

Female string duo of the Palace of Khulbuk

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Abstract: The discovery of two female musicians in the murals of the Palace of Khulbuk of the Khuttal rulers (9th-12th centuries) by archaeologist E. Gulomova in 1985a remarkable find. Khulbuk murals are similar stylistically to the wall paintings of the Lashkari Bazar in Afghanistan and to those to be found in some other medieval Islamic palaces; they manifest the continuation of the pre-Islamic art of the Middle East and Central Asia.

Restoration and reconstruction of the Khulbuk paintings enable us to some corrections of earlier interpretation and to recommend reveal the genesis of iconography, specifics of the instruments, and the character of the monumental art style in medieval East. We approach the Khulbuk life from three different perspectives: iconographic, organological, and stylistic perspective. The iconographic aspect that the musical scene which includes two female musicians, playing a harp and a bowed instrument, a festive character. From organological standpoint we propose to the bowed instrument a different way as it was initially suggested regard of the murals particularities of both genre and pomposity of a court scene.

A critical review of Khulbuk painting helps us understand and evaluate the music culture of Central Asia the 9th-12th centuries.

The discovery of the depiction of two musicians in the murals of the Palace of Khulbuk (Southern Tajikistan) in 1983 by the late archaeologist Erkinovi Guliamova¹ was a remarkable find. Surviving fragment of the mural represents a

¹ Guliamova, E. “Raskopki na gorodishche Khulbuk v 1983 g. [Excavations in the ancient town of Khulbuk in 1983] *ART - Archeologicheskie raboty v Tadjikistane*, v. 23 :298-308 (Dushanbe: Donish, 1991).

genre-painting that decorated *iwan* wall of the 9th-12th century palace of the rulers of the dynasty of Banijurids in Khulbuk – capital city of the medieval Khuttal. It is hard to overestimated its significance for the musical iconography of Central Asia that was so rich in pre-Islamic time² and abruptly scarce in the early Islamic time. This monument is also of a great interest for its unique representation of the early bowed instrument.

The Khulbuk musicians were described in a few publications by the archeologist E. Guliamova,³ Khmel'nitsky,⁴ and also mentioned in the recent publication by Siméon dedicated to the ceramics of the region.⁵ All aforementioned publications include drawings of the musicians made by the late architect and artist Vladimir Bazhutin.⁶ However a special analysis from the

² Cf.: *Mittelasien* / F. M. Karomatov, V.A. Meškeris, T.S. Vyzgo. Unter Mitarbeit von Alexander Häusler und Ajgul Malkeeva. Musikgeschichte in Bildern / Hrsg. Von Werner Bachmann. Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1987. Bd. II, Lief. 9.

³ Besides the first observation of the discovery during excavations of 1983 (Cf: Guliamova, E. “Raskopki...” *ART*, 23:298-308). See: Guliamova, E. “Muzykalnye instrumenty v zhivopisi Khulbuka” [The Musical instruments in the painting of Khulbuk] *Borbad i khudozhestvennye traditsii narodov Tsentralnoi i Perednei Azii: istoriia i sovremennost*. Dushanbe : Donish, 1999:133-134.

⁴ Khmel'nitskii, S. *Mezhdu arabami i tiurkami* [Between the Arabs and Turks]. (Berlin and Riga, 1992), (ill. on p. 343), and *Dvortsy Khuttalia: Idei I formy grazhdanskoj arkhitektury Srednei Azii IX-XII vekov*. (Berlin: Sawadowski-Verlag, 2006).

⁵ M. Pierre Siméon. *Étude du matériel de Hulbuk (Mā warā' al-nahr-Khuttal), de la conquête islamique jusqu'au milieu du XIe siècle (90/712-441/1050): contribution à l'étude de la céramique islamique d'Asie centrale*. BAR International Series 1945. (Oxford: John and Erica Hedges Ltd., 2009), fig. 2 on p. 211.

⁶ Illustrations published include drawings of the survived fragment with the depiction of two musicians made by V. Bazhutin published by E.G. Guliamova (*ART*, 23:305), Khmel'nitsky (*Mezhdu arabami i tiurkami*, p. 343; *Dvortsy Khuttalia*, Fig. 55 on p. 85, and fig. 56 on p. 86), and in: M. Pierre Siméon. *Étude du matériel de Hulbuk (Mā warā' al-nahr-Khuttal), de la conquête islamique jusqu'au milieu du XIe siècle (90/712-441/1050): contribution à l'étude de la céramique islamique d'Asie centrale*. BAR International Series 1945. (Oxford: John and Erica Hedges Ltd., 2009), fig. 2 on p. 211.

music iconography stand point is long time overdue.⁷ Its importance for music history has been emphasized by W. Bachmann by his reference to this image in the article in the *Grove's Dictionary* on early history of the bow⁸ where it befitted to his hypothesis on the origin of bowing in Central Asia.

The investigation of the Khulbuk imagery assumes multifaceted approach that would include iconographic, stylistic and organological aspects and be considered in connection with the social and cultural interrelations between many contemporary countries.

The murals of Khulbuk continue traditions of the monumental painting of pre-Islamic time (Balalyk-tepe, Varakhsha, Panjikent, Afrasiab)⁹ and at the same time reveal common stylistic traits with the monuments of the early Islamic art such as murals of Qusair al-Hair Gharbi (Syria), Samarra (Iraq), Lashkari Bazar (Afghanistan) and others. An important aspect that have predetermined the commonality of the art of the early Islamic time was that it had already a common platform, for “the monuments of early Islamic art fully belong to the succession of the vast empire of Rome, early Byzantine, and Iran.”¹⁰ Methodological approaches applied to the investigation of the early Islamic art (related, in particular, to architecture, decorative arts, ceramics, etc.) can be applied to the music as well.

⁷ The question on its importance for study was broached by V. Meshkeris at the International conference in Sankt-Peterburg in 1999. Cf.: Muzykal'naia kul'tura drenvei Srednei Azii i ee nasledie (baktriisko-tokharistanskii variant v svete arkheologicheskikh dannikh [Musical culture of ancient Central Asia and its heritage (Baktria-Tokharistan variant in the light of the archaeological discoveries), *Izuchenie kul'turnogo nasledii Vostoka* [Study of the cultural heritage of the East] (Sankt-Peterburg: Evropeiskii Dom, 1999), 147-149.

⁸ The murals were also mentioned by Werner Bachmann *et al.*, in the entry “Bow” concerning the origins of bowing, where it befitted to his hypothesis of the central Asian origin of the bow (Werner Bachmann, et al. s.v. “Bow” *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. 23 May. 2010 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/03753>>).

⁹ Guliamova, E. “Raskopki...”, p. 302.

¹⁰ Cf.: Oleg Grabar. *The formation of Islamic art*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, c1973, 1987), p. 197.

Khuttal, known also as Khuttalan or Khatlon, was a remarkable geographical and political place in the course of the history. Located on the territory of today's Kulob region of Tajikistan Khuttal during Banijurids was known as Bactria-Tokharistan (the latter included also South of today's Uzbekistan.) and was an important section of the Silk Road, crossroad of the caravan routs that connected this country with Rome, Byzantine, Iran, India, and China. The musical culture of Bactria-Tokharistan reflected the synthesis of different ethnic groups and artistic traditions (such as of eastern Hellenism, Irano-Zoroastrian, local Bactrian and Indo-Buddhism), especially in Khushan period (1st c. B.C.-4th c. A.D.).¹¹ Bactria is characterized by its diverse music imagery through the history. Examples are numerous and those include depictions of music scenes on some objects from the famous Oxus (i.e. river Amu-Darya) treasury of the Achaemenid time (5th-4th centuries B.C.)¹², Hellenistic period is marked by the discovery of real wooden and bone flutes (excavated in Aikhanum, Takhti-Sangin, Ancient Termez), Kushan period is remarkable by music imagery in frescoes, sculpture and figurines (Airtam frieze, Kampyr-tepe, Zar-tepe, Dalverzin-tepe, etc.) and later, in the early medieval period (5th-8th centuries) frescoes of Balalyk-tepe and images on Bartym goblet with music scenes, as well as fragments of a real lute can be mentioned among many others. Khulbuk murals with the musicians continue this rich tradition. Three decades ago T.S. Vyzgo in her book on the musical instruments of Central Asia has been anticipating that although no much evidence of music imagery were available so far there is no doubt that they were in existence in the early middle ages as well.¹³

The fragment of the mural with the depiction of female musicians have

¹¹ Veronika Meshkeris. “Archaeological Chordophones of Central Asia during the 6/3rd B.C.-9th century A.D. Typology, evolution, migration.” Paper presented at the 8th International Meeting of the Study Group on Music Archaeology in the ICTM, Limassol, August 26-30, 1996. (pp. 85-90)

¹² It must be mentioned that W. Bachmann assumes that one of the vessels of the treasury contains the depiction of a musician playing bowed instrument (Cf.: Bachmann, *Origins ...*, pl. 15.)

¹³ Cf. T.S. Vyzgo. *Musykalnye instrumenty Srednei Azii: istoricheskie ocherki*. (Moskva: Muzyka, 1980).

been found on the floor, shredded into pieces.¹⁴ This fragment consists of two parts: the upper part contains geometrical, floral and epigraphic (in Arabic script) decorations and the lower part displays two musicians seated on folding chairs in a double-arched niche (Fig. 1a,b).¹⁵ Two adjoined pointed arches are adorned in the inner contour by an undulating figurative ornament. The arches rest on columns that look as if they were made of weightless splendid garlands of flowers. Idealization of the eastern beauty prevailed in the artistic thinking of an ancient painter when dealing with the depiction of female musicians.¹⁶ They wear traditional tight dresses, baggy trousers, and pleated scarfs thrown over the shoulders.



Fig. 1a – Fragment of the mural with the depiction of female musicians

¹⁴ According to E. Guliamova (*ART*, 23:303) the scene with the musicians had been over plastered during the last period of the palace existence, i.e. late 11th-12th centuries. Could it be a sign of growing limitations towards depiction of human beings according to Islamic dogma, one can only guess.

¹⁵ Drawings from the murals were made by the late artist Vladimir Bazhutin who was also a member of the archeological team during these excavations.

¹⁶ E. Guliamova and some other archaeologists identified the harpist as male, because of some traits of mustache. At the same she noted that dress and jewelry are woman's.

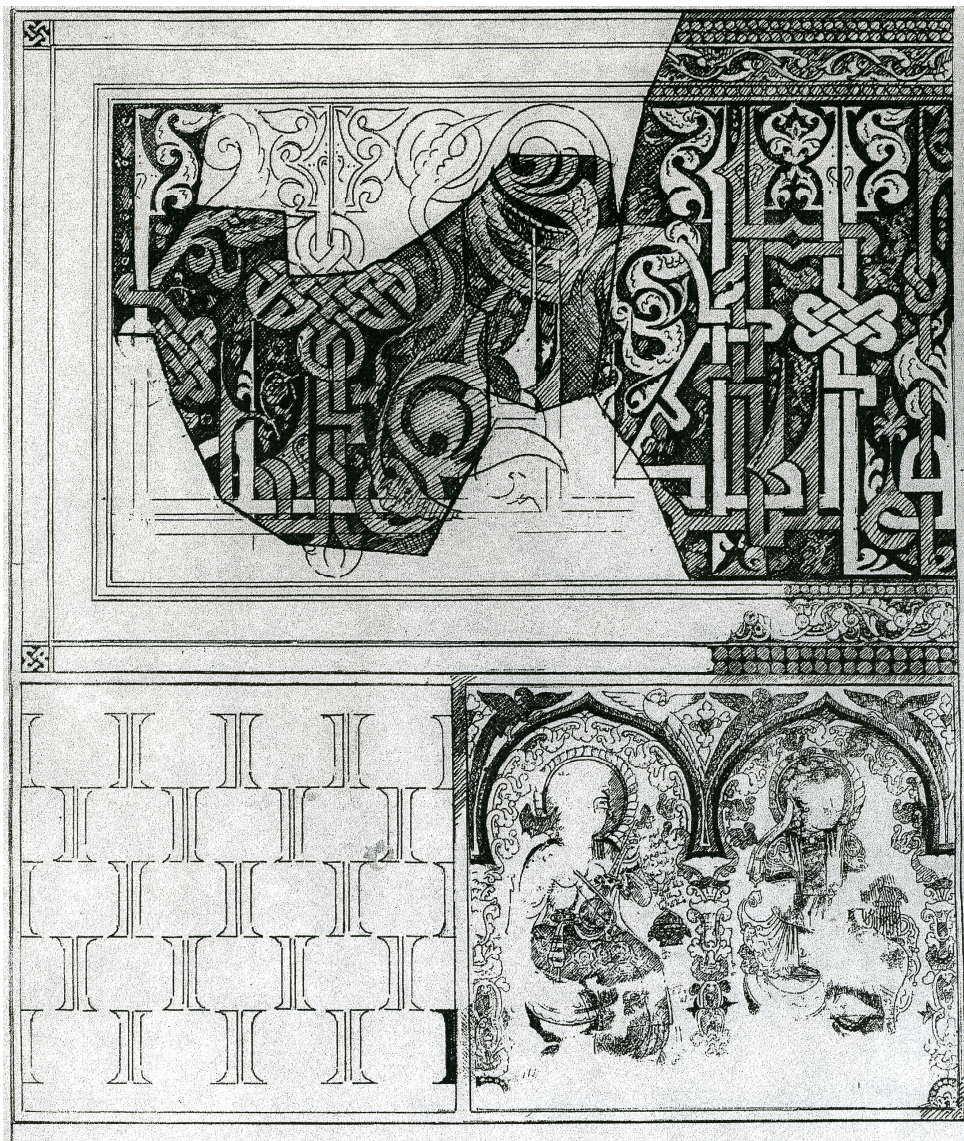


Fig. 1b – Fragment of the mural with the depiction of female musicians

The contrast color palette that included green, red, yellow, blue, as well as gold and black¹⁷, and furthermore the abundance of the adornments (elaborated ear-rings, beads, chain with pendent, hand and leg bracelets, inlaid crown-shaped hairdresses) increase the general refined magnificence of the scene. The heads of the musicians are surrounded by the halos outlined by the multi-colored twisted cords. This conventional detail can be perceived as the symbol of the elevated perfection of the persons. No color picture of the Khulbuk image has been published so far, but one can imagine how colorful the flower garlands, dresses and jewelry of the musicians must have been. The whole pictorial fragment covered the wall of the hallway between *iwan* (a roofed hall open at one end) and the reception room. The latter served for family ceremonies and was not intended for big official ceremonies (Fig. 2)

The musicians in the murals under discussion are shown playing a bowed instrument and a small angular harp with a curved resonator. This type was well known in Central Asia since the pre-Islamic times. It has a long history of spreading from ancient Mesopotamia to a vast territory of the ancient civilizations, including Central Asian Khwarizm, Sogd, and Bactria where it was known as *chang*. The harp of Khulbuk has 21 strings, which are attached to the resonator, while the free ends of the strings are twisted around the horizontal rod. There they could be tuned by twisting a collar around the rod.¹⁸ The horizontal rod as if it was suspended over the musician’s lap advocates that there was a vertical supporting extension, which can not be seen here but could be found elsewhere depicted in ceramic, metal and later in miniature paintings.

As for the bowed instrument in the hands of the left musician, no similar instrument became known so far in music iconography. It is unique and one of a kind. Besides, it is of great interest regarding its chronological aspect that corresponds to the early period of the bowing. As it is well known, following

¹⁷ According to Guliamova’s and Khmel’nitskii’s descriptions, the picture was executed in blue, yellow, green, red, gold and black colors and others. No color image was ever published.

¹⁸ More about ancient harp see Bo Lawergren, “Acoustics and Evolution of Arched Harps”, *The Galpin Society Journal* (Galpin Society) 34 (March): 1981. 110–129; and “Reconstruction of a Shoulder Harp in the British Museum”. *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* (Egypt Exploration Society) 66: 1980. 165–168

Werner Bachmann’s hypothesis, the origin of bowing is to be looked for most probably in Central Asia during the 9th century.¹⁹

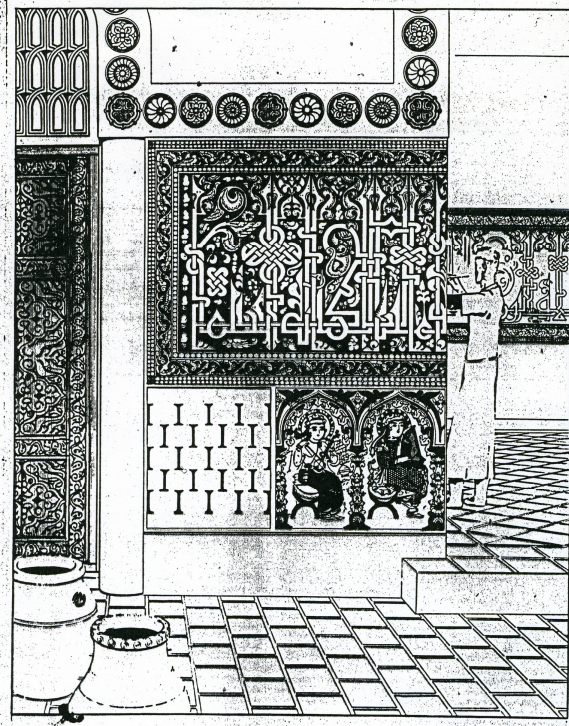


Fig. 2. Reconstruction drawing of the wall with depiction of the musicians

¹⁹ Bachmann, Werner. (1969). *The origins of bowing and the development of bowing instruments up to the thirteenth century*. Translated from German by Norma Deane. London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press. Meanwhile new researches deepen this dating up to the first millennium B.C. based on the investigation of rock paintings of Kazakhstan. (Cf. *Mittelasien...*; Also Cf.: G. Donchev, “K vopsoru o proiskhozhdennii strunnykh instrumentov i naibolee rannem poiavlennii ikh v Evrope” [Concerning the genesis of the string instruments and their early appearance in Europe]. *Voprosy istorii i teorii iskusstv*. Cheboksary, 1992).

Khulbuk fiddle depicted on the monument of the 10th -11th century looks as refined as the harp next to it.²⁰ In the following we will discuss the major aspects of the represented fiddle, first nomenclature, then construction.

In the first publication about the discovery E. Guliamova²¹ identified it as an instrument like the *tor* (obviously finding similarity with Azerbaijani and Iranian *tar* that is also popular today in Tajikistan and other republics of Central Asia). In later publications²² it was called *rubab*. And it is most likely that in medieval Khulbuk it was called *rabāb* (or *rubāb*) but it might have also been known under another names too. It was mentioned as *rabāb* in music treatises written in Arabic by Central Asian scholars as Farabi (d. 950) and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (d. 1037), as well as mentioned in the Arabic historical sources by Al-Mas’udi (d. ca. 956) and Ibn Khurdadbih (fl. 870-93). However, it is known in the history of organology that different instruments could have the same name, as

²⁰ This fact disproves the assumption that early bowed instruments were only used on the level of folk and lower class music as Christian Rault states: “If, unquestionably, the bow was conveyed from the East to Spain by the Muslims (and at the same time throughout the Byzantine Empire and Italy) it is important to note that this novelty has always remained of very limited interest in Arab society, staying in use only in the lower echelons of society, namely shepherds and nomads. From the 9th c. onward, the name *rubāb* has not altered, neither has its primitive frame of spike fiddle, nor its musical function of rhythmic and monodic accompaniment to the long melopoeias or traditional popular tales.” And further Ch. Rault writes that “We have to wait for the birth, during the 13th c., of the Arabo-Andalus *rubāb* in Spain (as a result of the deep cultural interpenetration between Muslims and Christians to see the bow accepted in Muslim courts and palaces. But this exception will never extend to the whole Muslim world and will always remain an Andalusian specificity.” (Christian Rault, “The emergence of new approaches to plucked instruments, thirteenth to fifteenth centuries”. *Gitarre un Zister: Bauweise, Spieltechnik und Geschichte bis 1800*. 22. Musikinstrumentenbau-Symposium Michaelstein, 16. bis 18 November 2001. Michaelsteiner Konferenzberichte, 66. [Ed. by Monika Lustig, et al.] (Döbel, Saalkreis: Stiftung Kloster Michaelstein und Verlag Janos Stekovics, 2004), 19-31. 20)

²¹ Guliamova, E. Raskopki..., p. 304

²² Guliamova, E. *Muzykalnye instrumenty...*, p. 133-134.

well as the same instrument was known under different names.²³ Hence, some plucked and bowed instruments could be called by the same name. There is no doubt that in Bactria-Tokharistan both plucked and bowed rubabs were known (like today identical plucked *tanbur* and bowed *sato*).

Meantime it is possible that a bowed instrument under discussion was also known as *ghijak*. Darvish Ali Changi (16th-17th c.), the author of a treatise on music, who lived in Bukhara, attributed (based on legends and tales) the invention of the bowed instrument *ghijak* to the time of reign of Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi (998-1030) and this innovation have been related to Nasir-i Khusraw (d. 1088) – famous poet of Ghaznavid period, and to philosopher Ibn Sina.²⁴ As it mentioned above, Ibn Sina was indeed one who mentions for the first time a bowed *rabāb* in his works. W. Bachmann was surprised “of how oral traditions dating back centuries may be corroborated by historical research.”²⁵ And now we are witnessing further corroboration when the depiction of the bowed instrument was discovered in Khuttal in murals of the time of Ghaznevids. Written sources confirm that both instruments, *rubāb* and *ghidjak*, were popular during this period. T.S. Vyzgo noted that even later in the 15th-17th centuries these two instruments will remain more characteristic to Central Asia than to Iran and their images appear to prevail in the Central Asian miniatures especially in the scenes depicting enthroned rulers of the Turkic dynasties like Mahmud Ghaznavi and Timur (i.e. Tamerlan).²⁶

The structural peculiarities of the depicted bowed instrument show its close relation to the instruments of the *rubāb* family, although they all are known today as plucked instruments (for instance Pamir rubob, Kashgar rubab, Afghan

²³ As Bachmann already stated in 1967 and it has been confirmed by many other scholars, but also in reference to other instruments, such as trumpets, shawms, lutes, an instrument could have different names. [Cit. from W.B. (p. 74-75) from *Busant* : “he ordered a fiddle (*videlen*) to be made” [then] “when the *gige* was ready.”]

²⁴ Cf.: A.A. Semenov. *Sredneaziatskii traktat po muzyke Dervisha Ali (XVII vek)* [Central Asian music treatise by Dervish Ali]. (Tashkent, 1948), p. 19; D. Rashidova...; W. Bachmann, *Op. cit.*, 48-49.

²⁵ Bachmann, *Op. cit.*, 49.

²⁶ T.S. Vyzgo. *Musykal'nye instrumenty Srednei Azii: istoricheskie ocherki* [Musical instruments of Central Asia: historical survey. (Moscow, 1980), 132.

rubab, etc.). It is most probable that the *rubāb* depicted in this wall painting of Khulbuk, alike the rubabs known today, was made of one piece of wood. The body is clearly divided into two parts: the lower part is round and covered with skin²⁷ and the upper part is prolonged and has lateral projections covered with a wooden soundboard. This corresponds to the characteristics of the *rubāb(s)* as it was described, for example, in the 14th c. treatise *Kanz al-tuhaf*.²⁸

The neck slightly tapers towards the head and as E. Guliamova observed it had frets indicated by cross lines sketched on the neck, which are not seen in our drawings. Although Pamir rubob today do not have frets, however rubab known as Kashgar rubab is fretted. Frets could be used in conjunction with both plucking and bowing techniques.

The pegbox is remarkable for its sickle-like shape.²⁹ This type of the pegbox is still used in Tajikistan and can be seen on the *blandzikom* known also as *Shugnon rubob*.³⁰ The pegs of the *blandzikom* are lateral and most likely the same meant to be on the Khulbuk fiddle. The pegs are drawn according to the then conventional rules of drawing but meant to be in lateral position supposedly.

Two strings extend from the pegs across a bridge-like bar, which can also be interpreted as a tailpiece. However, there is an ambiguity in the drawings we have: one shows a bridge-like bar (Fig. 1a) that could be considered as a tailpiece

²⁷ According E. Guliamova’s description it has a lighter color that says in favor that it was made of skin. She also noticed three hole-like marks on this surface that could be functioning that sound holes. (Cf.: Guliamova, *Muzykal’nye instrumenty v zhivopisi Khulbuka*, p. 134)

²⁸ *Kanz al-tuhaf*

²⁹ Thus it predates an image among the Capella Palatina frescoes, in Palermo, Sicily (1st half of the 12th century See reproductions, for instance, in: Ugo Monneret de Villard. *Le pitture musulmane al soffitto della Cappella Palatina in Palermo*. (Roma: La Libreria dello Stato, 1950), fig. 209; also in W. Bachmann, *Op. cit.*, il. 21; or David Gramit. “The Music Paintings of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo” *Imago Musicae*, 2. (1985), 9-49. Fig. 12 on p. 19.

³⁰ *Atlas muzykal’nykh instrumentov narodov SSSR / K. Vertkov, G. Blagodatov, E. Iazovitskaia*. 2nd ed. (Moscow: Muzyka, 1975), fig. 646. For *balandzikom* Cf. F. Karomatov and N. Nurdzhanov. *Muzyka’noe iskusstvo Pamira*, I (Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1978), p. 15.

(as Gulomova assumed) and according to the second drawing (Fig. 3) it has a kind of rounded block beneath the resonator to which the strings could be attached as well. As far as the second image represents more an artistic interpretation one would rather rely on the first one that is a tracing and could be considered as more accurate depiction. Nuts at the lower part of the body as well as the upper end of the neck are not discernable.



Fig. 3. A kind of rounded block beneath the resonator to which strings could be attached.

As for the bow, the Khulbuk image displays one with a shaft asymmetrically curved at one end. That is, according to W. Bachmann, “the resistance to deformation to the extended bow, curving sharply at one end, was greater than that of a bow of shallower and uniform curvature”.³¹ It is obvious that the bow depicted was a result of the development of the art of bowing in the area.

³¹ Bachmann, *Op. cit.*, 85. Such kind of bows can be seen occasionally in Western imagery too, like in a miniature of the beginning of the 12th c. “King David with musicians” (from the Brunonis Psalterium in the Bibl. Nat. in Paris, Ms. Lat. 2508) (Cf.: Bachmann, *Op. cit.*, pl. 23).

Horsehair was a commonly used material for bow strings in Central Asia.³² And the fact that the region of Khuttal and of Bactria in general was renowned by its legendary horses³³ could contribute to the potential wide use of horse materials.³⁴

The Khulbuk mural with the depiction of female string duo affirms that the musical art continued its rich pre-Islamic traditions in Central Asia of the 9th-11th centuries. The artistic style and imagery give the evidence of a sublime attitude towards the depiction of music scenes and musicians. The rear image of the bowed instrument confirms that Central Asia was a country with a long history of bowing and that the bowed instrument advanced to the remarkable refinement and was used in court music. The Khulbuk monument fulfills lacuna in the history of music iconography of the region and opens way to the expectations of more discoveries.

³² Cf. references to in: Bachmann, *Op. cit.*, 86.

³³ Belenitskii, *Istoriko-geograficheskii ocherk Khuttalia...*; Also his: “Khuttal’skaia loshad’ v legende i istoricheskom predanii” *Sovetskaia etnografiia*, IV, 1948:162-167.

³⁴ With the horse was connected one of legend heard in Pamir by the authors of *Muzyka’noe iskusstvo Pamira* about the origin of rubab. (Cf.: F. Karomatov and N. Nurdzhanov. *Op. cit.*, p. 13)