

Tulum lives on in its

THE BAGPIPE OF ANATOLIA

TURKEY's Black Sea coast is the fabled region to which Jason and the Argonauts were drawn in search of the Golden Fleece. Since it was colonised by Greek traders 2,900 years ago, it has experienced varying fortunes, cultural influences and rule under a succession of great empires: Persian, Hellenistic, Roman and Eastern Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman.

Rize is a city and region at the eastern stretch of that dramatic coastline, where steep hills rise from the sea.

The British scholar W. E. D. Allen believed the name "Rize" derived from the local Laz language and had the meaning "place where people and soldiers gather". It certainly has that mixed and sometimes sombre history. It is an area best known today for its extensive tea plantations.

It is among these hills, in the villages of the Tatos range and in the Artvin region to the east, among the Laz and the Hemshinli peoples in particular, that Turkey's bagpipe tradition survives.

The Laz call the bagpipe "guda". Their history goes back to the ancient Kingdom of Colchis that in ancient times ruled what is now western Georgia as well as the Turkish provinces of Trabzon and Rize. It was King Aetes of Colchis whose daughter, Medea, is remembered in Greek myth as the enchantress and wife of the hero-adventurer Jason. Colchis was wrested from Persian domination in 65 BC by Pompey, absorbed into the Roman Empire and subsequently re-organised to become a part of the Roman province of Lazicum, the name "Cochi" being supplanted by the term "Laz".

As a regional cultural group that brought together a number of early Christian identities that converted to Islam, the Hamshinli generally speak a Turkish dialect and today form a fully integrated part of the mainstream Turkish identity. To them, the instrument is a "tulum" a word that refers to the instrument's bag... and that also identifies a strong-flavoured sheep's



Photo: Mike Paterson

CENGIS ALKANS... "In the Black Sea region the tulum is too intimately a part of the culture for the need not to be felt. So it will survive. Now people are starting to introduce the tulum in rock music, and people not only from the Black Sea region. And more people are starting to learn, playing in the traditional way."

Black Sea heartland



Photo: Mike Paterson

milk cheese made in the region that is matured in a kid-skin bag.

The tulum has two individually reeded pipes tuned in unison, and no separate drone. The reeds are single-bladed, cut from cane (*Arundo donax*). The two pipes are mounted side by side in a carved, one-piece boxwood case (the *nav*) that is tied directly into the goatskin bag and terminates in a rectangular-sided horn. The pipes have five finger holes, side by side. Straws, placed into the pipes, are used to balance the pitch of the two pipes and fine-tune

the sound.

The traditional tunes are short, of one or two bars, and the range of the tulum is just six notes, but the rhythms are complicated, fingered on one of the pipes that is played as an effective drone — even though each finger lies across both pipes, over a hole in each — by the way the player works the first and second joints of each finger. It is a technique that means a player can produce chords in intervals ranging from a second to a sixth. The music pours out as a busy, intricate, two-parted polyphony, with gracings

and drone effects that sound puzzling at first to a Western ear but then begin to catch the attention and fascinate the listener as a layering of rhythmic and polyphonic patterns.

The instrument has the look of antiquity and simplicity, and is considered ancient in the oral tradition. But the technique it calls for is subtle, precise and complicated to master.

Cengiz Alkan is a professional tulum player now living in Ankara. He was five years old when his father, Harun, first put a pipe in his hands and began teaching him to play. And

the first music Harun Alkan taught his son was Hemshin horon: dance music.

“He is still the best tulum player I’ve known,” said Cengiz Alkan, “but he has stopped playing now. He has very fast fingers. I was a small child when I began to learn, starting on a single pipe, played with the reed in the mouth, not in the bag.

“The tulum is not good when you don’t know how to play it, so learners start on a single pipe until they are ready for the next stage of teaching.

“It is a tradition that a father who plays teaches his child. While my father gave me the only formal teaching I have had, I also was listening to recordings and other music.”

The tulum is local in the Black Sea region, he said. To the south, the tulum’s place is taken by the fiddle.

“It is only in the Rize region that the Tulum is played and then in localised areas,” said Cengiz Alkan. “In the old days, say 50 years ago, there were a lot more players. Today there are fewer because the tulum is a difficult instrument to play well and because people from the rural regions are going to the big cities for employment, and there they tend to play guitars and listen to modern pop music.”

He states that there are now probably fewer than 300 active tulum players.

“But interest in the tulum is again increasing,” he said. “There are more people around who are interested in folklore dancing, and the number of people who like to listen to the tulum and dance to it is also increasing. People travel from the big cities to the villages and, when they find people dancing and listening to the tulum, they often try to join them somehow.

“There is a difference between the cities and smaller centres.

“Although you will not see a tulum player in the middle of the street in a big city, that doesn’t mean you will not find any players there. They will meet together in a group, after work, for example, to get together and enjoy playing. In the smaller towns, it is more common that you can enjoy hearing tulum players every evening, sitting together playing and singing in public. You will hear the tulum playing outdoors for a wedding, or find players sitting in a restaurant or garden. And there are folk festivals and concerts.”

In general, players buy their instruments from a specialist maker, he said, “but the makers



Photo: Mike Paterson



Photo: Mike Paterson

are always players, of course. It usually takes a week or more to make an instrument.

“To match reeds, we take two sections from the same piece of cane: they are then easier to match up. We use tuning straws to lower the pitch. Both pipes must have the same tone as the two are played together and have to sound in unison. The straws help to ensure that both pipes are at absolutely the same pitch and, of it’s not enough, you have to change the reed. And we use bees’ wax to alter the pitch too, and to make the seat airtight.



Photo: Mike Paterson

THE MATCHED CANE REEDS OF CENGIZ ALKAN’S TULUM...
“To match reeds, we take two sections from the same piece of cane: they are then easier to match up.”

THE BOXWOOD CASE OF THE TULUM, HOLDING TWO CANE PIPES...
“We use tuning straws to lower the pitch. Both pipes must have the same tone as the two are played together and have to sound in unison. The straws help to ensure that both pipes are at absolutely the same pitch and, of it’s not enough, you have to change the reed.”

“The nav (the chanter, holding the two cane pipes, and bell) is made of shemsher (boxwood) for its hardness. That is necessary for the resonance.”

Cengiz Alkan worked in Turkey’s growing tourism industry as a tour operator but also was giving concerts as a professional player. “For the past year, though, I have just worked as a professional musician,” he said. “There are a number of people playing at the same level as professionals but there is a limit to how far you can take the instrument.

“What makes a good tulum player? It is important to have quick fingers so you can perform the melody in the right way because people know how it should sound, and you shouldn’t improvise. If you are playing well, the sound is bright; speed is not the point.

“In general, it is the tradition that the player will sing and play together. The song has a short phrase, a pause, and then another phrase. So the piper can sing a phrase, blow up the bag again and then sing again.

“Other than the traditional repertoire, you can play your own music and people are composing new melodies. And we play in orchestrations, parts that the tulum is able to pick up.

“It is really a solo instrument, though, and only one tulum will play at a time. The system of six notes is the same for all instruments, but the absolute pitch can vary from player to player. But there is an unwritten rule that, when you play with other instruments, the low note should be G and the highest D, and the tuning should be

consistently the same. But when you are playing solo you can choose which chords you will make and the tone. You can play either or both holes together.”

It is Cengiz Alkan’s view that the style of bagpipe represented by the tulum was probably introduced to the Black Sea region from Central Asia and then taken by way of the ancient Greek trading colonies back to the Greek Islands, where the surviving bagpipe, the tsambouna, has many similarities with the tulum and is also said to have ancient origins. (See: Mike Paterson: ‘Naxos’ pipes face uncertain future: the tsambouna of the Cyclades’ in *Piping Today* No. 27, 2007. p. 30-36). Somewhat similar double pipe, droneless instruments, with parallel-placed finger holes — but with separate bells for each pipe — are found across most of North Africa. (See: Colin MacInnes: ‘Finding the mizwid in Tunisia: Tunisian baggiping’ in *Piping Today* 2, 2006. p. 40-43.)

“The tulum probably died out in Central

Asia after it came to Turkey,” said Cengiz Alkan. “They have been used for hundreds of years in Turkey.”

And, he said, they have not seen recent change.

“The voice of the instrument is necessary to the tradition as it is. And it needs to be mouth-blown because you need your own breath, you need the moisture, so there are no changes that really can be made, and the instrument is unchanged.

“We now cannot imagine enjoying life without the tulum.” It is the instrument that leads the dancing at weddings and in the villages, and sustains a song tradition as well as the dances.

“In the Black Sea region the tulum is too intimately a part of the culture for the need not to be felt,” said Cengiz Alkan. “So it will survive.

“Now people are starting to introduce the tulum in rock music, and people not only from the Black Sea region. And more people are starting to learn, playing in the traditional way.” ●

Ross Reedmakers

The Champions’ Reeds



Tel: 562-981-6082 Email: andy@rossreeds.com

www.rossreeds.com