

The *semantron* to Western ears: othering through sound¹

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For centuries Eastern Churches only employed the semantron, usually an elongated piece of wood that is struck with a hammer, to gather the faithful. Eventually, most adopted bell ringing, even though semantra continue to be used by some Orthodox Churches. In the West bells were rung for the same purpose and the semantron was unknown. As a result, Western pilgrims, diplomats, and other travellers to the eastern Mediterranean were astonished and intrigued when they encountered the instrument. This article looks at their descriptions and discusses how the instrument and its sounds were used to other Oriental Christianity.

Keywords: *semantron*; Orthodox Churches; religious soundscape

Before the Christian communities of the eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans adopted the use of large bells for religious purposes,² their traditional instrument to call the faithful to divine service and regulate the everyday life of monastic communities was the *semantron*.³ This percussion instrument usually takes the shape of an elongated piece of wood that is hit with a wooden mallet. There are two main versions. One is

1 I thank Zorana Đorđević, who read a first draft and kindly provided feedback. Any mistakes are my own.

2 For the earliest use of bell ringing in Byzantium and the Orthodox Balkans, see A. Rodriguez Suarez, 'Towards a new religious soundscape: the introduction of bell ringing in the Byzantine Empire', in B. Caseau Chevallier and E. Neri (eds.), *Rituels religieux et sensorialité (Antiquité et Moyen Age). Parcours des recherches* (Milan 2021) 331–43, and 'When did the Serbs and the Bulgarians adopt bell ringing?', *CAS Working Paper Series* 10 (2018) 3–31.

3 B. Miljković, 'Semantra and bells in Byzantium', *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 55 (2018) 271–303; C. Hannick, 'Die Bedeutung der Glocken in byzantinischen und slavischen Klöstern und Städten', in A. Haverkamp (ed.), *Information, Kommunikation und Selbstdarstellung in mittelalterlichen Gemeinden* (Munich 1998) 1–23; A. Kazhdan (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford 1991) III.1868; E. V. Williams, *The Bells of Russia: history and technology* (Princeton 1985) 10–19; T. Dombart, 'Das Semanterium, die frühchristliche Holzglocke', *Die christliche Kunst* 20 (1924) 51–63, 77–8.



Fig. 1: Portable *semantron* (Russian Convent of the Ascension, Jerusalem). The author

thin and portable (Fig. 1); the other is larger and always hangs in the same place (Fig. 2). Most artistic representations of the *semantron* dating to the Byzantine period suggest that the portable type may have appeared first; at any rate, they seem to show that it was more common.⁴ The origins of the *semantron* are obscure; it has been suggested that striking wood to gather people was a Jewish tradition adopted by Christians.⁵ Its expansion throughout the Byzantine Empire has not been traced. A reference in the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, dated between the death of Theodore (613) and the Persian conquest of Ancyra (622), indicates that by the end of the sixth century the use of *semantra* was already present in the Byzantine capital.⁶ A text attributed to the

4 One of the earlier depictions of the *semantron* appears on a ninth-century manuscript, M. Evangelatou, 'Liturgy and the illustration of the ninth-century marginal psalters', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 63 (2009) 59–116 (105, fig. 3). For further representations, see the database GABAM Byzantine Musical Instruments Collection: <https://librarydigitalcollections.ku.edu.tr/en/collection/byzantine-musical-instruments-collection/>

5 R. Stichel, 'Jüdische Tradition in christlicher Liturgie: zur Geschichte des Semantrons', *Cahiers archéologiques* 21 (1971) 213–28.

6 *Vie de Théodore de Sykéon*, ed. A. Festugière, 2 vols (Brussels 1970) I.77, II.80.



Fig. 2: Large *semantron* (Armenian Cathedral of St James, Jerusalem). The author

Patriarch of Constantinople Germanos I (715–30) associates the *semantron* with the trumpets of the angels and states that the wooden instrument calls the contestants to battle against their invisible enemies.⁷ In fact, written sources claim that the sound produced by the *semantron* scared demons away.⁸ From the eleventh century, the number of *semantra* employed in monasteries increased. For instance, the *typikon* for the Evergetis Monastery, drafted in the eleventh century, mentions four: the standard *semantron* (surely portable); a large one; one made of metal (Fig. 3); and the one used for the refectory.⁹ The number of *semantra* demonstrates that the signals given in a monastery in the middle Byzantine period had become more complex. With the adoption of church bells, the religious soundscape of the late Byzantine period

7 P. Meyendorff, *On the Divine Liturgy* (Crestwood NY 1984) 56–9.

8 *The Life of Lazaros of Mt. Galesion: an eleventh-century pillar saint*, ed. R. P. H. Greenfield (Washington DC 2000) 129.

9 P. Gautier, 'Le typikon de la Théotokos Évergétis', *Revue des études byzantines* 40 (1982) 5–101 (25, 27, 33). The metal version is still quite common in Greek Orthodox monasteries and those of the Orthodox Churches in the Balkans.



Fig. 3: Metal *semantron* (Melkite Greek Monastery of St Saviour, Lebanon). The author

(1261–1453) became eclectic. It was composed of the pealing of bells and the striking of *semantra*. Nonetheless, the Ottoman conquest resulted in the end of this combination, which survived only in a few privileged locations such as Mount Athos.¹⁰ While the *semantron* was more tolerated than bells, it too was forbidden in Constantinople, the Ottoman capital from 1453.¹¹

In the Levant and Egypt, the story was quite different. In the seventh century, the Muslim conquest of these territories restricted the use of *semantra*. The instruments were generally allowed, but there were certain limitations and temporary bans.¹² The use of bells in the Holy Land was introduced by the First Crusade; however, the fall of the so-called Crusader states brought the practice to an end in the region.¹³ It is unclear if local communities adopted church bells; this seems to have been the case of the Maronites.¹⁴ The Orthodox Church in Cyprus employed both *semantra* and bells during the period of Latin rule over the island.¹⁵ Since Muslim polities generally did not allow the use of church bells, the *semantron* was the main instrument for the Christian communities of the Middle East to gather the faithful. This was the case

10 A. Rodriguez Suarez, 'Bell ringing on Mount Athos during the Ottoman period, II: Bells', *Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας* 42 (2021) 387–414.

11 E. Dalleggio d'Alessio, 'Le texte grec du traité conclu par les Génois de Galata avec Mehmet II le 1er Juin 1453', *Ελληνικά* 11 (1939) 118, 124.

12 M. R. Cohen, 'What was the pact of 'Umar? A literary-historical study', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 23 (1999) 100–57 (107: 'we shall only beat our clappers in our churches very quietly').

13 I. Shagrir, 'Urban soundscape: defining space and community in twelfth-century of Jerusalem', in I. Shagrir, B. Z. Kedar and M. Balard (eds.), *Communicating the Middle Ages: essays in honour of Sophia Menache* (London 2018) 103–20.

14 Jacques de Vitry, *The History of Jerusalem*, tr. A. Stewart (London 1896) 80–1.

15 T. Kaffenberger, 'Bell towers, bell gables, and bellcotes in Late Medieval Cyprus: the appropriation of new habits and architectural fashions in a multi-denominational environment', *Frankokratia* 4 (2023) 89–129.

until the mid-nineteenth century, when Ottoman authorities gradually allowed them to ring bells.¹⁶ In any case, the religious soundscape of the region was certainly dominated by the *adhan*, the Islamic call to prayer, chanted by muezzins from the top of minarets.

The convocation instrument of the Roman Church was the bell.¹⁷ Western churches and monasteries were provided with bell towers, and bell ringing not only played an important role in the religious sphere, but was employed by civic authorities to regulate the daily life of the population.¹⁸ Even after the Reformation, the new Protestant churches continued to ring bells to summon the people. Thus, the religious soundscape was a significant difference between West and East. As we will see below, even when Orthodox had adopted bells, the *semantron* made a deep impression on Westerners. In territories under Muslim rule, this impression was heightened by the fact that Christian communities could not ring bells and that the only instrument tolerated was the *semantron*. This article analyses a number of references found in Western sources, mainly travel accounts, from the Byzantine, Frankish/Venetian and Ottoman periods, from the ninth to the nineteenth century, to discuss how Westerners perceived and described this different soundscape. It has been noted that ‘sound is a prominent feature of cross-cultural contact in both early modern drama and travel literature.’¹⁹ The accounts I cite reveal that the *semantron* and its sounds remained a key marker of cultural distinctiveness over the centuries. The analysis of these references provides details about the *semantron*, its use and evolution in different locations and periods. Because the history of the instrument, particularly in the Ottoman period, has yet to be researched, the information from these accounts is valuable. So far this topic has only been noted in a brief manner.²⁰ For this reason, the present study is the first to look at the religious soundscape of the Eastern Churches as it was experienced through Western ears.

Byzantium

The earliest reference to the *semantron* that I have found in a Western source dates to the ninth century. In a letter to Abbot Hilduin of St Denis, Amalarius of Metz writes that

16 A. Rodriguez Suarez, ‘Two church bells from Antalya: traces of the religious soundscape of the Late Ottoman period’, *Adalya* 23 (2020) 523–5.

17 For the use of bells, see J. H. Arnold and C. Goodson, ‘Resounding community: the history and meaning of Medieval church bells’, *Viator* 43/1 (2012) 99–130; E. Neri, ‘Les cloches: construction, sens, perception d’un son: quelques reflexions à partir des témoignages archéologiques des ‘fours à cloches’, *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 55 (2012) 473–96.

18 C. Bernazzani, ‘La campana civica: tra *signum*, simbolo e celebrazione visiva’, *Opera · Nomina · Historiae: Giornale di cultura artistica* 2/3 (2010) 287–392.

19 J. Linhart Wood, *Sounding Otherness in Early Modern Drama and Travel* (Cham 2019) 5.

20 C. Rouxpetel, *L’Occident au miroir de l’Orient chrétien : Cilicie, Syrie, Palestine et Égypte (XIIe-XIVe siècle)* (Rome 2015) 198–9.

bronze is superior to wood, and adds that the custom of using wood to summon people to church is still employed by the Illyrians and all Greece.²¹ He had been to Constantinople in 813 as an envoy of Charlemagne (800–14) and so must have experienced *semantra* both on his way to and in the Byzantine capital. This piece of evidence indicates that by the early ninth century, the use of metal in the West (the bell) and wood in the East (the *semantron*) to call to divine service was well established.²² Thus, the religious soundscape is one of the earlier differences between the future Roman and Orthodox Churches, even before the so-called East–West Schism (1054). While Amalarius does not speak about the *semantron* in pejorative terms, he clearly says that the bronze instrument is better.

Two centuries later, an anonymous Westerner who was studying Greek in Constantinople wrote an account about the Byzantine capital. At some point he describes the miracle that took place in the shrine of the Virgin Mary at Blachernae, and we are told that, when this was about to happen, people were summoned to the church by striking a wooden board.²³ And, he continues, ‘for the Greeks do not have any other instrument for this task’. And he explains that this is the case not because they lack metals to produce the instruments that the Latins use (bells), but because they follow a tradition that goes back to the time of the Apostles. He adds that, in fear of the pagans, they would strike a wooden board as a signal to hasten to church. The anonymous author is aware that his audience will be surprised to find out that the Byzantines do not use bells to gather the people to church. For this reason, he provides an explanation. As we will see below, this was the case with many authors. Whether the locals came up with this story is untold. It implied that the use of wood to gather the faithful was a very old tradition, one that went back to the origins of Christianity. In any case, the description does not say that the *semantron* is inferior; the author just points out the difference in the instruments. Around the same time, another story narrating the origins of the *semantron* seems to have circulated in the Byzantine capital: according to Anthony of Novgorod, who visited Constantinople in 1200, the use of the *semantron* had been taught by an angel.²⁴

21 *Opera Liturgica Omnia*, ed. J. M. Hanssens (Vatican City 1948–50) II.470: ‘Praecellit enim aes ligno. Eodem enim signo ante Stephanum pontificem per omnes horas consecratis colligebantur fideles ad ecclesiam; quem usum Illyrici et omnis Graecia adhuc observat’.

22 It must be noted that, according to him, the wooden signal was also employed in Rome before Pope Stephen II (752–7). If we are to believe this, the *semantron*, or a similar instrument, had also been employed in the city of the popes. The construction of a bell tower in St Peter’s is attributed to Stephen II, P. Romano, *Campane di Roma* (Rome 1944) 10–11.

23 K. N. Ciggaar, ‘Une description de Constantinople dans le Tarragonensis 55’, *Revue des études byzantines* 53 (1995) 117–40 (122: ‘Appropinquante denique hora qua divina debent fieri miracula, percutitur tabula lignea ad vocandum in ecclesiam populum, quia Greci aliud non habent signum ad huiusmodi officium. Non quod desit eis es aut metallum ad facienda signa more Latinorum, sed illud agunt, ut dicunt, ad exemplum apostolorum qui ob metu paganorum clam ad hostium domus Christianorum ligneam percuciebant tabulam ut hoc signo properarent ad ecclesiam’).

24 *Die Kniga palomnik des Antonij von Novgorod*, ed. A. Jouravel (Wiesbaden 2019) 276–9. He also specifies that the Byzantines strike *semantra* while the Latins ring bells. This detail confirms that he was surprised to encounter the wooden instrument. Indeed, by that time bell ringing seems to have been

Between 1336 and 1341, the German cleric Ludolf von Sudheim travelled throughout the eastern Mediterranean. His account includes a brief description of each Christian group in the region. Of the Greeks we are told that in churches they do not have sculpted images, only painted ones. Also, that they use bells where they govern, but wherever they are under Latin rule, they strike boards with iron.²⁵ This, we are told, makes an artificial sound. Ludolf's account proves that by the first half of the fourteenth century, the Byzantines had already adopted bell ringing. Nonetheless, the sonic dichotomy that he reports is difficult to explain. What did he mean by the claim that the Byzantines only ring bells in locations where they rule? He had been in Constantinople, which after a short period of Crusader rule (1204–61), was back in Byzantine hands. There the Byzantine use of bell ringing is attested since the end of the thirteenth century.²⁶ On the other hand, Ludolf visited several places under Latin rule such as Rhodes and Cyprus, where perhaps Orthodox communities had not yet adopted church bells. Were they seeking to make an acoustic statement to differentiate themselves from their new Latin rulers? This is unlikely, since bells rung in the Byzantine capital. Perhaps they had simply been unable to obtain bells. In any case, Ludolf's statement amounts to a constructing of self (Latins) versus other (Greeks). The period of the Crusades witnessed the encounter of different Christian groups and Western authors noted the distinctions. Clearly, sound was one of the elements of this diversity.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, a Castilian embassy heading to the court of Timur (1370–1405) visited Constantinople and Trebizond. The travel account attributed to one of its members, Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, mentions the use of *semantra*. We are told that the Greeks are very devout people, but that their faith is marked by many errors. First, they use leavened bread for the Eucharist. Also, they do not ring bells in their churches, except in the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople, but summon the faithful by striking wooden boards.²⁷ During the last two centuries of Byzantium bell ringing is assumed to have become widespread, even though its real extent has not been determined.²⁸ At any rate, Byzantine sources confirm that *semantra* continued to be struck by the Orthodox community, even in the capital.²⁹ The Castilian account

common in Kievan Rus, B. Kindratiuk, 'The origins of bell-ringing in Kievan Rus', *Journal of the International Society for Orthodox Church Music* 2 (2016) 37–43. Thus, Westerners were not the only travellers to be astonished to discover the practice.

25 Ludolph von Sudheim, 'De itinere Terre Sancte', *Archives de l'Orient latin* 2 (1884) 368: 'Campanis vtuntur, ubi dominantur, sed ubi sunt sub Latinis percutiunt tabulas cum ferro artificialiter sonante.' The first part of the reference is incorrectly translated in Rouxpetel, *L'Occident au miroir de l'Orient chrétien*, 199.

26 George Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, ed. A. Failler, 4 vols (Paris 1984–99) III.29.

27 *Embajada a Tamorlán*, ed. F. López Estrada (Madrid 1943) 77: 'quando oficia la misa, non tiene libro nin tañen campanas en las iglesias, salvo en Santa Sofía de Costantinopla, que con unas tablas tañen a misa.'

28 Miljković, 'Semantra and bells in Byzantium', 287–96.

29 H. Delehaye, *Deux typica byzantins de l'époque des Paléologues* (Brussels 1921) 49, 52; H. Delehaye, 'Constantini Acropolitae hagiographi byzantini epistularum manipulus', *Analecta Bollandiana* 51 (1933) 263–84 (282–3).

corroborates that the religious soundscape of Palaiologan Constantinople was eclectic. Nevertheless, the claim that bells were only employed at the cathedral of Constantinople is certainly an exaggeration, as we know that bell ringing was employed in other churches of the Byzantine capital.³⁰ The author seems to have had his own agenda: to highlight the use of the *semantron* over that of bells in order to depict the religious practices of the Byzantines in a bad light. The *semantron* is not an instrument employed by the Catholic Church and so its use is incorrect. As in Ludolf's account, the author used the traditional instrument of the Byzantines to emphasize the differences between the Orthodox and the Roman rites. In this case, however, the *semantron* is considered inferior to the bell.

The previous opinion resembles that of the Franciscan friar Niccolò da Poggibonsi, who visited Jerusalem in the mid-fourteenth century. In a section devoted to the Greeks, he writes that they perform the liturgy in a different way than the Latins and goes on to list some of their practices. The second custom that he mentions is that they do not have bells to ring, but when they want to announce the time of the day, or any liturgy, their priest goes up the church with an oar and strikes it with a mallet, making a great noise that can be heard everywhere.³¹ Once again, the use of the *semantron* is considered a defining trait of the Orthodox rite, one that highlights the division between the two Churches.

Frankish and Venetian Cyprus

Cyprus was conquered by King Richard I of England (r. 1189–99) and was under Latin rule until the Ottoman conquest of the island in 1571. Felix Fabri, a Swiss Dominican theologian who visited the Holy Land twice in the second half of the fifteenth century sojourned in the island. Describing the capital of Cyprus, for instance, we are told that the city has many churches, both Latin and Greek. The Latin churches have bell towers, the Greek gables with wooden instruments to summon the faithful.³² Fabri claims that the Greeks only employ *semantra*. Yet while bells certainly prevailed in the Roman Church,³³ it is difficult to believe that by then no Orthodox church or monastery in Nicosia employed

30 John Bekkos, *Περὶ ἀδικίας, ἧς ὑπέστη, τοῦ οἰκείου θρόνου ἀπελαθείς*, ed. J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* 141 (Paris 1857–66) c. 953.

31 Fra Niccolò da Poggibonsi, *Libro d'oltremare (1346–1350)*, ed. A. Bacchi della Lega (Jerusalem 1945) 146. His account was the basis for an illustrated guidebook to the Holy Land, *Viaggio da Venetia al Santo Sepolcro, et al monte Sinai* (Venice 1606), K. Blair Moore, 'The disappearance of an author and the emergence of a genre: Niccolò da Poggibonsi and pilgrimage guidebooks between manuscript and print', *Renaissance Quarterly* 66/2 (2013) 357–411.

32 Felix Fabri, *Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae, Arabiae et Egypti peregrinationem*, ed. K. D. Hassler, 4 vols (Stuttgart 1843–49) III.230: 'Ecclesiae multae sunt in illa urbe, tam latinae quam graecae. In latinis sunt campanilia cum campanis, et cum clericis latino more officiantibus. In graecis sunt pinnacula cum ligneis instrumentis, quibus convocant suum populum ad divina, et graece canunt et legunt.' English translation in C. Delaval Cobham, *Excerpta Cypria: materials for a history of Cyprus* (Cambridge 1908) 42.

33 At least when they were free to choose. According to Fabri, Catholic clergy in Jerusalem resorted to a 'tabula', perhaps a *semantron* or something similar, to gather the faithful, Fabri, *Evagatorium in Terre Sanctae*, I.242.

belling. Thus, the reference is surely a literary construction that aims at dividing the two churches by means of sound. The author is reducing the religious soundscape of the Greek Orthodox Church to the use of the *semantron*, that is, the sonic dichotomy makes the reader believe that the Orthodox never rings bells, the Western/Catholic instrument. Yet his account, like previous ones, suggests only that *semantra* were employed more frequently, as would indeed have been the case in monastic foundations.

In 1518, Jacques Lesaige, a silk merchant from the Low Countries, also visited Nicosia on his way to Jerusalem. His account includes a description of a *semantron* being struck, something that astonished him greatly. He informs us how an attendant carried on his shoulders a rail about ten feet long and three inches wide; he struck the middle of the rail with two little wooden mallets producing such a loud sound that it was a marvel. According to Lesaige, he signalled the time for the *Salve Regina*, a Marian antiphon of the Catholic Church traditionally sung at Compline between Pentecost and the First Sunday of Advent. We are told, too, that the merchant had often heard this sound but did not know what it was. Finally, he says that in many churches the Greeks do not have other bells, which, he adds, are not expensive.³⁴ Unlike some of the previous authors, Lesaige relished the sound of the *semantron*. He experienced it after visiting the cathedral of Hagia Sophia, but he did not specify in which Orthodox church or monastery the event had taken place. Lesaige seems to have been unaware that this was the traditional instrument of the Orthodox Church and suggested that it was used in many Greek churches because it was cheaper than bells. He reports that many churches of the Greeks did have not bells, implying that some did. As we have seen, even though Orthodox monasteries adopted bell ringing, they also continued to employ *semantra*. The case of non-monastic churches may have been different, since they did not need to signal as many different calls, such foundations probably employed only one instrument. Lesaige's suggestion that *semantra* were employed because they were cheaper may not be completely accurate. The lack of bells in Orthodox foundations may instead be related to bell production. It is not known if bell founding ever existed in Cyprus; most bells on the island may have been imported from the West; for instance, from Venice.³⁵ Thus, obtaining the metal instruments would not have been that easy. Bells were not only more expensive than *semantra*, they had to be imported. Lesaige describes the portable *semantron* being

34 *Voyage de Jacques Le Saige, de Douai, a Rome, Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, Venise, Jérusalem et autres saints lieux*, ed. H.-R. Duthilloeuil (Douai 1851) 140: 'Quant fut l'heure du salve, ung de nos pellerins me monstra une chose de quoy fus bien esbahis. Ce fut ung valton avoit sur son espaul une roille bien de dix pieds de long et environ trois paulx de large et tapoit au millieu de ladite roille, tout deux petits marteles de bos et menoit cela si grant bruit que cestoit merveille. Cestoit le salve que sonoit; javoie ouy maintesfois marteles; mais ne scavoie que cestoit, en pluseurs eglises de grecqs nont point daultres cloches, aussy ne leur coutte guaire.' English translation in *Excerpta Cypria*, 59.

35 An inventory of properties (compiled in 1556) of the deceased Zuanbattista Campanato, a bell founder based in Venice, mentions a bell cast for Cyprus: V. Avery, *Vulcan's Forge in Venus' City: the story of bronze in Venice 1350–1650* (Oxford 2011) 76, 157 n. 69.

struck with two hammers at the same time; this seems to have been a new development and required the player to have both hands free. A seventeenth-century drawing shows the *semantron* being struck in this way; it reveals that the instrument was held over the shoulder by a cord clenched between the player's teeth.³⁶ Lesaige also informs us that the individual striking the *semantron* is signalling the time for the *Salve Regina*. However, since this was a Catholic antiphon, the instrument may have been struck to call to Vespers.

Ottoman Empire

In 1516–17 Ottoman armies conquered the Levant and Egypt. Soon after, in 1519, a Castilian noble named Fadrique Enríquez de Ribera travelled to Jerusalem, where he visited the Holy Sepulchre. The church was divided between different Christian groups. Describing the Greeks, he tells us that they do not have bells but a board to call to mass, and that in this way people know which of the Greeks or the Latins are calling the faithful.³⁷ Once again, the sound of *semantra* and that of bells represented the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches respectively. After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, the Greeks were only allowed to ring bells in a few locations. For this reason, the *semantron* re-emerges as the sole instrument of the Christian other.

In the early seventeenth century, the composer and author Pietro della Valle visited the Middle East and India. His travel account includes a description of the Greek Orthodox monastery of St Catherine in Sinai. We read that he attended the service, which the brothers announced, not with bells, but with rods of wood and iron that are struck with hammers and make a very beautiful sound.³⁸ And, he added, this is particularly so when they sound them in a musical manner as with the bells at the monastery of St Catherine of Funari in Rome. As we have seen above, della Valle's positive opinion about the sounds of *semantra* is not unique. His favourable perception was surely influenced by his musical knowledge, which helped him to appreciate the rhythmical composition. In fact, he compares it with the music produced by the carillon of a Roman monastery.³⁹ Also, for the first time we here encounter a metal *semantron*. Usually, large and wealthy monasteries employed more than one type.

36 Williams, *The Bells of Russia*, 13–14, fig. 8.

37 Fadrique Enríquez de Ribera, *Este libro es de el viaje que hize a Ierusalem* (Seville 1606) 101: 'No tienen campanas, sino vna tabla, y de esta manera tañen a missa, e a todas las horas. Pienso, que deue ser esto: porque sea conocido, entre ellos, quando tañen los Griegos, o los Latinos.'

38 *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle il Pellegrino* (Brighton 1843) I.219: '...mi trovai presente agli uffici; alli quali chiamano i frati, non con campane, ma con certe aste di legno e di ferro, che battono con alcune mazze che fanno un suono molto bello, massimamente quando suonano a doppio in un certo modo di musica come usano talvolta di fare in Roma con le campane nel monastero di santa Caterina de'Funari.'

39 The church of Santa Caterina dei Funari, rebuilt by Cardinal Federico Cesi in the mid-sixteenth century, was provided with a carillon made in Germany, S. Spartà, *I campanili di Roma* (Rome 1983) 144.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the French merchant and diplomat Laurent d'Arvieux travelled to the eastern Mediterranean several times. His memoirs, published after his death, mention a *semantron* in the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. We read that behind the altar is a large piece of wood, which the Greeks have instead of the bell and which they use to call the faithful. We are also told that nothing is more unwelcome than this unpleasant sound. And, d' Arvieux adds, the Greeks never miss the chance to produce this deafening noise when our own clergy is celebrating the Eucharist with the goal of disrupting it.⁴⁰ This account describes the sound of the *semantron* as a negative experience. The author dislikes it for several reasons. It is not only the other's practice, but represents the competition with the Greek Orthodox Church within the Holy Sepulchre. This famous shrine was (and is) shared between different branches of the Christian faith, and sound also played a part in the rivalry between them. It is unclear whether the Greek clergy really struck the instrument simply to annoy their Latin counterparts. If that was the case, sound was actually used to oppose the Latin presence at the most important church in Jerusalem. This must have been upsetting for the Latins since at the time they do not seem to have been able to employ any bells there.⁴¹

Also in the second half of the seventeenth century, the Dutch artist and traveller Cornelis de Bruijn visited several locations in the eastern Mediterranean. His travel account includes a section about the customs of the Greek Orthodox Church, in which he too discusses the *semantron* or, he calls it by another Greek name, *simandirion*.⁴² He tells us that since the Turks conquered Greece, the pealing of bells to call the faithful to church is no longer to be heard, and instead they only have the *semantron*, which is like a wooden board, long and narrow. While de Bruijn is well informed and provides one of the names of the instrument in question, his description implies that the Greek use of the *semantron* is a result of the Ottoman conquest. Later authors will make similar statements, but this idea is not accurate, for the Greek Orthodox Church employed the instrument before the Ottoman conquest. Since bell ringing for religious purposes was strictly forbidden by the Turks, only the exclusive use of the *semantron* was a consequence of the Ottoman conquest. The author does not say where he

40 *Mémoires du chevalier d'Arvieux*, ed. Jean-Baptiste Labat (Paris 1735) II.127–8: 'Le derriere de l'Autel est occupé par une grande piece de bois, soutenue par deux traverses de fer. C'est sur cette piece de bois, qui leur tient lieu de / cloche, que les Grecs sonnent leurs Offices, en battant dessus avec des masses de bois, que deux ou trois Sonneurs tiennent à chaque main, avec les quelles ils frappent en cadence de toutes leurs forces. Rien n'est plus importun que ce carillon éclatant & désagréable, & comme dans toutes les occasions ils affectent de nous donner des marques de leur mauvaise volonté, ils ne manquent jamais de faire ce bruit étourdissant, quand nos Religieux font leur Office, afin de les interrompre.'

41 The Catholic clergy of the Holy Sepulchre employed small bells within the church, but these instruments are only reported from the eighteenth century, E. Horn, *Ichnographiae Monumentorum Terrae Sanctae* (1724–1744), ed. E. Hoade (Jerusalem 1962) 86.

42 Corneille le Brun, *Voyage au Levant* (Delft 1700) 101, 103. This is a French translation of the Dutch original.

witnessed the use of *semantra* and could have taken the information from some travel accounts he mentions. On the other hand, he must have seen *semantra* in one of the many churches and monasteries he visited.

In 1835–6, the British geologist William J. Hamilton visited Asia Minor. At the town of Platana (modern Akçaabat), west of Trabzon, he visited an old Byzantine church still employed by the local Christian community. He narrates the following:

The priest was summoning his congregation to church on my arrival; and as the Greeks are not allowed the use of bells, they supply the want of them by a piece of wood suspended from a tree, which is struck like a drum by the priest, who at times endeavours to produce a kind of tune.⁴³

Large *semantra* could be placed on towers,⁴⁴ but the instrument was found in a wide range of places, even in hanging from the branches of a tree. More interesting is the fact that the instrument is employed in a village where part of the population is Muslim, that is, the Christian community was allowed to strike it. This, like many other accounts, suggest that the use of the *semantron* depended on both location and period. While bells were generally forbidden, there was not an established rule for the *semantron* and so the local authorities probably decided.

In 1845, the new British consul in Jerusalem, James Finn, arrived at the city with his wife. In her work dedicated to Jerusalem, she describes the *semantron* in the following terms:

As we passed through the vestibule, a deacon began to strike with small hammers a long curved plank, which was suspended by chains from the ceiling so as to permit free vibration. This was the church-bell, real bells not being permitted by the Mohammedans. The sound produced in this manner was very distinct. I asked Mary if it could be heard at a distance. –Oh yes, she said; we often hear it from the Convent in Jerusalem, especially very early in the morning; and then, you know, the various sects all live near and around their own convent, so that they are sure to hear it. –What is the name of this strange bell? –In Arabic? Nakoos.⁴⁵

The event is set up in the monastery of the Holy Cross, a Greek Orthodox foundation located outside the Old City and where they currently strike *semantra* and ring bells. Certainly, the *semantron* is known in Arabic as *nāqūs*.⁴⁶ This is how the instrument

43 William J. Hamilton, *Researches in Asia Minor, Pontus, and Armenia* (London 1842) I.247.

44 E.g. on Mount Athos: L. Allatios, *De Templis Graecorum Recentioribus* (Cologne 1645) 4 and n. 63.

45 E. A. Finn, *Home in the Holy Land: a tale illustrating customs and incidents in Modern Jerusalem* (London 1866) 40–1.

46 *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, 2nd ed., VII, 943; Ḥ. Zayyāt, *Al-Diyārāt al-Naṣrānīa fī al-islām* [Christian monasteries in the land of Islam] (Beirut 1938) 90–6.

appears mentioned in Arabic sources, even though the term will sometimes be employed to refer to actual bells.⁴⁷

Between 1855 and 1856 William Cowper Prime, an American journalist and attorney, travelled through Europe, North Africa and the Holy Land. In the Holy Sepulchre he experienced the sounds of the *semantron*, which he described in the following terms:

Hence we went back on the other or northern side of the Greek chapel, and visited the Chapel of the Apparition to the Virgin, which is now the Latin chapel, and one of the most beautiful parts of the building, possessing a small organ, whose music is exceedingly offensive to the Greeks, who are not possessed of a similar instrument. While we were here, a loud noise, much like miniature thunder, startled us. It was the rapping on a board swung near the door, which is the oriental substitute for a bell. It resounded through the aisles and arches of the church, warning all visitors and worshipers that the building was now to be closed, and they must depart.⁴⁸

Prime's account confirms that the soundscape played a significant role in the daily life of the Holy Sepulchre. While he implies that the Greek Orthodox clergy is envious because they lack a pipe organ, he seems unaware that they do not use any instrument as part of their liturgy.⁴⁹ Undeniably, they might have been annoyed by its sound,⁵⁰ just as d'Arvieux was irritated by that of the *semantron* in the seventeenth century. Sound highlighted both rivalry and differences between the opposed Christian communities. The Holy Sepulchre was partitioned among them, but the sounds of each group were perceived by all. If we are to believe Prime, the wooden instrument was also struck to announce the closing of the most important church in Jerusalem, that is, it was not only employed for religious purposes.

The competition for the religious soundscape is also noted by James Finn in the mid-nineteenth century:

Another of our gratifications should not be omitted, namely, the hearing of the large church bell of the Latins in Bethlehem on certain occasions, and always on Sunday mornings; at the moment of the sun peering over the eastern horizon that great bell struck, and was followed by a gush of the sweetest irregular music from smaller bells, probably belonging to the Greeks, and then by the nakoos (plank) of the Armenians, a relic of their primitive customs, serving for a bell -all these acting with one consent and with one intention, that of

47 Iṣṭifān al-Duwayhī, *Tārīkh al-Ṭāʾifa al-Mārūnīa* [History of the Maronite community], ed. R. a.-K. Shartūnī (Beirut ca.1890) 103.

48 W. C. Prime, *Tent Life in the Holy Land* (New York 1857) 81.

49 E. Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography* (Oxford 1962) 91–4.

50 The Latin community had employed a pipe organ in the Holy Sepulchre since at least the seventeenth century, Horn, *Ichnographiae*, 11–12.

celebrating ‘the Lord’s day’, as the early Christians delighted to call the first day of the week.⁵¹

According to Finn, the Latin community was – on occasion – able to use a large bell in the Basilica of the Nativity. The Greeks too rang bells there, albeit smaller ones, while the Armenians still employed the *semantron*. It is unclear why this was the case. Perhaps they did not have a bell, or the authorities had not granted them the permission to use it yet. From the mid-nineteenth century, under the pressure of their Western allies, the Ottomans started to allow bell ringing for religious purposes.⁵² As a result, bell and *semantron* were employed for the same purpose by different communities. In this case, even though bells were also used by the Greeks, sounds continued to represent different Christian communities. The *Tanzimat* period, which witnessed the granting of many rights to the Christians living in the Ottoman Empire in the mid-nineteenth century, was going to have an important impact on the use of the *semantron*. Finn’s account also informs us that the three communities signalled their respective instrument following a set order; they did not ring or strike at the same time, thus avoiding the different sounds to clash.

In 1882, members of the British royal family visited Mar Saba, a Greek Orthodox monastery near the Dead Sea. In the travel account we read how ‘the bells of the convent, two long slabs of metal, are still clanging a dissonant welcome as we go down from the tower to enter the convent.’⁵³ Interestingly, by then Mar Saba and other Orthodox monasteries such as St Catherine already had bells.⁵⁴ In any event, the new instruments did not replace the traditional *semantra* there.⁵⁵ An account regarding St Catherine is very telling. Alexander Wallace, who visited the monastery at some point in the 1860s, wrote:

There is a bell, but it is seldom used. Somehow or other, there is a prejudice against bells in the East; and out of deference, we presume, to this Mohammedan feeling, the Greek monks at Sinai announce the various times of devotion, chiefly by striking with mallets on a piece of wood or iron,

51 J. Finn, *Byeways in Palestine* (London 1877) 440. In a footnote the instrument is called by one of its Greek names, σήμαντρον.

52 From the second half of the sixteenth century, bells had announced the time in Ottoman cities of the Balkans.

53 Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales, *The Cruise of Her Majesty’s Ship “Bacchante”, 1879–1882* (London 1886) II.626.

54 G. Fisk, *A Pastor’s Memorial of Egypt, the Red Sea, the Wildernesses of Sin and Paran, Mount Sinai, Jerusalem, and Other Principal Localities of the Holy Land, Visited in 1842* (London 1845) 300 (Mar Saba); W. F. Lynch, *Narrative of the United States’ Expedition to the River Jordan and the Dead Sea* (Philadelphia 1849) 272, 277 (Mar Saba); A. Lindsay, *Letters on Egypt, Edom, and the Holy Land* (London 1838) I.342 (St Catherine).

55 W. Hepworth Dixon, *The Holy Land* (Leipzig 1865) I.225. Mar Saba may have had a clock associated with a bell: C. Wilson (ed.), *Picturesque Palestine, Sinai and Egypt*, 4 vols (London 1881–4) I.151.

pierced with holes, about eight inches broad and six feet long, and suspended by ropes from the roof of one of the galleries. The beating is done in time, as if regulated by a musical notation. In this lonely place, where sound carries so far, it is heard at a great distance.⁵⁶

The question that arises is, when then did they use the bell? Wallace gives an answer:

We happened to arrive at the convent the day before the celebration of Easter, and we were invited by several of the monks to attend the service in the church, which was to commence shortly after midnight on Sabbath morning. Before the service began, the mallets were unusually busy, and the convent bell was also rung. As the service was to commence so early, we did not go to bed, but kept strolling about from one gallery to another, till the mallets and the bell summoned us to church.⁵⁷

The bell is rung on important occasions like Easter.⁵⁸ And it is not one instrument or the other: *semantron* and bell are played in conjunction. A similar combination is already reported in the *typikon* for the Kosmosoteira Monastery, drafted in the mid-twelfth century. On the feast days of the Mother of God, the founder of the monastery and brother of the Emperor John II Komnenos (1118–43), the Sebastokrator Isaac, prescribes that the monks ring the two bells of the monastery after the wooden *semantron* has been struck.⁵⁹ The main instrument to be employed at the monastery is actually the *semantron*. Indeed, the monks had four versions of it. We can see that at least some Greek Orthodox monasteries followed a bell ringing tradition that was centuries-old and had survived the Ottoman conquest. These monastic foundations surely imitated the practices maintained on Mount Athos.⁶⁰

Beyond the Greek Orthodox Church

The Greek Orthodox clergy was not alone in employing the *semantron* in the Ottoman Empire. As we have seen, the Armenians used it in Bethlehem. The account of Frederick Arthur Neale shows that they also did in other places:

56 A. Wallace, *The Desert and the Holy Land* (Edinburgh 1868) 117. On the next page he calls the instrument ‘zimandro’.

57 Ibid. 118.

58 This is confirmed in Wilson, *Picturesque Palestine*, III.234: ‘Bells are only rung on church festivals and occasions of rejoicing, or to show respect to some high dignitary.’

59 L. Petit, ‘Typikon du monastère de la Kosmosotira près d’Aenos (1152)’, *Izvestiia Russkogo arkheologicheskogo instituta v Konstantinopole* 13 (1908) 17–77 (23); A. Rodriguez Suarez, ‘The Sebastokrator Isaac Komnenos: Manuel I’s Latinophile uncle?’, in D. Slootjes and M. Verhoeven (eds.), *Byzantium in Dialogue with the Mediterranean. History and heritage* (Leiden 2019) 189–93.

60 R. M. Dawkins, ‘Notes on life in the monasteries of Mount Athos’, *The Harvard Theological Review* 46/4 (1953) 217–19.

The Armenians have a chapel at Beilan [modern Belen, in Hatay, Turkey], where they have service every morning through out the year an hour before daylight, be the weather what it may. So long as they can crawl out, devout people invariably attend their matins. As no bell is allowed to be suspended in their church, a large hollow sounding-board is struck with an immense wooden hammer, and this is so distinctly heard all over the place as to answer every purpose required.⁶¹

Western accounts report that bells were rung at Etchmiadzin, the seat of the Armenian Catholicos.⁶² It seems that the place had received a privilege by the Ottoman authorities. However, in most locations, if allowed, Armenians employed *semantra*. They still do at the cathedral of St James in Jerusalem, where they have two, one of wood (Fig. 2), the other of metal. *Semantra* were also employed by the Romanians. In the early nineteenth century, the English physician William Macmichael experienced the instrument in Iași, the capital of the Principality of Moldavia: ‘We were awakened in the morning by the loud and continued ringing of bells, accompanied by a peculiar deafening clatter, that, on inquiry, proved to be occasioned by the rapid striking of two sticks upon a board, loosely suspended in the belfry of the neighbouring church.’⁶³

The two Romanian Principalities, Wallachia and Moldavia, had been vassal states of the Ottoman Empire for centuries. This status allowed them to continue ringing bells for religious purposes. As a result, one would expect *semantra* not to have played a significant role. Nevertheless, they indeed continued to be struck and so the religious soundscape of the Romanians was eclectic, like that of the late Byzantine period, Mount Athos during the Turkish domination or the late Ottoman Empire. Even today *semantra* play an important role in the Romanian Church.⁶⁴

Christian communities also struck *semantra* in Mount Lebanon. One case was that of the Maronites. The French physician and Orientalist Eusèbe de Salle visited the Levant in the first half of the nineteenth century. His travel account informs us that in Ehden, by the Qādīsha Valley, in the northern part of Mount Lebanon, is a cathedral with bells.⁶⁵ However, he adds, ten other smaller churches call to office by sounding the ‘naqous’. This instrument he describes as rules of wood fitted in the shape of a T, on which a small mallet is struck. The use of bells spread in Mount Lebanon during the eighteenth century and the

61 F. A. Neale, *Eight Years in Syria, Palestine, and Asia Minor, from 1842 to 1850* (London 1851) 255.

62 P. Rycaut, *The present state of the Greek and Armenian Churches, Anno Christi, 1678* (London 1679) 396.

63 W. Macmichael, *Journey from Moscow to Constantinople, in the years 1817, 1818* (London 1819) 80.

64 D. Benga, *Istoria și semnificația clopotului și a toacei în Biserica Ortodoxă* (Bucharest 2016) 47–54.

65 Eusèbe de Salle, *Pérégrinations en Orient, ou Voyage pittoresque, historique et politique en Égypte, Nubie, Syrie, Turquie, Grèce pendant les années 1837-38-39* (Paris 1840), I.152: “A Ahden, il y a un évêque maronite dont la cathédrale a des cloches : dix autres églises plus petites n’annoncent leurs offices que par des naqous ou règles de bois sonore emmanchées en forme de T, et sur lesquelles on frappe avec un petit maillet”.

first half of the nineteenth.⁶⁶ While the region was officially under Ottoman rule, a number of factors allowed the Maronites and other Christians there to ring bells. Nonetheless, not every church and chapel in the region was able to purchase bells and so continued using *semantra*. For this reason, the religious soundscape of Mount Lebanon too was an eclectic one, even though Christian communities there were free to ring bells. Also, it must be noted that some monasteries in the region, such as those of the Melkites, continued to strike *semantra*, even if they had bells. Today Maronites no longer employ *semantra*: for religious purposes they only use church bells.⁶⁷ Thus, this Eastern Church abandoned the wooden instrument. While it may not be the only reason, it is not a coincidence that the Maronite Church is Catholic.

Conclusions

The accounts cited above are of course only a selection. Yet they indicate that the *semantron* struck the attention of Western visitors to the eastern Mediterranean, from the mid-Byzantine to the late Ottoman period – so much so that they considered both instrument and experience worth reporting. Some authors identified its use as a religious error or a tradition to detest. This was mainly during and after the period of the Crusades, which witnessed increasing contacts between Westerners and Eastern Christians. Religious differences were highlighted and Latin rule spread to many territories in the East. In fact, Crusader conquests introduced bell ringing to some of these locations, accelerating an acoustic competition between two religious traditions but also promoting change in local practices. Even when the bell was adopted, the *semantron* was not rejected. Its preservation in monastic foundations tells us about the respect and admiration that Orthodox clergymen had for their centuries-old practices. The Ottoman conquest accentuated this sonic difference, since church bells were forbidden and local Christians were only allowed to strike the *semantron* to gather the faithful. Negative opinions about the *semantron* are also voiced when the setting is the Holy Sepulchre, where different Christian communities competed within the same building. The soundscape became another front in the conflict between them, particularly the Roman and the Orthodox Churches. In other words, sound defined religious communities.⁶⁸ In her work *Sounding Otherness*, Jennifer Linhart Wood rightly notes that ‘sounds of other cultures variously frighten, disorient, and delight English and European visitors.’⁶⁹ To a greater or lesser degree, the accounts presented in this article show how an alternative instrument and its sounds were used to

66 A. Rodriguez Suarez, ‘The religious soundscape of Mount Lebanon in the 18th and the first half of the 19th century’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2023): <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2023.2209026>

67 A. Rodriguez Suarez, ‘Qannūbīn Monastery and the Religious Soundscape of the Maronites in the 16th and 17th Century’, *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 74 (2022) 48–72 (71–2).

68 I. Weinryb, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge 2016) 104.

69 Linhart Wood, *Sounding Otherness*, 5.

construct the identity of the Orthodox other. The *semantron* functions as an aural signifier of alterity.⁷⁰ In addition, the descriptions seek to show the superiority of the West over the East, that is why the sound of the instrument is portrayed as artificial, unpleasant, noise and dissonant. Their renditions are reminiscent of another element of the religious soundscape reported by Western travellers to the eastern Mediterranean: the *adhan*. The *semantron* represented Orthodox Christianity; the call to prayer symbolized the Islamic faith.

The existence of the *semantron* was reported in the West through other means. In 1716 Theodor Laudien published an academic work devoted to it, mainly based on Greek and Latin sources.⁷¹ The instrument is even depicted in a painting by Andrea Mantegna, *Saint Jerome Penitent in the Desert*, dated to 1448–51.⁷² Even so, the *semantron* continued to be little known among westerners, and that was why it made such a strong impression on travellers over the centuries. Today, the church bell is the main instrument for gathering Christians around the world. The *semantron* has been marginalized and some Eastern Churches have even abandoned it. In any event, its use in the Balkans and Greek Orthodox monasteries guarantees the survival of the instrument, ensuring that future travellers will be astonished to listen to it.

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70 Ibid., 86.

71 T. Laudien, *De simandris graecorum, sive de ritu convocandi populum ad sacra per ligna* (Königsberg 1716) 16–32.

72 C. Campbell, D. Korbacher, N. Rowley and S. Vowles, *Mantegna & Bellini* (London 2018) 128. I thank Dr Tassos Papacostas for drawing my attention to this representation.