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توری با خانواده سالتیمبنک و نوازندگان ایران باستان (حدود ۶۰۰ پیش از میلاد)  
خاویر آوارز مون

چکیده

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واژگان کلیدی: عیلام، ارجان، خانواده سالتیمبنک، آکروبات، پیکاسو، پیرادی، ماری.

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Between Picasso and Piradi  
On tour with Saltimbanques and Musicians from ancient Iran (c. 600 BC)  
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Abstract

This article offers a new line drawing and photographs of the saltimbanques and musicians depicted in register II of the Arjan Bowl (c. 600 BC) housed at the National Museum of Iran and briefly investigates their social role within a broader Near Eastern context. At the same time, it frames the significance of these Elamite performers from ancient Iran in historical Western traditions of entertainment and artistic production.

**Keywords:** Elam; Arjan, Saltimbanques; Acrobats; Picasso; Piradi; Mari.

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*The next evening, we met on boulevard Rochechouart at the entrance to the (Médrano) circus. Picasso got a ringside seat [...]. In the second part of the program that evening, there was a group of equilibrists: three nude muscular bodies formed bold patterns by climbing on top of one another.*

*A few days later, when I visited Picasso, he pointed out a stack of canvases facing the wall and told me: "I am going to show you something. Look!"*

*There were our equilibrists from the other night! I had caught Picasso red-handed in the act of inspiration. [...] It was the first time I was able to see how, in his pursuit of a more profound resemblance, Picasso purified his subject matter down to its essential and identifiable traits. [...] A daring transposition had occurred. Yet it still captured the very particular atmosphere of the circus, with the luminous oval of the ring, the shining stars on the big top canopy, the audience in semidarkness. The group of acrobats was reduced to an ideogram vibrating in the beam of the spotlights.*

*Brassai, Conversations with Picasso (1999: 19-20)*

### From Picasso to Piradi

Not yet abstract or cubist in 1905 the painter Pablo Picasso was in his "cheerful" Rose (orange and pink) Circus Period and in his *Family of Saltimbanques*—staged on a lifeless neutral background, emotionally disconnected and unsettled—he portrayed a subject that, in one form or another, would continue to accompany him for the rest of his career: wandering acrobats and circus performers. Picasso's obsession with saltimbanques, from Italian "to leap on a bench/stage" [*salta(re) in banco*], was both deeply personal and intellectual. A few years earlier, while living in Barcelona, the 15-year-old Pablo had carried on an intense three-year romantic relationship with circus star Rosita de Oro ("Golden Rosita"), who unwrapped for him a world of wonder outside the visual and emotional boundaries dictated by the establishment. Non-conformist, poor, marginalized, and destined to wander, these circus performers made an indelible impression on young Pablo, growing inside him as an alter-ego that plotted the next acrobatic leaps in his artistic career.

The turn-of-the-twentieth century European circus experienced by Picasso showcased

entertainment traditions whose origins can be traced back to the societies of the ancient Near East<sup>1</sup>. More than forty vertiginous centuries ago, at the end of the 3rd millennium BC, the cuneiform records of the Syrian cities of Ebla and Nagar (Tell Brak) bear witness to the existence of groups of professional entertainers known as *huppûm* (HÚB) whose performances included acrobatic movements and dances accompanied by music<sup>2</sup>. The celebrated archives from the kingdom of Mari, dated to the time of king Zimri-Lim (1775-1761 BC), have brought forth a new stage to the activities and social status of the *huppûm* as exemplified, in particular, by one of the most celebrated performers of the time: the saltimbanque Piradi.

1. The invention of the modern circus traces its intellectual roots to the enlightenment, taking shape as an institution in 1768 London with the amphitheatre of Philip Astley and his equestrian spectacle, which also included musicians, clowns, saltimbanques and dancing dogs (Jacob 2019: 30). Troupes of comedians had been criss-crossing the European courts to perform for the elites of the day since the time of the Italian Commedia dell'Arte. The celebrated I Gelosi from Milan (1569-1604) for example, considered to be the first European Commedia dell'Arte troupe, were patronized by nobility of the courts of France, Poland, Spain, Germany, and England. By the early European Middle Ages, the boundaries between comedians and acrobats were indistinct with professional traveling entertainers embracing musicians, poets "singers of epics", "jugglers" and saltimbanques/acrobats (Faral 1987: 2). For various definitions of acrobats and historical backgrounds see Peignist (2005: 140-142). For the Greco-Roman origins of these traditions see Faral 1987: 10-24; for possible Near-Eastern influences in the figure of the Greek jester (alazôn) see Rumor (2017: 188-9). The exact etymology of the noun *aluzin-nu* "clowns and entertainers; a kind of cabaret performer" has always represented a conundrum. In its earliest attestations (at the opening of the 2nd millennium BCE) the term is, in fact, only found in texts written in the Akkadian language, and yet it is not Akkadian. Nor has a Sumerian etymology been found so far in extant documents (see discussion by Ziegler 2007: 277-280).

2. The term HÚB (variant HÚB.KI) is frequent in the administrative texts from Ebla dated to the reign of Ishar-damu (c. 2320 BC). Often, they appear together with musicians/singers (*nar*) and comedians, dancers and musicians (*NE-di*). Catagnoti associates them with the Akkadian *huppûm* (acrobats, cultic dancers). The HÚB appear in the texts receiving three pieces of garments, metal bracelets, a belt, an earring, and sometimes a headband; wooden and silver objects such as a pair of bowls and "tools" perhaps an axe, scissors and a saw (Catagnoti 1997). A recent article by Oates, Molleson and Soltysiak (2008: 396-7) claims to have found at Tell Brak the skeletal remains of an acrobat dated to c. 2250 BC and, as further confirmation of this interpretation, point to the representation of "spiky-haired" acrobats bending backwards on a contemporary seal impression. These figures have also been interpreted as "impaled captives" (Steele et al. 2003: 244).

Piradi was senior member of the *huppûm* corporation of Mari having under his authority twelve male individuals, perhaps members of the local troupe of saltimbanques<sup>3</sup>. Like modern athletes seeking mastery of body (and breath?), their craft was taught from infancy and involved challenging physical exercises combining balance and movement and described in texts as “playing”, “changing side non-stop”, “turnaround”, and perhaps “to do cabrioles”. Complemented by music and singing, their choreographed cultic dances and acrobatic performances took place in the context of banqueting and religious festivities showcased in temple and palace. Piradi and his troupe of acrobats, musicians and additional members of the court accompanied king Zimri-Lim during periodic visits to vassal territories and neighboring kingdoms. Vice versa, in 1775 BC during the visit to Mari of the king of Kurda, Simah-ilane, the saltimbanques offered three performances at royal banquets and one during the festivities of Ishtar in the nearby town of Der<sup>4</sup>. These performances were rewarded with gifts such as precious metals as well as wine rations, anointing oil, and luxury textiles or garments (stitched with gold?)<sup>5</sup>.

Piradi and his troupe faced rivalry from neighbouring acrobats and the ridicule and antagonism of local musicians. Zimri-lim's marriage to princess Shibtu, daughter of Su-

mu-Epuh king of Halep (Aleppo/Aleppo), brought Mari into closer contact with the famed “Halep school” of saltimbanques, a learning center dedicated to the art of the *huppûm* whose competition was of particular concern to Piradi. Mari was also home to about 50 adult male and child musicians and more than 250 female musicians based in the palace; these are rather large numbers considering the total estimated population of the city and its surroundings<sup>6</sup>. The musicians and saltimbanques maintained antagonistic relations, as the latter appear to have been excluded from the elite Mari learned “conservatory” or “academy” (*mumum*). The *mumum* was directed by the head of the musicians (the *nargallum*) and, in addition to musicians, its membership was reserved for the *aluzinnum* (jesters, clowns, entertainers), and perhaps the *kalûm* (lamentation singers)<sup>7</sup>. Hostility between Piradi and the *nargallum* came head-to-head when he was accused by palace musicians of offending the *mumum* with his sarcasm<sup>8</sup>. In a letter to king Zimri-Lim, Piradi addressed the issue, expressing his own professional frustrations: “I do a terrific job and no one helps...”, followed by an appeal to the ruler's own judgment: “now my lord knows deep in his heart when I have uttered (slander) and when I have not”<sup>9</sup>.

These antagonisms may have been personal but also appear to have been institutional, revealing cultural stereotypes against the physical activities and the presumed lower mental abilities of the saltimbanques versus the superior “artistic” traditions upheld by the members of the *mumum* “academy”. If accurately interpreted, these biases reveal a chasm between the arts of the body and physical dexterity versus the (inspired) activities of the intellect; a mind versus body dichotomy which also nurtured ideals of creativity entrenched in Western intellectual and artistic traditions<sup>10</sup>. Despite these divisions,

3. Note the terms saltimbanque and acrobat are used here interchangeably.

4. Some of the performers in the religious festivals could be locals but there were also itinerant troupes performing their skills. These artists were compensated with jewelry, clothing and meats (Durand 2002: 32).

5. (Zimri-Lim year 7, 1767) trip to Hušlâ: Piradi received one silver ring valued at 5 shekels, and a *hubûsum*-knife; (Zimri-Lim year 9; 1765) Piradi performed for the king in the temple of Bêlet-ekallim after the king's return from Ugarit and received 1 first-quality *massillatum*-textile. On another occasion (Zimri-Lim year 11, 1763) Piradi received another 1 first-quality *massillatum*-textile; and in another (Zimri-Lim year 12, 1762) a ration of wine (Durand 2002: 61; Ziegler 2007: 266-8). For discussion on *massillatum* see Watson (2017). An extensively discussed text from Mari dated to the late Old Babylonian period (c. 1800-1595 BC) narrates the sequence of activities describing a cultic ceremony performed early in the morning in celebration of the goddess Ishtar. The king attended the ritual framed by his bodyguards while a lamentation priest sang in Sumerian language accompanied by drums and the acts of a group of jugglers, wrestlers, saltimbanques and cross-dressers (Dossin 1938, Sasson 1990, Durand and Guichard 1997, Ziegler 2007).

6. The city itself may have had about 2,000 inhabitants while the surrounding neighbourhood may have included about 13,000 (Ziegler 2007: 3, nt. 8).

7. For the *mumum* see Ziegler (2007: 77-78).

8. For the characteristics and status of the *nargallum* see Ziegler (2007: 7-12).

9. Letter 67 [A.440]; see Ziegler (2007: 270-273).

10. For discussion of this stereotype in the history of Greek and Medieval sport see Young (2005).

musicians and saltimbanques must have performed together in concert, and, as we shall see below in the much later example from the Arjan bowl, the same entertainer could showcase musical and acrobatic skills at the same time.

### **Let the Show Begin! Saltimbanques and Musicians of the Arjan Bowl (c. 600 BC)**

In 1982, a stone-lined tomb was discovered by accident on the left bank of the Marun river near the ancient city of Arjan and the present-day city of Behbahan. Inside the chamber was a bronze bathtub-style coffin with the interment of an adult male equipped with an ornate iron dagger, an intriguing gold “ring” with flaring, decorated, disc-shaped finials, some textile remains and dozens of gold appliqués. Outside the coffin were several metal vessels, a tall bronze “candelabrum”, and a lamp. Four objects from the tomb—the “ring”, the candelabrum, a large bronze bowl and a silver vase—were engraved with a late Neo-Elamite cuneiform inscription: Kidin-Hutran son of Kurlush. The Elamite name Kidin-Hutran combines Kidin, a recurrent name in Neo-Elamite and Achaemenid documentation, and the divine name Hutran. The father’s name, Kurlush, is possibly, but not certainly, Iranian. This inscription manifests Elamite-Iranian acculturation within a noble or even royal family. The metal grave goods appear to have been manufactured around 600 BC, but the addition of the inscriptions and the interment itself were probably slightly later events occurring, perhaps, around 575 BC<sup>11</sup>.

Housed at the National Museum of Iran, the bronze bowl from Arjan (with 11.73% of tin) has a diameter of 43.5 cm and a height of 8.5cm [Fig. 1]<sup>12</sup>. The entire inner surface is engraved with a central rosette encircled by five concentric registers divided by guilloche bands [Fig. 2]. These circular registers carry sequential narratives brought to life by a rich iconographic vocabulary: 112 human figures, 66 animals of 33 species, diverse trees, and various artifacts. We may be gazing here upon an edited series of events associated with the

ruling Elamite elite, perhaps an Elamite king, with motifs and themes adapted from an earlier corpus of Syro-Phoenician bronze bowls and Assyrian bronze and ivory work. Undoubtedly, the bowl reflects periods of interaction between Assyrian and Elamite ruling classes as well as the participation of elite artists carrying on a two-century old metalwork tradition<sup>13</sup>.

Beginning at the outer edge of the bowl (Register V) the first register is structured into two narratives, the return of a hunting party (Va) and a drinking ceremony (Vb) separated by mountain ranges. The drinking ceremony takes place outside a portable tent dwelling. The next register (IV) comprises two main narratives unfolding on the periphery of a fortified city: a mock battle (IVa) and date harvesting and fishing in a marsh (IVb). The actions in the next two registers (III and II) develop inside the city—the familiar space par excellence—and offer a fascinating window into two activities carried out in the Neo-Elamite court: the tribute procession (Register III) and the feast with music (Register II). Certain elements in the tribute procession speak for a Neo-Elamite participation in the formation of the classic Persian tribute scene in which the enthroned king, with the “prince” standing behind or beside him, receives an individual making a reverent gesture while a procession of tribute-bearers bring various animals.

The second scene (Register II) offers a coordinated feast for the senses. In the absence of a sharply defined focal point, our attention drifts from the preparation of food, to performances by musicians, dancers, and acrobats, to a loosely arranged central event in which, amidst this panoply of sights, sounds and smells, a cup bearer, the most trusted and loyal servant of the ruler, pours liquid into a bowl as he approaches the seated king from behind. Two individuals, one perhaps wearing an Elamite round-knobbed helmet, are crouching on the ground before the king indicating perhaps some level of verbal interaction. Since no religious attributes such as sculptures of deities or divine symbols are observable it is most likely that we are witnessing a banquet-sympo-

11. Álvarez-Mon 2020: 392.

12. Álvarez-Mon 2004. See Vatandoust (1999: 31) for metal composition.

13. For the chronology of “Phoenician” bowls see Markoe (1985: 156).



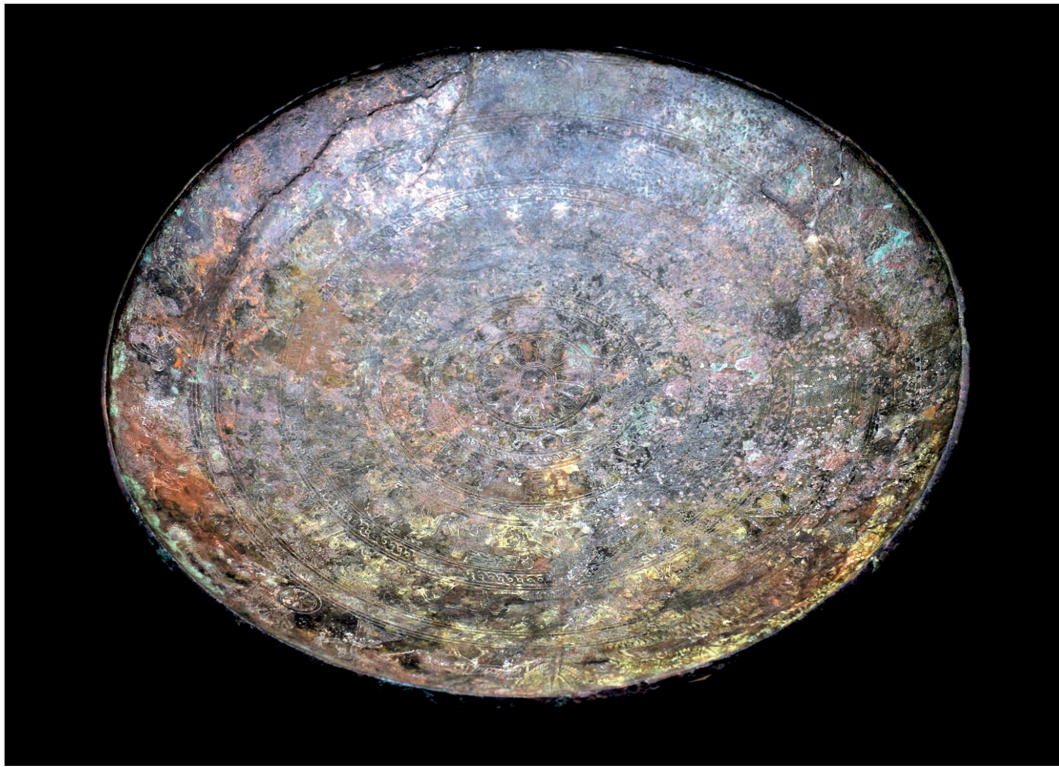


Fig. 1. Photograph of the Arjan bowl by M.R. Rokni (Copyright © National Museum of Iran). Line-drawing of the Arjan bowl after R. Vatandoust (in Towhidi and Khalilian 1982).

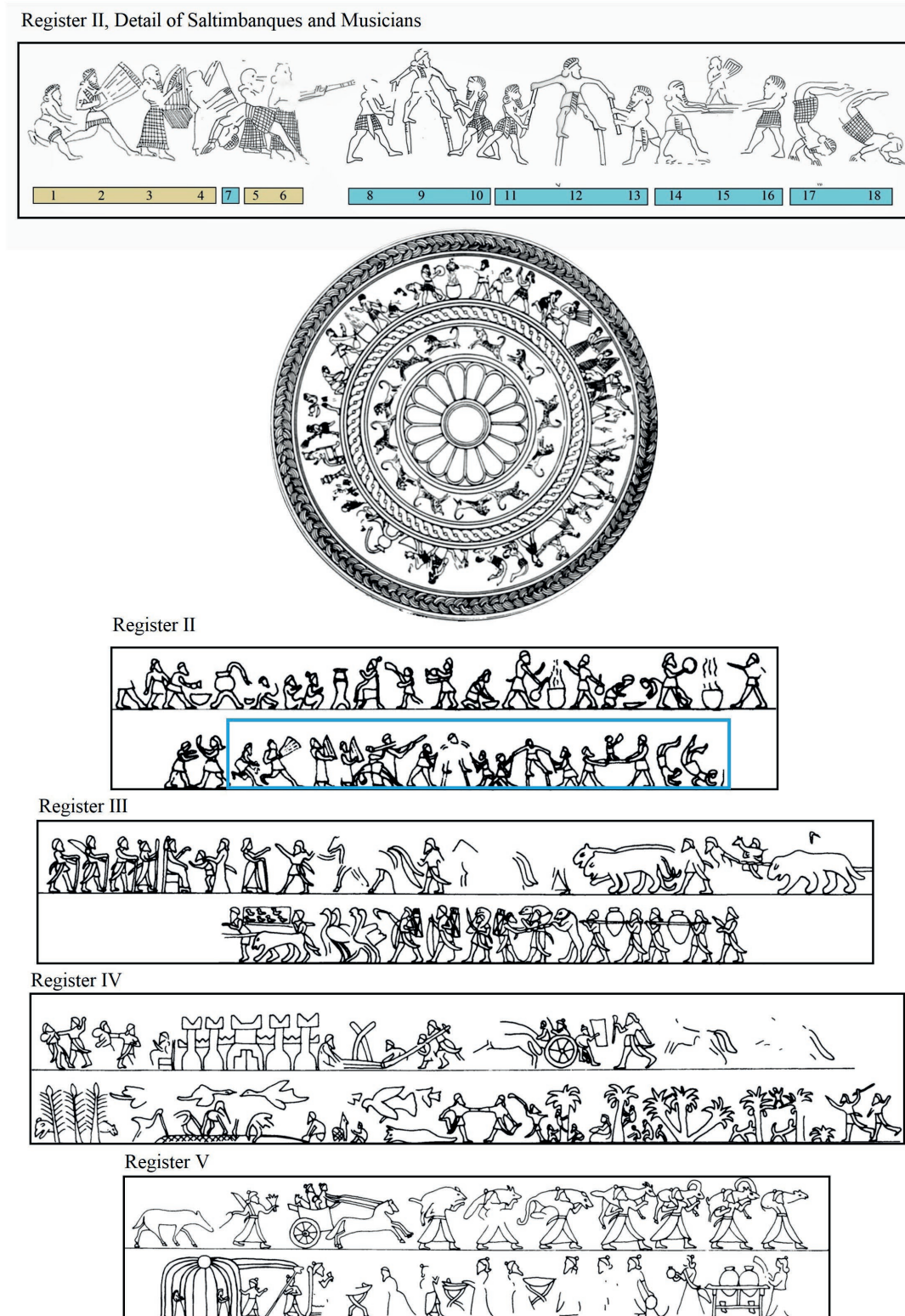


Fig. 2. Line drawings of the Arjan bowl after R. Vatandoust (in Towhidi and Khalilian 1982) with new line-drawing by the author of the musicians and saltimbanques exhibited in register II.



sium conducted in honour of guests and perhaps intended to seal an agreement of mutual benefit. The center of the bowl is occupied by a register with six alternating pairs of lions and bulls running around a central rosette.

The banquet-symposium scene was engraved with an extraordinary level of detail inside a narrow register measuring little more than 2.2 cm in height. The composition includes a group of eighteen performers: seven musicians (Nos. 1-6 and 15) and eleven saltimbanques (Nos. 7-18) one of whom (No. 15) simultaneously plays a harp and performs acrobatics [Figs. 2 and 3]. They are oriented towards the right and are depicted with an exceptional dynamism, expressed through the overlapping of bodies and movement of body parts (such as Nos. 1 and 2 who are running). The scale of No. 15 is adjusted to fit the register (rather than a deliberate intention to depict a dwarf or child); a technique used in other parts of the bowl to enable inclusion of the desired elements (for example, the tiny figures in the chariot in register V). Some details such as the hands of harp and lute players Nos. 3 and 6 are purposely enlarged to emphasize their function. As suggested by their long beard (sometimes square, sometimes pointy) they appear to be adult males (unclear though for No. 7). They have a hair bun at the back, and some wear a hairband. Their uniform is distinguished by a band over the chest (or a tasselled skirt?) and garments covered by a squared pattern. Some of the performers wear short skirts with a distinctive wide, pointy band hanging down the middle. Some saltimbanques seem to be wearing bracelets (Nos. 7, 18) and wide belts (No. 7).

At least three types of instruments are represented in the musical orchestra: four harps (Nos. 2-4 and 15), a double flute (No. 5) and a lute (No. 6). A fourth type of instrument, perhaps a drum, is played by No. 1. Two types of harps are depicted: two vertical angular harps with a row of hanging tassels (Nos. 3 and 4) and two U-shaped harps (lyres) (Nos. 2 and 15). The first four musicians in the group (playing the lute, the double flute and the two angular harps) are standing still and wear a similar long skirt with tassels. The two musicians following (Nos 1 and 2) wear a short skirt are depicted in the act of running as if

the performance had already started and they came late to the fore. Similarly, the harp-playing acrobat No. 15 is wearing a short skirt.

The saltimbanques are divided into three trios (Nos. 8-16). Trios Nos. 8-10 and Nos. 11-13 depict an individual balancing on stilts and holding on to two sticks held by two individuals. Trio No. 14-16 comprises an individual playing a U-shaped harp while balancing on top of two (or four?) sticks held horizontally by two individuals. In addition, a pair of men walk on their hands (Nos. 17-18) and a single individual making a backwards bridge (No. 7). All of the saltimbanques wear short skirts some with the peculiar hanging band.

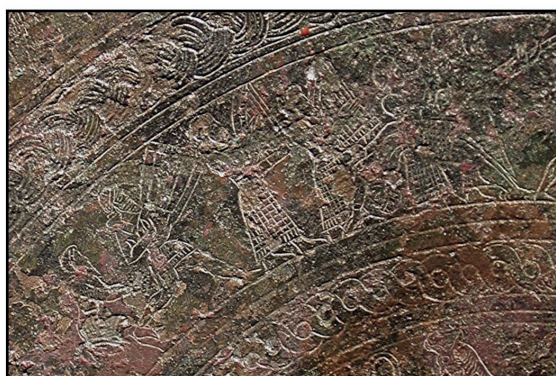
The orchestra depicted in the Arjan bowl finds close parallels in Elamite art of the first half of the first millennium BC [Fig. 4]. The Elamite orchestras of Kul e Farah, Madaktu, and Arjan involve from three to twenty-six individuals and are characterized by the primacy of string instruments, especially harps, supplemented by drums, pipes, and, in the case of the royal Elamite orchestra from Madaktu, singing and clapping [Fig. 5]<sup>14</sup>. Conversely, there are no saltimbanques depicted outside the Arjan bowl emphasizing the entertaining nature of the performances versus the more ritualistic nature of the Elamite royal orchestras from Kul e Farah and Madaktu.

The original acts performed by the Elamite troupe are characterized by the combination of balancing acts, shows of strength, and musical performances. It is unclear, however, why the stilt-walking individuals Nos. 9 and 12 required the aid of two acolytes unless the intention was to showcase a movement as part of a sequence familiar to a contemporary audience. Apart from individual No. 7 whose backbend-bridge is made by acrobatic dancers portrayed in a celebration of the annual 'Beautiful Festival of the Valley' in the Red Chapel of Hatshepsut (c. 1473–1458 BC) at Karnak in Egypt<sup>15</sup>, the saltimbanques perform acrobatic acts that, to this author's knowledge, are depicted for the first time in the artistic record.

14. Álvarez-Mon 2017, 2019.

15. Graves-Brown 2010: 93, Pl. 8.





Nos. 1-7



Nos. 1-4



Nos. 4-10



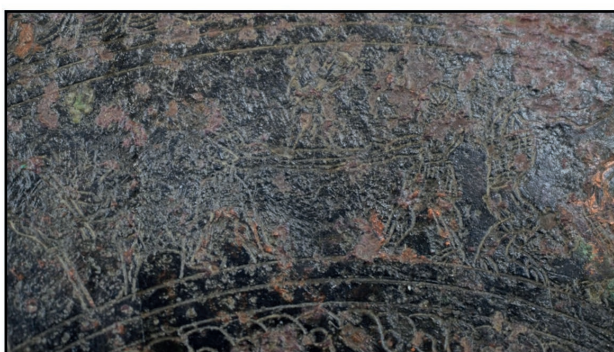
Nos. 1-7



Nos. 6, 8-12



Nos. 10-15



Nos. 13-17



Nos. 15-18

Fig. 3. Photographs of register II. Photograph top-left (Nos. 1-7) by the author; all other photographs by M.R. Rokni (Copyright © National Museum of Iran).



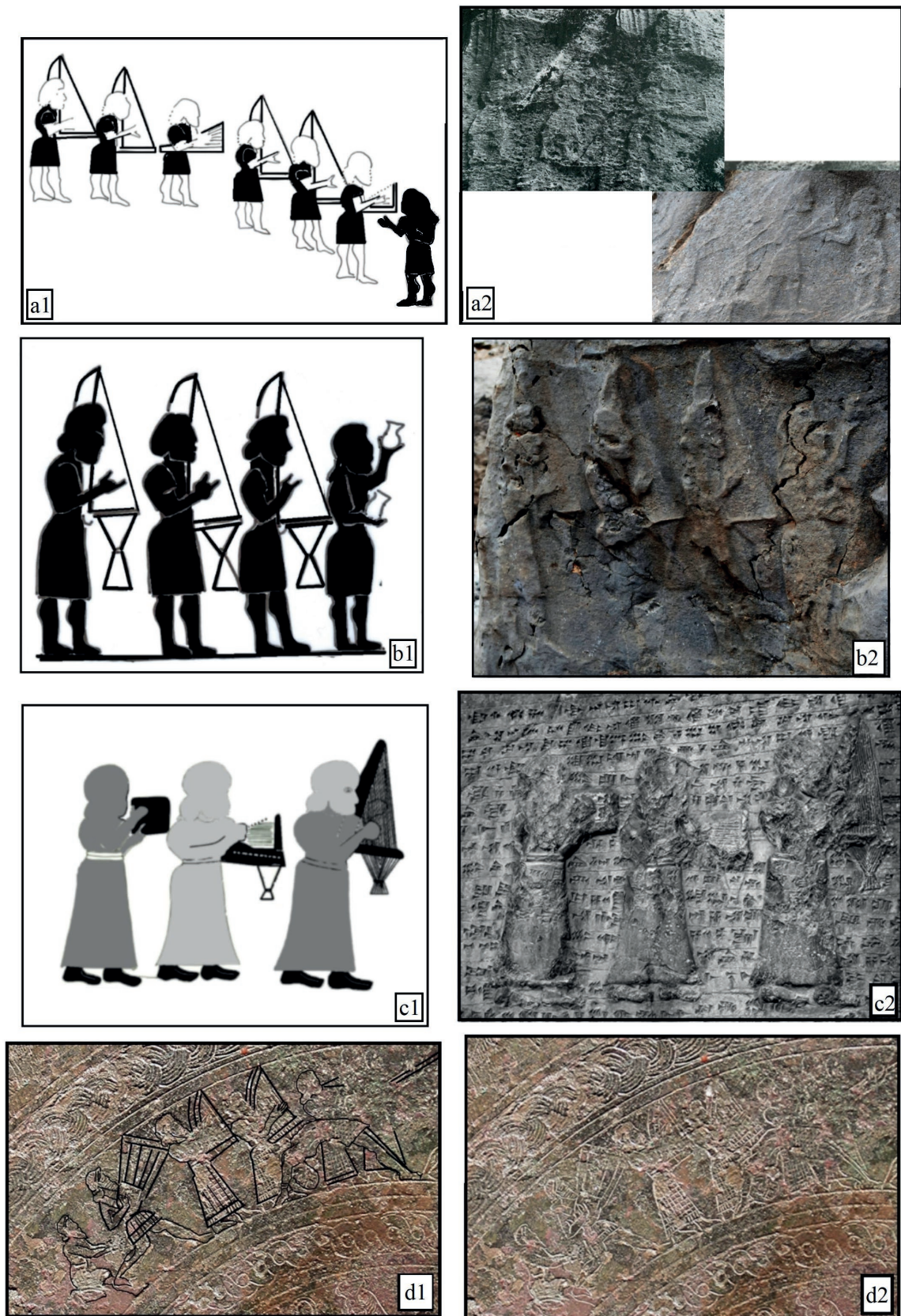


Fig. 4. Elamite Orchestras from [a] Kul-e Farah IV, [b] Kul-e Farah III, [c] Kul-e Farah I, and [d] the Arjan bowl (all photographs and line drawings by the author).



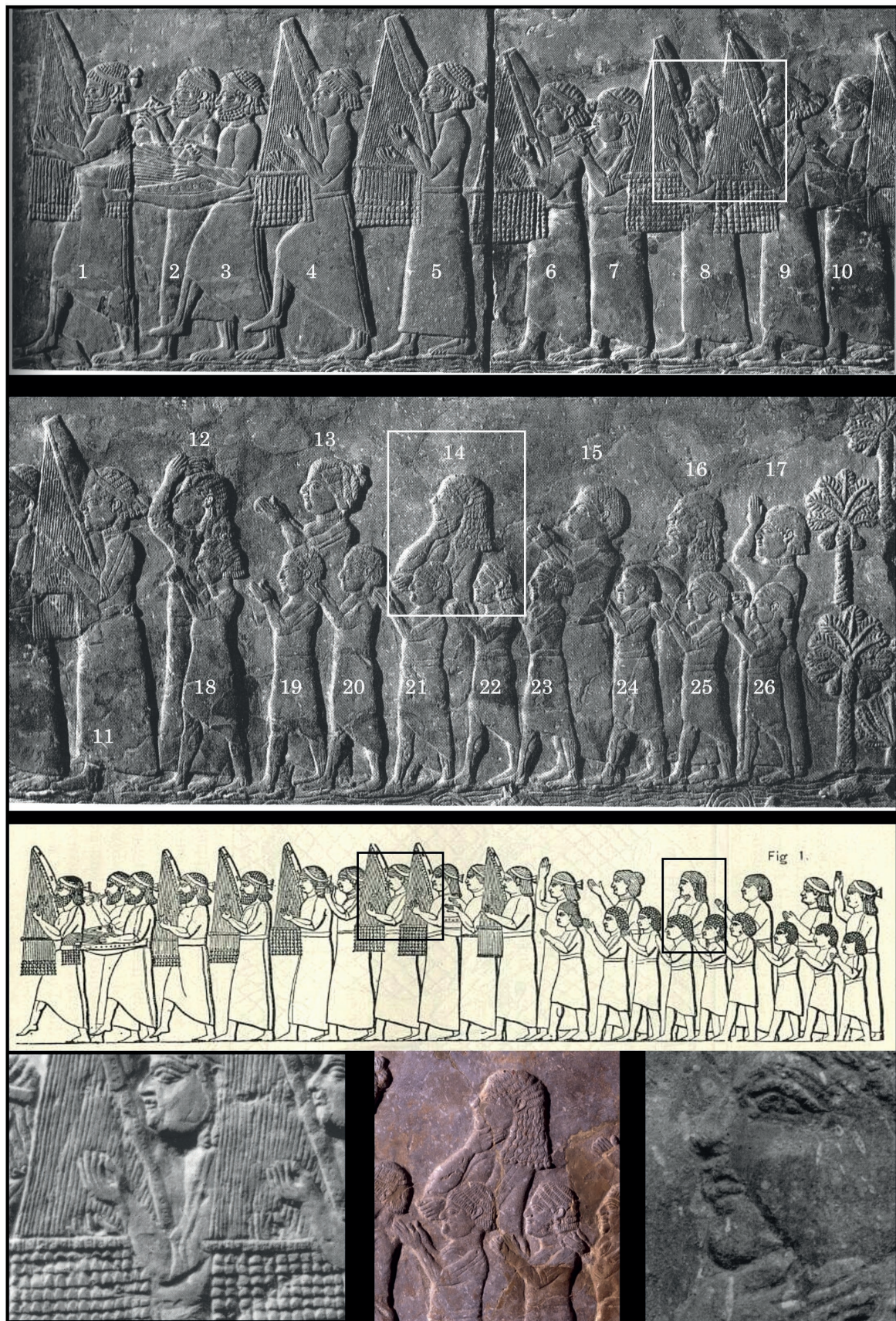


Fig. 5. Royal Elamite orchestra from Madaktu, southwest Palace of Sennacherib, Room 33 (ca. 653 BC); line drawing after Rawlinson 1873, Pl. 13, photographs by the author.



### Concluding Remarks: Society's Entertainment Values in Leaps and Turns

The exceptional information provided by the Mari archives (c. 1775 BC) and the Arjan bowl (c. 600 BC) bring new insights to the history of entertainment in the ancient Near East. They provide a realistic backdrop to performing art forms involving music and acrobatics (and perhaps singing) which were generally reserved for religious and palace-based contexts, but may also have found expression in popular culture and private life. Judging by their similarity to other Elamite orchestras, the joyful troupe of musicians and saltimbanques depicted inside the circular ring of the Arjan bowl were professional artists most likely belonging to the royal court of the Elamite ruler depicted in the bowl; or, conversely, a traveling troupe of artists hired for the occasion. In any case, following on the tradition of Piradi and his Mari troupe, the Elamite saltimbanques from Arjan reveal a clear pattern of continuity with the past whose heritage went beyond the Near East and ancient Iran to inform, through historical leaps and turns, European traditions of entertainment.

Throughout history saltimbanques excelled in showcasing wondrous superhuman feats harmonizing the control of physical strength with the expressions of the body. The sense of magic and power they displayed on stage together with their ability to freely move through social and territorial boundaries, interacting with multiple elements of the society, customs, and ideas, captured public imagination<sup>16</sup>. Tight-ropeing though society's norms and prejudices, and often irreverent to its values, saltimbanques offered an alternative view of reality which, akin to Picasso's ideogram vibrating in the beam of the spotlights, inspired creative enterprises at the root of Western modernity.

*Postscript.* It has come to my attention that the Arjan Bowl was selected as symbol to represent the Iranian delegation for the summer Olympic Games held in Japan, Tokyo 2020; indeed, a most fitting emblem!

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