

The Frame Drum

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Since skins, as clothing to protect us from the cold, were dried on a frame in the earliest days of hominid development, we might well say that frame drums may have been the earliest of all our skin-headed drums.

A frame drum is, by definition, a drum that is wider in diameter than its depth. Some, like our modern tambourine, had pairs of miniature cymbals, set on axles in holes cut in the frame, to add a jingling sound, but this seems to have come fairly late, perhaps not until European mediæval times when we see such drums in miniatures and church carvings from around the fourteenth century onwards; none of the earlier iconography that we have shows any such jingles. Others, still used in much of Central Asia, have rows of steel discs or rings stapled round the inside of the frame of the drum, to rattle together, and this, because we can never see such details in the iconography, might be very much earlier in date. Others, especially today in North Africa, have one more strands of gut running below the drum head inside the frame, fixed between the top of the frame and the skin head, and the same applies here – we can never see such a detail. And others are plain, just a skin and a frame, but this is much rarer because most peoples around the world seem to prefer something more lively than the simple reverberation of a drumhead.

It is true, over much of the world, that the frame drum was and is a woman's instrument, in some areas even more so than as a man's. There seem to have been rules and traditions that prevented women from playing other forms of drum, even the kettledrum which, being made from a cauldron in which the women would cook the animal that had lived in the skin that now formed the head of the drum, may have been forbidden to women. Kettledrums, though, have often been status instruments, royal instruments even, so obviously they would have been reserved for men in all male-dominated societies.

But women were free to use the frame drum. One reason, perhaps, is that one of women's duties is to prepare animal skins for use as clothing and some other purposes.

First the animal has to be killed, skinned and flayed, removing traces of flesh, and soaking in water for a day to remove any dirt or blood.

Then there seem to be three main ways of carefully preparing a skin. One is tanning, soaking the skin in a solution of tannin, such as oak bark, urine, dog-shit, and other materials; this is to produce leather. Another is tawing, a different process from tanning, using a solution of potash and alum. This produces a soft white leather, including sheepskins and other animal skins, but also coloured for cricket balls and book bindings. A third is soaking it in a dehairing liquid of rotted or fermented vegetable liquid, including stale beer, and then stretching, skiving, and drying the skin to produce parchment or vellum – the difference between parchment and vellum seems to be the age and size of the animal, larger and older (eg cows) for parchment, smaller and younger (calves, goats, and sheep) for vellum. A fourth, by far the earliest and simplest, seems to be just drying, soaking, and then suppling, for clothing and other early uses such as tents, though other than stories of Eskimos chewing the skin to supple it, I have not succeeded in finding out how else this is done; Wikipedia is less informative in such details.

For drumheads in our own culture, vellum is considered to be the best, and parchment second best. In much of the rest of the world, just soaking and drying often suffices for drums. Since we are concerned here with frame drums, vellum is the norm worldwide – heavier skins such as antelopes, cattle, etc, often with the hair left on, may be fine for larger stick-beaten drums, but for hand- and finger-playing, parchment and vellum are the answer.

Skins are dried on a frame to stretch them as part of the process in both our third and fourth categories above, and while they are still damp and held in this way, parchment and vellum are skived, using a demilune blade, to scrape them to the desired thickness and evenness – industrially today, machines are used with abrasive belts.

Drumskin will only sound when it is under tension, and once it has dried on its frame, it is naturally under tension, and a casual blow (by a mischievous child?) on such a skin may well have been the origin of all skin-drumming, the realisation that skin will produce a sound. But for all normal drumming, a shell is needed, whether a cauldron or some other hollow vessel for kettle drums, or a tubular body, open at each end, for many other shapes of drum, or simply a narrow frame for our frame drums.

The simplest is a circle of bent wood or other material that will bend and hold its shape. The skin can be simply stitched round such a ring, as with the Greenland Eskimo drums. The rim of a broken pot has been used for the Nigerian *sákàrà*, though better ones are specially made in the shape of a rim; I have examples of each. The commonest is a bent circle of wood, whether with a nailed or glued overlap, or a scarfed joint (each end planed down to avoid any localised thickening of the joint). Nailed or morticed square, triangular, hexagonal and other shapes of frame are also often seen.

Then the head has to be attached. For a single head, the skin is first soaked again. The simplest way of attaching it is to fold it over the frame and turn it up into the interior of the shell, relying on the natural glues in the collagen to hold it in place once it has dried. Alternatively, it can have holes pierced round the edge of the skin, then folded over the outside of the frame, and cords run to and fro through the holes to hold it as tight as possible while it dries. Some drum are left like that, but others, such as our tambourines, are then nailed round the circumference, just below the upper rim of the frame, and then the unwanted part of the skin cut off. Alternatively a narrow wooden ring can be nailed over the skin to hold it. Or the head can be lapped (American, tucked) on to a flesh-hoop and tension screws fitted with or without a tension-hoop. Other more modern methods are also used today.

Double-headed frame drums are usually triangular or square, sometimes a waisted sub-rectangle, folded over the frame on one side with the other sides stitched together. These are common in Portugal and North Africa, with at least one surviving from ancient Egypt, and others can be seen in Iberian mediæval

manuscripts. Circular double-headed drums, for example in Tibet and China, have the heads fixed in much the same ways as our tambourines.

Remember, as said above, that drumheads will only sound when under tension. This has always been a problem with any drum with a fixed head, i.e. without tension cords or screw brackets, etc., such as most frame drums. One common method of adjustment is by damp or heat. If the head is too tight, rubbing it with a damp cloth or swishing a little water round the inside of the frame are the usual ways. If it is too slack, then holding near a fire tightens it, or if no heat source is available, rubbing the head briskly with the hand tightens it by friction, which generates heat. Neither method is practical on the concert platform – delaying a concert performance in the middle of a piece of music by going off the platform to look for water or a fire is unlikely to please a conductor. So a number of makers today have devised hidden methods of adjusting the tension.

Frame drums appear in carvings in ancient Mesopotamian reliefs, painted on many ancient Greek pots, and also in the text of our Bible. We know from the Book of Exodus that after the crossing of the Reed Sea, Miriam and her women took their *tuppim* (the plural of *tof*) and sang in praise of the Lord, and I think that we can guess that they danced as they sang. *Halaluhu b'tof umaḥol* is a verse from Psalm 150 – Praise Him on the drum and ? And what? *Maḥol* has a meaning of hollow, but was it a hollow piece of reed on which someone could pipe, or was it a ring of people dancing in a circle, that most common form of dance in that part of the world? It could be either, for the *tof*, the drum, goes so frequently with each. Pipe and drum, dance and drum go together like bacon and eggs (perhaps not the best analogy for a psalm of the Bible), so which it was we may never know. At least we have no doubts about the meaning of *tof*, for it is the same word as *duff*, the common Arabic name for the frame drum.

Frame drums are spread all around the world, differing in shapes and in use. Often they are sacred, for example all around the northern Arctic circle, and down into the Americas. Siberian shaman's drums often have an iron frame at the back to strengthen them and to be used as a handle, or sometimes a network of cords; they are struck with a beater of animal skin. Finnish sacred drums,

used for divination, are also struck, but with a decoratively carved T-shaped wooden or bone handle; they are marginal among frame drums, for they have a wooden shell that is almost closed at the back, verging towards kettledrums. The Javanese *terbang* also comes into that category, again verging towards the kettledrum because of its curved wooden back. Alaskan frame drums are also struck with a beater, often of sealskin, and more usually on the frame than on the head. The Irish bodhran is also struck with a beater, usually double-ended; traditionally they were often made of old sieves, a goatskin head replacing the wire mesh; I asked an Irish friend where he got his heads and he said he took out a shotgun: “They never know how many goats they have”.

Elsewhere frame drums are more often dance instruments, and, as above, often specifically women’s instruments, though men may use them also. In the Greek Dionysian cult, the *mænads*, the women who followed him into the hills, played their frame drums. The only areas which seem to have no trace of frame drums are Australia and Oceania, though they are common enough in Indonesia, which borders that area; perhaps they arrived there after the emigrations into Oceania.

In China and Tibet they are most often double-headed, the Tibetan ones elaborately painted, and mounted on a pole as a handle, and struck with an S-shaped beater, and in China they are often decorated with painted dragons and other symbols; a ring fixed in each side holds them in a frame. These were commonly used in the early New Orleans jazz bands as Chinese tom-toms, along with Chinese woodblocks and temple blocks (*mu yu*) though how they got there I do not know; perhaps as extra stock in Chinese grocery stores?

Decoration is also common in North African double-headed drums, but differently done. Before they are folded over the frame, a hot iron is used on the underside of the skin to raise patterns of lines that are then coloured. I have a triangular example with a *ḥamsa* pattern on it, the well-known protective figure of a human hand, and a square one with leaf-like patterns. The Portuguese square ones are larger and usually unpatterned, but all have rattling elements, sometimes just a snare internally, but in my Portuguese *adufe* there are also jingles internally.

The Moroccan and Libyan examples of single-headed drums that I have, usually just have a snare under the head but I also have very large Moroccan ones with pairs of cymbals let into the frame. One characteristic of North Africa and the Middle East seems to be that the frame drums are used for dance and what we might call light music, whereas the goblet drum, the *darabukka*, or *dombak*, is used for more serious music.

A Japanese one that I have is built like a heavy window frame and has a very thick head (I think cowhide); it is marked on the back with the name of a famous master-maker, Maruyama Sanzaemon.

A modern Israeli example that I was given by a drummer colleague has a hard plastic head with ridges built in to make thumb-rolls easier, and modern pop-groups often use headless tambourines, just jingle-rings that are not frame drums at all, because they are not drums but instead are rattles.

An innovation in Europe of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a fashion for ladies' frame drums, the head often nicely painted, somewhat in the style of Angelica Kauffman, and often with pellet bells as well as jingles on the frame, plus decorative ribbons. These usually had both counterhoops and flesh-hoops and tuning brackets. I have not encountered any literature to explain what the ladies used them for.

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