

# MONUMENTA AEGYPTIACA XII

Série IMAGO N° 3

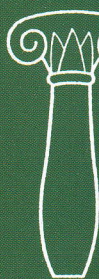
Thèbes aux 101 portes  
Mélanges à la mémoire de Roland Tefnin  
Édités par Eugène Warmenbol & Valérie Angenot



ASSOCIATION ÉGYPTOLOGIQUE REINE ÉLISABETH

BREPOLS

2010





## The Noble Harp of Amun

*Lise MANNICHE*<sup>1</sup>

For centuries past it has been the custom to single out not only great composers and musicians, but also certain makers of instruments whose skill enables musicians to perform on instruments of the highest quality. Stradivarius and Steinway are two names that first spring to mind. A number of famous organ builders could also be mentioned. But these are concepts belonging to western tradition of the past few hundred years. If we move further back in time, names of composers and performers may well have survived, but the instrument makers remain anonymous. One assumes that perhaps musicians made their own instruments.

As far as ancient Egypt is concerned, the sources are silent as to instrument makers. So it is with the composers, but we do have a fair number of names of musicians, although the music they played remains shrouded in darkness. Instruments survive, combinations of instruments are recorded, and we can trace the circumstances in which music was played, and with some imagination and comparisons with modern relatives of the ancient instruments we may obtain a general idea of the musical landscape of 3000 or 4000 years ago along the banks of the Nile. But it is difficult to see how it can ever become more than a sketchy picture.

Amongst the traditional representations of musical activities, such as those depicted in quantity in the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty tombs in the Theban necropolis, some are distinguished because of their artistic quality (as, e.g. the famous trio in the tomb of Nakht; the two dramatic solo harpists in the tomb of Ramesses III; or the blind harpist in the tomb of Inherkhau at Deir el-Medina; and numerous others less well known to the general public). Others have achieved fame because of the first appearance of an instrument on Egyptian soil (e.g., the lyre in the Middle Kingdom tomb at Beni Hasan); or by being the first musical scene from a Theban private tomb recorded in modern times: TT 65 (recorded by Denon of the Napoleonic expedition). Virtually all scenes depicting musical topics include a representation of musicians playing their instruments. But on a few occasions we have an instrument on its own, displayed at rest among other items as a very special gift to a deity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Carsten Niebuhr Institute, University of Copenhagen.

### The instrument

Among the musical instruments in ancient Egypt there can be no doubt that the harp was of prime importance. Known in Egypt since the 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty, the shovel-shaped harp<sup>2</sup> became an essential member of the ensembles of music in the Old Kingdom along with two wind instruments: *nây* (end-blown flute) and *zummâra* (double clarinet). The situation appeared to change little in the Middle Kingdom, whereas in the New Kingdom new shapes and sound options developed. Subsequent to the shovel-shaped harps we find the larger boat-shaped harp, a portable version of the same, an angular harp, as well as the more compact ladle-shaped harp, all of these appearing in similar contexts throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty, though not necessarily being played together.

It is the ladle-shaped harp which is of interest here. It is an instrument usually, though not exclusively, played by a man, and in a number of instances by a man who is distinguished as being deprived of his eyesight. By the time we get to the Amarna Period, this is the instrument which, in a slightly modified form, is used in the temples of the Aten, as opposed to the harps used in the palace, which are exclusively boat-shaped or angular. When the musicians in the Ramessid Period appear on the stage, it is mostly in a religious context, and they use an instrument which appears to be related to the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty ladle-shaped harp, rather than the boat-shaped harp. These come in various shapes and sizes, by the present writer loosely called 'arched harps'.<sup>3</sup>

The ladle-shaped harp has the unusual characteristic of being decorated with a head at the tip of the neck of the instrument: a royal head or a female head, sometimes specified as Maat, or the head of a falcon - a detail which gives the opportunity of conveying a special message, a signature, to use a modern term.<sup>4</sup> No parts of ladle-shaped harps seem to have survived, hence it is not possible to ascertain details of the construction of the soundbox. Based on the conventions of Egyptian representation and the shape and nature of harps of different types, it is likely to have been hemispherical, although in theory it may have been wedge-shaped.

Although the ladle-shaped harp appears next to instruments used in a secular context, its subsequent history suggests that it was special, set apart from the others, and played by men of a certain standing, sometimes blind.<sup>5</sup> This is the type of harp of which a present was made to the Theban god, Amun-Ra, in the reign of Tuthmosis IV.

2 I am indebted to J. R. Harris for reading the text and suggesting sundry improvements. The terminology used here is basically an English translation of the one developed by HICKMANN 1954, p. 309-68.

3 MANNICHE 1975, p. 50-53.

4 For a discussion of the falcon as 'the god of harpists' see SCHOTT 1935-38, p. 457-4.

5 MANNICHE 1991, chapter 7; MANNICHE 1978, p. 13-21.



### The noble harp of Tuthmosis IV

The splendid portico of Tuthmosis IV,<sup>6</sup> originally standing in front of the 4<sup>th</sup> pylon at Karnak, was dismantled by Amenophis III and used as fill in the 3<sup>rd</sup> pylon. It thus stood in place for a few years of the reign of Tuthmosis IV and some decades (one would hope) into the reign of his successor. After extraction some 50 years ago the blocks were for many years stored in front of the temple, in what later became the new parking space. Over the past years the monument has been rebuilt in the Open Air Museum inside the temenos wall. The scene in question, in delicate low relief with traces of colour, sits on the long, eastern wall, almost in the middle of the present arrangement of the blocks. The harp, facing left, rests on a sledge-shaped stand, supported on the back(?) of a kneeling figure (fig. 1). Four painted, red strings are visible, but, judging from another longer string



Fig. 1 : The harp on the monument of Tuthmosis IV. Photo LM.

<sup>6</sup> GRIMAL & Larché 1993, p.vii-x; LETELLIER 1979, p. 51-71.



visible to the left, the harp may have had ten strings all together. The neck has the decoration of a head with the so-called Nubian wig, fillet and uraeus. The accompanying text conveniently gives the name of the harp as *bnt*,<sup>7</sup> preceded by the words *ḏm ʿ3t ʿš3t* 'electrum, numerous (semi-precious) stones' which may have been considered as separate items, unrelated to the harp. Yet texts of the king's predecessors refer to instruments being incrustated with such embellishments: king Ahmose mentions consecrating 'a harp of ebony with gold and silver' (*Urk.* IV 23,7), while Tuthmosis III elaborates in his description of 'a noble (*špst*) harp, with work in silver, gold, lapis lazuli, turquoise and all precious stones...' (*Urk.* IV 174,13). No remains of such costly musical instruments of inlaid ebony have ever been found in Egypt, and, as in many instances, it may be a figure of speech which does not necessarily correspond to reality. Next to the harp is a low table possibly supporting sistra (partly destroyed, see below). The context reveals that the harp is one among a quantity of costly objects being presented to the god.

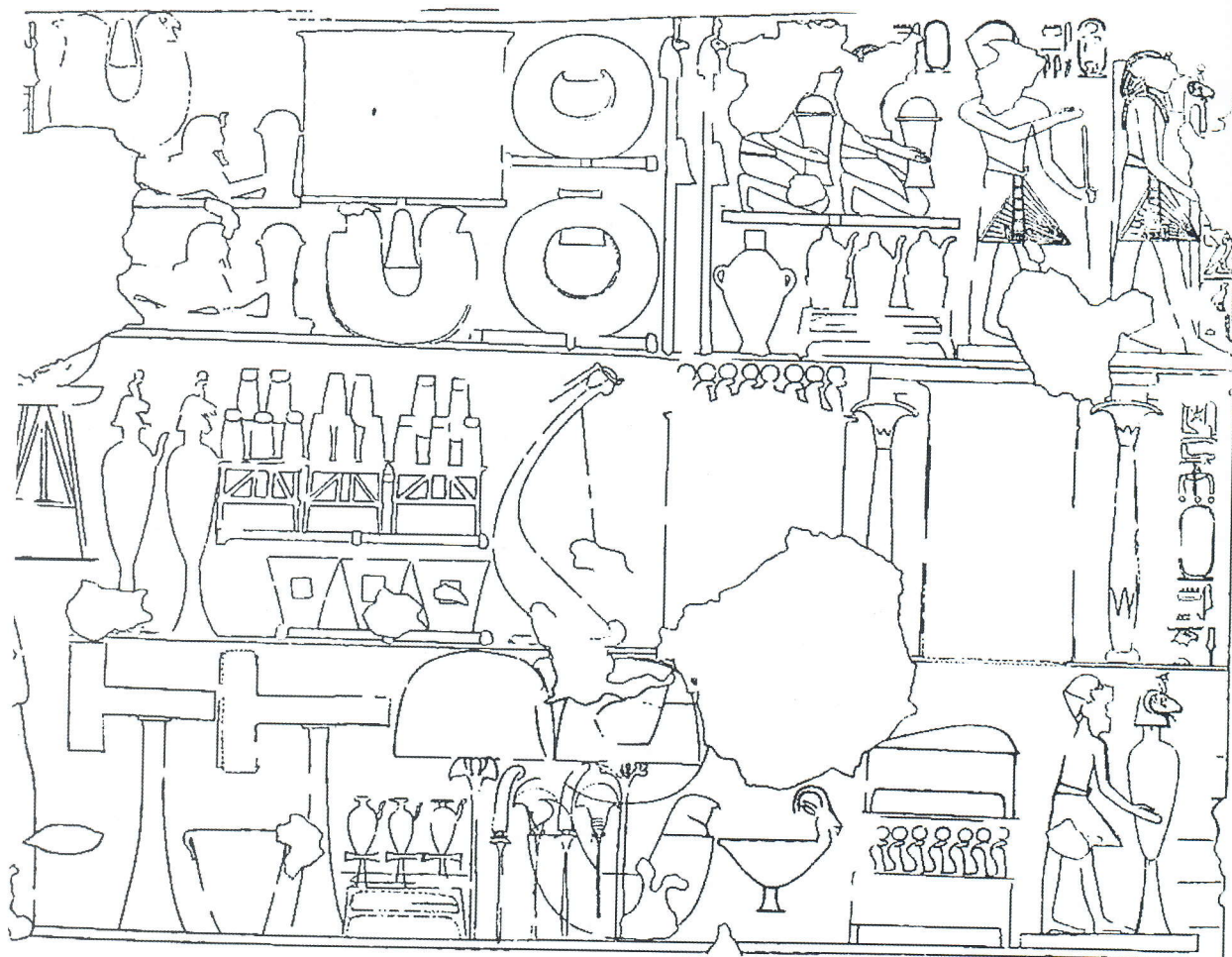


Fig. 2 : The harp as represented in TT 75. (from DAVIES 1923, pl. XII).

<sup>7</sup> A generic name for an arched harp, known since the Old Kingdom, cf. HICKMANN 1954.



It is a rare coincidence that the very same harp was depicted by one of the king's officials in his tomb in a similar situation, i.e. among offerings to the god.<sup>8</sup> The harp is virtually identical, but rendered with fewer surviving details (fig. 2) for the reason that this part of the decoration was only sketched. A comparison between the display of gifts in TT 75 and the building of Tuthmosis IV reveals that the majority of the objects are identical, including the model of a golden porch of the king,<sup>9</sup> all items which would delight the god during the cult ritual and processions. Sistra and menat are mentioned in the tomb, but not depicted, whereas the sistra appear to be included in the decoration of the temple, just to the right of the harp. The texts in the tomb indicate that the objects are royal gifts whose manufacture had been supervised by the tomb-owner, Amenhotpe-sise, second prophet of Amun.

### Other harps offered to Amun-Ra

In the temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu a similar harp is displayed on the north wall of the treasury along with a few other items, including golden vessels, a figure of the king censuring and likewise a model of a building,<sup>10</sup> all of it being presented to Amun-Ra and Mut in the hope that it may be exchanged for numerous *sed*-festivals for the king on the throne of Horus (Pl. 27). The harp has nine pegs and is decorated with a royal head wearing the *nemes*-headcloth. The sound box of the instrument is green.

Sethos I had also presented musical instruments to the god. In one of the magazine rooms in the temple of Abydos there is a sketch of two harps of a similar type. Unfortunately the context was not copied in the publication (fig. 3).<sup>11</sup> One of the instruments is decorated with a head wearing the blue crown. The harps have up to 18 strings, but their number is obscured by the fact that the drawing has been corrected, altering the inclination of the strings.

Apart from harps included in 'frises d'objets' on Middle Kingdom coffins<sup>12</sup> the only other harp being presented and not played known to the present writer<sup>13</sup> is of a different type and period. On the causeway of Unas at Saqqara a person is shown walking with a shovel-shaped harp and a box towards a man seated with a basket of fish.<sup>14</sup>

8 TT 75 of Amenhotpe-sise: DAVIES 1923, pl. XII. The harp had already caught the attention of Champollion, who drew a sketch in CHAMPOLLION 1844, p. 483.

9 YOYOTTE, 1953, p. 28-38.

10 THE EPIGRAPHIC SURVEY 1957, colour pl. 322.

11 CULFIELD 1902, pl. XX.

12 LACAU 1906, pl. XXXVIII (162); SCHÄFER 1908, p. 85 and p. 90.

13 Excluding instruments depicted in the Amarna Period.

14 Unas causeway: HASSAN 1938, pl. XCVI, p. 520.



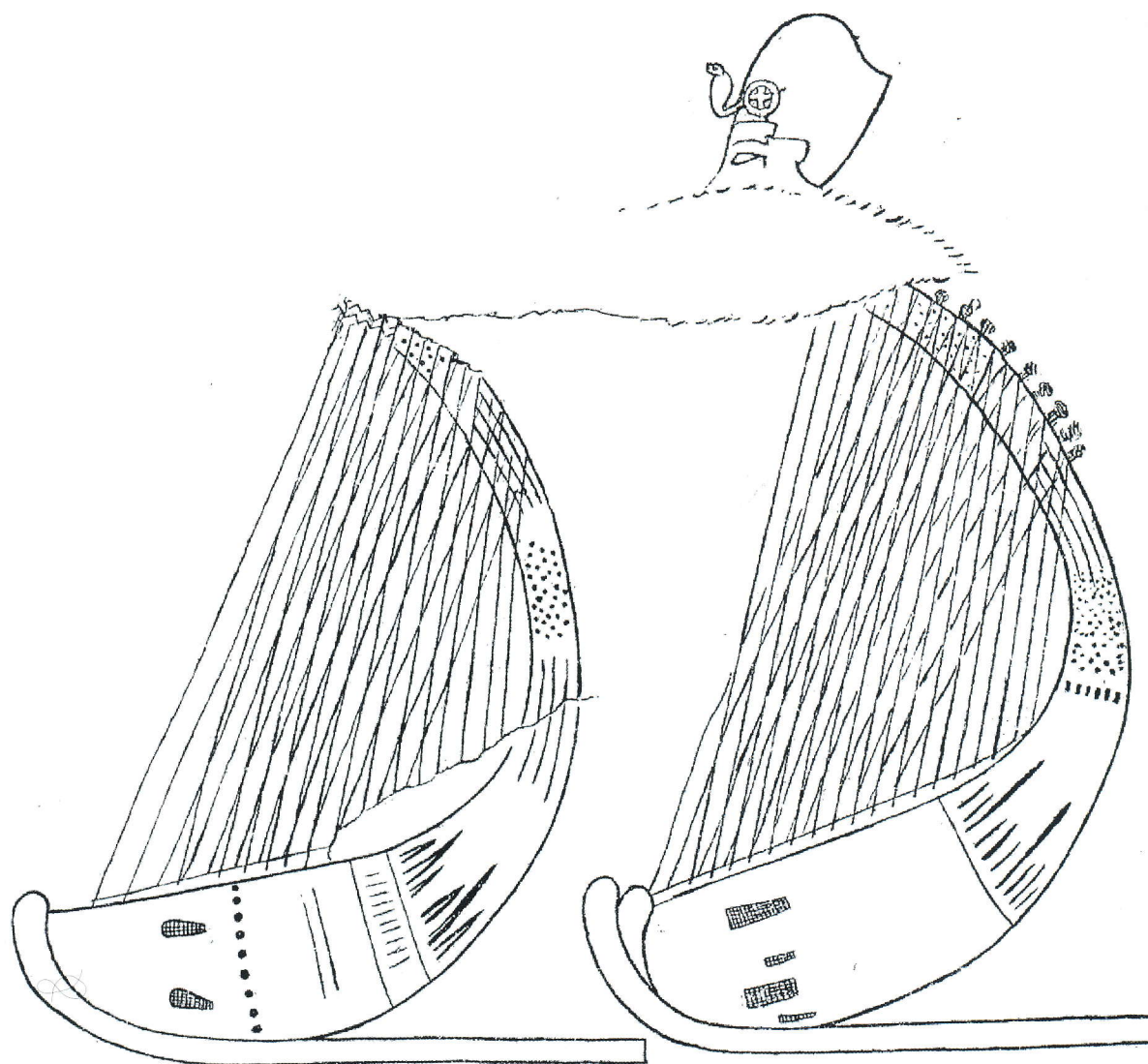


Fig. 3 : The harps of Sethos I. (from CAULFIELD 1902, pl. XX).

### The harpist

Presenting a fine harp to the chief god of Thebes was a grand gesture on the part of the king, but it only becomes significant if there is a gifted player available to play it. We may not know the name of the musician who played this very instrument, but we know of one colleague of his who is exceptionally forthcoming with information about his duties. Amenemheb called Mahu lived in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty, for 'stylistic reasons' no earlier than Tuthmosis IV and no later than Amenophis III. He had a statue made of himself holding a stela which gives not only the text of the hymn he is performing,



but also a vignette of himself playing before the sun setting in the western horizon (fig. 4).<sup>15</sup> On this monument, no doubt commissioned for his tomb, he asked for a specific favour in that respect:

Praise to you millions and millions of times!  
 I have come to you, adoring your beauty.  
 Your mother Nut embraces you.  
 You are joyful as you traverse the sky and the earth.  
 May the gods of the Underworld worship you [and sing] your praise  
 when you hear my words which worship you every day,  
 so that you endow me with a burial place after enduring old age  
 and my ba being among my ancestors, following [the king].



Fig. 4 : The stela of Mahu (from EDWARDS 1939, pl. 30).

This may have been a formulaic statement appropriate to any Egyptian of the elite, but the interesting point is that Mahu held the title of chief singer of Amun, and specifically *ḥsw bnt špst n 'Imn* 'singer of the noble harp of Amun'. He is known from another stela<sup>16</sup> where he says that he 'followed in the king's footsteps in southern and northern lands', as well as being overseer of the singers of the North and South - obviously a very important person on the musical scene. When on duty in the temple, he says, 'I purify my mouth. I adore the gods. I exalt Horus who is in the sky. I adore him. The Ennead listens, the inhabitants of the Underworld rejoice. They appear at my voice,' and he continues to relate how the gods salute the sun disc as creator of all. This echoes ideas to come during the reign of Amenophis IV, but the foundations for these had already been laid in the reign of his grandfather, Tuthmosis IV. Knowing what we do about the martial exploits of Tuthmosis IV and Amenophis III one would be inclined to visualise the king in whose

15 BM 22557: EDWARDS 1939, vol. 8, pl. 30, p. 35-6; MANNICHE 1991, p. 59-60, pl. 8.

16 Now lost? KUENTZ 1922, p. 601-10.



footsteps Mahu followed, with or without his harp, as being Tuthmosis IV rather than Amenophis III. The fairly brief reign of Tuthmosis IV would narrow down the choice of gifted harpist at the time even further, and it is just possible that Mahu was the brilliant star of his day for whom the splendid instrument commemorated in the temple as well as in the tomb of one of the officials had been made. It is interesting that someone like Mahu, obviously a gifted musician, should have been sent abroad as part of the royal train - unless 'following in the king's footsteps' is a mere figure of speech.

In scenes from temple walls depicting the daily cult in the temple, musicians are rarely present. On the other hand, we find them on private monuments, notably on wooden stelae from the Third Intermediate Period where a harpist is shown directly in front of a deity.<sup>17</sup> Yet we know that they performed on location in the temple, singers and musicians (*hsw(t)*, *šmzw(t)* - both sexes) being known from texts, although their functions are not specified. Some titles may be honorific, but specific musicians, such as our Mahu, would have performed as mediators in the offering, communicating with the deity in a supporting role to the voice of the officiant (ideally the king himself). The instrument would thus have been a very important tool in this communication. A clue may be found in the inscription of Tuthmosis III mentioned above, which goes on to say that he consecrated the noble harp ['in order to adore the radiance (*nfrw*) of his person (*sc.* the god)] at his appearances and in (all) his names'. An interpretation of this phrase would conjure up a vision of a recital of the god's names and epithets, accompanied by the harpist's chords, when god appeared in his manifestations<sup>18</sup> in his shrine or during processions.

The well-known harpist's songs<sup>19</sup> do not belong in a temple context in spite of the fact that they may have religious overtones. Scraps of lyrics, performed on the occasion of the Festival of the Valley, would frequently make reference to Amun. One such fragment is of particular interest in that it is written on the instrument itself: Amenmose, son of Bakt owned a splendid portable boat-shaped harp, an instrument only in use for some 100 years in the middle of the 18th dynasty.<sup>20</sup> On it is written '... Sweet is the air you give, Amun, O sweet of air.' We have no direct evidence of what was performed by the temple musicians, but it is fair to suppose that it was praise of the deity, invoking his epithets and activities, for example his role in the creation of the world. Such hymns have survived,<sup>21</sup> and they would have been greatly enhanced by the accompaniment of a gifted musician playing an instrument such as the noble harp consecrated by Tuthmosis IV.

17 Stela of Zedkhenséf'ankh in the Louvre N3657: ZIEGLER 1993, p. 74 and stela of Harudja (Udjahor) in Cairo inv. no. 65756: HICKMANN 1961, p. 64-5. Cf. also, for a 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty example, the tomb of Raia at Memphis: MARTIN 1985, frontispiece.

18 Cf. the *hprw* as 'names' in the tomb of Amenemhet: DAVIES and GARDINER 1915, p. 100.

19 LICHTHEIM 1945, p. 178ff.; WENTE 1962, p. 118-28.

20 Louvre N 1440a=E 116: ZIEGLER 1979, p. 108-10. It is one of only two instruments with such an inscription, the other being a lyre in Leiden (MANNICHE and OSING 2006, p. 129-41).

21 P. Boulaq 17, written down c. 1250 BC.



## Bibliography

- CAULFIELD 1902 = CAULFIELD (A. T. S. G.), *Temple of the Kings*. London.
- CHAMPOLLION 1844 = CHAMPOLLION (J. F.), *Monuments de l'Égypte et de la Nubie. Notices descriptives*, I. Paris.
- DAVIES & GARDINER 1915 = DAVIES (N. de G.) & GARDINER (A. H.), *The Tomb of Amenemhet* (No. 82). London.
- DAVIES 1923 = DAVIES (N. de G.), *The Tombs of Two Officials of Tutmosis the Fourth*. London.
- EDWARDS 1939 = EDWARDS (I. E. S.) (ed.), *Hieroglyphic Texts from Egyptian Stelae etc. in the British Museum*, vol. 8. London.
- GRIMAL & LARCHÉ 1993 = GRIMAL (N.) & LARCHÉ (F.), Karnak, 1989-1992. *Cahiers de Karnak IX*, Le Centre Franco-Égyptien d'Étude des Temples de Karnak, p. v-xx.
- HASSAN 1938 = HASSAN (S. B.), Excavations at Saqqara 1937-8. *Annales du Service des Antiquités*, XXXVIII, p. 503-521.
- HICKMANN 1954 = HICKMANN (H.), Les harpes de l'Égypte pharaonique. *Bulletin de l'Institut d'Égypte*, XXXV, p. 309-68.
- HICKMANN 1961 = HICKMANN (H.), *Musikgeschichte in Bildern. Ägypten*. Leipzig.
- KUENTZ 1922 = KUENTZ (Ch.), Stèle d'un chef de chanteurs. *Recueil d'études égyptologiques dédiées à la mémoire de Jean François Champollion*. Paris, p. 601-10.
- LACAU 1906 = LACAU (P.), *Sarcophages antérieurs au Nouvel Empire*, II. Cairo.
- LETELLIER 1979 = LETELLIER (B.), La cour péristyle de Thoutmosis IV à Karnak (et la „cour de fêtes“ de Thoutmosis II). In VERCOUTTER J. (ed.), *Hommages à Serge Sauneron*. Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1979, vol. I. Cairo, p. 51-71.
- LICHTHEIM 1945 = LICHTHEIM (M.), The songs of the harper. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* IV, p. 178-219.
- MANNICHE 1975 = MANNICHE (L.), *Ancient Egyptian Musical Instruments*. Münchner Ägyptologische Studien 34. Munich.
- MANNICHE 1978 = MANNICHE (L.), Symbolic blindness. *Chronique d'Égypte*, LIII, p. 13-21.
- MANNICHE 1991 = MANNICHE (L.) *Music and Musicians in Ancient Egypt*. London.
- MANNICHE & OSING 2006 = MANNICHE (L.) & OSING (J.), An Egyptian lyre in Leiden. *Orient-Archäologie*, Band 20. Studien zur Musikarchäologie V. Rahden/Westf., p. 129-41.
- MARTIN 1985 = MARTIN (G. T.), *The Tomb-Chapels of Paser and Ra'ia at Saqqara*. London.
- SCHÄFER 1908 = SCHÄFER (H.), *Priestergräber*. Leipzig.
- SCHOTT 1935-38 = SCHOTT (S.), Der Gott des Harfenspiels. *Mélanges Maspero I*. Cairo, p. 457-4.
- THE EPIGRAPHIC SURVEY 1957 = THE EPIGRAPHIC SURVEY. *Medinet Habu*, vol. 5, Chicago.
- WENTE 1962 = WENTE (E.), Egyptian "Make merry" songs reconsidered. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, XXI, p. 118-28.



YOYOTTE 1953 = YOYOTTE (J.), Une porche doré : La porte du IV<sup>e</sup> pylône au grand temple de Karnak. *Chronique d'Égypte*, LV, p. 28-38.

ZIEGLER 1979 = ZIEGLER (Chr.), *Instruments de musique égyptiens au Musée du Louvre*. Paris.

ZIEGLER 1993 = ZIEGLER (Chr.), *Le Louvre. Les antiquités égyptiennes*. Paris.





Pl. 27 : The harp of Ramesses III. From *The Epigraphic Survey* 1957, pl. 322.