

Angel musicians on the choir stalls in Lincoln cathedral



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION: ANGEL MUSICIANS	1
2. THE INDIVIDUAL CARVINGS	2
2.1 Idiophones	2
2.2 Membranophones	3
2.3 Chordophones	4
2.4 Aerophones	8
3. CONCLUSIONS	10
REFERENCES	11

PHOTOS

Photo 1. Lincoln Cathedral choirstalls	1
Photo 2. Jingling clappers, Lincoln Cathedral	2
Photo 3. Neapolitan jingling clappers	2
Photo 4. Nakers	3
Photo 5. Nakers at Beverley Minster	3
Photo 6. Snare drum	4
Photo 7. Appalachian dulcimer types	4
Photo 8. Waisted zither	4
Photo 9. Piriform lute with recurved neck	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Photo 10. Piriform lute with bent back neck	5
Photo 11. Harp	6
Photo 12. Organistrum	6
Photo 13. Rectangular psaltery	7
Photo 14. Waisted viol	7
Photo 15. Lyre	8
Photo 16. Panpipes on a Lincoln choirstall	9
Photo 17. Panpipes, Ravenna	9
Photo 18. Romanian <i>nai</i> panpipes	8
Photo 19. Large portative organ, Lincoln	10
Photo 20. Small portative organ	10
Photo 21. Damaged	10

FIGURES

Figure 1. Paired claves in the Cantigas	2
Figure 2. Rectangular psalteries	6

ABSTRACT

The choirstalls at Lincoln Cathedral have rectangular wooden panels which show angel musicians. Although noted in various resources, these have never been described in detail. The paper provides recent digital images of the musical panels, together with identification of the instruments and commentary on their relation to other similar instruments elsewhere in England and Europe.

Key words: Angel musicians; fourteenth century; organology; Lincoln Cathedral

1. Introduction: angel musicians

England is rich in the iconography of medieval musicians, in stone, wood, glass and manuscripts. Many of these are illustrated in some of the characteristic published monographs (e.g. Galpin 1911; Pulver 1923; Panum 1939; Harrison & Rimmer 1964; Montagu 1976, 1978, 1988, 2007; Montagu & Montagu 1998; Remnant 1978). However, the repertoire is no means completely published, and an intriguing set of woodcarvings which has so far received limited attention is the angel musicians on the choirstalls in Lincoln Cathedral.

The present Lincoln Cathedral was begun by Bishop Remigius in 1072, but little of the original Norman building remains. Fire and earthquake necessitated major reconstruction around 1200, by the Bishop, later St. Hugh. Elaborate stonework friezes were created in the third quarter of the thirteenth century, and some of which show musicians. The wooden choir stalls were put in the late fourteenth century (Photo 1). There are scattered misericords under the seats, which have humorous images which include musical instruments, although their features are hard to discern. The upright rectangular wooden panels behind the seats have images of angels and kings. The majority are musicians, but there are also figures holding books and other symbolic objects. A few figures are damaged, making the performance details of some instruments unclear. I

Photo 1. Lincoln Cathedral choirstalls



Source: Author photo

have included one damaged image, which may or may not be a musician. The instruments are all different, and some are not usually played by angels, such as the kettledrums. There is no sense of an ensemble, and it is likely the panels depict instruments known to the carvers. They definitely do not depict the whole range of instruments played in this period. In contrast to most sets of angel musicians, there are no woodwind or brass instruments, with the exception of an unusual type of panpipe.

Surprisingly, it is difficult to find images of these musicians either in published literature or on the web. The cathedral itself publishes no glossy book of photos and there is no detailed academic description. It is also striking how disappointing older (pre-digital) images seem in the light of modern reproduction. A up-to-date review of these images in terms of their organology and context is therefore warranted. This paper¹ provides recent digital images of these carvings, together with a commentary on their identity and construction. It is organised according to the classic Hornbostel/Sachs terminology, beginning with idiophones. This is a convenient structure for the paper, but certainly does not reflect medieval ideas.

¹ A visit was made to Lincoln Cathedral on 23rd September 2015. I would to thank Stephen Hall for assisting my photographic expedition.

2. The individual carvings

2.1 Idiophones

Musical instrument repertoires in medieval Europe included relatively few idiophones, principally bells. However, the Cantigas manuscript (13th c.) illustrates paired claves of some type (Figure 1). It is not entirely clear how these were operated, as to function they would need some type of hinge, which is not shown. However, in Lincoln a player is shown with a single instrument in one hand, which might have a hinge, and also projections which are almost certainly some type of jingle. A better parallel may be a European folk instrument such as the Neapolitan xx (Photo 2) where a stick is clapped against another stick furnished with tambourine-type jingles.

Figure 1. Paired claves in the Cantigas



Source: CC

Photo 2. Jingling clappers, Lincoln Cathedral



Source: Author photo

Photo 3. Neapolitan jingling clappers



Source: Author collection

This representation is apparently unique in the British Isles and there seem to be no parallels in the literature. This may be because the clapper was a folk instrument, and was common but not depicted, or was an exotic import.

2.2 Membranophones

Drums were common in the Middle Ages and are represented in many manuscripts, especially in secular and martial contexts. One of the most common drums in Europe from the thirteenth century were the paired kettledrums adopted from the Near East as a consequence of the Crusades. The Arabic name *naqqara* became French *nacaires*, Italian *naccheroni* and English *nakers*. The nakers reach England during the fourteenth century (Blades & Montague 1976) and are shown on the Lincoln choir stalls, played by an angel (Photo 4). A parallel representation are the nakers depicted on Beverley Minster (Photo 5) and two types are shown in the mid-14th century Luttrell Psalter. In these other examples, the instruments are significantly larger and are clearly played by a secular performer. The image of an angel playing nakers, and the absence of 'loud' instruments such as shawms and bagpipes, suggests that the Lincoln carvings do not represent any coherent ensemble.

Photo 5. Nakers at Beverley Minster



Source: CC

drums shown in English medieval iconography. Nothing quite like it is shown in Blades & Montague (1976). The image on Wykeham's crozier reproduced in Montagu (2002: 540) of a tabor, also late fourteenth century, shows a small drum with a pronounced snare and a thick beater. Similarly, the Luttrell Psalter (c. 1340) shows a standing performer playing a small snare drum supported on the left arm and being beaten with a very heavy, possibly padded, stick.

Photo 4. Nakers



Source: Author photo

The other membranophone represent in Lincoln cathedral is a small snare drum (Photo 6). The unusual aspect of this drum is that it is small enough to be held in the left hand and it appears the right hand is missing, so we have no details of the beating technique, and it is unclear whether the skin was struck with a drumstick or the fingers. The odd part of the representation is the loop or toggle apparently holding the snare in place. The drum rests on the left forearm and the fingers are shown resting on the drumskin. This rather suggests a darabuka type of performance where the fingers tap the rhythm and the other hand is used to damp and tension the skin to change tonal colours. If so, this would be unique within the repertoire of

Photo 6. Snare drum



Source: Author photo

2.3 Chordophones

The chordophones are by far the most diverse group shown at Lincoln. There are three types of lute, a harp, lyre, organistrum, psaltery and a fiddle. The lyre is probably a fantastical image based on mythology and not a representation of a current instrument, but all the others are shown in considerable detail. One of the more puzzling instruments I am calling a waisted zither (Photo 7). The instrument has a soundbox with two incurving areas or waists. The strings do not seem to pass over a bridge, and there is no sign of tuning pegs although these may be hidden in the large head. The overall impression is more like a dulcimer held upright; many European folk dulcimers have a variety of waisted shapes, and these are carried over into the Appalachian dulcimer (Photo 8). I therefore suggest the instrument on the Lincoln choirstalls is a dulcimer held upright, rather like a strummed rhythm instrument, similar to

Photo 7. Waisted zither



Source: Author photo

Photo 8. Appalachian dulcimer types



Source: CC

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an Indian *tanpura*. The *tanpura* also can be held across the body like a long-neck lute or laid on the ground. If this is correct, the Lincoln instrument is unique in medieval English iconography.

A more conventional type of lute is the four-string piriform lute with recurved neck shown in **Error! Reference source not found.** Lutes of this type are shown all across Europe from the twelfth century and still survive in some folk traditions (Montagu 1976).

Photo 10 shows another type of piriform lute where the neck is bent back at right angles to the fingerboard. There appear to be five strings and instruments of this type derive more directly from the Arab *ʿud* and are ancestral the six-course Renaissance lute.

Photo 10. Piriform lute with bent back neck



Source: Author photo

Photo 9. Piriform lute with recurved neck



Source: Author photo

Moving into more conventional territory, Photo 11 shows a small 'Gothic' harp. Montagu (1976) points out that two types of harp are commonly distinguished in medieval iconography, a smaller instrument held in one hand and played by the other hand, and a larger

Photo 11. Harp



Source: Author photo

harp with a prominent soundbox, and brays, rattling pins which give it a more penetrating sound. Lincoln Cathedral also has a stone carving of the larger harp played by King David (Montagu 1976: Plate 22).

Photo 12. Organistrum



Source: Author photo

Photo 12 shows an organistrum or symphony on one of the choir stall panels. Unfortunately the right hand is damaged, but it would almost certainly have shown the wheel being turned. Symphonies are the ancestor of the hurdy-gurdy and are first illustrated in the 11th century. The earliest models are shaped like fiddles and required two players, but by the period of the Cantigas, one-player models with rectangular soundboxes had been developed. A symphony is shown in a Dutch astrological treatise of the early 14th century which is quite similar to the one in Lincoln (Montagu 1976: Plate II).

Photo 13 shows what is probably the most surprising instrument in the set, a rectangular psaltery. The psaltery, a board or box-zither, was one of the most common instruments in the Middle Ages, and the Cantigas manuscript illustrates no less than four separate types. However, nearly all psalteries are irregularly shaped, to account for the different string lengths. The Lincoln psaltery has no soundholes, and

Figure 2. Rectangular psalteries



Source: CC

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the shallow soundboard may indicate it was not hollow, but just a resonant flat board, similar to African

Photo 13. Rectangular psaltery



Source: Author photo

likely solution is that they passed through the soundboard and were secured beneath it by wooden toggles or knots, and could be tightened by twisting the toggles. This is extremely unusual for European zithers, although it is widely attested in East African board zithers.

Photo 14. Waisted viol



Source: Author photo

board-zithers with external resonators. The strings pass over a straight bridge, so the strings must have been tuned by some non-visible mechanism. The

By contrast, the strings psalteries shown in the Cantigas pass to tuning pegs, exactly like a modern² *qanun*. Figure 2 shows a pair of rectangular psalteries in the Cantigas manuscript. These are, however, very different from the Lincoln psaltery in being held upright in front of the player, having prominent soundholes, no bridge and very obvious tuning pegs. The performer in Lincoln Cathedral is clearly plucking the strings with both hands as is common for instruments laid flat. This contrasts with the psalteries in the Cantigas which appear to be strummed with the left hand. This rectangular psaltery is thus apparently unique in European iconography, although it has parallels in instruments in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Libin (2014: 169) points out that some early representations of David have him playing a rectangular instrument with ten strings, which might be inspired by texts and not actual instruments. However, apart from the *qanun*, the *nuzha* was another rectangular North African zither and it is conceivable this is a version of the *nuzha*.

² Using the term 'modern' loosely. Some qanuns now have tuning screws and other devices

The final realistic string instrument is the four-string fiddle (Photo 14). Fiddles of this type are descended from the *lira* of Byzantium and are known from at least the ninth century (Bachmann 1969). By the fourteenth century they are widely shown in carvings and manuscripts all across Europe (e.g. Figure 3). The tuning pegs are somewhat indistinct, but seem to project from the sides of a block. Another fiddle is also depicted in Lincoln Cathedral, an angel playing a five-string waisted instrument with a circular pegbox clearly shown, dated to around 1270 (Montagu 1976: Plate 13).

Figure 3. Fiddle and tambourine



Source: CC

The last string instrument represented is the only one which is probably fantastical or allegorical, the lyre. This type of lyre, with its matching swept-up arms, improbable array of strings and no resonator, is a tidied-up version of the Greek lyre. The attested instrument was resonated with a tortoise-shell and had four to ten strings, as do its descendants in East Africa today. Greek lyres had no bridges and were played with a plectrum and a strumming motion. However, another type of folk-lyre survived in Europe into historic times, both as the Welsh *crwth* and the Polish *xx*. These had flat soundboards and the strings were raised with bridges. The *crwth* has been a bowed instrument in recent times, but almost certainly was originally plucked. A bridge of this type has been excavated on Skye and dated to 2500 BP (ref) and a partial lyre dating to the 7th century AD is part of Sutton Hoo ship burial (Montagu 1976). Westminster Abbey Chapter House has a *rotta* of the Welsh type shown dated to c. 1370 (Montagu 1976: Plate 54). All of these are playable instruments, and point strongly to the Lincoln image as an aestheme, an iconographic representation of a literary trope.

2.4 Aerophones

In contrast to almost all other sets of angel musicians in England, wind instruments are poorly represented in Lincoln. The only example of woodwind are the panpipes played by a rather severe looking angel (Photo 17). There appear to be seventeen pipes, and

Photo 15. Lyre



Source: Author photo

Photo 16. Romanian *nai* panpipes

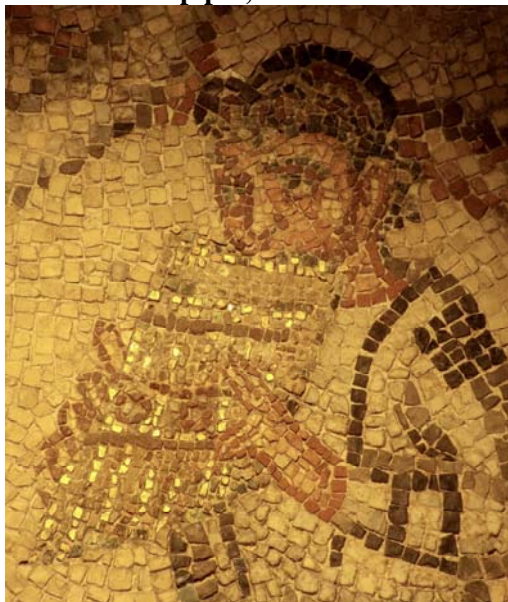


Source: CC

the embouchures are slightly bevelled instead of being cut flat. The pipes are very short, and must have produced a high pitch. They are not bound together with a cross-strip as most panpipes but apparently fixed into a box-frame at the base.

Panpipes are referred to in many musical texts in the Middle Ages, but actual images are much rarer. Montagu & Montagu (1998) point out that medieval panpipes divide into two classes, the 'Romanesque' type with fewer, long pipes and probably wider bore, and the long narrow types. They reproduce (Pl. 92) a panpipe at St. Mary, Ware, which has fourteen pipes, presumably a range of two diatonic octaves. Such a Romanesque panpipe is shown in Elder Lady Chapel of Bristol Cathedral, dates around 1215 AD (Montagu & Montagu 1998: Pl. 91). They were common in antiquity, presumably because of the association with Pan, and are often shown played by shepherds. Nonetheless, there are numerous realistic representations, such as the player shown in the sixth century mosaics in the Domus Tapetti at Ravenna playing an instrument with seven sounding pipes (Photo 18). The wide and shallow instrument depicted at Lincoln has far more in common with the large Eastern European panpipes such as the Romanian *nai* (Photo 16).

Photo 18. Panpipes, Ravenna



Source: Author photo

Byzantium and spread widely in Europe in the thirteenth century. The smaller instrument shown in Photo 20 is a more 'classic' type, where the player pumps the bellows with one hand and plays the keyboard with the other.

Photo 17. Panpipes on a Lincoln choir stall



Source: Author photo

Finally, there are two organs of different sizes. Organs go back to the Greek *hydraulos*, with references as far back as the third century BC, and a surviving instrument from the first century BC. Instruments of this type are widely represented from the thirteenth century onwards. Photo 19 appears to show a larger-scale instrument which requires two players, one to pump the bellows, the other to play the keyboard. Damage to the panel, and in particular the performer's hand makes this difficult to confirm. The keyboard is also broken off. There may be a second row of pipes behind the first; this is common in later images of the portative. Such instruments, albeit played by a rabbit and a dog, are shown both in the Gorleston Psalter (c. 1325) (Montagu 1976: Plate 23) and the Macclesfield Psalter (c. 1330) (Montagu 2006: Plate 8). They were adopted in

Finally, Photo 21 shows a damaged panel, where a king is holding an item whose identity cannot be

Photo 20. Small portative organ



Source: Author photo

symbolic item. There is a correlation between kings and non-musical symbols, but there are also non-musical angels.

3. Conclusions

The choirstalls in Lincoln Cathedral contain wooden panels which show angel musicians, playing instruments largely characteristic of the period of their carving, the later fourteenth century. These do not form an ensemble, and it is unlikely they would have played together. There are a number of common instruments of the period apparently 'missing', including shawms, flutes, bagpipes, tambourines. One instrument, the lyre, is likely to be mythological, and not a depiction of an actual instrument.

Several instruments appear to be unique, at least within the context of the British Isles. These include;

- a) Jingling clappers
- b) Small snare drum possible played with fingers
- c) Double-waisted lute or zither
- d) Rectangular psaltery without resonator, soundholes or tuning pegs
- e) 17-note psaltery

Photo 19. Large portative organ, Lincoln



Source: Author photo

confirmed. This might be an instrument or simply a

Photo 21. Damaged



Source: Author photo

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This diversity suggests that we still have much to do in understanding the instrumentarium of the Middle Ages, and that instruments were probably brought in from many areas of Europe, and sometimes popular only for a short period before disappearing.

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