

Identifying popular musical instruments in the iconography and archaeology in the Medieval and Renaissance period in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Using iconography as evidence for societal practice faces a common problem across the world, that pictorial art of typically created by social or religious elites, and so typically reflects their taste and practices. As with other categories of representation, musical instruments played by the elite, both secular and religious, are over-represented in the art of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Only with Praetorius' *Syntagma Musicum* (*De Organographia* 1618) do we get an overview of instruments at all levels of society (and the first acknowledgment of the music of other cultures). Nonetheless, insights into popular instruments can be gained from unexpected or marginal representations. For example, in a more egalitarian society such as Sweden, the paintings of Albertus Pictor (1440-1507) show a wide range of popular instruments. Archaeology has begun to make an important contribution; a recent survey of finds of Jews' harps in Medieval Europe suggests it may have been the single most popular instrument of the period, despite being hardly depicted in painting. Another source is surviving folk traditions; instruments such as the shawm remain widely played in folk contexts, despite having disappeared from the classical repertoire. The paper aims to establish a popular instrumentarium for Europe, through an assessment of the available sources, and to suggest directions for future research.

Keywords; musical instruments; Medieval; Renaissance; elite; poor

Introduction

Using iconography as evidence for societal practice faces a common problem across the world, that pictorial art of typically created by social or religious elites, and so typically reflects their taste and practices. As with other categories of representation, musical instruments played by the elite, both secular and religious, are over-represented in the art of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Only with Praetorius' *Syntagma Musicum* (*De Organographia* 1618) do we get an overview of instruments at all levels of society (and the first acknowledgment of the music of other cultures). Nonetheless, insights into popular instruments can be gained from unexpected or marginal representations. For example, in a more egalitarian society such as Sweden, the church paintings of Albertus Pictor (1440-1507) show a wide range of popular instruments. Archaeology has begun to make an important contribution; a survey of finds of Jews' harps in Medieval Europe suggests it may have been the single most popular instrument of the period, despite being hardly depicted in painting. Text references are very limited, but the remarkable *Yconomica* of Konrad of Megenbug specifically links poverty to musical practice. Another source is surviving folk traditions; instruments such as the shawm remain widely played in folk contexts, despite having disappeared from the classical repertoire. The paper aims to establish a popular instrumentarium for Europe, through an assessment of the available sources, and to suggest directions for future research.

2. Sources of information

2.1 Iconography

2.1.1 Stone- and wood-carving

Since at least the tenth century, religious buildings have been the focus of highly personal stonecarving. Buildings older than this seem to be more constrained, with only religious imagery permitted. Why this should be is unclear, but when local carvers were let loose on both exteriors and interior capitals, this seems to have been a zone of tolerance, both for representing popular practice and images from a suppressed folk imagery deriving from spiritual concepts older than the official church. The undercroft of Canterbury cathedral (1070 AD onwards) has capitals with a variety of animals playing musical instruments which are notably absent in more prominent locations (Photo 2).

Nonetheless, there are significant variations in the representation of musical practice in different places. For example, the rich repertoire of capitals in the cloister at Monreale (ca. 1200 AD) includes both scenes of daily life and images from pre-Christian mythology, but not a single musical instrument. By contrast, the exterior of the Palazzo Ducale, Venice, which is characterised by images from different trades, as well as food processing, has numerous musical instruments, some played by angels, others by comically dressed characters, probably jester-musicians (Photo 1). The ground floor arcade capitals are 14th and 15th century, although some were replaced with 19th century copies.

Photo 1. Viol, Palazzo Ducale, Venice



Source: Author photo

Photo 2. Animal musicians in Canterbury cathedral undercroft



Source: Author photo

The well-preserved wooden bosses of Norwich Cathedral, created across the 14th century, include numerous scenes of ordinary life, and several of folk musicians. Photo 6 shows a 14th century boss in the east walk of the cloister representing a shawm and a frame-drum. The costumes are clearly intended to indicate these are popular entertainers. Photo 3 shows a 14th century boss in the south walk of the cloister illustrating a rebec and a long trumpet. The status of these performers is less clear, since the robes they wear may indicate clerical roles.

2.1.2 Painting

Medieval wall paintings are far more rarely preserved than carvings for obvious reasons. Religious change and iconoclasm has encouraged destruction, particularly in

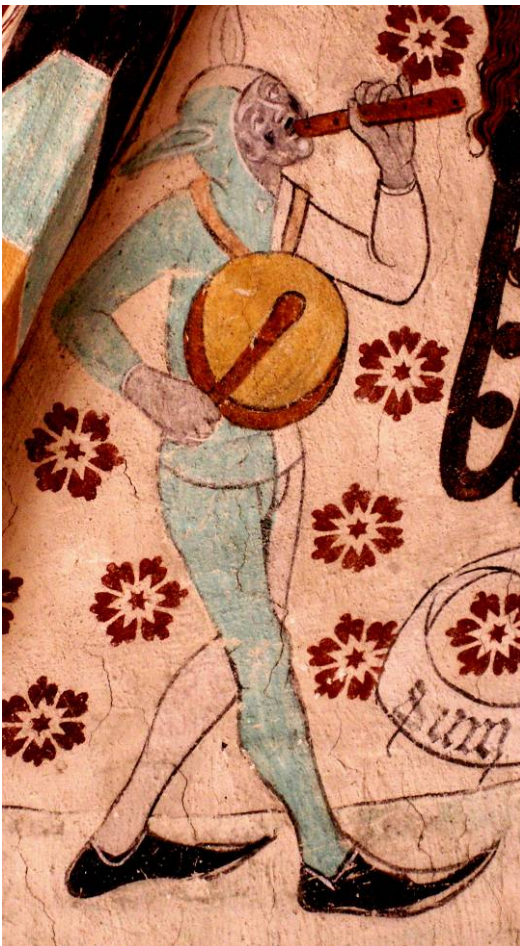
Photo 3. Musicians, Norwich Cathedral roof boss



Source: Creative Commons

England, and paintings are often the victim of climate, fire and water-damage. By far the richest heritage of such paintings is preserved in Scandinavia, especially Sweden. The painted churches of Uppland remain in remarkable condition, made all the more surprising in the light of the contrast with their austere exteriors. One painter in particular, Albertus Pictor (c. 1440 – c. 1507), was

Photo 5. Pipe and tabor, Albertus Pictor



Source: Author photo, Herkoberga Church responsible (perhaps with apprentices) for nearly all the paintings which show scenes of daily life. Albertus Pictor inspired the film director Ingmar Bergman and he makes an appearance in the film, *The Seventh Seal* (1957). The famous scene of the knight playing chess with death is drawn directly from an Albertus Pictor painting in Täby kyrka. The scenes of village life are mixed with more conventional religious representations in a quite unusual fashion, and can be contrasted with the equally well-preserved paintings in Sigtuna, where no idiosyncratic representations occur anywhere in the church. Albertus Pictor makes it

Photo 4. Jews' harp, Albertus Pictor



Source: Author photo, Herkoberga Church

plain these are entertainers through the costumes. Angels are shown playing more established sacred instruments such as the portative organ (though there is also one painting of a pig playing the organ).

Another instrument which clearly belongs to the folk tradition then as now is the bagpipe. Its raucous sound and drone was highly suitable to accompany dancing but was unlikely to induce spiritual responses in the congregation and it was thus always illustrated in secular contexts. One of its associations was death, and there are occasional representations of death playing the bagpipe, as in the fifteenth century Dance of Death by Bernard Notke, in the Nikolaikirche, Tallinn (Photo 8).

Photo 7. Viol, Albertus Pictor

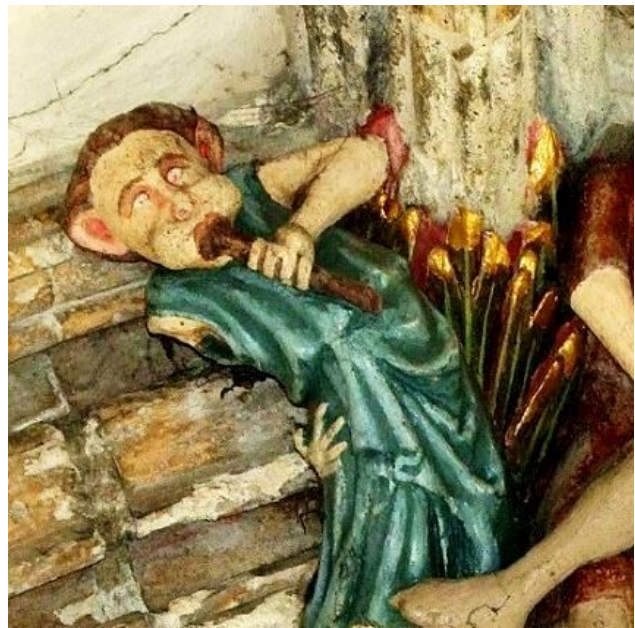


Source: Author photo, Herkaberga Church

2.2 Archaeology and surviving instruments

Surviving medieval instruments are few in number (Crane 1972), but those that exist provide valuable information about construction and appearance, although not social context. Until recently, archaeology rarely contributed to our understanding of early musical instruments. However, an increasing density of excavation and better identification of fragmentary instruments has meant that we can begin to make some assertions about popular instruments with some confidence. By far the most common instrument found in excavations is the Jews' harp (e.g. Photo 9). Kolltveit (2006) has published a wide-ranging

Photo 6. Musicians, Norwich Cathedral roof boss



Source: Creative Commons

Photo 8. Death playing bagpipe, Nikolaikirche, Tallinn



Source: Author photo

Photo 9. Medieval Swedish Jews' harps



Source: Author photo, Stockholm Medieval Museum

Source: Author photo, Stockholm Medieval Museum

Elite and popular instruments in the Middle Ages and Renaissance Circulation draft Roger Blench
overview of finds up to 2006. Far more surprising, however, is the terracotta ocarina shown in Photo 10. Ocarinas with a duct-flute embouchure are widely found in European folk music, but are hardly reported in the archaeological literature.

More common everywhere is the bone flute, of the type shown in Photo 11. This type of flute, apparently with a notched embouchure, similar to those in South America, has been found in contexts dated as early as the Aurignacian 43,000 -35,000 BP (Conard, Malina & Münzel 2009). Until recently, such flutes were played by folk performers, for example on the Greek islands (Anoyanakis 1979).

Photo 10. Medieval Swedish terracotta ocarina



Source: Author photo, Stockholm Medieval Museum

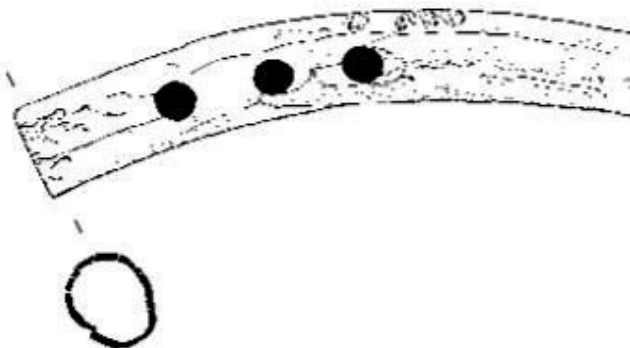
Photo 11. Medieval Swedish bone flute



Source: Author photo, Stockholm Medieval Museum

A so far unique find is the three-holed end-blown horn made from a deer antler found in Thuringia and considered thirteenth century (Hakelberg 1995). We cannot be certain of the embouchure and it is possible it was a bladder-pipe, but the weight of iconographic evidence points to a detachable cup mouthpiece (Photo 12).

Photo 12. Thuringian thirteenth century cornetto



Source: Hakelberg (1995)

Occasionally instruments survive, and do not have to be excavated. One of the most remarkable of these is the Brian Boru harp, now owned by Trinity College, Dublin (Photo 13). Although the doubtful ownership of Brian Boru, High King of Ireland, was dismissed long ago, its early ownership is unclear. It is now generally considered to be fifteenth century. The harp is one of those instruments that seems to have crossed social barriers. Played for courtly ensembles, represented as the instrument of angels because of the spurious association with King David¹, it was also played by the travelling harpers, of whom Turlough O'Carolan was the most famous, moving around Ireland in search of patrons.

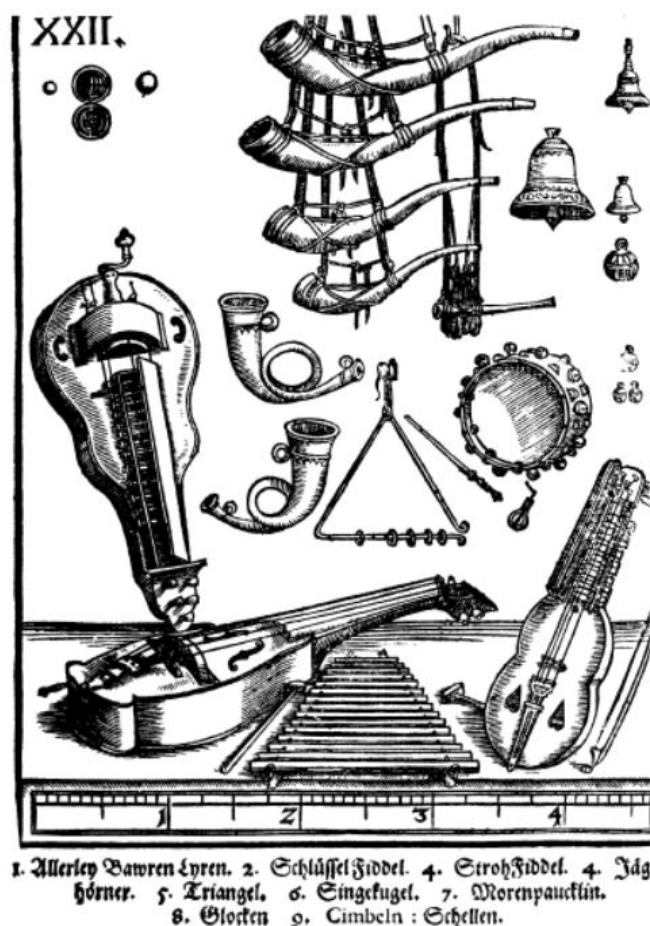
2.3 Texts

Textual references to non-elite musical performance are extremely sparse until the Renaissance. Page (1982) has drawn attention to the remarkable *Yconomica* of Konrad of Megen burg (ca. 1350) which is a guide to household management, not a

Photo 13. The Brian Boru harp



Photo 14. Popular instruments in Syntagma Musicum



Source: Praetorius (1618)

timbrel, triangle, jews' harp, hurdy-gurdy, Hardanger fiddle, and some type of viol.

Source: Creative Commons
 musical treatise². Konrad distinguishes professional musicians from *ioculatores*, for whom *facultas lucri cupida mendica est* (ability exercised for gain is beggarly) and rather scathingly notes that paupers must 'sweat at their instruments', developing musical skills *propter indigencias suas* (because they are poor). The role of music in the quadrivium meant that high status was accorded music theory, and all early texts, such as the *Micrologus* of Guido d'Arezzo (991/992 – after 1033) hardly describe performance. With the *Musica getuscht und angezogen* of Sebastian Virdung (born c. 1465 - after 1511) some reference is made non-elite practice. The *Musica instrumentalis deudsch* (1528 and 1545) of Martin Agricola (1486–1556) also includes references to popular instruments, but only with the volumes of *Syntagma Musicum* (Praetorius *De Organographia* 1618) are images presented of popular instruments. Photo 14 shows a plate which illustrates some of these including pellet and clapper-bells, gemshorns, hunting horns,

¹ If King David played any chordophone, it would most likely have been the lyre.

² Published in Kruiger (1973 & 1977)

2.4 Inferences from folk practice

All across Europe, surviving folk practice can provide hints and sometimes surprising survivals which provide insight into medieval performance practice. In some regions, musical instruments undergo bottlenecks, disappearing from folk tradition leaving only vocal music. England represents an example of this; the rich instrumentarium in iconography of the Middle Ages has completely disappeared. An example of this type of survival is the *launeddas* of Sardinia. The *launeddas* is a triple-pipe, an idioglot clarinet with two drone pipes (Bentzon 1969). It is a clear descendant of the classical *aulos*, and is present in Maghrebin folk culture. Images appear on tombstones in the British Isles in the 8th and 9th centuries and there is a literary reference in the 10th century (Hickmann & Eichmann 2004). However the triple-pipe has disappeared entirely from the European mainland, so the Sicilian traditions represent a striking survival which illuminates a tradition present all across Europe.

Photo 15. The Sicilian *launeddas*



Source: Creative Commons

3. Individual instruments

Individual instruments can obviously be the subject of book-length monographs, so the evidence must be summarised. Overviews such as Munrow (1976) and Montagu (1976) provide primary resources for this material. Table 1 presents a list of the instruments which can be associated with popular culture, when they first appear and what type of evidence is available. There are, of course, many more instruments found in medieval iconography, but their popular status is doubtful. Similarly, many images either appear only once or are hard to interpret.

Table 1. Popular instruments and their first appearance

Instrument	First appearance	Type of evidence
Idiophones		
Cog-rattle, ratchet	surviving example, 14 th century	Found widely in folk traditions across Europe, especially elaborated in Poland and related areas. Also used in churches and synagogues
Castanets	13 th century	Referred to the Catigas' manuscript. Probably never spread outside Spain.
Triangle	14 th century	Mersenne (1636) notes they were played by beggars, but medieval images show angelic performers
Xylophone	1511 (Schlick)	First shown in a Holbein engraving of 1523. Probably introduced by sailors from West Africa
Membranophones		
Frame-drum	17 th century	The Irish <i>bodhrán</i> strongly resembles North African frame-drums such as the Moroccan bender. However, its use in Ireland can only be documented relatively late, and its widespread use only dates from the 1960s.
Tambourine	Known from antiquity	Origin in the Near East and represented in classical antiquity. Associated with popular ecstatic cults. Only surviving in European folk culture along southern edges. Unclear whether the tradition is

Instrument	First appearance	Type of evidence
Friction-drum	1559 ?	continuous from antiquity to medieval period. <i>cf. The Fight Between Carnival and Lent.</i> Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Found widely in folk traditions. May be an introduction from Central Africa
Chordophones		
Lyre	10 th century	Known to the Romans, and a folk instrument around much of Europe, surviving into modern times in Wales and Poland. Existed in both plucked and bowed forms. Survived in Wales into historic times.
Hammer dulcimer ³	14 th or early 15 th century	Found widely in folk traditions from Europe to China.
Gittern	13 th century	First represented in an anonymous manuscript from Avranches, Manche, France
Hurdy-gurdy	10 th [?]/ 12 th centuries	Abbot Odo of Cluny (d. 942) is attributed the treatise <i>Quomodo organistrum construatur</i> . Stone-carving on the Porta da Gloria, Santiago da Compostela
Psaltery	12-15 th century	Gorleston psalter c. 1310
Vielle, fidel	12 th century	The seal of Bertan II, Count of Forcalquier, France, dated 1168, shows him playing a vielle
Rebec	12 th century	Early textual sources conflate references with the vielle.
Aerophones		
Transverse flute ⁴	Known from antiquity, perhaps disappears and re-introduced from Byzantium in the 12 th century	Rudolf von Ems's <i>Weltchronik</i> (c. 1255-70)
Duct-flute, recorder	14 th century	At least eight duct-flutes have been recovered from fourteenth century ⁵ archaeological sites. Pipe and tabor instruments are also usually duct-flutes
Panpipe	Known from antiquity	Represented from the 11 th century onwards.
Ocarina	'medieval'	At least one Neolithic example, found at Runik in Kosovo. Modern-looking globular ocarinas of terracotta with duct-flute embouchures found in Sweden
Shawm	12 th century	Origin disputed. Perhaps known in classical antiquity, but medieval traditions date from the period of the Crusades
Bagpipe	Known from antiquity	Assuming the identification of the <i>utricularius</i> played by the Emperor Nero is indeed accurate
Idioglot clarinet	Known from antiquity	The characteristic European form is the <i>launeddas</i> or Sardinian triplepipe and the Basque <i>alboka</i> . Widely represented in Western Europe from the 8-10 th

³ Gifford (2001)

⁴ Hickmann (1952)

⁵ Lander, Nicholas S. 1996–2017. *Recorder Home Page: A memento: the medieval recorder*.
<http://www.recorderhomepage.net/instruments/a-memento-the-medieval-recorder/>

Instrument	First appearance	Type of evidence
End-blown horn, cornetto	11 th century	centuries, it then appears to die out Undercroft of Canterbury cathedral
Lamellophone		
Jews' harp	Known from antiquity	Extensive archaeological finds, but first represented in the fifteenth century

4. Other aspects of musical practice

4.1 General

Reconstructing other aspects of musical practice is significantly more difficult than establishing which musical instruments were played. A picture of bagpipes may not tell you much about how they were played, unless the piper is accompanying dancing peasants. But if animals are shown playing instruments, we can make guesses about the moral associations of an instrument, but not necessarily its social context. Images often do not show realistic ensembles; angel musicians are particularly unreliable in this respect. Again we can make rare inferences from manuscripts, and from folk practice.

Broadly speaking, court music and religious music would be excluded from the popular category. Major manuscript song collections, such as the *Cantigas of Alfonso el Sabio* (reign 1252 -1284) which include a wealth of images concerning performance practice, consist entirely of praise-songs to the Virgin Mary, cannot provide reliable evidence. However, there are intriguing cases where popular practice leaks into the religious sphere. For example, the *Carmina Burana* manuscript (ca. 1230) found at Benediktbeuern, includes a *Missa Ludorum*, a remarkable popular parody of the Mass text where key spiritual terms are replaced by references to gambling. This was part of the once yearly reversal performances, where ordinary people mocked the solemnity of the monasteries.

Table 2 then lists the major popular genres of the period and some of the key manuscripts which provide texts.

Table 2. Popular genres and key manuscripts

Genre	Key Manuscripts
Dance music	Llibre Vermell de Montserrat
Lyric songs	Carmina Burana, Carmina Cantabrigensia
Secular amusement songs	Carmina Burana, Carmina Cantabrigensia

4.2 Dance-songs: the evidence of the Llibre Vermell de Montserrat

One of the most precious survivals from the late middle Ages is the *Llibre Vermell de Montserrat* (compiled 1399) a collection of dance-songs for pilgrims. The particular interest of this collection is that the compiler includes a description of performance;

*Quia interdum peregrini quando vigilant in ecclesia Beate Marie de Monte Serrato volunt cantare et trepidare, et etiam in platea de die, et ibi non debeant nisi honestas ac devotas cantilenas cantare, idcirco superius et inferius alique sunt scripte. Et de hoc uti debent honeste et parce, ne perturbent perseverantes in orationibus et devotis contemplationibus.*⁶

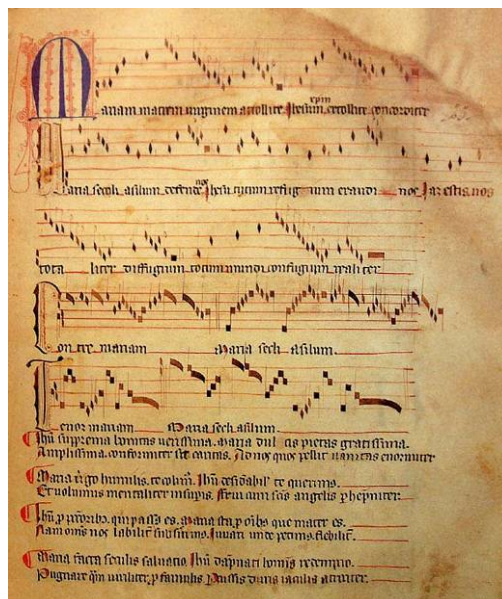
⁶ 'Because the pilgrims wish to sing and dance while they keep their watch at night in the church of the Blessed Mary of Montserrat, and also in the light of day; and in the church no songs should be sung unless they are chaste and pious, for that reason these songs that appear here have been written. And these should be used modestly, and take care that no one who keeps watch in prayer and contemplation is disturbed.'

Photo 16 shows the text of the song *Mariam matrem virginem*. In addition, several songs are in the vernacular, including the motet *Imperayritz de la ciutat joyosa / Verges ses par misericordiosa* (fol. 25v) where Catalan and Latin texts are sung simultaneously. Remarkably, the tradition that gave birth to these dance songs still survives in Barcelona. On Sundays, *cobla* ensembles play in front of the cathedral in the Barrio Antiguo, while passers-by are encouraged to join in round dances, *sardanas*. The original *cobla* ensemble was pipe and tabor, shawm and bagpipes, about as medieval a grouping as survives in modern Europe.

4.3 Folk polyphony

One of the most distinctive aspects of vocal music in southern Europe is the use of polyphony. Polyphony in the classical tradition developed from the organum pioneered by Perotin in Paris in the twelfth century. By the time of Machaut, it was fully developed and has remained a basic compositional tool ever since. Across all of Northern Europe, the characteristic structural type is monophonic music. However, in southern Europe, folk polyphony persists especially on the islands of the Mediterranean, quite different from classical polyphony, which suggests it is both ancient and was once more widespread. These traditions are as follows;

Photo 16. The song *Mariam matrem virginem*



Source: Creative Commons

Table 3. Southern European traditions of vocal polyphony

Place	Reference	Comment
Corsica	Macchiarella (2008)	Records of <i>cunfraternità</i> (singing brotherhoods) go back to the 12 th century, although the current style may be of 15 th century origin
Sardinia	Macchiarella (2008)	
Sicily	Macchiarella (2008)	
Balkans	Ahmedaja & Haid (2008)	This tradition spreads from Montenegro to Macedonia and Epirus
Albania	Ahmedaja & Haid (2008)	Albanian migrants, such as the Arberesh in Southern Italy, have carried the polyphonic tradition with them

Documentation for the antiquity of these traditions remains weak, although their distribution (and relatives further afield in Georgia and Armenia) suggests it is a type of singing that preceded the dominant monophony.

5. Directions for future research

Although in some ways the iconography of the Middle Ages and Renaissance would appear to be well-explored, the inventory of stone- and wood-carvings on religious buildings across Europe has barely begun. A comprehensive list does not exist for any country of the existence, dates, state of preservation and interpretation of such carvings. Yet they remain crucial to the reconstruction of daily life in a period when texts have little or nothing to say. Elite forms of iconography, such as painting, typically do not represent ordinary life, with a few exceptions. If we want to better understand the contexts of music in the medieval period and its relationship with broader societal trends, much work remains to be done.

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