, Leonard. 1934. *Ur Excavations, Volume 2: The Royal Cemetery. A Report on the Predynastic and Sargonid Graves Excavated between 1926 and 1931*. London and Philadelphia: British Museum and Museum of the University of Pennsylvania/ New York: Carnegie Corporation.