

The oldest written melody



The pre-war French excavations at Ras al-Shamra, the ancient Ugarit in Modern-day Syria, produced three musical texts written in Hurrian, texts 1, 2 and 3 and the two last seasons in 1950 and 1951 yielded texts 4 and especially text 6, which has been the object of much controversy. These texts are the oldest so far where a musical song is written with both music and lyrics. They date from about 1400 BC.

The scribes who wrote these texts were Akkadians writing in Hurrian, this accounting for the Hurrianisation of the original Akkadian terminology.

The tablets, in all probability, would all have had the same rectangular shape to fit the length of the hand. The first part gives the verse and the second the music and rhythm. A colophon, states that it is . . . . a song in the scale of 'x' followed by a qualitative and deities to whom the hymn is devoted. Then follows the name of a scribe, a certain *Ammurabi*; another, *Ipšali* and the name of one of four Hurrian composers: *Tapšihun*, *Puhiyanna*, *Urhiya* and *Ammiya*.

There is only one tablet reconstructed from three fragments which came reasonably intact to us. It is known under the number of H6 (R.13.30 + 15.49 + 17.387).

In 1972, Wulstan wrongly assumed that the system was ascending and that the Hurrianised Akkadian terms of intervals defined a series of notes, which principle had been previously established and that the numbers which followed the expression stated the number of notes to be selected. In 1982, Duchesne-Guillemin also wrongly assumed that the system was ascending and that all the notes in the intervals were to be played and that the numbers codified melismatic breaks

between recitative sequences. In 1994 West came with the most rational idea. He assumed it is the second member of the interval which belongs to the melodic line. Then his hypothesis was that the numbers indicate the repetition of the second member of the interval. There were other hypotheses. Kilmer and Smith, Cerny , Thiel , Arndt-Jeamart, Krispijn, Monzo, etc., all thinking that the notation indicates both members of the intervals are to be played together as harmony and the numerics the number of times the dichord should be repeated. However, the hypothesis that the Hurrians some 3400 years ago knew harmony which only appeared in the west some two and a half thousand years later is a bit far-fetched.

In 1995, Dumbrill succeeded in decyphering the rhythmic structure of the melody, which had remained obscure for all scholars, and took the scale as rising on the basis of Krispijn's interpretation of a term which proved that the assumption was correct. Additionally he concluded that the intervals given in the text were to be taken as filled, that is c-g should be interpreted as c-d-e-f-g, for example, and not as the c-g dichord as most scholars had hypothesised. This was based on his understanding that because these intervals belong to a precise scale which is named on the colophon of the tablet, *nīd qibli*, that if the intervals were not filled, then the purpose of mentioning which was the scale used, would have had no purpose other than placing the melody at a relative pitch, but would certainly have not given the mood of the scale in which the piece was intentionally written. This proposition is certainly a powerfully conclusive argument for his interpretation. According to Dumbrill, the melody is made up of 6 lines of 6/8, repeated, and to which the vocalisation of the Hurrian lyrics fits exactly. Furthermore the piece lends itself to analysis.

Dumbrill was unsure if there was a relationship between his interpretation of the melody on the Hurrian tablet and the Oriental *maqam* practice. However, last May 2011 during a conference of Oriental Lanscapes conference held at Damascus, organised by Hannibal Saad, he explained the methodology of his interpretation and his rendition of the text to a audience of *maqam* scholars and musicians, they all found that his interpretation was certainly similar to the practice in Syria and started to sing, hum and whistle along proving that the speaker's interpretation was certainly close to its original intention. Interestingly scholars present found that this interpretation was the tonal support upon which the modal would rest, a brilliant

proposition coming from the leading *maqam* authorities in the Near and Middle East. Dumbrill is at present working on the modal rendition of this melody and will present his final work to a panel of *maqam* experts, probably in Damascus, next year.

Regretably, Dumbrill's interpretation of this most famous text has been plagiarised, unashamedly, for commercial reasons and recommends that any profit made from the unlawful exploitation of his interpretation should be given to the Syrian Department of Antiquities for the conservation of the site of Ugarit.

The approximative translation of the lyrics, is as follows:

*I will bring offerings at the divine throne. I will repent for my sins. I feel good after having made a sacrifice. I have pleased the goddess and she will love me in her heart. The gift of sesame oil I gave her paid for my sin. May the sterile women be fertile. May they have children to give to the father. And may all sterile women have children.*

Photograph of the obverse of tablet H6 hosted at the Museum of Damascus