

# When the Drummers Were Women

a review of Layne Redmond's new book

by George Franklin

In her outstanding new book, "When the Drummers Were Women," Layne Redmond traces the centuries-long tradition of sacred drumming in Mediterranean cultures. In these pages, we offer a brief synopsis of her historical findings as well as a review of the entire book.

For hundreds of years, the spiritual life of many of our ancestors revolved around veneration of Mother Goddesses through dance and music. Flutes, harps, and most of all hand drums were essential parts of sacred ritual.

Surviving sculpture and relief carvings from these vanished cultures document that women had a primary role as priestesses and as drummers in drawing people into intimate communion with the Goddess.

Frame drums — hand-held hoops shaped like a wheel covered with animal skin — were found in many ancient Mediterranean cultures. Their rhythms were used by shamans and priestesses as part of rituals, processions, prophecies and healing.

Early hunting, fishing and agricultural societies were intimately aware of the rhythms of nature: the turning of the seasons, the cycles of the moon and its relation to tides, and the migrational patterns of animals on whom they depended for their livelihood. The rhythm of women's menstrual cycles may have especially attuned them to natural rhythms.

Did sacred drumming begin as an imitation of the heart's pulse? A pattern known from a mother's womb was echoed by the beating of the priestesses' frame drums.



## MYTHIC ORIGINS OF DRUMMING

"In every Mediterranean civilization I studied," says Redmond, "It was a Goddess who transmitted to humans the gift of making music. In Sumer it was Inanna; in Egypt, Hathor; in Greece, the nine-fold Goddess called the Muses." In each of these cultures, drumming was used both to invoke the Goddess and to enter into a trance-like state wherein humans could hear and channel divine energy.

The rhythm of the frame drum was also a way priestesses made contact with the spirit world. The moon-shape of the frame drum suggests a connection with cycles of death and rebirth akin to the phases of the moon. In the Mesopotamian city of Ur, the new moon was believed to descend into the underworld. Its resurrection was facilitated by drumming.

In the Near Eastern story of Inanna's descent and return to the underworld, the Goddess remains in the

## "A Spiritual History of Rhythm"

by Sabrina

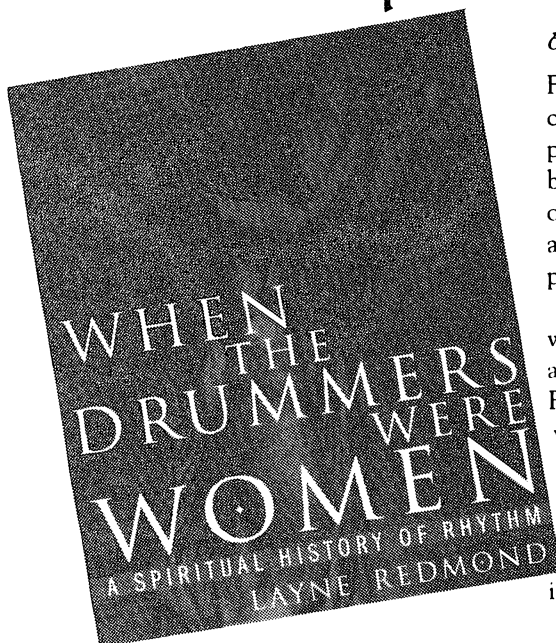
For those of you into playing the drum, cymbals, tambourine, or a similar percussion instrument, there's a new book out that might change your outlook on your musical activities and also get you more involved with practice and performance.

*When the Drummers Were Women* was written by internationally-acclaimed percussionist Layne Redmond, who spent more than 10 years researching it in the Middle East and Europe. Redmond's newborn baby (published this year), at a whopping 223 pages, is a successful attempt to rewrite the history of percussion instruments (the frame drum in

particular) from a feminist and goddess-oriented perspective, and turn it into "herstory."

The book, divided into five parts and 13 chapters, begins with Redmond's views on the spiritual quest of the goddess and the connection between rhythm and the goddess. On a spiritual search herself, Redmond tells the tale of how she was led into the world of drumming and how, for her, it seemed like it was considered a masculine profession. While studying on the side about ancient religions, she saw to her surprise that many goddess figures held frame drums, tambourines, harps, and other instruments. No one had written

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land of the dead for three days and nights — roughly the time of the new moon. And it is the beating of a drum by Ninshubar which initiates Inanna's journey back to the land of the living.

Variations of the story of Inanna's descent recurred in almost every subsequent Mediterranean culture. It is found in myths associated with Isis and Osiris, Cybele and Attis, Aphrodite and Adonis, Demeter and Persephone, Ariadne and Dionysos. In each of these traditions, the frame drum played a pivotal role in the sacred rites.

## DRUMMING IN ANCIENT CULTURES

In many ancient Mediterranean cultures, prayer was an active, trance-inducing combination of chanting, music and dance. A shrine painting at the ancient site of Catal Hüyük (in modern Turkey) shows a group of dancers clothed in leopard skins, one of whom seems to be playing a small frame drum. This painting, from c. 5800B.C., is the oldest known depiction of a drum.

Frame drums appear in Egyptian art from at least the reign of Amenhotep III (1417-1379 B.C.). Thanks to the unique desert climate of Egyptian tombs, decorated skin heads from some drums have survived. Two skins from the New Kingdom (c. 1600-1100 B.C.) show Isis giving life to Osiris, linking the drum to creation and resurrection myths.

Priestesses are also shown in Egyptian art playing the frame drum to accompany divine processions.



### GRAPHICS

page36: Egyptian procession, c. 1225 B.C.  
top right: Cybele from Anatolia, c.400 B.C.  
center: Priestesses of Dionysos, C. 420 B.C.

Although Egypt was by this time a patriarchal society, drumming appears still to have been partly in the hands of women. When the sun God made his daily way across the sky, women are depicted setting the rhythm for his journey with frame drums.

Around the same time, the island civilization of Crete was the site of a strong Goddess-oriented culture. The Goddess Rhea (later known as Ariadne in Greek myth) sat before a sacred cave playing on a brazen drum, compelling attention to the oracles of the Goddess.

In later Greek versions of her story, Ariadne is the Goddess of the labyrinth. To enter the labyrinth, Redmond suggests, "is to experience a ritual death; to escape from it is to be resurrected." The story of Ariadne giving Theseus a ball of thread to guide him back out of the labyrinth is well-known. Redmond draws a fascinating parallel with shamanistic ritual, in which "the beat of the drum is the thread guiding the

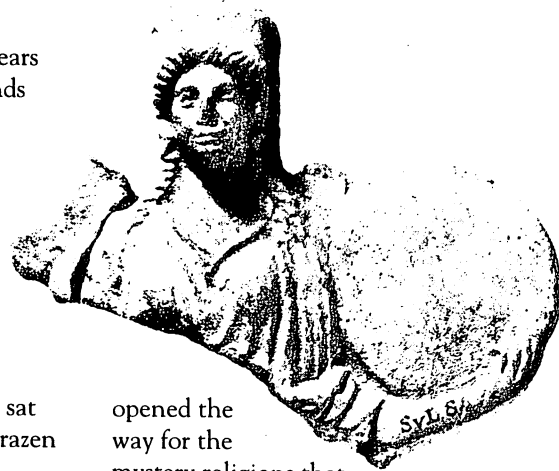
shaman back to the natural world..." It is hardly a coincidence, then, that Ariadne is often shown playing a frame drum.

## GREECE AND ROME

As we move on to ancient Greece and Rome, the last of the pre-Christian Mediterranean cultures, we are squarely in the realm of patriarchy. Nevertheless, many elements of Goddess worship and ritual survive in these cultures.

Cybele, adopted into Greek religion from the Near East, was considered a source of prophecy in Greek times. Her priestesses used drums and flutes to enter into a receptive trance and hear Her divine revelation. Around 200 B.C., Cybele was also adopted as a protectress of the city of Rome, where her flamboyant followers shocked the staid Roman patricians.

The popularity of Cybele's cult



opened the way for the mystery religions that flourished in the Roman Mediterranean during the early A.D. centuries. These mystery schools were often adapted from older practices of Near Eastern origin. One of the best known was that centering around Eleusis, near Athens. Dating back to at least 1200 B.C., the Eleusinian Mysteries carried Goddess worship into later times. It is Persephone, not a male deity, who travels to the land of the dead and must be recalled — like Inanna, by the playing of a frame drum.

The Dionysian mysteries, better known to history for involving wine-fests and sexual liberty, were also built around drumming and dancing. Priestesses led the celebration of the Dionysian festivals at Delphi for over a millenium. A key part of the observance was a mystic journey, made at night, at which secret dances were performed to the accompaniment of frame drums.

## DECLINE AND REDISCOVERY

Sacred drumming, associated with pre-Christian religions (lumped together as "heathens" or "pagans" by later writers), declined after Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century A.D. Yet the image of women drummers survived, as attested by occasional paintings of musical angels from the Middle Ages.

As we approach the new millenium, women are once again becoming powerful drummers and leaders of spiritual movements. The closing chapter of Redmond's book documents this development and the hope this carries for transforming our society.