

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LYRE

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE LYRE AND THE HARP

The lyre seems to have been an evolution from the even more ancient harp, and what I think drove this evolution, was the desire by specifically *nomadic* cultures in the ancient Middle East, to create a harp-like instrument which unlike the larger harp, was *portable*.

The harp is an incredibly ancient instrument and the very first illustrations of the harp can be found from c.3300BCE – 3000BCE, in rock etchings found in Megiddo, in the North Western Valley of Jezreel in ancient Israel:



Further details about of this ancient etching of the first known depiction of the fully evolved triangular harp, complete with harmonic curve, can be seen in of Joachim Braun's highly informative book, available from Amazon:

Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine - Archaeological, written & Comparative Sources (Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 2002)[\]](#)

These rock etchings date from an incredibly ancient era, before the Bronze Age, and before the First Dynasty of ancient Egypt. This remote era in archaeology is known as the "Chalcolithic" period (4000 - 3200 BCE) - the "Copper Age". The triangular harp depicted in the Megiddo etchings is so fully evolved, that the history of the harp must predate even this ancient illustration by at least a few thousand years! The ultimate ancient evolution of the harp, may have been the

result of a long, progressive series of developments in refining the plucked sound made by the basic strung bow and arrow of the Stone Age...

Incredibly, this Mesolithic ancestor of both the harp & lyre, the basic musical bow, is still very much alive & well today in Africa - a continuous musical tradition, dating back at least 60,000 years or more...



According to Prof. Richard Dumbrill, in his book, "The Archaeomusicology of the Ancient Near East", the lyre and harp both likely evolved from the Mesolithic Music Bow, as he demonstrates in this illustration:

The earliest form of lyres stem directly from the primaeval arched harps that were described in the previous chapter.

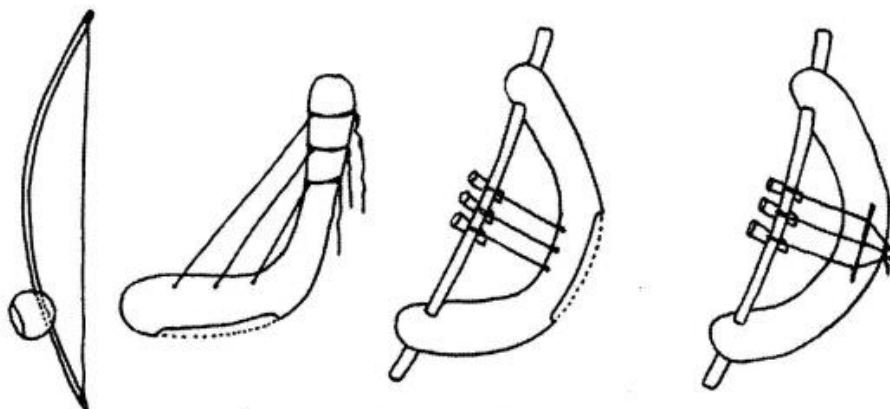


Plate 1, bow-harp, arched harp and its evolution into the arched lyre. (Reconstruction)

As can be seen in Dumbrill's diagram above, the fundamental difference between a lyre and a harp, is that in a harp, the strings enter directly into the hollow body of the instrument, whereas on a lyre, the strings pass over a bridge, which transmits the vibrations of the strings to the body of the instrument – just as on a modern guitar. For all details of Prof. Dumbrill's incredible research, including the deciphering of the 3400 year old Hurrian Hymn (text H6), please see his book, available from Amazon: *"The Archeomusicology of the Ancient Near East"*.

THE EARLIEST EVOLUTION OF THE LYRE FROM THE HARP

The very first lyres were harp-sized, and were discovered at Ur. Incredibly, they predate the building of the Pyramids in Egypt - they date back to c.2600BCE. These lyres became known as the Golden Bull Lyre of Ur and the Silver Lyre of Ur. The archaeologist Leonard Woolley led the team that discovered the instruments as part of his excavation of the Royal Cemetery of Ur from 1922 and 1934. The remains of the lyres were restored and distributed between the museums that took part in the digs. Here is a photograph which captures the moment of their discovery:



Here are some photographs of the restored lyres:



THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF A TRANSITIONAL FORM OF LYRE

By about 2000BCE, a *transitional* form of lyre seems to have evolved from these first harp-sized Temple Lyres from Ur - although still not yet portable, *they certainly appear reduced in size*. These early large, cumbersome lyres were still played *vertically*, like a harp. This early form of lyre can be seen in the Negev Rock Etchings (p.73-74, "Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine", by Joachim Braun)





In my exploration of the history of the lyre, we will see how these early, cumbersome lyres became the portable ancestor of the Biblical lyres played in the Temple of Jerusalem, the lyre played in the New Kingdom of Ancient Egypt & later to become the Kithara-style lyres of ancient Greece & Rome.

THE CANAANITE ANCESTOR OF THE LYRE OF THE ANCIENT HEBREWS?

By the time of the Lyre of the Ancient Hebrews (c. 1900 BCE) the lyre had become *portable* & unlike the harp, could be played *horizontally* - ideal for wandering groups of Semitic nomads to play whilst constantly on the move.

This could well be due to the nomadic origins of the Hebrews, as described in the Biblical text. Since the same Biblical text describes how Abraham was himself born in the city of Ur, it could even have been Abraham himself, who actually had the idea of scaling down the “Harp-Lyres” he heard at Ur, to a convenient-sized, portable lyre, which could be played on the move? A fascinating possibility!

The very first illustration of nomadic Semites playing such a lyre, is seen in the tomb of a prosperous ancient Egyptian baron named Knumhotpe - he had a forty-foot-long mural painted in his tomb at Beni Hassan, about halfway up the Nile to Nubia:



The mural clearly depicts "A group of Semitic traders, smiths, and musicians at a custom post set up on the Middle Nile by an Egyptian Baron, Knumhotpe about 1892. The leader is identified with the Hebrew name Abushei, the same as that of one of King David's two generals. The lyre being carried by one of the family group was at that time unknown in Egypt. During a two-hundred-year period, referred to by archaeologists as the Second Intermediate Period, Semitic kings ruled Egypt. In that period Egypt was thrust from the Chalcolithic (Copper-Stone) Age into the Late Bronze Age. In addition to many technological and agronomic innovations, the Semites introduced the lute, harp, tambourine, chalil (a precursor of the oboe), new forms of music and dance"

(Quoted from: http://www.hebrewhistory.info/factpapers/fp010-2_egypt.htm)

Below is an illustration of the complete mural:



"By commemorating the lucrative trade he had had with the nomadic Semites in his final resting place, Knumhotpe sought to assure an eternal traffic of tradesmen paying tribute to him in the afterworld.

The painting evidently registers an actual event which Knumhotpe felt worthy of eternal repetition...It depicts a group of thirty-seven Semites in full size in the act of paying customs duties to the nomarch's officials. A bold hieroglyphic text states that these Asiatics are supplying him with such important items as stibium, a mineral required for eye makeup acquired in Mesopotamia. Knumhotpe evidently feared that the place he would occupy in the hereafter might lack the mineral, as was the case in Egypt. The date given is the fourth year of Sinusert II's rule, or about 1892 B.C.E"

(Quoted from: http://www.hebrewhistory.info/factpapers/fp010-2_egypt.htm)

The most *fascinating* details, which are *immediately* evident in this magnificent ancient mural, is the striking similarity between the illustrations of the these ancient Semites, and the Biblical narrative of the patriarch Joseph - this group of nomadic Semites can clearly be seen, wearing their immediately distinctive "coats of many colours", so vividly mentioned in the timeless Biblical text!

The musicological significance of the *unique* appearance of this first type of portable lyre as depicted in the Beni Hasan Mural, is discussed at length by Joachim Braun:

"One of the nomads is holding a completely new instrument. Unlike the older, larger, rather cumbersome lyre, which was held vertically, this instrument was smaller (ca.50x30cm), portable, and almost symmetrical in form. It was held horizontally so that it could even be played comfortably while walking, as in the case in the representation here, whilst simultaneously allowing the musician to breathe more easily whilst singing. This particular instrument, portrayed in the hands of distinctly Semitic nomads and yet to the southwest of Canaan proper, is richly attested and doubtless represents an early example of the horizontal lyre, a logical development for musicians who, as part of a nomadic group such as this one, were constantly in motion and thus needed a more portable instrument"

(Pages 78-79, "Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine", by Joachim Braun)

It was the descendants of these first portable lyres, which eventually led to the Asymmetrical Canaanite lyre from the time of King David, the Egyptian lyre of the New Kingdom of ancient Egypt, the Biblical Kinnor (the lyre played by the Levites in the Temple of Jerusalem), and the Kithara of Classical Greece and Rome.

THE CANAANITE ASYMMETRICAL LYRE



The "Lyre of Har Megiddo" is an instrument etched onto an ivory plaque that was discovered by archaeologist Gordon Loud in the excavations of a royal palace in the ancient city of Megiddo (aka Armageddon) in Israel, dating to the 2nd Millennium BCE, circa 1200 BCE (currently on display in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem).

THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN LYRE



The portable lyre was very likely introduced to ancient Egypt sometime during the reign of the Hyksos during the Fifteenth Dynasty (1650 BCE – 1550 BCE) who were probably Canaanite in origin. The illustration above is from the 18th Dynasty (1543–1292 BC) – during the New Kingdom (16th – 11 centuries BCE)

THE BIBLICAL KINNOR



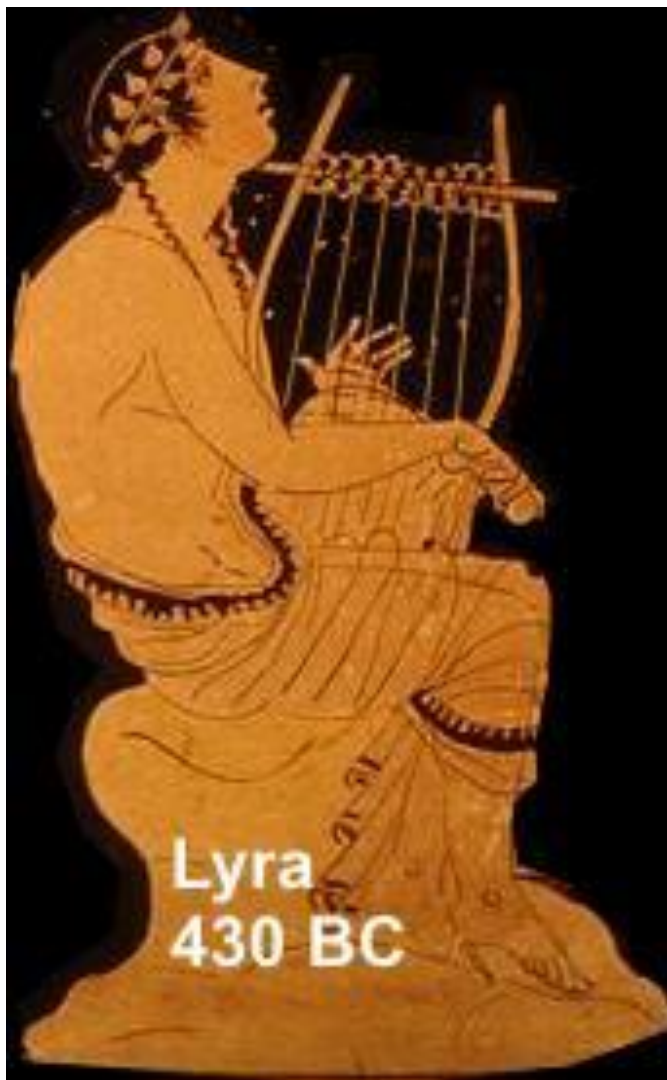
The reverse of this Kithara-style lyre, as depicted on the Simon Bar Kokhba coins seen in the illustration above, was minted at the time of the Simon Bar Kokhba Revolt against the Roman occupation of Judea in the 2nd century CE.

Notice the ridge down the back of the instrument – *exactly the same ridge can be seen down the back of the Classical Kithara of ancient Greece*, as this ancient Greek coin clearly shows:



According to the musicologist Michalis P. Georgiou, *the ridge was meant to represent the spine of a tortoise* - as was seen in the more archaic ancient Greek 'Lyra', which classically featured a resonator made of a tortoise shell:





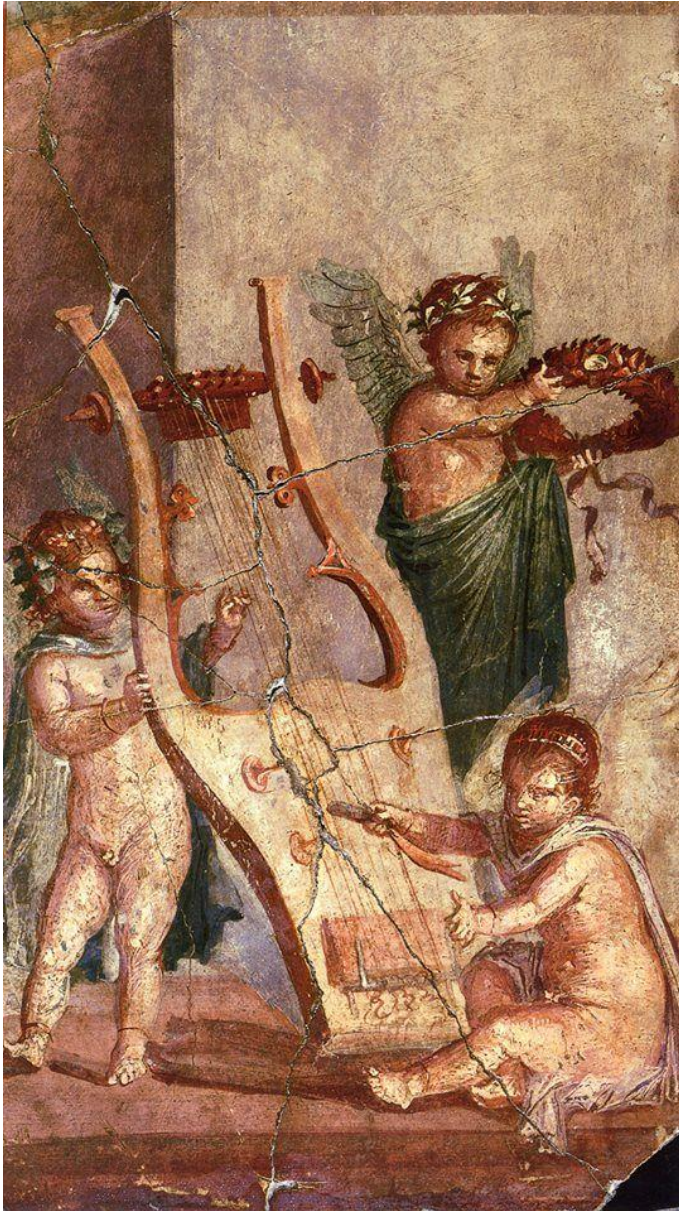
Lyra
430 BC

THE ANCIENT GREEK KITHARA



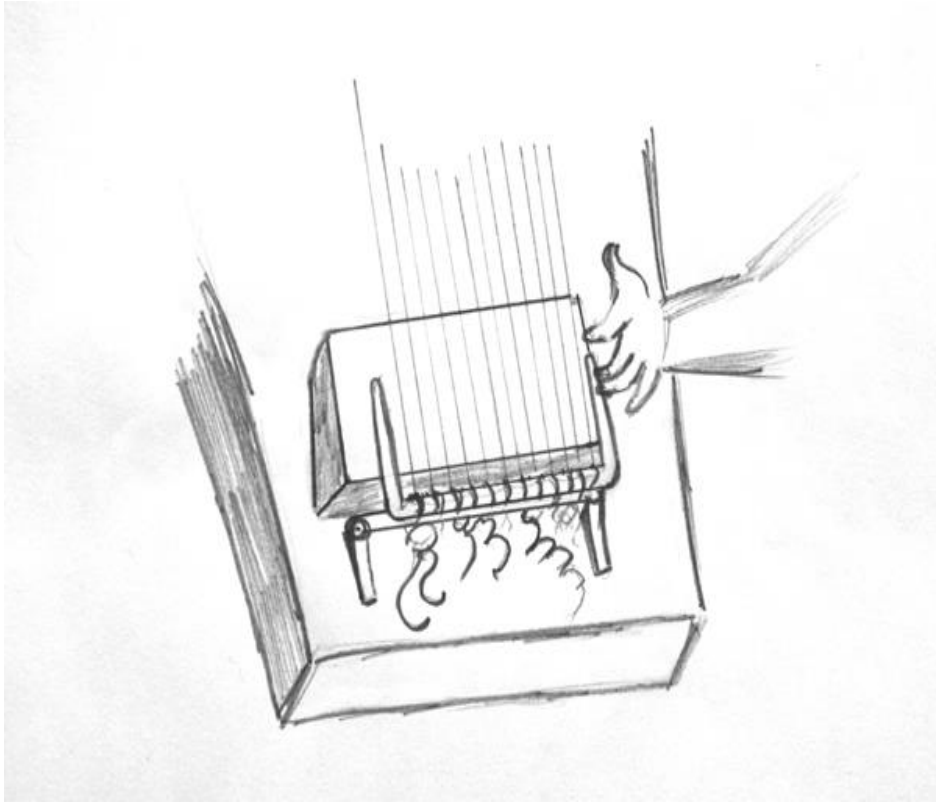
An illustration of the Classical Greek Kithara, from circa 450 BCE. Notice the “U” shaped features below the arms of the Kithara – there is research by both Pavel Kurfurst & Michalis P. Georgiou to suggest that these features were in fact either brass or iron *springs*, which allowed lateral oscillation of the arms of the Kithara, resulting in a unique vibrato effect – the structures on the top of the arms appear to be *counterweights*, whose function seems to be to slow down the oscillation of the lateral movement of the arms, so that the vibrato effect would have had the sound of a vocal vibrato – which is probably why the Kithara was so venerated in Classical Greece. If this research is correct, then the Kithara would be the first mechanical musical instrument in history!

THE ANCIENT ROMAN KITHARA



Detailed illustration of a Roman Kithara, from the ruins of Herculaneum from the 1st century CE. As this detailed painting shows, the Roman Kithara was virtually identical to the ancient Greek Kithara.

Regarding the research into the spring vibrato mechanism on the classical Kithara of ancient Greece, when one takes a closer look at this particularly detailed image of a Kithara from ancient Rome, it appears that the Cupid on the right of the painting may even be pushing what looks like the world's very first illustration of a '*whammy bar*' – the vibrato mechanism famously used on most of the classic modern electric guitars, such as the Fender Statocaster!



As Peter Pringle, an expert on recreating the musical instruments of antiquity explains:

“The really ASTONISHING thing about this wonderful fresco from Herculaneum is the obvious presence of what could only be described as a "whammy bar" on the lyre! Not only are we looking at a whammy bar, but the left hand of the child (possibly a cupid) who is playing the instrument is actually pressing down on it as he actively strums the strings with the plectrum.

The lyre has 12 strings that lie over a flat bridge, and wrap onto what appears to be a spring mechanism. The artist is showing us a good deal of detail and you can see that the whammy ensemble consists of two parts: a '] ' shaped upper bar to which the strings are attached with two slightly raised arms, and a lower part that acts as the spring. The action would be similar to two pairs of tweezers lying on a table, with their open ends joined with a pencil. Push downward on the pencil and the "tweezers" close. Release the pressure and they open up again pushing the pencil back up to its original position.

The artist, obviously a master painter, has even given us enough perspective to see the upward curve of the feet of the lower part of the spring (i.e. the tweezers) in the open position. By depressing either one of the two upper whammy arms, the pitch of the strings would sharpen, possibly by as much as a semitone. This would facilitate all sorts of interesting ornaments and effects, including vibrato.

Another interesting detail the artist has given us is the colour of the whammy device. In contrast to the rest of the instrument, it is quite evidently made of a white, shiny metal - possibly silver.

This is a fascinating discovery and I have no doubt whatsoever that what we are looking at is what I have described above. Here is my own sketch, based on the fresco, showing the mechanism. The Romans used this type of spring for all sorts of other things: box lids, tongs, hair pins, latches, locks, tweezers, forceps, medical devices, even other musical instruments, but this is the first time I have heard of its being used on a lyre”

This is of course a contentious interpretation of this particular feature of the Roman kithara as depicted in this 1st century painting, but one matter we *can* be certain of – both the music *and* the musical instruments of Classical antiquity were not as ‘primitive’ as the general views on ancient music would have us believe!