

Further to Comms 1944 and 1948 – Napoleon and a Seven Course Oud – an Update

Comm1944 refers to an engraving of a seven course 'Egyptian' oud and its case published in the monumental work 'Description de l'Égypte' in the years that followed Napoléon Bonaparte's late 18th C 'Egyptian Campaign' and scientific expedition. The campaign was a military and political failure but the scientific expedition was of significant importance giving rise to a renewed international interest in all things ancient Egyptian (the 'Egyptomania' phenomenon), resulting in the deciphering of hieroglyphs through the discovery of the 'Rosetta Stone' and leading to other important discoveries such as the Tomb of Tutankhamen etc.

The Egyptian musical instruments depicted by the engravings are described by Guillaume-André Villoteau, French scholar and member of the expedition to Egypt, in the text of 'Description de l'Égypte' – 'Première Partie, des Instrumens à cordes connus en Égypte' (Note 1) The first chapter, pages 221 to 246 deals with the oud in general and Article IV page 229 provides details and dimensions of the oud and its case represented by the engravings. The instrument has seven double courses of gut. The sound board is a single piece of pine, unvarnished extending 18 mm on to the fingerboard. The bridge is made from nut wood (walnut?). The bowl is made from 21 maple ribs separated by rosewood fillets (bois de Sainte-Lucie). The sound board edge is reinforced with a 14 mm wide strip of blue cotton glued half on the soundboard and half on the bowl. Other lute like features are the slanted neck joint and straight sided pegbox. The plectrum guard is of green fish skin (i.e. isinglas – from the swim bladder) glued to the sound board. Overall length from the extremity of the pegbox to the bottom of the instrument measures 726 mm. Length of the neck is 224 mm, width at nut is 49 mm (nut 47mm wide) and at the neck joint 65 mm. Maximum depth of the bowl is 162 mm. Sound board length from neck joint to bottom of the bowl is 433 mm and maximum width 350 mm. No vibrating string length is given by Villoteau or relative bridge position that would allow string length to be calculated from the other dimensions provided.

Belgian musicologist Françoise- Joseph Fétis (1784 – 1871) – knowing of Villoteau's instrument collection sought to acquire a collection of instruments similar to those illustrated in the 'Description de l'Égypte' (Note 2). Fétis purchased the instruments in 1839 collected on his behalf and according to his instructions, by the Belgian consul in Alexandria, Etienne Zizinia. This collection included 'du luth (é oud) avec son étui arabe' (see Fétis 'Histoire de la musique', vol. 2, p37n). Following the death of Fétis his instrument collection and extensive library were purchased by the Belgian state in 1871. The oud #0164 and the remnants of its case are now in the Musical Instrument Museum, Brussels.

In Comm 1948 I expressed a thought that this oud and its case were in fact the original models for Villoteau's engravings - given some practical simplifications, such as single courses, made by the engraver – assuming that the engravings were made in Egypt during the expedition period. Villoteau returned to France with his instrument collection but the whereabouts of the oud and its case today is not known (Note 3). Did Villoteau return to France with the oud and its case or were they, for whatever reason, left behind in Egypt only to be purchased years later by Zizinia? This idea is now proven false by the details and dimensions provided by Villoteau when

compared to those of oud #0164. The MIM oud is quite a bit larger than the one described by Villoteau with sound board length of 516 mm and width of 401 mm. String length is 637 mm. so proportionally Villoteau's oud might have had a string length of about 600 mm? Furthermore the soundboard of oud #0164 is made from 4 pieces and does not have a reinforced edge. Also the bowl of Villoteau's oud is flattened in section whereas oud #0164 has a proportionally deeper section than semicircular. The rosettes are set in flush with the sound board surface.

The images of oud #0164 in Comm 1944 are low resolution so fine detail is not visible. Some more detailed images are posted on a new website 'oudmigrations' (Note 4) and clearly show that the string layout, oddly, does not conform to the geometry of the fingerboard with the first and seventh courses lying outside the fingerboard boundaries. This impractical arrangement (Note 5) suggests that the original bridge may have been replaced by one with wider overall string spacings. Scaling of the images posted on the oudmigrations website indicate that the width of the nut measures about 48 mm and about 66 mm at the neck joint - sufficient for seven double courses - yet overall seven course string spacing at the bridge is about 126 mm when a perfectly reasonable spacing of about 90 mm is required if all of the strings are to be positioned over the fingerboard area. Perhaps the bridge of this original seven course oud did not have the specified exact appearance of the one in Villoteau's engraving so was conveniently replaced by one that did – possibly by a hired local artisan skilled in making decorative but unplayable 'wall hanger' instruments sold to unsuspecting and wealthy Europeans caught up in the 19th C. 'Egyptomania' craze?

Notes

1) 'Description de l'Égypte – recueil des observations et des recherches', Tome Treizieme, seconde édition, published 1823 is available for free download from the Bibliotheque national de France link:-

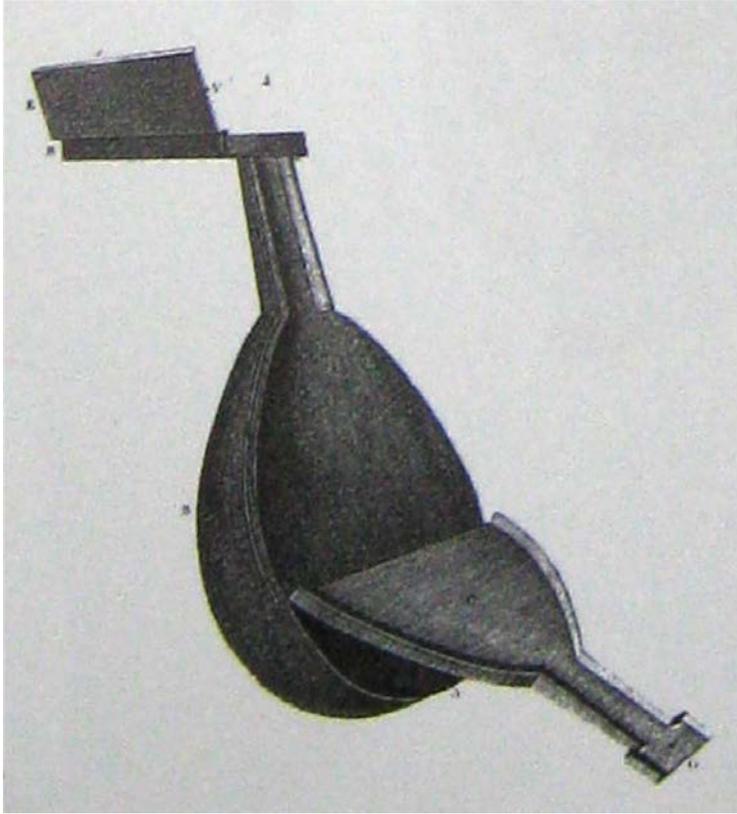
[gallica.bnf.fr/ark/12148/bpt6k28010m/f226.item.r](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k28010m/f226.item.r) =Description historique villoteau

2) Fétis certainly had access to Villoteau's descriptive accounts according to curator at MIM, Saskia Willaert who notes that there are three copies of Villoteau's publication in the Fétis fund in the National library including one German translation. The 'Catalogue de la Bibliothèque de F.J. Fétis' acquired by the Belgian State in 1877 for 152,000 francs (plus 3,500 francs for shipping and preparation of the catalogue) has been digitised by Google and is freely available online from various sources including Google eBooks. It makes interesting reading.

3) Many of the instruments in Villoteau's collection were purchased by Adolphe Sax. Some were later purchased by then MIM curator Mahillon for the museum at the auction of Sax's instrument collection in Paris 1877 but the oud was not listed among this collection.

4) See **oudmigrations.com** – a new website devoted to early Ottoman oud history by Rachel Beckles Willson.

5) It has been suggested that the first and seventh courses do not need to lie over the fingerboard as these strings are rarely played on a seven course oud! It might be acceptable for the seventh course to lie outside the boundaries of the fingerboard if only used as a drone bass but surely not the first course.



Villoteau Oud



Fétis Oud #0164