Researching the Recorder in the Middle Ages

By David Lasocki

We know from numerous surviving examples and depictions that various members of the flute family existed in Western Europe in the period 1100-1500. Internal-duct flutes were common and their form was hardly standardized. Panpipes, left over from ancient times, were ubiquitous, at least through the turn of the 15th century. Transverse flutes played a role that has not been fully researched yet.

"Internal-duct" is just a fancy way of describing a windway on the inside of the instrument. At first, such instruments came in sizes from small down to minute, and possessed from two to seven holes, in various conformations. The kind of "pipe" played one-handed by a performer who also beat a small drum ("tabor") slung around the neck tended to have a thumb-hole and two finger-holes. Towards the end of the 14th century a form of duct flute with a thumb-hole and seven finger-holes emerged that would eventually become the most common and play a significant role in art music—the recorder.

If we want to research the history of the recorder in this period, we need to see it as part of the larger family of flutes. We also need to supplement the surviving examples and depictions with written evidence—from literary sources and from inventories and payment records. When I started looking at the latter in 2003, for a lecture I was going to give at the Utrecht Symposium, I was surprised to discover that no one had ever made a systematic survey of inventories and payment records. So I made a survey myself, and was further surprised at how many sources of this type existed, and how useful they were for researchers.

When I turned a couple of years ago to previous research derived from literary sources, it soon became clear that, with the exception of a few studies on France and Germany, little systematic research had been done on that subject either. It should be no surprise that I decided to make my own survey of the literary sources. The present article summarizes the results of all the written evidence I have found.

Some useful quotations from literary sources can be found in historical language dictionaries. But in making use of such quotations to decide what Medieval instruments were called, compilers of such dictionaries, as well as scholars of musical instruments, have generally relied on extrapolation backwards from later usage of terms such as flute (in many languages) and flageolet, assuming that the same name implied the same instrument. To avoid this pitfall, I began with the first instances where names of instruments are
The first surviving description of a recorder linked to a name is found in a Latin treatise of the late 15th century. Clearly linked to a description or depiction, then took those same terms and traced them forwards from their first occurrences in history.

A 14th-century Flemish manuscript of a 12th-century Latin work, *De planctu Naturae* by Alain de Lille, includes drawings to accompany a description of a concert given by the musicians of Hymeneus, the god of marriage, on 11 different types of instruments. Of these instruments, two are duct flutes marked "fistula" with the Old Dutch word *fleyt* written underneath. One is a four-holed taborpipe, with a thumb-hole and three finger-holes. The other seems to be a seven-holed duct flute without a thumb-hole (see illustration, previous page).

The first surviving description of a recorder linked to a name is found in a Latin treatise of the late 15th century, Johannes Tinctoris's *De inventione et usu musice* (Naples, c.1481-83). It mentions *fistula* (literally, pipe or tube), a particular type of woodwind instrument (*tibia*) with "seven holes in front and one behind." He was also familiar with the practice of doubling the seventh finger-hole on some unnamed types of *tibia*, so that players could play the instrument with either hand uppermost. Such an arrangement was common on pre-Baroque recorders.

The first vernacular description of the recorder linked to a name, the first surviving description linked to a picture, and the first fingering chart come from the early 16th century: Sebastian Virdung's *Musica getutscht und ausgezogen* (Basel, 1511). He calls the instrument *Flöte*, as does Martin Agricola's *Musica instrumentalis deudsch* (Wittenberg, 1529, 21545). Moreover, 16th-century treatises in other countries tend to use the plain word "flute" in their language in conjunction with similar descriptions, pictures, and fingerings: flute in French (*Liére plaisant et tres utile*, 1529, a translation of Virdung); *fluyte* in Dutch (*Dit is een veer schoon boocken*, 1568, also a translation of Virdung);
and flauto in Italian (Silvestro Ganassi, Opera intitulata Fontegara, 1535; Aurelio Virgiliano, II Dolcimelo, c.1600).

In contrast, the main term used for the recorder in 1556 by Philibert Jambe de Fer, who also depicts the instrument and provides fingerings for it, is fleute à neuf trous (flute with nine holes—including the doubled seventh hole).

This term indirectly furnishes the earliest corroboration of the meaning of “recorder” in English, because Jean Palsgrave’s English-French dictionary, Les clarissement de la langue francoyse (London, 1530), includes the definition: “Recorder a pype fleute a. ix. neuf trous.....”

Agricola depicts a tiny Rügpfiff: a duct flute with four finger-holes and an expanding bore. He also mentions the klein Flüèlein, “which has no more than four holes, except that when the lowest end of the instrument is employed (as commonly happens), it may be reckoned as having five or six holes.” He includes a fingering chart as well as an illustration of the klein Flötlin (presumably a casual variant of the spelling) with four holes. Finally, Agricola was the first to link a name for transverse flutes—actually, two names, Schweitzer oder Querpfeiffen (Swiss or cross-pipes)—with a depiction and a fingering chart.

It is not until Marin Mersenne’s Harmonie universelle (Paris, 1636) that we find a name with a picture and a fingering chart for the tabor-pipe, which he calls flûte à trois trous (three-holed flute). He also provides the same for the flageolet or flûte à six trous (flageolet or six-holed flute), a duct-flute with two thumb-holes and four finger-holes. And he differentiates between the flûte d’Allemand (flute) and the fife (fife).

**Roots of the Words**

Let us now go back to ancient times and trace all these kinds of terms—flûtre, fistula, flageolet, flauto, Flûte, fluyt, flute/flûte, fluyte, Querpfeiff, recorder and tibia—fortwards in ancient Greek and Latin, as well as in older versions of Catalan, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Occitan (Provençal) and Spanish.

In ancient Greece, the word aulos usually denoted a wind instrument consisting of two pipes and two (probably double) reeds. But since the word was also applied to any long hollow tube, it could refer to any wind instrument consisting of a single pipe with or without a reed. For essentially the same double-reed pipe, the Romans employed the term tibia, or occasionally fistula, a word that poets used for the shepherd’s panpipes.

Both tibia and fistula turn up again in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, as we have already seen with Tinctoris, as names for woodwind instruments in general, or for members of the flute family in particular.

You may have seen the assertion that the recorder is termed fistula anglica in a 12th-century English manuscript in Glasgow called the Hunterian Psalter, which shows King David tuning his harp and surrounded by musicians. In fact the illustration is not labeled. I can only think that somehow the originators of the assertion knew the term for the recorder used by Mersenne in the Latin version of his treatise, Harmoniae sive libri, published in 1635: “Fistula dulcis, seu Anglica,” or in other words: fistula dulcis or fistula anglica.

Apparently the earliest surviving account of members of the flute family in any language is found in the Latin Yconomica (1348-52) of Konrad of Megenberg, a German who studied and taught at the University of Paris. The book is a compilation of material that the young sons of princes needed to study. One section is about the servants of a household, including its musicians, who are among the servants providing entertainment. He views
such musician-servants as distinct from, and vastly superior to, professional jongleurs.

Wind players are divided into two types: macrofistulus and microfistulus. The latter "is the one who makes music on a smaller pipe (fistula); and I call those pipes 'smaller'—named flatillae in the vernacular—because they give sound with a little blowing of the breath of the mouth, but the sound is weak and feeble. Whence they sometimes play together with fiddles." Later he writes that flatille "arouse or exasperate amorous spirits, and to an extent move them to the sweetness of [religious] devotion. Organs, therefore, on account of their variety and multitude [of flute pipes], are fittingly allotted a place in churches where divine services are celebrated."

In the 15th century the recorder was to develop dual sexual/spiritual associations that continued into at least the Baroque era.

In literature, although terms and their spellings were far from standardized, some general tendencies can be noted. The panpipes that were common until the early 15th century had their own term in French and Anglo-French (frestel), English (frestel), and Occitan (frestal). The instrument was associated in ancient times with the pastoral god Pan, and the Middle Ages continued to assign it to him as well as to shepherds and shepherdesses. Nevertheless, it was also considered a loud instrument and placed in the hands of minstrels, jongleurs and tower watchers.

All the languages had terms for the tabor-pipe: Catalan, Occitan, and Spanish (flauta), Dutch (pleute/floute), English (flute), French (flauté), Anglo-French (flute/floute), German (flöte), and Italian (zaffola). In French poetry, the flauté is almost exclusively associated with minstrels and tower watchers, and occurs slightly more in loud contexts than in soft contexts. German Medieval romances and Dutch archival records generally put the flöte in the hands of minstrels. In Germany, its sound was described as clear, loud or resonant.

The flautèle, or small flauté, mentioned in five sources of the 13th century, is clearly linked to the tabor. It is reminiscent of Konrad of Megenberg's term flatilla, although his description of that instrument as "weak and feeble" suggests general duct flutes rather than tabor-pipes.

Only French (flajol), Occitan (flaujol), and Italian (flauto) had special terms for duct flute that were clearly differentiated from tabor-pipe. Citations of the flajol in French poetry are evenly split between minstrels and shepherds, with the exception of one nobleman. Several poems describe the flajol or its music as douce (soft or sweet). Yet Guillaume Machaut's epic poem La Prise d'Alexandrie, written towards the end of his life (c.1370-72), mentions that there were at least 20 kinds of flajols, both loud and soft. In his earlier Le remède de Fortune (1340s?), he had already singled out Flajols de saus (flajols made of willow). Eustache Deschamps in the late 14th century mentions "The sweetly/softly resounding flageolts, which we make from wood of the forest" (Les doux flajolets ressonans / Que des selvs des boyz faisons). They were presumably small flajols.

The sole reference to flaujol in Occitan poetry puts the instrument in the hands of a troubadour. The rare English term flagel, although perhaps derived from flajol, seems to have meant tabor-pipe.

Until the late 15th century, only Catalan (axaebes/xacebes, travesada), French (flauté traversaire), and German (zwercspfiff) had recorded terms for the transverse flute. Nevertheless, the instrument is depicted in more than 50 works of art, mostly from France and Germany, but also England, Mallorca and Spain. Therefore the suggestion by scholars that the instrument may have been subsumed under the term flauté is plausible, although it could also have been subsumed under flajol.

Terms for the Recorder
Through the research summarized above, we have gained some perspective on the terms that may have referred to the recorder when it came on the scene in the late 14th century. It turns out that the instrument began to take over the terms that had meant tabor-pipe in Catalan, Dutch, French, German, Spanish and Italian (in the last case, also the flauto that had meant duct flute). In French the usual spelling shifted from flauté to flautiste or flustre.

Only English invented a new term, first documented as Recordour in 1388 in the household accounts of Henry, Earl of Derby (shown here in a 16th-century painting as King Henry IV).
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of Henry, Earl of Derby, the future Henry IV of England. Why English would need a new term, when the Romance and Germanic languages of the Continent managed perfectly well with existing terms, may have to do with the rarity of flagel in England and its switch of meaning from the French flajol.

Modern authorities all derive “recorder” from the verb “to record,” stemming from the Old French recorder, and ultimately from the Latin recordari, to remember (re-, back, plus cord, from cor, heart or mind; thus to bring back to mind). The comprehensive Middle English Dictionary sets out no fewer than seven families of meanings for “to record” in the 14th century, deriving the instrument from meaning (6), “repeat, reiterate, recite, rehearse (a song),” and also comparing it to the Old French recordour, a word which the Tobler–Lommatzsch dictionary of Old French indeed defines as a “reciter.” Eric Partridge’s etymological dictionary spells out his theory about this connection: the Middle English noun recorder “has agent recordor, a rememberer, a relater, a minstrel (whence the musical instrument).”

But these authorities left out an important intermediate step in the derivation of the verb: Anglo-French (formerly known as Anglo-Norman), the dialect of French spoken in England after the Norman Conquest in 1066 until about 1475. Curiously, the equally comprehensive Anglo-Norman Dictionary does not cite any use of recordor in Anglo-French, only recordour in the legal sense of “person officially appointed to make a record.” Nevertheless, the dictionary shows that the language did transmit meanings of the verb recorder that made their way into Middle English, including remember, repeat, recite, and learn by heart.

Even in England, flout/loyte seems to have overlapped with the new word until the 1430s. In literature the first dateable occurrence of “recorder” comes in the poem The Fall of Princes (1431-38) by John Lydgate:

“Pan first taught to unite many reeds with wax” (Pan primus instituit conjungere plures calamos cera). In two of his earlier poems, Lydgate used flout/loyte in ambiguous situations. In Reason and Sensuality (1407), he writes of the god Mercury:

“In his left hand a floute he held, When so him list the long day, Therewith to pipe and make play ... Which gave so sweet a melody That no man could himself so keep, But it would make him sleep.”

Although left-hand playing might suggest a tabor-pipe, the instrument puts people to sleep, as confirmed a few lines later in an initial reference to a Siren:

“But all her singing was in vain, To be compared, in soothness [truth], Unto the excellent sweetness Of this floyte melodious, By force of which Mercurius Made Argus sleep.”

Guillaume de Deguileville’s Le pèlerinage de la vie humaine (1331) contains a passage about the bellows blast of Pride, which “makes pipes and fletes and shawms emit sound” (fuit sonner tuaus / Et fletes et chalemanus). A translation probably made by Lydgate, The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man (1426), renders the passage loosely:

“Bombards and cornemuse, These Floutys eek, with subtle music, And these shall loud cry.”

Two Medieval recorders: (top) probably from the late 14th century, discovered in 1940 in the former moat of a fortified mansion near Dordrecht, Holland’s oldest city; (bottom) 15th century, found in 1998 in a latrine in the old Hanseatic city of Elblag (Elbing), Poland.
The Floutys with their “subtle music” sound more like recorders than taborpipes, even though Pride’s blast forces them to “loud cry.”

A little later, the French text refers to another member of the flute family: “for I deceive them all with my flaiol” (Quar touz les deçoif au flaiol). But the English version uses the same term as before: “So sweetly with my Floute I pipe.” Thus the translator saw flaeute and flaiol as interchangeable terms for soft duct flutes, rendered as floute.

A Complaint that “Alas for thought” is found in two surviving manuscripts, dating from around 1430 and 1450, of Lydgate’s Temple of Glass (written c.1403). It contains the revealing lines: “These little herd-grooms Floutyn all the long day, Both in April and in May, In their small recorders, In floutys and in reed spears [stems].” Recorders and flutes are clearly distinguished now, although both can “flute.” By the end of the 15th century, flute was reserved in English for the transverse instrument, as today.

The earliest surviving recorders, all from around 1400, are soprano-sized. But the first reference to the instrument, 10 years before Recourdour in England, is to flatuates (plural) that were ordered at the Court in Zaragoza, the capital of Aragon, in 1378. Thereafter, the recorder became established as an instrument for art music throughout Europe, played by court and city musicians, frequently in consort. At his death in 1410, the king of Aragon still owned “tres flautes, dues grosses e una negra petita” (three recorders, two large and one small black one); this is the first secure reference to recorders of different sizes. They were perhaps the ones bought in 1378, and in any case could have been used for three-part consort music.

Archival records for fleustes/flutes (plural) at the Court of Burgundy begin as early as 1383. In 1426 and 1443, the duke ordered sets of four; in 1454, four minstrels played recorders; and in 1468 four minstrels almost certainly played a four-part chanson on recorders.

In Brescia, Italy, in 1408, a pifaro (wind player) of the court ordered four new flauti. In France, in 1416 the queen ordered eight grans fleustes and a case for five of them. Here the adjective “large” suggests they were perhaps discants (and lower sizes?) rather than sopranos.

Bruges is the earliest documented city band to order a case of recorders (fleuten) (1481-82), and the presence of four minstrels in the band suggests that the case contained a set of four recorders. The frequent theme of “four” suggests that recorders were commonly used for the four-part polyphonic music that was already being composed in the late 14th century but more strongly developed from the 1430s.

We know from Virdung (1511) that by his time four to six recorders were generally put together in a case called a coppel: two discants, two tenors, and two basses. In four-part music, the range of the contra part determined whether to employ two discants, tenor, and bass or else discant, two tenors, and bass.

Finally, in the 16th century, the terms for the recorder became more standardized: French (flute/flute but also fleute/flute à neuf trons), Dutch (fluyt), German (Flöte), Italian (flauto), and Spanish (flauta).