



Summary :

The aulos was imported possibly from Asia Minor. It appears as the invention of Hyagnis from Phrygia or of the goddess Athena. It was always played in pairs. It remains unknown whether both auloi played the same melody. With the improvements made by the Theban school in the 5th century BC the aulos could produce all harmonies. It required virtuous playing by professionals. Many types of aulos have been recorded. It was an essential part of all social gatherings but did not form part of the official education of the young.

1. Introduction

The aulos¹ was one of the most important musical instruments in ancient Greece, with a steady presence in the history not only of ancient Greek but also Roman music. It is the most frequently depicted instrument in ancient art than anyone else of its counterparts. It accompanied, alone or with other stringed instruments or singing, various social events. The aulos bears common features with the modern oboe.

2. Origins

The Greek aulos was double. Double auloi are depicted on monuments in Mesopotamia and Egypt (some examples survive to this day), already from the 3rd millennium BC, while equally ancient are some depictions of double auloi on Cycladic and Minoan monuments. Mycenaean examples have not survived. In Greek literature we find limited references in the Iliad,² while in art it appears a little later, on geometric vessels of the 7th century BC. This evidence, combined with the sources which refer to Phrygia as its place of origin, lead to the assumption that the aulos or at least the art of the aulos, if we accept that some form of the aulos was known from the very early years in the Hellenic world, was imported to Greece from Asia Minor, perhaps along with the worship of [Dionysus](#) and [Cybele](#) – with whom the instrument is closely connected – or from Syria, sometime around the 8th/7th century BC.

The most ancient of the mythological traditions attribute the invention of the aulos and its art to Hyagnis from [Phrygia](#) or the Phrygian triad ([Hyagins](#), [Marsyas](#), [Olympus](#)).³ According to a possibly later tradition, which perhaps aimed to give the aulos a Greek origin, the instrument was said to have been invented (or discovered) by the goddess [Athena](#) after the beheading of Medusa in order to compose a melody (the first **rule of the aulos**) about her murder which would recreate the terrible sounds of her death wails. Athena, however, terrified by the sight of her face deformed by blowing, threw the aulos away in disgust; it was later found by Marsyas. According to another narrative Marsyas himself informed the goddess of her inappropriate image and encouraged her to abandon the aulos; she gave no notice until she saw her reflection in the waters of a river.⁴ It is said that Marsyas was such a brilliant aulos player that he did not hesitate to boast that he was a better musician than [Apollo](#) and challenged him to a virtuosity contest. They agreed that the winner could do whatever he pleased to the loser. The god, in one version possibly employing some trick, was declared the winner and punished Marsyas for his insult by skinning him alive.⁵ According to the lyric poet Alkmanas,⁶ however, Apollo himself also played the aulos after being taught by Athena.⁷

3. Form – function of the aulos

The aulos' main body was formed by a tube called the "bombyx" which was tubular or conical, i.e. its diameter grew wider from the "glottis" to its end, in order to improve the sound of lower notes, a characteristic which is missing from the Attic art at least, after 520 BC. In surviving examples the "bombyx" is not compound but jointed, formed by two or more parts. It appears to have been constructed by various materials such as reed or wood, box-wood, lotus or a type of laurel, but also out of bone (usually deer), horn, ivory or bronze or wood or bone in a metal casing.⁸ The classic aulos usually had 5 holes. The second was also open underneath and was closed by the thumb. Sometimes there was also a sixth hole low on the bombyx which was not used in playing the melody but by opening or closing it, it changed the acoustic length of the aulos.

The so-called «Theban» school of aulos players was decisive in the development of the art of the aulos during the 5th century BC.



One of its representatives, Diodoros, is said to have increased the number of holes⁹ which later reached up to 24. Until then it required more than one aulos to play different harmonies, but Pronomos, the head of the school, first managed to play all harmonies on a single pair of aulos,¹⁰ a fact which would require not only an increase in the number of holes but the introduction of the use of metal keys for the closing of some of the openings, depending on each harmony's needs. The comparison of the holes in various examples of aulos which survive from the archaic era, combined with the information recorded in ancient sources on scales, has led to the supposition that there was a great variety in tuning, not only among different types of aulos but also among aulos of the same type.

The aulos' mouthpiece consisted of the "glotta" or "glottis", the "kalami" and two (sometimes even three) bulbous sections, the "olmos" and the "ypholmios". Each of the twin auloi had its own "glottis". Whether this was single (like in the clarinet) or double (like the oboe), is a point of disagreement among researchers. According to the most dominant opinion it was generally double, at least until and including the Classical period, when they were finally replaced by the single "glottis". The "glottis" was embodied into the "olmos" which was supported by the "ypholmios", or the opposite. The length of the aulos, as can be calculated from representations and mainly from surviving examples ranged from 15 to 60 centimetres, perhaps even longer.¹¹ It is believed that the longer aulos also produced a deeper sound.

The Greek aulos was played as a rule in pairs, one in the right hand and one in the left, as shown in surviving representations and by their names "twin" and "parallel auloi" or "double-reed auloi". Both auloi were probably played simultaneously. They were of uneven or, usually, even length. The issue of whether they were played in unison or not remains unanswered. According to one opinion, particularly if they did not have the same length, the longest played the melody, the shorter kept a type of drone bass or played a variation of the main melody. It has also been supported that they may not have been played simultaneously but in turn, one at a higher and one at a lower tonal height. There are indications that the relationship between the two auloi evolved through time. So, from some surviving music-scores for auloi, and from the fact that in representations both auloi appear to be of the same length and the players' fingers in the same places (although this could be the potter's device) we can assume that during the Archaic and Classical era they both produced the same melody, with slight perhaps variations. Relevant references in various sources suggest that during the Hellenistic era there developed a type of "dialogue" between the two auloi, they played i.e. in symphony but not in unison, while during the 1st century BC it appears that the left aulos played the melody and the right supported it.

4. Aulos-players' accoutrements

The aulos-players appear often in representations wearing the "phorveia" (or "epistomida" or "peristomion"), a type of strap made of leather or fabric which covered the mouth and cheeks and tied behind and sometimes, with a smaller strip, above the head. At the mouth it had one or two openings for the "epistomia" of the auloi to pass through. The wearing of the "phorveia" was imposed not only for aesthetic reasons, i.e. so that the cheeks did not bulge outward deforming the face (thus the myth which attributes its invention to Marsyas),¹² but mainly for functional purposes. It is assumed that by pressing the cheeks, the "phorveia" increased the air pressure within the mouth cavity and increased the strength of the sound. For this reason it seems that its use was considered essential in cases when one had to play loudly or for a long time, such as some professionals during virtuosity contests, or more rarely women, who used to play in a more restraint way, and during performances in open spaces or in a festive (often Dionysian) atmosphere.

Auloi were kept in a special double case, the "sybini" (or "aulothiki" or "aulodoki"). Hanging from the sybini was the "glottokomeion", the small box used for storing spare glottis reeds, which were easily damaged.

5. Types of aulos

Sources mention various categories of aulos, of which the main is based on the extent of height. According to the main distinctions accepted by Aristoxenos there were the following 5 categories:¹³ the "parthenios" for girls, the "paidikos" for boys, the "kitharistirios", the "teleios" for adults and the "hyperteleios". The "parthenios" was the highest and the "hyperteleios" the lowest, having a 3 octave distance between them. The "teleios" and the "hyperteleios" accompanied male choirs, the "parthenios" female choirs, the "paidikos" boys choirs while the "kitharistirios" accompanied citharoedus.



Other types of auloi are distinguishable according to their origin (“libys” (Libyan), “lydos” (Lydian), “Phrygian” (Phrygia), etc), their material of construction (“kalaminos” (reed), “pyxinos” (box-wood), “elephantinos” (ivory) etc), the aulos’ tone-colour or potential¹⁴ as well as its size.¹⁵ Some other types’ distinction is based on their special use. So, “paroinioi auloi”, which had a sharp sound, were used at symposia, “spondaikoi” accompanied hymns, “choirikoi” – and possibly “tragikoi” as well – accompanied dithyrambs and other choral songs, “vomvykes” were played during Dionysian orgiastic ceremonies and “pythians” at the homonym music contests and perhaps at the theatre (in which case they are called “theatrical”). Some of the aforementioned terms describe the same type of aulos. The “hemiopos” aulos, for example, is possibly identified with the “paidikos”, the “pythikos” with the “teleios” and the “theatrical”, while the “choroikos” could also be called “teleios”, “paidikos” and “parthenios” aulos.

These types differ in length and position of their holes and thus in tuning, but not in shape and construction. In this respect only the “plagiaulos” and the “monokalamos” or “monaulos” differed from the basic Greek type in as much as they were not played in pairs but alone, occupying the fingers of both hands. This practice is already found in the archaic period but remained rare. These auloi were mainly imported later, after the 4th century BC. A type of long “monaulos” (single aulos), the “gigglaros”, was of Egyptian origin and was used for wedding songs. Another type, of Carian or Phrygian origin, accompanied lamentations while a third, the “giggras”, of Carian or Phoenician origin measured 10 cm and was used for teaching beginners or in the worship of Adonis and Cybele. The “plagiaulos” possibly refers to a type of single aulos with a sideways positioned “glottis”, like the modern-day flute. The Phrygian aulos or “elymos” had a special characteristic: to one of the two aulos, usually the left, was added a cow horn. Although very little is known about the Hellenistic period, they are often encountered during Roman times and are connected to the worship of Cybele and particularly to the theatre.

6. Position of the aulos in the life of the Greeks

The aulos could render a large variety of tone-colour and enact in all harmonies. Its dynamic was greater than the guitar’s and its playing required great virtuosity. Its use was widespread. It was present at public and private religious ceremonies – particularly the Dionysian ones – it was included in processions (wedding, funerary etc), dances – religious and secular – athletic contests, but also in athletic training and practice, the theatre and in symposia. Melodies produced by aulos were, in fact, used to keep time for the oarsmen on triremes and marching of soldiers in battle.

There is safe evidence that the Lacedaemonians and the Thebans were taught the art of the aulos.¹⁶ Athenaios¹⁷ records examples of notable men, such as Alcibiades and Epaminondas being taught the aulos by virtuosos. In pottery, in school scenes, apart from the [lyre](#), the aulos is also depicted.

Plato however ostracizes it from his *Republic*,¹⁸ because professional involvement with the aulos made it an instrument of the «vulgar» as all professionals were at that time considered.

1. Other names: kalamos (Ευρ., *IT* 1126, *Ηλ.* 702; Πίνδ. *Ο* 10.84, *N* 5.38), (libya) lotus (Ευρ., *Ηλ.* 716, *Ελ.* 170, *Τρω.* 544, *ΙΑ* 1036; *Παιάν Δελφ.* 12). It must moreover be noted that the term «aulos» was also used for other wind instruments, especially those with a glottis.

2. Ομ. *Ιλ.* 10.12, 18.495.

3. Jacoby, F. (ed.), *Chronicum Parium* (Chicago 1980), verse 10; Πλούτ., *Ηθ.* 14, *Περί Μουσικής* 1133a (refers to the *Συναγωγή των περι Φρυγίας του Αλεξάνδρου*), 1133f; Πολυδ. 4.75.

4. Πίνδ., *Π* 12.18-27; Πλουτ., *Ηθ* 456b. Πρβ. Απολλδ. 1.4.2; Preller, L. – Robert, C., *Griechische Mythologie 1: Theogonie und Gotter 4* (Berlin 1894), p. 223-224.



5. Ηρ. 7.26 (attributes the story to the Phrygians); Πλάτ., *Συμπ.* 215b-c, *AP* 7.696; Ον., *Met.* 6.392-395; Πλούτ., *Hθ.* 713d. See also Απολλδ. 1.4.2. For the possibility of a reconciliation, of a literary origin, between Apollo and Marsyas in the 5th century under the condition of Marsyas' conversion to the apollonian lyre, see: Boardman, J., «Some Attic Fragments: Pot, Plaque, and Dithyramb», *JHS* 76 (1956), p. 18-25, part. p. 18-20; Landels, J.G., *Music in Ancient Greece and Rome* (London – New York 1999), p. 159.
6. See Αλκμ. (7th century BC), excerpt 51 in Page, D. (ed.), *Poetae melici Graeci: Alcmantis, Stesichori, Ibyci, Anacreontis, Simonidis, Corinnae, poetarum minorum reliquias, carmina popularia et convivialia quaeque adespota feruntur* (Oxford 1962); Πλούτ., *Hθ.* 1136b.
7. Κόρινθ. (6th/7th century BC), excerpt 15 in Page, D. (ed.), *Poetae melici Graeci: Alcmantis, Stesichori, Ibyci, Anacreontis, Simonidis, Corinnae, poetarum minorum reliquias, carmina popularia et convivialia quaeque adespota feruntur* (Oxford 1962); Πλούτ., *Hθ.* 1136b.
8. Πολυδ. 4.71.
9. Πολυδ. 4.80.
10. Παυσ. 9.12.6; Αθήν. 14.631e.
11. See note of Παυσανίας (9.30.2) that in a statue of the famous aulos-player from Argos Sakadas the aulos had a height double his height.
12. Πλούτ., *Hθ.* 456c (possibly echoes Simonidis), 713d.
13. Αριστόξ., excerpt 101 in Wehrli, F. (ed.), *Die schule des Aristoteles: Texte und Kommentare* (Basil – Stuttgart – Schwabe 1944-1959); Αθήν. 14.634e.
14. αιάζων (*aeazon*) = wailful; τέρην (*terin*) = tender; καλλιβόας, πολύκομπος, βαρύβρομος (*kallivoas, polykombos, varyvromos*) = with nice, loud or deep sound respectively; πολυμελής (*polymelis*) = suitable for playing many melodies, etc.
15. μεσόκοπος (*mesokopos*) = middle size; ημίποπος, πολύτρητος (*hemipopos, polytritros*) = with the half or large number of openings respectively, etc.
16. Αθήν. 4.184 c-f.
17. Αθήν. 4.184 d-e.
18. Πλάτ., *Πολ.* 3.399 d.

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Webliography :

	Aulos http://www.instrumentsmedievax.org/pages/Aulos.html
	The ancient aulos http://classics.uc.edu/music/aulos.html

Glossary :

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Solo melody conducted with the aulos. The most important one was the Pythian that was established by Sakadas, the famous aulos player from Argos. During the festive of Pythia in 586 BC he was awarded with the first prize in the art of the aulos.