



---

On the Shape of the Ancient Greek Lyre

Author(s): Martha Maas

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The Galpin Society Journal*, Vol. 27 (May, 1974), pp. 113-117

Published by: [Galpin Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/841757>

Accessed: 11/10/2012 04:32

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Galpin Society* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Galpin Society Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## On the Shape of the Ancient Greek Lyre

FOR many centuries the lyre of the ancient Greeks has been represented and thought of as an instrument with arms that extend straight upward in the same plane as its flat belly, and for very good reason, since nearly all of the hundreds of existing vase-paintings from antiquity show a direct front or back view that gives no hint of the shape as seen from the side. When confronted with one of the rare efforts on the part of Athenian vase painters to show that the arms of the lyre curve forward as well as to the sides, writers have been hesitant to believe their eyes; the editor of one of the volumes of the *Corpus vasorum antiquorum*, for example, remarks of one such painting that the painter has made an error in perspective.

In their article on the Greek lute (reviewed *GSJ XXI*), R. A. Higgins and R. P. Winnington-Ingram have called attention to a number of representations of the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. showing 'rectangular kitharas' which, by making both arms curve slightly in the same direction, indicate 'that the front of the instrument is not in one plane, but curves over at the top in such a way that a plumb-line from the yoke would fall well away from, and forward of, the base'.<sup>1</sup> But, perhaps for lack of corroborating examples, the authors decline to find the same phenomenon in two paintings from the end of the 5th century by the Meidias Painter, who captures the same effect by showing the outer arm curved and the one nearest the player straight.<sup>2</sup>

There are now sufficient examples at hand to make it clear that this forward curve is present not only in the 4th-century 'rectangular kithara', but also in the classical *lyra* and probably in the barbiton and 'cradle' kithara. The earliest of these examples is a painting by the Timocrates Painter on a *lekkythos* (oil vase) of c. 475-450 B.C. (Brussels, Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, A1020) which shows a *side view* of a *lyra*, a problem of perspective as difficult as that of the Renaissance lute, and a sight so rare that the instrument depicted was described in a recent publication as a 'harp in the form of a boat'.<sup>3</sup>

The painting (Pl. V a) shows two women, probably meant to represent Muses, with musical instruments. The one on the left plays the

*auloi*, the double reed-pipes, while the woman on the right carries a *lyra* but does not play it. In her right hand, at her side, she holds the *plektron*, with its cord dangling through her fingers; in her left hand she holds the *lyra* by reaching through from the back and grasping the strings in her curled fingers. The instrument is held at such an angle that while the front with its bridge and lower string fastener is visible, the gnarled bumps of the tortoise-shell back can also be seen in profile. Though only the arm of the instrument that is furthest from the player is visible, and the yoke or crossbar cannot be seen, the arm that does show is provided with the common accoutrements of the lyre: the sling for the player's left wrist (in red), and the usual set of loose-hanging strands (whose purpose has not been determined—extra strings, or perhaps merely decoration).

The most interesting feature of this unusual painting is the view it gives us of the way in which the arms bend forward from the body of the instrument. The front of the body appears to be quite flat; but the visible arm does not continue upward in this same plane: the painter has managed to suggest that it curves out to the side (in the manner familiar from front views) and he has shown that it curves forward in such a way that the strings stand well away from the front of the sound-box. Part of the value of this painting lies in the fact that the strings are still visible—and they run at an oblique angle to the front of the sound-box, an angle that makes the player reach farther from the back of the instrument to touch the strings with his left-hand fingers than one might have supposed.<sup>4</sup>

One other side view of an instrument of the lyre family has come to light, a painting in some ways as remarkable as the first, though less detailed and less well preserved. This is Brussels A 309I, a *stamnos* (wine-storage jar) by the Kleophon Painter made near the end of the 5th century, which on one side shows three young men wearing wreaths and apparently on their way to a drinking party; the young man in the middle carries the long-armed lyre generally agreed to be the barbiton (Pl. V b).

The body of the instrument can scarcely be made out—it was obscured in part by the player's arm and mantle (he does not seem to have held it in playing position) when the painting was complete, and it has now disappeared because the vase was broken at this point. But the player appears to hold it almost at a right angle to his own body, which faces us, and the painter therefore depicts the arms of the instrument as curving, not away from one another but in the same direction, and quite close together. The result is startling enough that we might think him to be carrying the unassembled pieces of a

barbiton, were it not that the typical crossbar structure at the top is obviously complete and in place, joining the two arms. There is little doubt that the painter is trying to indicate the other aspect of the curvature, and that the arms of the barbiton bend not only to the sides but also to the front—in two ways at once, like the horns of such an animal as the gazelle from which they may originally have been made.

A vase of somewhat earlier date than the preceding, a *pyxis* (cosmetic container) of c. 430 B.C., Athens Nat. Mus. 1241, offers two more examples of instruments with arms painted curving in the same direction: one is an ordinary *lyra*, and one the rather rare instrument associated with women and particularly the Muses, the 'cradle' kithara. In this scene of Apollo and the Muses, one of the lyre-playing Muses is seated on a chair, the other upon the rocks that symbolize Mount Helicon. The latter is tuning a *lyra* which is shown to us almost in full front view; but by showing both arms curved to the right, and by making the outer arm longer and more curved, the painter manages to suggest that the front of the body is turned somewhat to the left.<sup>5</sup>

The 'cradle' kithara held by the other Muse is very sketchily outlined, recognizable only by the characteristic shape of the arms and the rounded base (Pl. V c). Now the arms of a 'cradle' kithara do not 'curve' at all, as can be seen from any front view.<sup>6</sup> But this painting makes clear a detail that we otherwise might never have suspected: that the arms do *lean* forward. The painter has simply made both arms lean to the left; and this, together with the foreshortened shape of the body, gives the impression of a three-quarter view in which the instrument is turned away from the viewer towards the player. The painter made this unusual attempt with only a few strokes and, perhaps wisely, left it at that.

From at least the middle of the 5th century, painters seem to have struggled with the problem of depicting the true shape of the lyre. Sometimes the outer arm is made thicker than the one next to the player; sometimes, as on the large white *kylix* (wine cup) dated c. 460–450 B.C. at the Berlin *Antiquarium*, F. 4059, it is made longer, so that the crossbar must be shown slanting up to it.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes the outer arm is more curved than the other, and the method finally adopted at the end of the century by the Meidias Painter and others of approximately the same date is the one in which the outer arm is curved and the arm next to the player is nearly straight.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Florence 81947 the Meidias Painter also increases the thickness, especially of the outer arm, just around the midpoint, thus increasing the effect of curve for both arms.

A slightly different but equally successful method is that of the Nikias Painter on the fragment of a bell *krater* (wine-mixing bowl) from Naucratis now in the Fitzwilliam Museum (Pl. V *d*). The lyre held by a reclining banqueter in this scene shows each arm curving out to the side as it would in a front view; but the inner arm, near the top, curves back again in the other direction until, above the crossbar, it is nearly parallel with the outer arm, which continues in the same arc from bottom to top.

That it is the intention of the Nikias Painter, the Meidias Painter, and their contemporaries to indicate that these instruments have a forward curvature can scarcely be doubted in view of other, and in some cases earlier, examples in which both arms bend in the same direction, and particularly in the light of the Brussels A1020 side view of the *lyra* from the second quarter of the 5th century.

Higgins and Winnington-Ingram suggest that this frontal curvature makes unnecessary a bridge over which the strings will pass between tailpiece and crossbar, since the function of the bridge is 'to keep the strings from contact with the soundbox'.<sup>9</sup> Whatever the purpose of the bridge, it is there—clearly visible on the lyres mentioned above wherever there is any body detail present (Brussels A 1020, Athens 1241, New York 37.11.23, Florence 81947, and Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Mus. 99).

These authors also speculate that the curve of the arms to the side was sacrificed, in order that the forward curve might be introduced, in the invention of the 'rectangular kithara' (perhaps of Italian origin, and possibly a forerunner of one type of Roman kithara) which appears in the 4th century. But the examples discussed here show that both curves can exist simultaneously, and that the forward curvature was by no means a 4th-century innovation.

There is at this time no evidence to indicate that this frontal curvature was a part of the design of the traditional kithara, the large, ornate instrument of Apollo and the kitharodes. But all the other principal members of the lyre family seem to have shared this feature, a significant detail in the construction of these instruments which we must take into account if we are to increase our knowledge of the manner in which the instruments were played.<sup>11</sup>

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The photographs in the illustration for this article are used by permission of the Compagnie Belge d'Éditions S.P.R.L. (Pl. V *a*) and the Union Académique Internationale (Pl. V *b*, *c*, and *d*).

## NOTES

1 R. A. Higgins and R. P. Winnington-Ingram, 'Lute-Players in Greek Art', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* LXXXV (1965), 69. Items cited include the Mantinea relief (Athens National Museum 215-217; Pl. XVII 4 in the article cited above) and three Italian vases of the late 4th or early 3rd century (British Museum F 309, F 399, and Naples Museo Nazionale 80084). The Naples vase may be seen in Max Wegner, *Griechenland*, Vol. II 4 of *Musikgeschichte in Bildern* (Leipzig, 1961—), plate 70. A further example, called to my attention by Prof. D. A. Amyx of The University of California at Berkeley, is San Simeon, Hearst Mon., Inv. 5609, an Apulian *pelike* of c. 350-325 B.C., which according to A. D. Trendall may be by the Varese Painter.

2 Florence, Regio Mus. Arch. 81947, in *Corpus vasorum antiquorum* (CVA) Italy XIII (Florence II), plates 60 no. 2, 64, and 65; New York Met. Mus. 37.11.23, in *American Journal of Archaeology* XLIII (1939), 2-4.

3 Roger Bragard and Ferdinand de Hen, *Musical Instruments in Art and History* (New York, 1968), Pl. I-7.

4 This aspect is confirmed by a funerary sculpture of c. 350 B.C. (Athens, Nat. Mus. 774), a lyre-playing harpy whose left hand, in playing position, though it has lost its fingers, juts out well beyond the front of the soundbox. The fingers would have extended further still, showing that the player had to reach a considerable distance to touch the strings, and that the arms of the lyre, for which only the sockets remain, must therefore have curved forward in this example also.

5 CVA Greece II (Athens II), Pl. 77, no. 3. On another *pyxis* from the late 5th century by the Painter of the Berlin Dinos (Scheurleer Coll. Inv. 623), a woman is shown holding out a lyre with arms that both curve to the left, but the body is awkwardly done and the arms are of the same length and amount of curvature (the strings curve too!) so that the illusion does not work: CVA Netherlands II (The Hague II), Pl. 82 no. 6.

6 For example, Max Wegner, *Das Musikleben der Griechen*, Berlin, 1949), Pl. 16.

7 CVA Deutschland XXII (Berlin III), Pl. 1036 no. 2. In this painting also the strings curve, though they remain neatly equidistant.

8 A good example of this, in addition to the Meidias-Painter vases (note 2), is a bell *krater* at Paris by the Pothos Painter, Louvre G 516, on which the lyre borne by Apollo as he prepares for the contest with Marsyas, though slightly obscured by the box carried by one of the Muses, is clearly shown in this way. H. R. Immerwahr, 'Book Rolls on Attic Vases', *Studies in Honor of B. L. Ullman*, I (Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Vol. XCIII, 1964), pp. 17-48, fig. 11; CVA France VIII (Louvre V), plates 4, 5.

9 Higgins and Winnington-Ingram, p. 69 and note 51.

10 See note 1.

11 The material in this article is part of a research project made possible by grants from The American Council of Learned Societies and from The Ohio State University Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.



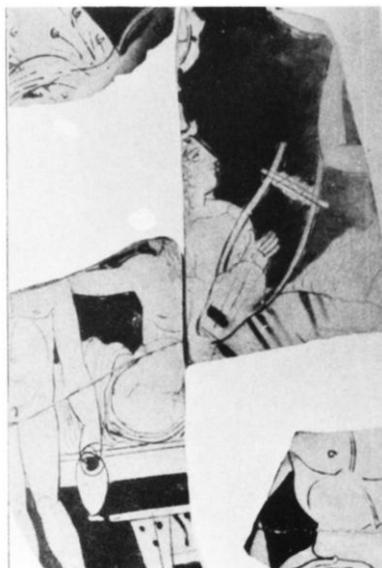
(a) *Brussels M.R.A.H.*  
A1020



(b) *Brussels M.R.A.H.*  
A3091



(c) *Athens Nat. Mus.*  
1241



(d) *Cambridge, Fitzwilliam*  
*Mus. 99 (160, 147, 161)*