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What Instrument did the *Bucinator* Play?

The answer to the question posed in the title would seem to be simple. The Roman *bucinator* played the *bucina*, an instrument traced back (like all the Roman brass instruments) to the Etruscans. Four terms were used: *tuba*, *cornu*, *lituus* and *bucina*. All of them appear in ancient Latin literature and they are even discussed by Vegetius, a military writer of the fourth century A. D. The musicians who played these instruments were called *tubicines*, *cornicines*, *liticines* and *bucinatores*. They are portrayed on Roman monuments and their names are found in inscriptions. So what is the problem? The problem is that in spite of abundant literary, epigraphical and artistic evidence, the apparent distinction between the *bucina* and the other instruments is not at all clear. This paper will examine this problem along with the opinions of modern scholars; a small selection of slides will illustrate the various brass instruments as they appear on Roman monuments; and finally a new interpretation will be suggested.

The ambiguity is clearest in Vegetius who cites *bucinatores* or their instrument in three passages, although his text does not provide a distinction between the *bucina* and other brass instruments. Most literary sources (such as poets or historians) use the terms indiscriminately and imprecisely. Representations on monuments depict only two main types of instrument: straight and curved (plus the *lituus*, a variant of the *tuba* with a curve at the end); but unfortunately we cannot be sure what the Romans called any of the instruments depicted on monuments. Inscriptions, however, do list the names of musicians identified as Tubicines (TVB), Cornicines (COR) and Bucinatores (BVC), implying three different instrumentalists, but it is possible that these designations distinguish military jobs (*munera*) rather than instruments since the instruments are not mentioned. Considering all the evidence, and there is more, we conclude that the term *bucina*, like *tuba*, was used generally (to refer to any of the brass instruments) and specifically (most often to refer to the curved variety). Ancient literature is surveyed and the scholarly works of Bate, Fleischhauer, Landels, Meucci, Speidel and Wille are discussed.