

## Research Article

### THE BACKGROUND OF THE HARP IN ANCIENT GREEK CIVILIZATION

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#### ABSTRACT

The harp is one of the oldest instruments in human history, which has a special place among the stringed instruments in ancient civilizations. The Greek civilization is one of the most brilliant parts of the world's history which examples of harp, lyre, and kithara can be found, but due to the few explorations that have been carried out and the limited number of musical works obtained, the study of Less has been done on the stringed instruments of this land, especially the harp. Therefore, in this research, based on historical sources and archaeological excavations, we will discuss the structure and performance of the harp instrument. The current research has a descriptive-analytical approach and its data has been collected through library studies. The structure of harp, lyre and kithara and how they are performed have been identified in this research and the place of these instruments in Greek civilization has been discussed. Since the evolution of this instrument did not occur in one civilization and various reasons such as cultural, political and geographical conditions have affected the changes of this instrument, it can be concluded that musical instruments may not have a single origin and are influenced by other civilizations.

**Keywords:** Harp, Ancient Greece, Lyre, Kithara.

#### INTRODUCTION

Ancient Greece refers to a civilization that belongs to a period of Greek history that started from the 6th and 7th ancient period BC and lasted until the classical era (around the 6th to 7th centuries). Immediately following this era was the beginning of the early Middle Ages and the Eastern Roman Empire. (Thomas, 1988) The ancient era is a golden era in the history of ancient Greece, which was the beginning of the cultural and commercial exchanges of this land with the Phoenicians, Syria and the Near East. The gold coinage resulting from this connection with the Lydians and the visual arts of the Greeks was influenced by the eastern arts, and these centuries have been called a revolutionary period full of changes, especially in stringed instruments. Stringed instruments were known to the people of Greece even before the ancient times, and still the construction of these instruments or the origin of their adaptation is still in an aura of ambiguity. Ancient Greek art includes 4 geometric periods (about 3200 to 1100 BC), the Archaic period (600 to 480 BC), the classical period (480 BC to 323 BC) and the Hellenistic period (323 BC to 321 BC)(Renee .m, 2016). By valuing music as a superior cultural principle, the Greeks actually caused the elevation of music. They created musical modes that became the basis of church music centuries later, and also the naming of musical notes based on the letters of the alphabet, which from then on until today are always used to name musical sounds from the first letters of the alphabet, left their lasting impact on music all over the world in all the centuries after them (Taherkhani, 2015). The harp had a special place in ancient Greece and its presence is tied to Greek myths, its creator is considered to be Hermes, and this instrument had a significant presence in all formal and informal ceremonies. Therefore, the study of its structure and the performance of this instrument together with its family (kithara and lyre) can greatly increase our understanding of the structure and performance of this instrument of civilization. Mesopotamia, Egypt, because the existence of political, cultural and

religious connections have been involved in the changes and transformations of an instrument from various aspects, including the type of instrument, the way it is tuned and its performance methods. Factors such as war, immigration and in historical times, trade has played a significant role in the interaction and tension of music and the evolution and changes of musical instruments (Binesh, 1378: Advance). On the other hand, the dispersion of instruments in different civilizations has always been one of the most important topics in history. Although there is no detailed history about these them. This research aims to show what evolutionary path the harp has taken, as the most important ancient Greek instrument, in shape, sound box and performance.

#### RESEARCH METHODS

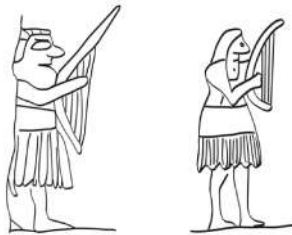
This research was carried out in a descriptive and analytical way and the library method and searching in archaeological documents and findings were used in data collection. This research is based on archaeological data. To study the works of this instrument in literary books and the remaining pottery, the structure of the harp, lyre and kithara and the way of performing of these instruments and their place in ancient Greece

#### HISTORICAL REVIEW

##### Background of harp in other civilizations

The harp is the oldest instrument of the family of stringed instruments, the first examples were bowed harps which the evidences can be found in the works related to 3300 to 3000 years BC in Tel Megiddo, a village in Israel that had a triangular shape harp (West, 1992:70). Bow harps were a modification of the same bow (war tool) and were turned into triangular harps by the Sumerians. In bow harps, the rod is located along the axis of the sound box, while in triangular harps, the rod is perpendicular to the axis. In the number of strings, vertical triangular harps generally have 15 to 25 strings, while the number of strings on the bow is less. There are not many examples of horizontal triangular harps, but in the Assyrian period, there is an example that

has 9 strings (Lawergren, 1987:51). Almost at the same time as vertical harps, which were very important in ancient cultures, horizontal harps were also engraved on ancient works. In 1900 BC, the triangular shape of the harp and a millennium before that the arched models (figure 1) was used by the Sumerians (figures 2 to 3) also observed in Egypt in 1400 BC (Lawergren, 1996:447).



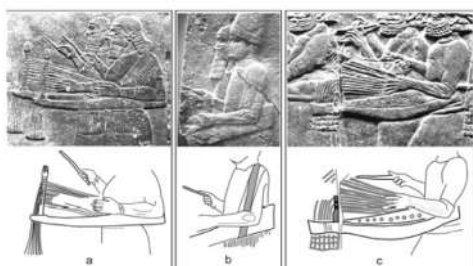
2600 BC figure 1 Sumerian bow-vertical harp Bo Lawergren, p. 450



1900 BC Figure 2 Sumerians vertical triangular harp, Bo Lawergren

1900 BC Figure 3 Sumerians horizontal triangular harp, Bo Lawergren

In the years of 630 to 900 BC, horizontal triangular harps called change were very common among the Assyrians. These harps have nine strings, which are held by the left hand and plucked by the right hand with a long plectrum (Lawergren, 1996:447) (figure 4). The end part of the instrument is under the musician's armpit. The thickness of the resonant box increases from the beginning to the end of the instrument and the beginning of the box is heavier than the end. The strings are drawn from one place on the resonant box in the primary column of the instrument, which is the same as the rod (Farahani, 2017).



7th century BC Figure 4 Assyrian relief of Banipal Nineveh Lawergren

These horizontal harps consist of two parts; A resonating box and a yoke that are connected at the head of the resonating box, curved upwards in one of the models and curved downwards in the other model, and the strings are tied around it. The resonating box is placed under the musician's armpit, and the yoke is facing the musician's face. Both musicians of this instrument are playing while moving, and one of the musicians has an instrument similar to a plectrum in his right hand (Farahani, 2017).

### Harp in ancient Egypt

Native harps in Egypt consisted of small harps with 3 to 4 strings and big harps with 8 to 20 strings, which were played in a standing position (Mashhoun, 2013: 20) (figure 5). Another type of harp was also common, unlike other harps, had the feature of being completely carried and played on one of the shoulders. The number of its strings was three or four (Khaleqi, 1381:165). Also, the first example of these portable harps reached Egypt, which, unlike its previous examples, was portable and small, and could be played horizontally and this ability makes it possible to play while moving (figure 6).



1892 BC figure 5 Bani Hasan temple Late Bronze Age Samuel Korinsky



figure 6 Angled harp Egypt Bleiberg, 2005

### Harp in Greece

Music has played an important role in the life of the Greek people and has always been used in the worship of Greek gods and goddesses, funeral and wedding ceremonies, Greek home gatherings (symposium) and religious festivals such as Panasenia and Dionysia, which were accompanied by sacrifices. Also, singing and playing competitions were recognized with the name of singing for the kithara, in which musicians and artists competed. In the middle of the 6th century BC, Pythian competitions were held in Greece, in which athletes competed, while they were accompanied by flute players and percussion instruments, as well as in songs that were sung during the capture. Prizes were written, the instrument of the kithara had a special place. In the Bronze and Iron Age and before 600 BC, there are not many documents about the presence of the harp in Greece. According to the writings of Socrates, there were recommendations about instruments with multiple strings, which prohibited the Greeks from using these instruments due to the combination of musical modes (lawergren, 2016). Until the middle of the 5th century, the harp instrument was visible only in literary works with the name Pecktis and in pottery works, which according to the experts, were string instruments. It was multi-stringed, capable of playing a melody in octave intervals, and entered Greece from Lydia. There are only small sculptures from the Cycladic period (2300-2800 BC) of players with triangular harps (Robertson and Stevens, 1369) (figure 7).



2700 BC Figure 7 Harpist Maas-Snyder: 29-32

At the same time as Elam and the mentioned civilizations, it seems that only the kithara and lyre were used in Greece. The lyre is the evolved form of the heavy and ancient harps. Some researchers believe that the motivation for making the lyre, especially among the desert tribes of the Middle East region, was to build a harp-like structure that could be carried (figure 8 and 9). The lyre is an instrument that is also used in Persian under the names of Shaliaq or Roman harp. In astronomy, a constellation similar to this instrument is known as "Lyra" or "Sheliaq". This instrument is also family with kithara, which had a more complex structure and was played by professional musicians. The Greeks played lyre with their fingers or with a plectrum, and they also used it for playing the introduction and filling the empty spaces without singing. However, it is still not known whether this instrument played the role of accompaniment at that time or whether it remains completely silent during recitative singing (West, 1992:50).



Figure 9, Lear, Bacarzos, 2011

480 BC Figure 8 Cup of Doris , Berlin Museum, photographer: Daniel, Perseus Online Library

Lyre instruments were divided into two groups: box lyres or kitharas in 4 forms and bowed lyres in 3 forms:

#### Box lyre or kithara

Kitharas or box lyres in 4 shapes: 1- circular sound box called phorminx, 2- square shaped which was a more common model compared to other types (concert model) 3- square or circular with horn shaped arms which are in the region of Thrace has been used (West, 1992: 50). Kithara was a special instrument for sacred ceremonies such as sacrifice, poetry reading and praise of the gods (Mathiesen, 1999: 258). There was no name of this instrument until the fifth century BC, until it was mentioned in Homer's writings under the name of phorminx. Most of the existing images of this instrument are depicted on black earthenware, including amphora, which is used for storing drinks, and hydria, which is a container for storing water and used in wedding ceremonies (Maas and Snyder, 1994:55) (figure 10).

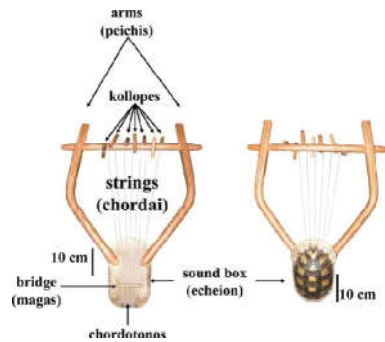


figure 10 Apollo and Artemis Mast and Snyder p. 71

Kithara is generally made of wood and was very expensive, it was for professional musicians and official and public gatherings. In this instrument, the arms of the instrument became longer over time to better transfer the vibrations of the string to the sound box. There are holes on the sound box that are built to have better resonance (Mathiesen, 1999: 258). Most of the paintings on vases depict the kithara with seven strings, but some professional kithara players played instruments with more than seven strings, and some believe that this type of kithara belonged to the Romans. This instrument was played with a plectrum and with the right hand, while the fingers of the left hand were used to muffle the sound of the strings. Until the middle of the 8th century BC, there are not many traces of the kithara (West, 1992:53- 56).

#### Bowed lyres

Bowed lyres were divided into 3 forms: lyre, Tortoise lyre or chelys and barbiton. Lyres were used in private celebrations and by amateur musicians and were used in youth training classes. The Greeks took the lyre from the Egyptians and the Phoenicians. The oldest form of this Greek instrument found on the vases belonging to the tombs of Depolo, which is small in size and round, and also has four parallel strings. A small bronze statue from Heraklion from the end of the 8th century BC shows a musician with the same instrument (Braun, 2002, p78-79). The lyre is the most common instrument in all historical periods of Greece. And at the end of the 7th century, the harp instrument was used. The lyre has a sounding box (something that is not present in the harp), two arms next to the sounding box, which are connected by a wooden rod. A vault and strings parallel to the top plate of the resonance box attached to the upper wooden bar. Today, this instrument is also called lyre-harp or lyra. In ancient Greece, chelys or turtle lyre was more common than lyra. Tortoise lyre (chelys) was first seen on water jugs in the 8th century BC. Because they used turtles in their structure, the name Chelys, which means turtle in Greek, was given. Although the names of lyre and chelys have been used interchangeably many times during the history of Greece, this instrument is one of the most important instruments in the history of Greece, and its birthplace is attributed to mythology. According to Homer, in ancient Greece, they believed that the harp was invented by Hermes from the bowels of the cow while he was in the womb and handed over to his brother Apollon. Hence, Apollon played the harp at the divine banquets while the Muses sang along with him. They read (Hesiod, 1914:45). According to many graphic and linguistic works and available documents, Chelys played an important role in the upbringing and education of children in this period. It has also been used in ceremonies such as mourning, weddings, komoi (men's dance) (Hesiod, 4.41-54). This instrument is made of turtle and cow leather and is connected to the sound box with two wooden arms called perchis. (Bakarezos *et al.*, 2012) (figure 11).



2012 Figure11 lyre Bakarezos

The barbiton has a structure similar to the lyre, but the instrument arms are longer. It generally has 7 strings. The sound box in this instrument is larger than that of the kithara and the resonance of the sound is better. It was used in drinking ceremonies and private ceremonies until the beginning of the 5th century BC and disappeared from Greece in 400 BC, but it can be seen in Roman art (West, 1992: 58-59). In all forms of the lyre instruments, it was possible for musicians to play them while dancing, sitting, standing, and walking (sacrifice ceremonies). His left hand comes to the strings from one side and his right hand from the other. Barbiton and lyra were far from the musician and they held the instrument using a strap or chain that was wrapped around his left wrist, and the other side of this chain was connected to the lyre's arm. Each one's left fingers would squeeze one of the strings and hit the strings with the plectrum of the right hand. The plectrum is connected to the sound box by a strap (Landels, 2002:90).

## Harp

Since the fifth century BC, two types of harps have been visible in pottery; The first type had a flat base, which was actually considered a sound box and was placed on the musician's thigh. There was a bent and vertical arm in which the strings were connected to the base in a bent or vertical way. The number of strings were 16 to 22, so it was called polychordin or multi-strings. There were small circles on the curved side that were used for sewing strings. At the end of the 4th century, an ornamental and carved type was seen in southern Italy, which is depicted in white color on pottery (figure12). In this type of harp, there is a support at the end of the bent arm and a sound box made in the shape of a bird (Mathiesem, 1999). This harp, which is similar to Iranian angular harps, was used in Greece as a result of cultural exchanges. (Farahani,2019) It seems that the influence of Iranians in Greek instruments is more than the influence of Iran from Greece (Rahgani,1377: 66)



5th century BC figure12 harp Landels2002

The second type of harp had 3 sides and appeared in the form of a right triangle (figures 13 and 14). There was a sloping side and shorter strings were further away from the player. Like the first type, the instrument was placed on the musician's thigh. The name Trigon, which means triangle, was given to this type of harp. The name Syrnix is also seen in some documents, which probably means a horizontal angled harp whose strings are connected to the sound box

at an angle and was used in the Near East, but there is a trace of this type of harp in Greece. In the fifth century, most of the harp players were female and had a rank (Landels, 2002: 73-76)

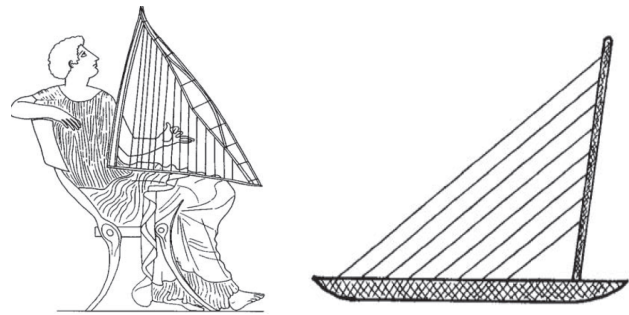


figure 11 Triangular harp Landels 2002. figure13. Angled harp Landels, 2002

## CONCLUSION

Music has a high place in all ritual and non-ritual ceremonies in the ancient Greek civilization and the harp along with the lyre and the kithara are known as the most common stringed instruments in ancient times until the end of Hellenism. But contrary to imagination, there was no example of a harp instrument until the middle of the fifth century and it was found only in literary works and pottery found in this civilization, and the lyre instrument was the most common instrument in all historical periods of Greece, which is one of the cultural exchanges between The Greeks, Egyptians, and Phoenicians entered this land. Playing this instrument is done by striking with a finger or using a plectrum. It has 7 strings. Boxed lyres or kitharas were another type of regular lyres that had a more complex structure and were for professional musicians. Kitharas were generally made of wood and were for professional musicians and official and public gatherings. At the end of the fifth century, angular harps of Iranian and triangular harps were used, although triangular harps were visible only in literary works and pottery in these centuries. Contrary to imagination, the harp did not have a prominent presence in the early days of this civilization, and the lyre and the kithara were more important, while the harp had a special place in the lands of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Iran during these centuries. It seems that the influence of the Greeks from Iran on the structure of the harp was far greater than their influence on the harp in ancient Iran.

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