*tu-qa-no? – τόμπανον

1. Tympanon1 (a unique kind of a drum familiar to the Greeks – τόμπανον, in poetry also τόμπανον) was not a kettledrum, a description which in most cases is found in lexicography as well as with many commentators who attempt to put an interpretation on this instrument. The shape is the same as that of the daire2 – a small drum with a circular frame (with 30–50 cm in diameter), according to M. L. West possibly closed with skin on both sides, but only one side was struck.3 The tympanon was held straight up in the left hand

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1 The Greek τόμπανον does not correspond to the Macedonian tapan, in fact that membranophonic instrument in Macedonian music tradition is called daire (dajre) – a small drum (see Pl. 2). The name daire is not a Macedonian word but it was imported along with the instrument, Arab dā'ira > Turkish da'ire ‘circle’ (P. Skok, Ėtimoľoški rječnik hrvatskoga ili srpskoga jezika, Zagreb 1972, JAZU, s.v.). There is also a difference in the shape: on the frame of the daire there are rectangular slits in which pairs of metal disks have been inserted. Up till now metal disks have not been seen in the scenes illustrating the instrument but most often, not always, have been depicted as handles (see Pl. 1). That is the reason why I have taken the transcription tympanon – in order to keep the distinction of the instrument itself. But we should not identify it with to modern tympanon.

2 A. Linia, Народни музички инструменти во Македонија, Скопје 1986, 34.

3 M. L. West, Ancient Greek Music, Oxford 1992, 124. There is also a tambourine closed on both sides. According to the illustration from the classical period and the Near East (see in “Ancient Israel”, Music in the Ancient World, Haifa Music Museum and AMLI Library, Israel 1979), the position of the left hand holding the tympanon straight up suggests that the frame is closed on both sides. This way of holding the tympanon is impossible because the hand itself also faces the left side and that position of the hand is wrong. This is most likely due to the two dimensional painting. The tympanon must have been faced parallel or a bit aslant to the body of the player.
and smitten with the fingertips or knuckles of the right hand. The position of the left hand enables it to strike the edge of the drum with the fingertips of the left hand which has been the practice of striking such an instrument in the Balkans.  

2. Almost everybody who has studied this issue claims that the tympanon emerged in the Aegean region in the fifth c. B.C. Is it possible that the drum, one of the oldest instruments since human existence, emerged in Greece that late, in spite of the fact that the drum was present among the most primitive peoples and still exists up till now? It has generally been accepted that drums of similar forms have existed since about 2000 B.C. In the classical period it appeared exclusively in orgiastic cults of the Great Mother, Dionysus Bacchus and Sabazius which proves its oriental origin. There are neither evidences in the Minoan civilization nor any other archaeological findings in the Mycenaean world. There is a Knossos tablet, KN Db 1279, written in Linear B script, on which the name of shepherd is mentioned Tuqa-ni-jo-so identified as Tumpianiasos according to Tu(m)πανέατι — probably meaning ‘One who beats the drum.’ The name is derived from τό(μ)πανος, a word which has no other meaning in the Greek language except ‘drum.’ It is most

4 Nowadays daire players produce the stressed values of the notes by striking with their right hand while those unstressed are produced by the left hand. It is most likely that there used to be tympanons closed with skin only on one side and their back side cannot be seen because of the two dimensional painting, there is only a frontal approach.

5 14 Homeric Hymn, where it is mentioned, is very likely to date back before the fifth c. B.C. J. Younger in his monograph (Music in the Aegean Bronze Age, Jonsced (Sweden): Paul Åströms Förlag, 1998) does not even mention it, even though in many places he describes instruments about which, except vague interpretation of certain fragments, there is no reliable archaeological evidence.

6 In ancient times the drum was a typical shamanistic instrument which made it possible for the shamans to get in touch with the rest of the world and which was also used for healing by exorcising evil spirits. Shamans assumed that their drums originated from supernatural material. (M. Eliade, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, Princeton, 1972, 168–9).


8 Hdt. 4, 76, 4; Hymn. Hom. 14. 3; Pind. fr. 70b etc. Sabazius, the name of the god Dionysus in Phrygia and Thrace.

9 perhaps on two other KN Dk 920 and Uf 5721, but which is not certain (J. Chadwick, Docs, 1973, 588).


11 П. Хр. Илеевски, Животопи на Микенциите во пишењето низмени све-

dошта, МАНУ, Скопје, 2000, 339.

12 There is no other meaning as in au-ro.
likely that the name is actually a nickname.13 Even though it is about a personal name, yet it is written evidence which suggests that the Mycenaeans knew about that instrument.

3. É. Masson who researched the Semitic words in the Greek language, connects the etymology of τώ(μ)πανον with the Semitic root tupp-, about which there is evidence in all Semitic dialects.14 The Jewish name of the instrument top,15 whose shape was actually taken by the Greeks, is confirmed in the Aramaic as tippa. The root *tpp is confirmed in Ugaritic as a noun tp as well as in the Phoenician verb tpp. The Jewish top (tof), especially pl. tippim represents a common name for all kinds of drums. According to this the Greek word is formed from the root tupp- and the I.E. suffix for instruments -avo-.16 The presence of the nasal infix in front of a double Semitic labial is confirmed – σινδών < sadd- or sidd-. Nevertheless É. Masson is not quite sure in her assertion about the etymology of the word, although there is no doubt that the instrument tympanon, two-sided skin hand-drum, is of Semitic origin, which is also proved by its being present in the chthonic and orgiastic cults which originate from the Orient.17 Such a doubt has been suggested by M. Lejeune’s18 interpretation that the word has been derived from the Greek verb τύπτει, stem τυπ, by adding the suffix -avo- and inserting the nasal infix, as a sort of praehellenic term, with a folk etymology. Although it is a kind of instrument which is of Semitic origin, I personally think that M. Lejeune’s interpretation is more accurate because in the Macedonian language besides tupan, tapan, t’pan, from the root *tup, there have been derived verbs tupa, tupka (pf. tupna), tupoti, the nouns tupanje, tupkanje, tupot, tupotenje (from verbs), tupanica and tupalka (tupalo) – anything that produces the sound tup.19 The musicologist Y. Arbatsky, who for a long time studied the tradition of playing the drum in the Balkans, particularly in Macedonia, shares the same opinion as É. Masson,20 which is that

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13 Whether this was about a nickname given to a person who struck the tympanon or whether it was given as an insulting name because of the shape of a part of his body or the body itself cannot be proved.
15 According to the new transcription – tof.
16 cf. βάσσα, ὄργανον, τρόπανον, etc. (P. Chantraine, DELG, 1144).
17 It is most likely that most of the instruments and the Near East cults reached the Aegean Region simultaneously.
19 Serbian and Croatian bubanj is also from onomatopoeic I.E. root ḫb (P. Skok, 1972, s.v.)
20 É. Masson’s opinion has been accepted among all those who have been studying this issue.
the word is of Semitic origin as well as the instrument itself, but he does not rule out the possibility that the word might be an imitation of the sound of the drum. Well, then, are τύπτω, τύπος and tapan, tupan, t'pan and all the other words derived in the Macedonian language from the root *tup of Semitic origin derived from the root *tupp? It is impossible to adopt something that exists in almost all speeches of all peoples – onomatopoeia of sounds in nature and other things. While writing down the sound a difference might appear because of the different languages and the different kinds of instrument. Thus the Hebrew top, tuppim, Aramaic tuppā, Phoenician tpp, Greek τύ(μ)πανον, Macedonian tupan (tapan, t'pan) are all derived from the root *tup, which represents an imitation of the sound of the instrument.

With the advanced technique in playing the drum as well as the appearance of different kinds of drums there appeared different names such as the Russian and Bulgarian baraban, a small drum with a metal frame, two wooden sticks being used to beat it and the technique and the sound corresponds to the name of the instrument. The same is the case with the English drum – an onomatopoeia of the sound of the later drums.


22 In the Macedonian language the difference between tapan, tupan and t'pan might not be a phonetic one, because these names come from different dialects and at the same time there is little difference in making the instrument and the sound it produces. The same is the case in the Greek language: it might be that nasal -m- is not an infix, but is an imitation of a sound – timp, as it is in the African tam-tam. It certainly is a sound imitation in the root *tup, perhaps the Semitic sound imitation influenced the Greek name and later the Greek one influenced the Macedonian name. If that is the case, why then did the tribes, which were for a long time isolated from other civilizations (and were illiterate) and had no script, have a similar name for the instrument? The onomatopoetic origin of the root tup is also attested in the Sanskrit tugh, tuhph, topati, tugh", tuhph", tugh" = τύπ-το-ω, τυµπανον (M. Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, 1899–1979, s.v.).

23 М. Фасмер, Этимологический словарь русского языка, I, Москва 1986, s.v. and Български етимологичен речник, 1971ss., s.v. baraban as a loan word from Persian, Polish and the Ukrainian taraban.

24 Samuel Kurinsky (“The Transformation of Egypt Under Canaanite Rule,” The Eighth Day; The Hidden History of the Jewish Contribution to Civilization, Jason Aronson Inc., 1994, ch.5, pp.113-128) connects wrong the word drum with Hebrew top, that from the Greek tympanum the word insinuated into the Latin tympanum, and ends in the English words timbrel, tambourine, tabret, and timbre, along the way the word detours into the Low German trumme, the Dutch trommel and drummel, and enters English as drum. What then are Sanscrit words tup, tugh, topati?
4. Now, then, is the personal name Tu-qa-ni-jo-so, which was read on the Mycenaean tablets, a sufficient proof that the tympanon existed in Mycenaean music? It was proved that it existed in the Eastern Mediterranean (see above), it has been mentioned in the Old Testament in the oldest texts,25 it is especially associated with King David who reigned at the same time when the Mycenaean civilization in the Aegean region collapsed.26 The Old Testament evidence shows that the tympanons used to be a part of an instrumental band made up of many instruments. A characteristic of these instruments is that they are always mentioned as being together with the cymbals, as used to be the case in the classical period in Greece.27 Music cannot exist without percussion instruments, especial not without the drum, which can be seen in the Old Testament texts. The fact that there is no evidence in the Aegean Region is due to the fact that tympanon is made of organic materials such as skin and wood. The absence of figure depiction is most likely due to the fact that the tympanon was not respected in upper class circles or among clergy, but it was present among the lower walks of life, this being suggested by the personal name of the shepherd – Tu-qa-ni-jo-so.

25 Gen. 31 : 27, tympanons are mentioned along with kitharas; Ex., 15 : 20 the prophetess Miriam with tympanon and the female chorus with tympanons.
26 1. Sam. 10 : 5, when Samuel anointed Saul as king, in front of the prophets at the head of the procession went an instrumental band consisting of a psaltery, tympanon, auloi and kinnors (kinyra, kithara); 1. Sam. 18 : 6, women with tympanons and cymbals greeting David after his victory over Goliath; 2. Sam. 6 : 5, where David and other musicians before God play kinnors, psaltery, tympanons, cymbals and auloi; 1. Chron. 13 : 8, again David and all the Israelis before God play kinnors, tympanons, cymbals and trumpets and in other places of the psalms.
27 M. L. West, 1992, 125.