

## The lute-player in the tomb of Rekhmira (TT 100)

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In a recent article in *GM*<sup>1</sup> it was suggested that the ancient Egyptians had invented a bow for playing stringed instruments. The basis for this assumption is a representation high up on the wall of the tomb of Rekhmira where a musician is represented with the body of the lute resting on the ground<sup>2</sup> while grasping the tip of the neck with her left hand, her right hand being positioned at a point below as far as she can reach. In their brief communication the authors address 1) the method of playing the lute in this scene, and 2) the origin of the lute, with particular reference to the possible use and provenance of the bow.

In the 18th dynasty two types of long-necked lutes were in use: a heavy model with the sound-box carved of wood, and a lighter version with the sound-box made out of a tortoise-shell. There are excellent examples of both in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, and they are frequently depicted in tomb paintings.<sup>3</sup> Judging from its outline, the instrument under discussion is the heavy, wooden lute, here, unusually, shown entirely in profile view enabling us to see how the neck of the instrument was skewered through the membrane covering the sound-box. When played in concert, lutes are *invariably* shown en face, revealing also the little wooden gadget at its lower extremity that was used for the initial tuning of the strings.<sup>4</sup> It is a well known fact that lute-players played their instruments by means of a plectrum, not by strumming with the fingers alone.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D, Krejčí and P. Zamarovský, 'Mysterious Lute Player in Rekhmire's Tomb (TT100)', *GM* 227, 2010, pp.61-63.

<sup>2</sup> In actual fact it rests on the sole of the foot of the woman kneeling on a mat in front of her.

<sup>3</sup> Shown in great detail side by side in a fragment of wall-painting from the tomb of Nebamun, now in the British Museum: R. Parkinson, *The Painted Tomb-Chapel of Nebamun*, London 2008, figs. 83 and 93.

<sup>4</sup> H. Hickmann, *Catalogue général des instruments de musique du Musée du Caire*, Cairo 1949, pp.159-163; id., 'L'accordage des instruments à cordes', *ASAE* 48, 1948, pp.646-663, on lutes pp.649-656.

<sup>5</sup> A notable exception may be seen in the tomb of Nebamun, mentioned above n.3, where the musician has let go of her plectrum which is left dangling. For traces of the method of playing on surviving instruments cf. R. Eichmann, 'Strings and frets', *Studien zur Musikarchäologie I* (Orient-Archäologie 6), 2000, pp.35-46, esp. p.36.

The musician in the tomb of Rekhmira was discussed by H. Hickmann in 1961 as follows:

'Lange Zeit hat man nicht verstanden, warum die Musikerin hier zwar mit der rechten Hand nach den Saiten greift, das Instrument aber nicht wie gewöhnlich im Arm hält oder auf den gewinkelten Arm auflegt, sondern es auf den Boden aufgestemmt hat. Des Rätsels Lösung fand sich, als ein solches Instrument nach dem Original des Museums Kairo rekonstruiert wurde und man nun die Bespannung und Einstimmung der Saiten dieser Kopie vorzunehmen hatte. Aus diesen Experimenten ergab sich, das es tatsächlich am zweckmäßigsten ist, die Laute während des Stimmens abzustellen und nicht im Arm zu halten. Da die altägyptische Laute keine Wirbel besaß, wurden die Saiten um den Hals gewunden, fest ins Längsrichtung nach oben gezogen und festgezurr. In dem vorliegenden Dokument stellt die Musikerin die Laute vor sich auf dem Boden, stemmt sie fest gegen die Brust und zieht mit der linken Hand die Saiten straff nach oben. Währenddessen schlägt sie mit der plektrumbewehrten rechten Hand, der Spielhand, die Saiten an, um die Stimmung zu prüfen.'<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 1 From Davies, *Rekh-mi-rē' II*, pl. 44  
(ca. 1965)

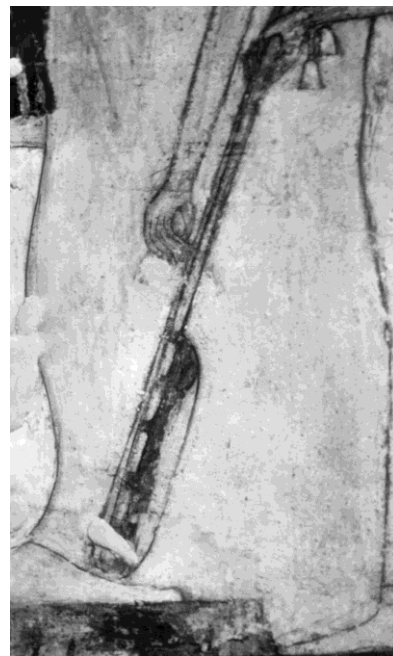



Fig. 2 UNIDIA 38682

<sup>6</sup> H. Hickmann, *Musgeschichte in Bildern. Ägypten*, Leipzig/Halle 1961, pp.70-71.

In the publication of the tomb from 1943,<sup>7</sup> the drawing shows the thumb of the girl's left hand pressing against the strings near the upper extremity of the neck, the forefinger of her left hand, and possibly her thumb, being in direct contact with a string<sup>8</sup> further down. No plectrum is apparent, nor is a bow [fig. 1]. Some photographs [fig. 2], including recent ones taken by LM, show some discoloration, giving the appearance of an arch, at the level of the fingers, but that this is secondary is evident from similar marks elsewhere on the same wall. The illustration given by the two authors does not reveal any object either, and it is not clear whether it is merely the depiction of the fingers and that of the instrument in this particular scene that lead them to *assume* that there was a bow. If the ancient draughtsman had intended to show a bow, he would have depicted it unambiguously (as in the hieroglyph  (Gardiner signlist T 10). However, there is no tangible evidence that the ancient Egyptians made use of a bow for playing any stringed instrument.<sup>9</sup>

The musician in question is not engaged in a musical performance as such. A group of singers is positioned in front of her, but her fellow instrumentalists are placed two registers below her. The instrument is depicted at an odd angle and in an unusual position, but there is nothing to suggest that the imaginative draughtsman has done other than catch her while she was tuning her instrument, in this case in order to adjust it to the singing, cf. Hickmann's remark that 'on accordait, très probablement, selon la mélodie qu'on voulait accompagner, et le registre des voix auxquelles il fallait rajuster les notes du luth.'<sup>10</sup>

Nor is there anything to suggest that the girl is a foreigner. Her garment is Egyptian and so is her hairstyle (and that of the other pubescent girls in the scene). Only in the

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<sup>7</sup> N. de G. Davies, *The Tomb of Rekh-mi-rē*, New York 1943, I, p.62, II, pl. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Lutes were provided with two or three strings. Recent measurements of the thicknesses of the strings on the Harmose lute (Eichmann, 'Strings and frets', p.37) suggest that they were *not* tuned more or less in unison, as previously assumed (Hickmann, 'L'accordage...', p.655.)

<sup>9</sup> Website-users may have come across another erroneous reference (<http://www.eternegypt.org/EternalEgyptWebsiteWeb/HomeServlet>) to a bow in connection with a portable boat-shaped harp in the antiquities museum at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina where a stick is displayed next to the harp (now said to derive from Mallawi museum), a situation that may confuse some visitors. Because of the position of the strings in a harp (of any type), a bow would be of little benefit in playing it.

<sup>10</sup> Hickmann, 'Sur l'accordage...', p.655 (LM emphasis).

harem quarters at el-Amarna do we find female foreign musicians depicted, and their appearance is all together different.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the long-necked lute did make its first appearance in Egypt at the very beginning of the 18th dynasty,<sup>12</sup> and it was clearly one of several imports from the Levant, having first appeared in Mesopotamia in the late 3rd millennium BC.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> N. de G. Davies, *The Rock Tombs at El Amarna VI*, London 1908, pl. 28.

<sup>12</sup> L. Manniche, *Ancient Egyptian Musical Instruments* (MÄS 34), Munich 1975, pp.70-76; id., *Music and Musicians in Ancient Egypt*, London 1991, pp.45-47.

<sup>13</sup> R. Eichmann, 'The design of ancient Egyptian spike lutes', *Studien zur Musikarchäologie 4* (Orient-Archäologie 15), pp.363-371, esp. p.364.