

From cacophony to music: sound perception in ancient societies

International round table

École française d'Athènes, from 12 to 14 June, 2014

Call for papers

The Écoles françaises à l'étranger (ÉFA-ÉFR-IFAO) have established a common research programme (2012-2016) looking at the constituent elements of the soundscape in urban spaces of the ancient Mediterranean World (see below for links).

The challenge facing the second international round table organised within this programme is to deconstruct the idea of a temporal and geographic universality of aural perception that is the same for all cultures. On the contrary, every society can be defined and distinguished from others through a particular relationship with sound. Thus, aural perception is above all a cultural construct. This premise has, however, never been applied to the ancient world. Therefore, a comparative study involving the four great civilisations of the ancient Mediterranean over a period running from the 3rd millennium BC until the 4th century AD could lead to the establishing of a geography and chronology of the way sound was thought about through an analysis of the manner in which it was named, described and experienced by the Ancients.

The present call for papers takes into consideration the conclusions reached at the first international round table that was held in the École française de Rome, January 2013, under the title "The notion of soundscape, a historiographical assessment and perspectives for the study of ancient civilisations". During the meeting it became apparent that a lexicographical approach to the relevant terms within the semantic field of sound was indispensable in order to grasp more clearly the way in which the Ancients perceived sound phenomena and to understand what was, for them, the line between noise and music. Regarding Antiquity, the major difficulty is to describe the sounds that belonged to civilisations that no longer exist and whose modes of classification and representation might be totally different from those in use today. Within the context of this round table, it will be a question of starting from words employed by the Ancients to describe the sounds that they heard, whether musical or not, produced by man or by nature. This can help to avoid as much as possible any confusion with contemporary categories. The words will, in effect, reveal the way in which music and sounds were perceived and constructed, whether through a range of expressions developed by the speakers themselves, through the interpretive imagery applied to a noise, or through the way in which they categorise different aural phenomena. If it might initially appear simple to identify this vocabulary, one soon realises that it is not so easy to grasp the nuances. A lexicographical analysis is thus the necessary first stage in all study of soundscape, in that the semantic field of sound can vary considerably from one civilisation to another.

A cognitive and anthropological approach is thus at the heart of this second international round table to be held at the École française d'Athènes from 12 to 14 June, 2014. In order to understand the manner in which sound was lived, felt and described in Antiquity, the sources need to be studied for themselves, through speeches and representations, without trying, in the first instance, to analyse them in the light of our own system of thought. Naturally, one can turn to the iconography, archaeological remains (musical instruments and noisemaking objects), as well as systems of

musical notation where these sources bear witness to the way in which the Ancients tried to give an account of a sound, its emission and its reception. Travellers' chronicles (e.g. Herodotus, Strabo) and the rare bilingual text, such as the Decree of Canopus, that has survived can also serve as enlightening sources of comparison when they demonstrate the manner in which the author has attempted to describe and to translate into his language the aural reality of another culture.

The noises of nature can also provide a field for investigation, since whatever the culture, it is confronted by its environment, which it learns to understand by identifying and even interpreting the sounds. Sound is often integrated into a system of representation that attempts to explain its origin. The role of onomatopoeia in the formation of vocabulary is an obvious sign. The study of the vocabulary of sound within a given culture allows one to ask questions about the imitation and rationalisation of sounds by language. To describe a sound, one might simply try to reproduce what one hears or, on the other hand, elaborate a rational discourse that endeavours to provide an account of it, or even make a musical instrument capable of recreating it.

Attention will also be paid to the question of limits. What qualifies as cacophony and what as music? When does sound become noise and noise become a din? When does sound become music? Can a musical instrument sometimes produce music and sometimes a noise, depending on the context of use? In what way can noise be ritual? What sounds are considered as signs of fright or of disturbance? What does sound reveal about ways of listening, the relationship with noise, with music, with silence?

Paper proposals should fit into the following themes:

- Lexicographical studies of sound in ancient languages.

One could imagine, for example, diachronic studies of the same sound-related term, in search of eventual changes in meaning; synchronic studies clarifying linguistic nuances between terms that may appear close; studies by authors or corpus of authors centring on a term or a group of terms; studies shedding light upon the semantic wealth of a word by referring to the metaphorical analogies of which it is the object.

- Studies regarding the line between sound and music within ancient societies.

It will be of interest to demonstrate how aural phenomena were perceived and analysed. What was the mark of din and hubbub? What sounds did given individuals in a specific context find pleasant? What meaning or meanings were given to certain precisely identified sounds? What values and emotions were attached to them? In contrast, where did tolerance thresholds lie, beyond which sounds were considered as unpleasant cacophony? How do we understand that a sound was inoffensive to one and intolerable to another? All these points can help explore the questions of listening and interpretation.

- The study of sound as a mark of identity.

Sound is integrated into the discourse a culture produces about itself and about others. It is a mark of building one's own identity, by deciding which sounds belong and which sounds are designated as foreign. One might ask what was the influence of political and religious power in this definition of the other through sound. And how did the different populations of the ancient Mediterranean, living side by side in peace or at war, manage to take possession of new sounds from, or, on the contrary, firmly associate them with the figure of the other?

Proposed papers (title and abstract of 250 words approx.) should be sent before 1st March 2014 to the following:

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Accepted papers will be selected by the organisers of the international round table. Authors will be informed before 31 March 2014.

Languages of the round table: French & English.

The programme internet links

http://www.efrome.it/fr/q/d/Programme_2.7.4.pdf

<http://www.ifao.egnet.net/axes-2012/transition-croisements-culturels/2012-paysages-sonores/>