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Kemangeh roumy: a migrating instrument

Acquisition of a kemangeh roumy

When in 1878, Victor Mahillon (1841–1924), newly appointed as the first curator of the Musée des instruments du Conservatoire in Brussels, inventoried the nearly 300 instruments then constituting the collection of the new museum, he categorized this instrument as a German viola d'amore.[1] From a purely formal view this was not an illogical decision. Its morphology is that of a viola d'amore, a bowed chordophone with sympathetic strings, enjoying a certain success in the eighteenth century, especially in the German-speaking countries and in Italy.

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Kemangeh roumy, Egypt, 1750-1800, inv. 0225



François-Joseph Fétis (1784-1871)

Eurocentrism

It is not without significance that Fétis undertook to acquire Egyptian instruments at the very moment when, forced into neutrality by the Treaty of London in April 1839, the young Belgian kingdom became involved in the 'Oriental Question' and the complex power games

Question and the complex power games between France, England, the Ottoman Empire and the Egyptian Viceroyalty. While the conflict between the Egypt of the Khedive Muhammed Ali and his 'theoretical' sovereign, Sultan Mahmud II, was entering a new episode with the second Egyptian-Ottoman war

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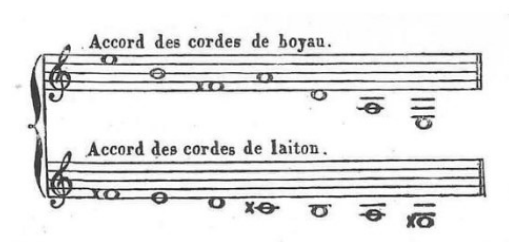
Kemangeh roumy and viola d'amore

Among the sixteen instruments which Zizinia collected for Fétis in Alexandria - lutes, flutes, oboes, drums, lyres, zithers and viols - was this 'kemangeh roumy'.^[1] As said, this instrument exhibits the characteristics of the European viola d'amore: it has six melodic strings and six sympathetic strings (i.e. strings that vibrate sympathetically, without being touched by the musician). The sympathetic strings run under the fingerboard, which has no frets. The system of attachment of the melodic and

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Passage of the sympathetic strings under the fingerboard and fixation at the bottom of the sound box on the kemangeh roumy (MIM, inv. 0225) and on a classical viola d'amore (Andreas Ostler, Wrocław, 1730, MIM, inv. 1388)



Tuning of the kemangeh roumy (Fétis, Histoire générale de la musique, 1869)

Tuning

According to Fétis, one particularity that distinguishes the kemangeh roumy from the European viola d'amore is its tuning. The tuning is reversed in comparison with western bowed instruments, where the lowest strings are on the left side and the highest on the right. Fétis associates this characteristic with the shape of the tailpiece, which is longer on the left than on the right.^[1] On European violas d'amore

the tailpiece is either symmetrical or longer on the right side.

[1] Fétis, Histoire, vol. 2, 141.

Internal structure

The internal structure of the instrument strongly suggests that it was designed for a European-style tuning, with the lower strings on the left, as the bass bar, carved in the wood of the inner side of the sound board, is located under the left foot of the bridge rather than under the right foot. The general impression from an internal examination is that the kemangeh roumy was made by a European or a violin maker trained in European techniques. For example, the sound holes are chamfered from the inside, a typical feature of European Baroque violin making. The

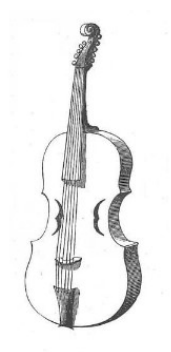
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Kemangeh roumy (MIM, inv. 0225), endoscopic photographs (linings, chamfered sound holes, corner block, carved out bass bar)



Left: Plate AA of Villoteau (in Description de l'Égypte. Planches, 1817), n° 14: Kemangeh roumy. Right: Fétis, Histoire, vol. 2, p. 141



Fétis and Villoteau

It should be noted that 40 years before Fétis, Guillaume André Villoteau (1759–1839), one of the savants who joined Napoleon's Egyptian campaign (1799–1801), had depicted a similar kemangeh roumy in his contribution on musical instruments to the famous Description de l'Égypte, on a plate with engravings entitled: 'Oriental instruments known in Egypt'.

Villoteau's report on the kemangeh roumy reads that 'this viol bears a strong resemblance to the instrument known, not long ago, in France and Italy, under the

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Migration

Villoteau's and Fétis' testimonies raise the question of whether, perhaps, the European viola d'amore was used by local musicians in late eighteenth-century Egypt. As mentioned above, the kemangeh roumy seems to be nothing but a retuned European viola d'amore. It is known that in the second half of the eighteenth century, viola d'amore was amongst the goods which were traded between Europe and the Ottoman Empire – of which the Viceroyalty Egypt was still a part, despite the Mamluks' desire for autonomy. The first evidence of viola d'amore being

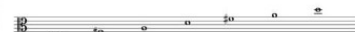
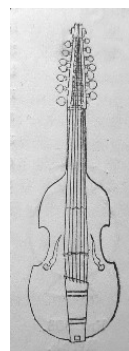
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Another record of the same type of instrument is from the hand of the Turkish musician and musicographer Rauf Yekta Bey (1871–1935) writing in the early 1920s that the sine keman was still

the most popular instrument among Turkish classical music lovers ... The chamber music of the Turks being very soft, the viola d'amore's strangely poetic and melancholic timbre suits it better ... and its particular charm is enjoyed more fully in the luxurious and mysterious surroundings of the Oriental salons.[1]

Yekta says that he owns a sine keman

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Rauf Yekta Bey, 'La musique turque', in Lionel de la Laurencie en Albert Lavignac (ed.), *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire*



Kemangeh roumy, Egypt, 1750-1800, inv. 0225

The kemangeh roumy at the MIM

When Villoteau saw kemangeh roumys in Cairo at the end of the 1790s, he described and depicted one in his report, but considered it not interesting enough to take with him to France. Apart from Villoteau's illustration and Fétis' instrument, no other Egyptian kemangeh roumys in the shape of a viola d'amore are known. Consequently, Fétis' kemangeh roumy may well be the first (and only?) one brought to Europe. It may have been of Austrian production, and may have traveled from Vienna to Alexandria and then to Brussels.

After Fétis' death in 1871 his sons Édouard and Adolphe sold his musical...

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