

A Worldwide History of the Pan Flute

by *Douglas Bishop*



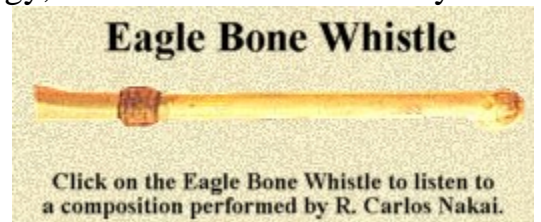
Auenis found in Roman-era Alesia, in modern France.

The combined evidence of the worldwide archaeological record, historical and mythological references, early literary works and oral traditions testifies to the fact that the pan flute is one of the oldest and most enduring musical instruments in the world, having been in existence for more than 6000 years. The precise origin of the pan flute is unclear, but the Roman poet *Ovid* provides a clue to this mystery in his poem, “Metamorphoses“:

Sitting on the riverbank, Pan noticed the bed of reeds was swaying in the wind, making a mournful moaning sound, for the wind had broken the tops of some of the reeds. Pulling the reeds up, Pan cut them into pieces and bound them together to create a musical instrument, which he named "Syrinx", in memory of his lost love.

Although this account belongs to the annals of Greek mythology, a similar scenario is likely to have occurred repeatedly, and in many different regions around the world. Populations of early humans often foraged near bodies of water (lakes, ponds, rivers, seacoasts), since such areas provide abundant resources for hunter-gatherer peoples. With the appearance of more permanent settlements and the advent of agriculture, the advantages of a settlement site near a source of water were obvious. Such locations are also prime habitat for hundreds of species of plants with naturally hollow stems (bamboo, reeds, river cane, etc).

As is the case with hunter-gatherer and tribal peoples today, these ancient people would have been supremely attuned to their environment, since such awareness was a matter of survival for them. Such people would be quick to notice the haunting sound made by broken hollow-stemmed plants while the wind was blowing.



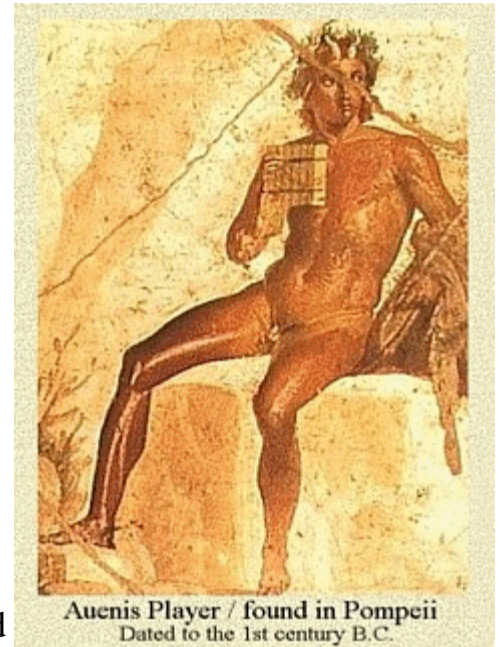
Greek Coin
Discovered in Panias / Dated to the 3rd century B.C.

The curiosity of early humans probably encouraged them to attempt to achieve the same effect with their own breath. As the concept of sound production with hollow tubes and breath was developed, tubes of varying materials (wood, bones, ceramic, stone, etc.) began to appear. The first forms of the pan flute were probably rudimentary, often consisting of a single tube. Examples of such instruments can still be found today among certain indigenous tribes of Papua New Guinea, and the Eagle Bone Whistle, an instrument traditionally made from the hollow wingbone (ulna) of an eagle, is used in sacred ceremonies among Native American peoples throughout North America. In the course of their cultural evolution, early humans became aware of tonal differences, and pan

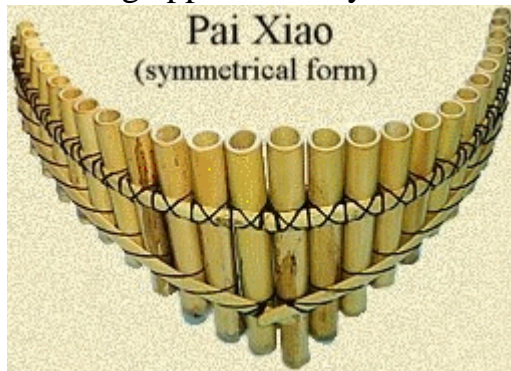
flutes with 2 or more tubes began to appear. This in turn struck the spark of creativity that would lead to the development of pan flutes of diverse forms (straight, curved, *bundled*, symmetrical, and circular). It is unlikely we will ever know the exact time and location of the pan flute’s origins, but it has clearly evolved independently in cultures geographically and historically isolated from each

other ([View maps](#) displaying the global distribution of pan flute forms).

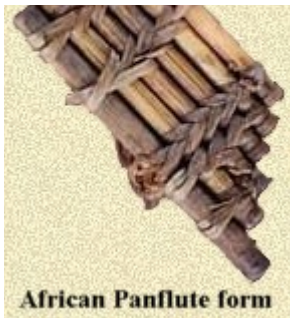
Evidence of the existence of the straight-formed Greek pan flute ([syrinx](#)) around 2500 B.C.E. has been found on the Cyclades Islands in the Aegean Sea. It disappears from Greek history for a while, but reappears in the 7th century B.C.E. with the growth of the Greek Empire. In the year 146 B.C.E. Greece was conquered by Rome, who adopted many aspects of Greek culture, including the syrinx, which was known to the Romans as the [aueinis](#). Archaeologists excavating the site of the Roman colony of Alisia (in modern France) found a diatonically-tuned aueinis, and a [well-preserved aueinis](#) made of boxwood was unearthed in 2004 at the former site of Tagetium, in Switzerland. Frescoes depicting pan flute players have been found in the ruins of Pompeii, preserved by volcanic ash from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 C.E., and an excellent mosaic depicting an aueinis player was discovered in Tunis (formerly Carthage, in Tunisia). In "Tristia", [Ovid](#) speaks of the pan flute (most likely the syrinx) used by the shepherds of the Roman colony of Tomis (present-day Constantza in Romania), where he lived in exile after his banishment from Rome.



During approximately the same period, a pan flute form known as the pai xiao was being played in China. It was a musical instrument used in court ensembles and religious rituals in the days of the philosopher [Confucius](#), who reportedly became depressed upon hearing a pai xiao's melancholic tones. Two birdbone panpipes, each consisting of 13 pipes bound together with ribbon, and more than 40 individual pipes, were among the funerary goods discovered in an 11th century B.C.E. tomb in Luyi, Henan province. This find is among the earliest known evidence of the pai xiao to have been found in China. A pai xiao with 13 bamboo tubes dating back to the period of the Warring States (475 B.C.E. - 221 B.C.E.) was found in Hubei province, in the tomb of Marqui Zeng Yi (View [an excellent performance](#) of the pai xiao in a traditional ancient Chinese ensemble). The pai xiao occurs in straight and curved designs, but it is also found with a unique symmetrical form, which has a centrally-located bass tube, with tubes of decreasing size radiating outwards on either side. This form of pai xiao resembles a bird's outstretched wings, and its use in the religious ceremonies of the time was symbolic of the phoenix, the legendary fire-bird that represented life, death, and resurrection. The pai xiao's symmetrical form is also found constructed with the central tube as the highest-pitched tube, with outward-radiating bass tubes, and is known as a "So" on the Korean Peninsula. Perhaps one of the most unusual pan flute forms is found in Vietnam, the circular Panflute known as the dding-dek.



The dding-dek is also known as the "wode" in Thailand. Other pan flute forms found in southeast Asia include the ["crenh"](#), a pan flute form native to the Mong people of Vietnam (read a [footnote](#)), and another flat pan flute form



African Panflute form

called a "wot" is also found in the Isan region of Thailand. Other forms of bundled (*au ware*) and flat pan flutes (au waa) can be found in Indonesia and the islands of Oceania, particularly in the *Solomon Islands* (among the *Aré Aré people*). In the New Hebrides (present-day Vanuatu) the English explorer, *Captain James Cook*, revealed his own interest in the pan flute by collecting a small instrument (most likely a form of au ware or au waa) in 1768, during one of his exploratory voyages. Two distinct African pan flute forms, the *nyanga* and the *ngororombe* can be found today in eastern and central Africa, in

present-day Uganda, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. The *ngororombe* has its origins among the *Shona* people, who built the African kingdom of Great Zimbabwe (13th - 15th century C.E.). In the northwestern corner of India, evidence of a straight pan flute form appears during the Gandhara period (1st - 5th century C.E.), in the form of a *stone bas-relief* in the British Museum's collection. The presence of *the pan flute in*

ancient Egypt can be seen during the Ptolemaic Dynasty (332 B.C.E - 30 B.C.E.) in the form of small figurines depicting individuals playing the syrinx. In fact, Ptolemy XII, Cleopatra's father, was also called "Auletes" (Greek = flute player), because he spent all his time playing flutes and neglected his responsibilities as Egypt's pharaoh. Evidence of the pan flute's presence in the Middle East dates back to *ancient Mesopotamia* (whose oldest known communities date from 7000 B.C.E.).

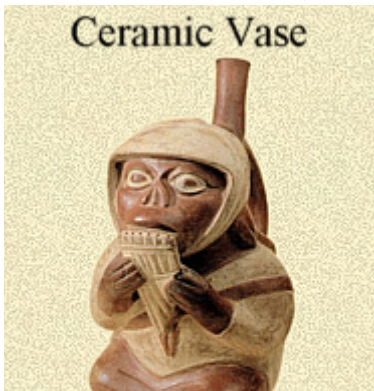
Abundant *linguistic clues* linking the pan flute's Middle Eastern history with that of the Romanian nai can still be observed in the Arabic and Persian (Fârsî) languages. The pan flute's existence in *Ottoman Turkey* (a historically crucial cultural crossroads) is evident in the form of the miskal, a pan flute form which made its way throughout the Ottoman Empire. In the region of the Ottoman sphere of influence that encompasses modern Romania, the miskal evolved into the muscal, the pan flute form that would eventually be known as the *nai*.



The miskal was a pan flute form integral to Ottoman court ensembles. Note the use of both right-handed and left-handed versions of the miskal by the court musicians.

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Pre-Columbian pan flutes have been found throughout the Americas, dated to as early as 4200 B.C.E. at *Cahuachi*, and dating to 3200 B.C.E. at *Chilca*, both located in Peru. The arcane pan flutes of the Americas were constructed using a wide range of materials (reeds, bamboo, river cane, bone, copper, ceramic), and have been found as far north as present-day Ontario, Canada (*view a map* showing the locations of pan flute artifact discoveries in eastern North America). Long before the Spanish conquest, and even before the rise of the Inca civilization, pan flutes of varying sizes and designs were being used in indigenous music, religious rituals, dancing, and even hunting. The archaeological record suggests these pan flute forms originated from the ancient Aymara and Quechua civilizations. However, the extensive



Ceramic Vase

Attributed to the Moche of coastal Peru (100 C.E.- 700 C.E.).

trading routes used by indigenous civilizations could, conceivably, have led to the use of these pan flutes among peoples as diverse as the Hopewell of the Ohio River Valley, the Mound Builders of Cahokia (near present-day St. Louis), the Maya of Central America, and the *Chiribaya*, *Paracas*, and Nazca of Peru.

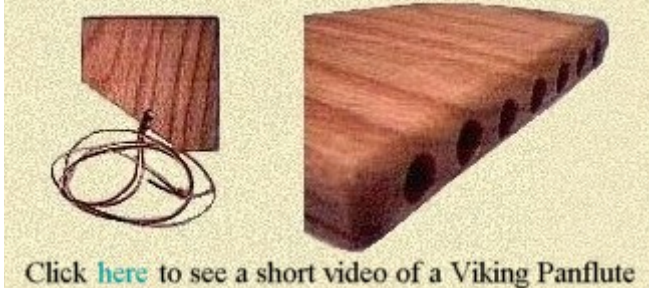
These pan flute forms are now typically constructed in 1-3 straight rows using bamboo strips and woven textile bands or string. This family of pan flutes has many representatives: antara (Quechua) or siku (Aymara), chuli, sanku, malta (the most common variety of siku), *toyo* (bass siku), and rondador (Ecuador's national instrument, a chorded pan flute).



The players of these instruments, traditionally only men and boys, are known as sikuri (Spanish = tañedores de siku). After the Spanish conquest, the words zamponas (Spanish = tubes) and zamponeros (Spanish = tube players) came into general usage. "Zamponas" is commonly used in Spanish today to describe any tubular flute, similar to the usage of "pan flute" in English. In the southern United States, a pan flute form known as the quills was played among African-American slaves as early as the late 18th century, according to accounts from plantations in the Deep South (*Read* about an analysis and reconstruction of quills). This association, and the lack of any other evidence of the pan flute in the region at that time, strongly suggests an African origin for the quills. Like the Andean forms of the pan flute, the quills survived into modern times, with a rural folk tradition continuing in the southern United States to this day, carried into the 21st century by musicians such as American blues artist *Dom Flemons*. The playing of the quills was also documented in the 1927-29 recordings of early blues legend *Henry "Ragtime Texas" Thomas* (Listen to the original recording of "*Bull Doze Blues*", performed by Henry Thomas), and the writings of *Prof. Thomas W. Talley* describe the quills in vivid detail, drawing upon both his childhood memories and his extensive research into the folklore and music of the region.

A wide variety of pan flute forms have been found throughout Europe. The Greeks, who had a

Viking Panflute handcrafted in Red Oak by Douglas Bishop



powerful influence over the culture of the Black Sea region for centuries, likely introduced the syrinx in the 7th century B.C.E. to the Dacians (ancestors of present-day Romanians). The Vikings possibly encountered the pan flute during one or more of their voyages (or raids) in the eastern Mediterranean or the western shores of the Black Sea. The shores of the Volga River which flows through Russia (where the

kugikly can still be found today), or northeastern Lithuania (the home of the *skuduèiai*), are also very likely points of contact between the Vikings and various pan flute forms. Any or all of these scenarios are likely, but a *10th century Viking pan flute* found at the Coppergate archaeological excavation of Jorvik (present-day York) in northern England offers proof of the pan flute's existence in Europe during the Middle Ages (5th-15th century C.E.). Unlike the majority pan flute forms which are constructed by connecting individual tubes, the Viking pan flute is constructed from a solid block of wood, in which holes are drilled in a straight row. A small hole was drilled in the instrument's base, most likely to allow a string, leather thong or chain to be attached for easy portability (*listen to a*



recording of the Jorvik artifact pan flute). In the case of the xipro de afiador (a pan flute form found in Portugal and the Galicia region of Spain), the base of the instrument is commonly carved into a fancifully-shaped handle, often the head of a horse. The xipro de afiador was traditionally played by an afiador (Portuguese=knife sharpener), whose occupation was to travel throughout the region, sharpening knives, scissors, and other implements, as well as acting as a travelling veterinarian (providing the service of neutering livestock!). The recent discovery in Switzerland of a *2000-year-old pan flute* offers evidence of the existence of the wood-block design in antiquity. The *frestel* of medieval France possibly descended from the syrinx or the auenis, which was introduced into the region by the Romans. After the fall of the Roman empire, the pan flute continued to quietly exist in the Italian



A Romanian taraf (folk ensemble) of the 19th century, featuring a naiist.

countryside, particularly in the Brianza region, in the form of the *firlinfeu*, which bears a remarkable similarity to the ancient Greek *syrinx*. Evidence of the Romanian pan flute (*nai*) has been found from the early 16th century, such as the booklet "The Teachings of King Neagoe Basarab for his son Theodosios". For the next 300 years, however, the Romanian nai was a rarity, used primarily in rural areas among peasants, and it is for this reason it remained obscure to the European composers and intellectuals of the time (*read a footnote*). No more than 13 Romanian pan flute players (naiists) were

known to exist in Bucharest (Romania's capital city) in the year 1843, but in 1864 Prince Alexander John Cuza abolishes serfdom in Romania, and many newly-liberated naiists began to appear in urban areas throughout Romania, performing in various venues and often attaining astonishing levels of technique. The Romanian nai became popular at this time, occasionally even replacing the violin as the favorite soloist instrument. The nai's stature increased in Romania, culminating in a "golden age" for the instrument during the period between the two world wars (1918 - 1939), though the actual number of naiists during this time was less than in the previous century. By 1945 no more than 16 naiists were known to exist in Romania, and the instrument was once again fading into obscurity. The Romanian nai's survival found a champion in Fanica Luca, whose musical appearances include two world exhibitions during the late 1930's , as well as concert tours throughout Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. Ironically, Fanica Luca was discouraged by his father (also a naiist) from pursuing his interest in the nai, but in 1951 he founded a school which remained under his direction until he died in 1968 (read about *the modern renaissance of the Romanian nai*, as told by Damian Luca). Being primarily self-taught, Fanica Luca's work was based more upon his knowledge of the nai gained by long years of trial and error, rather than



musical training in an academic capacity. In spite of his lack of formal musical education, Fanica Luca proved an exemplary teacher, whose students introduced the Romanian nai to the modern Western world. Fanica Luca's students include: *Gheorghe Zamfir* (the first naist to achieve worldwide fame), the late *Simion Stanciu* (the first naist to successfully introduce the instrument to classical music), and many others.

Curiously, the pan flute has not enjoyed the wider familiarity of its descendant, the pipe organ. However, the pan flute is slowly transcending its image as a primitive folk instrument. In recent years, world-famous recording artists such as Sting, Marilyn Manson, and Shakira have begun to discover the possibilities of the pan flute in pop music. The new-age music duo *Coyote Oldman* has been using Incan pan flutes as an integral part of their music for over 25 years, and Andean folk music groups such as Inca Son, Imbaya, and Viento de los Andes have been touring around the world in recent decades, with sikuri as these bands' centerpieces. The pan flutes of Oceania have also been well represented by the *Narasirato Pan Pipers* of Malaita, in the Solomon Islands, whose recent performance tours have included appearances in England, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In the hands of the late *Yu Xun-Fa* (1946-2006), the



pai xiao was carried into the new millenium. The formation of *Panflute.org* in 1988 by a consortium of amateur pan flute clubs in South Korea marks the first appearance of a pan flute themed organization on the Internet. In the Western world, the year 1998 marked the founding of *Panflute World*, the Internet's first English-language pan flute chat group, by Kevin Budd, and the conception of *Pan-flute.com*, the Internet's first major pan flute website, by Brad White. On September 7th, 2001, Damian Draghici, the grandnephew of Fanica Luca, returned to Romania to perform in the PBS special presentation, "*Damian in Concert from Bucharest*". With an audience of 72,000 and international television coverage, this event was one of the highest profile pan flute concerts in history. The sound of the pan flute has also made many appearances in *film and television music scores*, most notably performed by Gheorghe Zamfir. More recent pan flute work in film music includes Ulrich Herkenhoff's work on Howard Shore's score for "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King", which won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2003. Ulrich Herkenhoff is also the winner of the Deutsche Phono Akademie's prestigious *Echo Award* in 2000 for Best Classical Soloist, the first panflutist to be so honored. Internationally attended events and seminars are now enhancing the public's awareness of the pan flute. The Dajoeri Company, founded by Joeri Murk, sponsors the annual *Arosa Pan Flute Festival* in Switzerland. In the Netherlands, the Delft Pan Flute Day was the brainchild of the late Costel Puscoiu. Pan flute instruction in cyberspace became a reality in 2003 with the creation of *Pan Flute 101*, the world's first free online course of video classes for the pan flute, created by Douglas Bishop. The newest frontier, real-time Internet video instruction, is being explored by a number of pan flute teachers, including Joeri Murk, Brad White, and Douglas Bishop. Two things are made clear by the pan

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flute's history - the pan flute is here to stay, and it is well on its way to achieving a higher profile in the modern musical consciousness.