The History of the Bagpipe

From its first mention in antiquity to the present day – and its spread across the countries of the world

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> This overview is based on documented facts. Where research is divided or where a story rests on tradition, this is noted. The list of sources at the end contains clickable links.

1. From the Orient to Europe

A bagpipe consists of four parts: an airtight bag, the blowpipe, the chanter with its finger holes, and one or more drones, which hold a constant sustained note. The bag is the actual invention – pressed by the arm, it supplies an uninterrupted stream of air and so makes the continuous sound possible in the first place.

The oldest forerunners are double-reed pipes from Egypt and Mesopotamia; silver pipes dating from around 2450 BC have survived from Ur. The Greek-influenced word *askaules*, the bag piper, combines *askos*, the wineskin, and *aulos*, the reed pipe. The first clear written evidence comes from Rome: the historian Suetonius reports that Emperor Nero vowed to appear as a bagpiper at his victory games. By the 1st century AD at the latest, the principle of bag and pipe was therefore known – the drones, however, were only added in the Middle Ages.

2. The Instrument of All Europe

The bagpipe did not disappear after the fall of the Roman Empire. From the 13th century onwards it appears in great numbers in European art: in illuminated manuscripts, on churches and in paintings from Hieronymus Bosch to Pieter Bruegel. In the Canterbury Tales, Geoffrey Chaucer has the Miller lead the group of pilgrims out of town with his bagpipe.

At that time the bagpipe was not a Scottish instrument but a European one – the instrument of shepherds, minstrels and village weddings from Portugal to Russia. To this day there are dozens of different regional forms of bagpipe in Europe alone.

3. Where the Bagpipe Is at Home

The bagpipe is far more than a Scottish instrument. Almost every European country has developed its own form – with its own name, its own construction and its own music.

Country	Name of the instrument
Scotland	Great Highland Bagpipe, Border Pipes, Scottish Smallpipes
Ireland	Uilleann Pipes, Brian Boru Pipes
England	Northumbrian Smallpipes, Border Pipes
Wales	Pibgod (Pipa cŵd)
France	Cornemuse du Centre, Biniou (Brittany), Bodega (Occitania)
Spain	Gaita gallega (Galicia), Gaita asturiana, Sac de gemecs (Catalonia)
Portugal	Gaita transmontana
Italy	Zampogna (southern Italy and Sicily), Piva, Müsa

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Country	Name of the instrument
Switzerland	Sackpfyffe
Germany	Schäferpfeife, Hümmelchen, Dudey, Bock
Austria	Bock
Czech Republic	Dudy (especially Strakonice), Gajdy
Slovakia	Gajdy – UNESCO cultural heritage since 2015
Poland	Koza, Kozioł, Dudy podhalańskie
Hungary	Duda
Romania	Cimpoi
Bulgaria	Gajda and Kaba Gajda – UNESCO cultural heritage since 2025
Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, North Macedonia	Gajde, Diple
Greece	Gaida, Tsambouna, Askomandoura (Crete)
Turkey	Tulum (Black Sea coast), Gayda (Thrace)
Estonia / Latvia / Sweden	Torupill / Dūdas / Säckpipa
Russia, Ukraine, Belarus	Volynka, Koza, Duda
Georgia / Armenia / Azerbaijan	Gudastviri / Parkapzuk / Tulug
Iran	Ney-anbān
Tunisia and Libya	Mezoued
Oman	Habban
India	Mashak

The names are similar, too: the Spanish *gaita*, the Bulgarian *gajda* and the Arabic *ghaita* probably go back to the same root. And the German word “Dudelsack” came into German from the Slavic languages in the 17th century – from the Czech *dudy*.

4. The Bagpipe in Scotland

How the bagpipe came to Scotland has not been established – Roman legionaries, Norse seafarers and returning crusaders have all been suggested. As early as 1362, the royal accounts, the Exchequer Rolls of Scotland, record a payment to the King’s pipers. Among the earliest depictions are stone carvings in Rosslyn Chapel, founded in 1446 – an angel playing the bagpipe – and in Melrose Abbey. The first clear reference to the Highland bagpipe dates from 1547.

In the Highlands the bagpipe became a symbol of clan identity. Every major clan kept its own piper – a highly respected office, often held by the same family for generations, as with the MacCrimmons. The piper played for welcomes and funerals, called the warriors together and marched ahead of them into battle.

5. How the Great Highland Bagpipe Came About

Today’s pipe with its three drones grew over some two hundred years. The medieval Scottish pipe had only a single drone. Around 1500 a second tenor drone was added. When the large bass drone followed is not precisely documented – dates between 1600 and 1800 are given, most often around 1700. It gives the Great Highland Bagpipe the full, carrying sound for which it is known today.

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The classical art music of this instrument is called *Ceòl Mòr*, the great music, usually known as piobaireachd. For centuries it was not written down but passed on through canntaireachd – a sung system of syllables in which every note and every embellishment has its own syllable. Only in the 1790s did Colin Campbell of Nether Lorn record some 169 tunes in writing. His manuscripts long went unnoticed and only became properly known in the 20th century.

6. 1746: What Was Really Banned

After the Battle of Culloden in 1746, the British government passed the Act of Proscription, also known as the Disarming Act. The story that the bagpipe was banned at the time as a weapon of war persists stubbornly. Modern research sees it differently: the text of the act does not mention the bagpipe at all, no prosecutions for playing the pipes are known, and the Highland regiments in British service went on playing.

The act was repealed in 1782. The greater damage did not come from the law anyway, but from the Highland Clearances: tens of thousands were driven from their land and emigrated to Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand. The pipers went with them.

7. Around the World with the British Army

Pipers were already part of the Scottish Highland regiments in the 18th century. In 1854 their position was formally recognised: the War Office approved a pipe major and five pipers for certain regiments. What had been a clan instrument thus became part of the army of a world power – and went around the globe with it.

To India, where it is part of military bands to this day. To Pakistan, where the city of Sialkot is now one of the largest bagpipe makers in the world and supplies pipes all over the globe. To Nepal through the Gurkha regiments. To Jordan, where the British built up the Arab Legion in the 1920s and the bagpipe has been part of military tradition ever since. To Africa. And with the emigrants to Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand.

8. The Bagpipe Today

Today, bands from all over the world compete at the World Pipe Band Championships in Glasgow, for example from Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand and France. At the same time the old European traditions have returned: in Galicia and Asturias many young people learn at gaita schools, in southern Italy the zampogna is played, and in Bohemia the Bock is enjoying a revival. In Slovakia and Bulgaria the bagpipe tradition is now on the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The instrument that was long regarded as rustic and too loud is thus both today – a ceremonial instrument of Scottish character played all over the world, and a living folk instrument in dozens of European regions.

Would you like to hear the bagpipe rather than just read about it? On the website, under “Auftritte” (performances), you will find everything about weddings, celebrations and funerals. And anyone who would like to learn to play can find out under “Unterricht” (lessons) how to get started. www.dudelsack-regensburg.de

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