

THE EARLY LYRE IN SCANDINAVIA. A SURVEY

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Abstract

The paper will survey the early lyre in Scandinavia on the basis of available sources, which are mainly archaeological finds and depictions. Written sources are scarce, but should not be excluded. The paper is not based on extensive research within the field, but should be considered as a brief listing of material regarding the instrument in the period c. 500–1400, connected with some problems and questions.

KEY WORDS: Norway, Ethnic culture, History of music, National instrumental music, Folk music instruments, Lyre.

Anotacija

Straipsnyje apžvelgiama senosios lyros raida Skandinavijoje. Remiamasi turimais senaisiais šaltiniais, kurių daugumą sudaro archeologiniai radiniai ir piešiniai. Pateikiamas turimos faktinės medžiagos apie šį instrumentą 500 – 1400 m. e. m. laikotarpiu išdėstymas, akcentuojant svarbiausias problemas.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: Norvegija, etninė kultūra, muzikos istorija, liaudies instrumentinė muzika, muzikos instrumentai, lyra.

Introduction

In this paper I will introduce the material about the early historical lyre in Scandinavia. The main object is to list and survey the finds, an approach I consider to be important. Especially within the field of early music history and music archaeology, but also on a more general level, the collecting, collocation and documentation of material is an important task which provides a basis for further research.

The term lyre denotes a stringed instrument consisting of a sound box (corpus) which is connected to a crossbar (yoke) with two arms. The crossbar holds the strings. The earliest lyres are recorded from the 3rd millennium BC in Mesopotamia, and their existence is well known from the antiquity of Egypt, Greece and Rome. The connection between the antique lyres and the earliest medieval examples in Europe, is not clear.

Their existence in Scandinavia may be accounted for through archaeological, iconographical and written sources. The written sources are scarce, and it is often difficult to know which instruments the texts refer to. This survey is based predominantly on iconographical and archaeological material.

The Years 500 – 1100

An engraving on a Swedish picture-stone from Lärbro Källstede, Gotland, is the earliest indication of the lyre in Scandinavia. The motive is thought to be a lyre (Henschen-Nyman, 1980, Lund, 1981, p. 255). The stone is dated to ca. A.D. 500:



Fig. 1. Picture stone, Lärbro Källstede, Gotland, 6th c.
(Lund, 1984, p. 23)

The bridge is one part of the lyre which from time to time turns up in excavations. From the period before 1100, three bridges for lyres have come to light in Sweden. One is made of amber, excavated at Broa in Halla parish, Gotland, and dated to 8th–9th century (Lund, loc.cit., Reimers, 1980). It has notches for six strings:

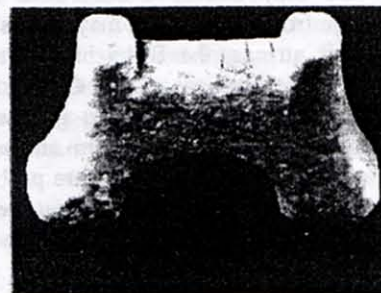


Fig. 2. Bridge made of amber, Broa, Halla, Gotland, late 8th – early 9th c.
(Lund, 1984, p. 22)

Another bridge, from the famous viking locality Birka in Uppland, is made of antler, and has place to carry seven strings. It is dated to the viking age (Lund, loc. cit.):

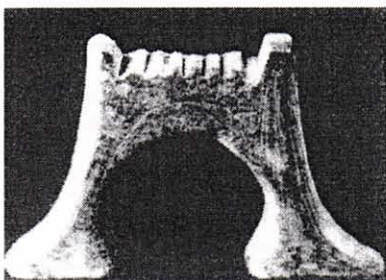


Fig. 3. Bridge made of antler, Birka, Uppland, viking age
(Lund, 1984, p. 22)

The last one is also a viking age find, found at Gerete in Fardhem parish, Gotland (information supplied by Gotlands Fornsal, Visby):

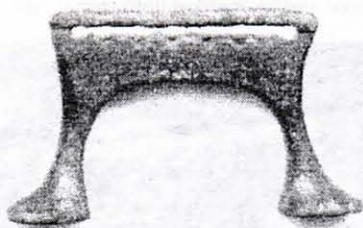


Fig. 4. Bridge made of bronze, Gerete, Fardhem, Gotland, viking age
(Photo by Gotlands Fornsal, Visby)

It is made of bronze, and has the unusual feature of an extra bar at the top, allowing the strings to cross in the space between the bar and the notches. Apart from this feature, the bridge has a similar design to the antler-bridge from Birka.

It is common to these bridges that it is difficult to determine how many strings they have supported. The reason for this is that the notches furthest to the sides look different, suggesting the possibility that they have not served as notches for strings. This also concerns the question of the function of the "towers" on each side of the notches. Are they there to prevent the strings slipping off, or are they merely a decorative element? Hence, the bridge from Broa, Halla may have supported either four or six strings, the Birka bridge may have supported five or seven strings, and the Gerete, Fardhem one have had six or eight strings. To get answers to these questions, it is necessary to perform analyses.

The hard materials of these bridges are probably not ideal from an acoustical point of view, but they correspond with the practice elsewhere in Europe (Crane, 1972, p. 10ff, Homo-Lechner, 1996, p. 85).

From this early, pre-Christian period one more archaeological fragment of a lyre is known. It is part of a crossbar from the 10th or 11th century:

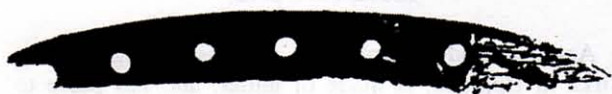


Fig. 5. Crossbar of lyre, Hedeby, Schleswig, 10th–11th c.
(Kristensen, 1994, p. 164)

It is found at Hedeby, now part of Germany (Kristensen, 1994, p. 164). Hedeby was an important port of trade for the Scandinavian and Baltic region from the 7th century. The crossbar has six holes for tuning pegs.

These finds should be paralleled to finds in other western European countries, where bridges and other parts of lyres have come to light, and where the finds are accompanied by iconographical sources. The examples have been found to date from around the 6th to the 11th century, and the most usual number of strings was probably six. The remains of the lyres from Obeflacht, Cologne and Sutton Hoo are among the most well-known examples from this period:

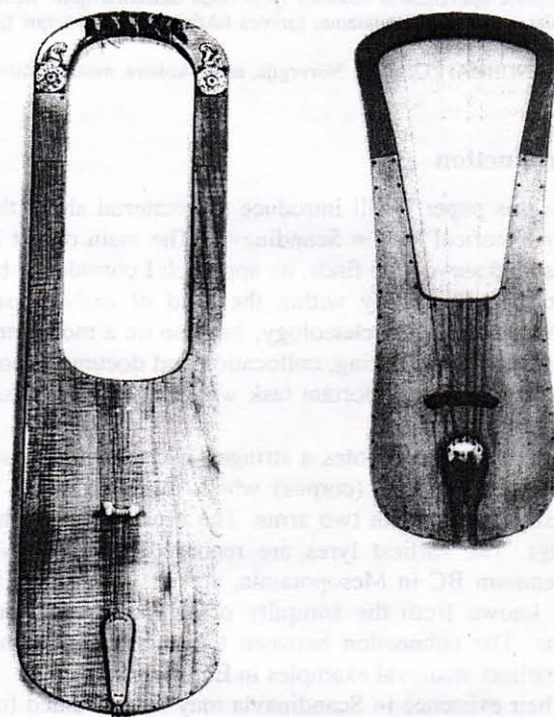


Fig. 6. Reconstructed lyres from the ship-burial Sutton Hoo, East Anglia, England, 7th, c.; and St. Severin church, Cologne, Germany, 8th c.
(Bruce-Mitford, 1983, p. 683, 690)

The Years 1100 – 1400

From the 11th century and onwards the bow spread in Europe (Bachmann, 1969). Different stringed instruments started to be played with the bow, whereas instruments specially made for bowing probably appeared later. The lyre was one of the instruments which became popular to play with the bow. Depictions of bowed versions of the lyre are found quite frequently from this time and onwards. The opposite is the case with the plucked version, which probably lost its popularity. Scandinavia, particularly Norway, was however an exception to this, as the plucked lyre probably survived into the 14th century. The evidence to support this is the following:

On the portals from Hylestad and Austad stave churches the story about Gunnar i ormegården (Gunnar

in the Snake Pit) is carved as a series of scenes. Both date to around 1200 (Lawson, 1978, p. 141). In one scene, Gunnar is pictured playing the lyre:



Fig. 7. Motive from Hylestad stave church portal, c. 1200 (Grinde, 1991, p. 9)



Fig. 8. Motive from Austad stave church portal, c. 1200 (Panum, 1915, p. 86)



The instruments are rounded, and have ornaments at the top of their arched crossbars, creating a “royal” impression. They are depicted with a lot of strings, apparently 10 – 12 (Hylestad) and approximately 15 (Austad).

Three more depictions of lyres in connection with the story of Gunnar are known. In Norum church, Bohuslän, Sweden, there is a font with Gunnar and his lyre engraved on the stone, which is dated to the 12th century (Lawson, loc. cit.):



Fig. 9. Carved font, Norum church, Bohuslän, 12th c. (Panum, 1915, p. 88)



A Norwegian wooden bench from Hove in Lisleherad, Telemark, has the same motive:

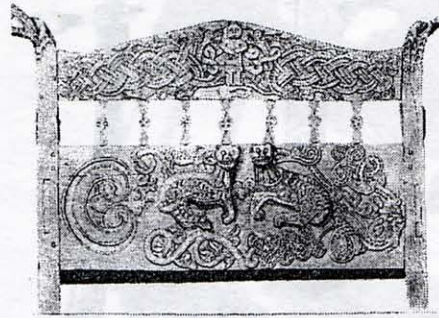


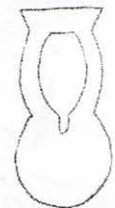
Fig. 10. Bench, Lisleherad, telemark, 13th c. (Panum, 1915, p. 87)



This bench is believed to date from 1250 or later (Hohler, 1998, p. 156, Lawson, loc. cit.). Finally, a 14th century drinking vessel from Mo, also Telemark, shows the same (Aksdal & Hagland, 1987, p. 106f.):



Fig. 11. Drinking vessel, Mo, Telemark, 14th c. (Aksdal & Hagland, 1987, p. 108)



The story of Gunnar is part of a large cyclus of stories, found in Germanic countries. The motive with Gunnar in the snake-pit fighting the snakes is also found in a wide area, but the musical scene is probably added in Scandinavia. In some pictures, Gunnar plays a triangular harp, an instrument known in Scandinavia from approximately the 13th century.

Another lyre-player who is a somewhat parallel figure to Gunnar, is King David. The depictions of David with his lyre are often stylized, and do not always give information about local musical instruments and traditions. The artists who imaged the stories of Gunnar, on the other hand, are more likely to have been inspired by actual musical instruments. One indication of the view that Gunnar’s lyres are not borrowed motives, is a remarkable find of the material remains of a lyre. It comes from the farm Kravik in Numedal, Norway:

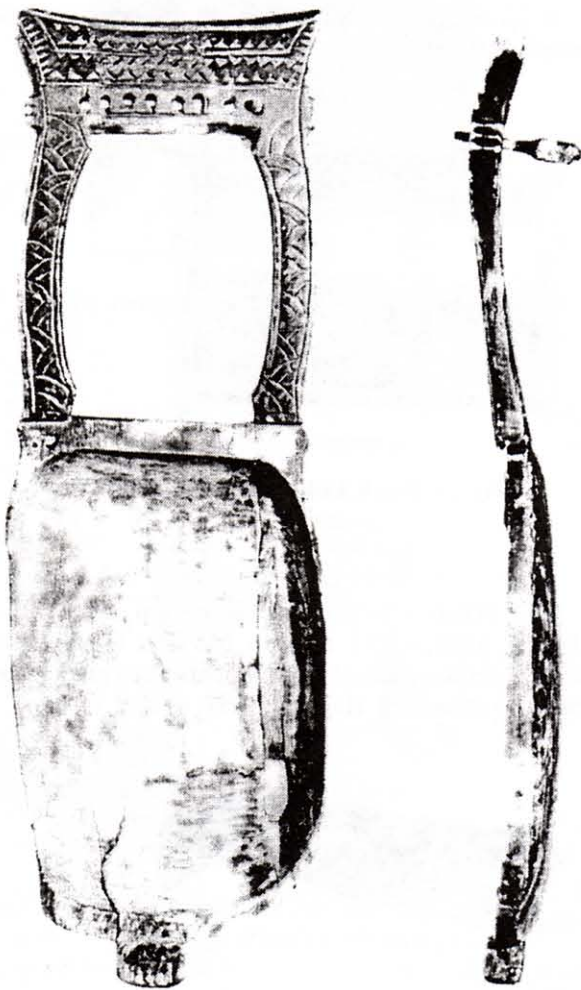


Fig. 12. Wooden remains of lyre,
Kravik, Numedal, 14th c.?
(Grinde, 1991, p. 11, 12)

The Kravik-lyre should not be regarded as an archaeological find. It was probably kept at the farm during centuries as a kind of jewel. It is made of one piece of pine. The soundboard is missing, as well as parts of the resonator. Before it arrived at the Historical Museum in Oslo in 1864, one piece of the crossbar was also missing. The museum replaced it with a piece of wood, and during this operation they probably made an extra hole for the tuning pegs, so that the instrument now has eight holes, whereas the original number was seven (Emsheimer, 1980). The dating of this specimen is difficult, as there are few clues. The literature often describes it as 14th century. This is in accordance with its similarity to the depictions from Lisleherad and Mo, which are given a later date than the Setesdal-portals.

Further, an interesting archaeological find is a bridge from Gamlebyen (the old town) in Oslo (Kolltveit, 1997):

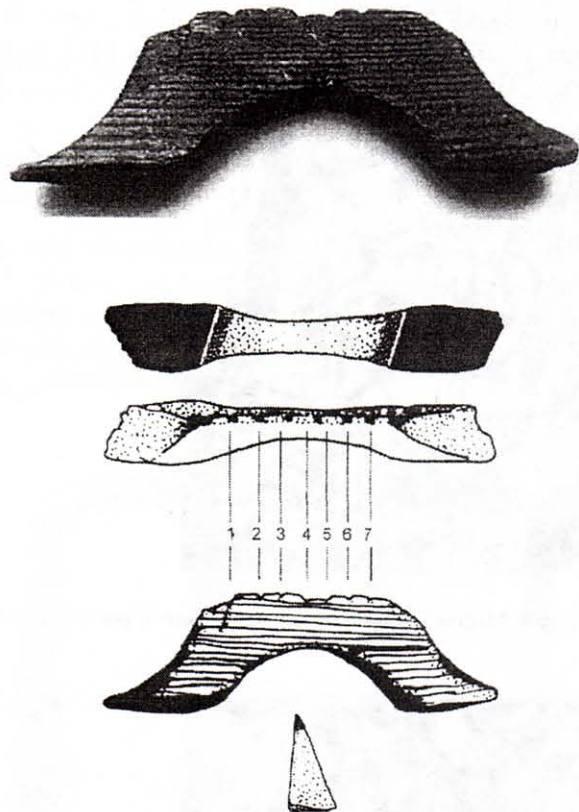


Fig. 13. Bridge from Gamlebyen, Oslo, 13th c.
(Photo and drawing by author)

The bridge is found in layers dating from the middle or third quarter of the 13th century. It is made from pine, and presumably had notches for seven strings. It does not resemble the bridges from the earlier periods, which are usually made of hard materials such as amber, antler and bronze, and it is not as thoroughly made. It is formed like the bridges of bowed instruments, but since it is not curved, it is most probably a bridge for a plucked lyre. (As far as we know, lutes or other plucked instruments were not in use in Scandinavia at this time.)

A late romanesque wall painting from Aal, Jutland, Denmark, shows a musical instrument which has been interpreted as a lyre (Haastrup & Egevang, 1987, p. 114):

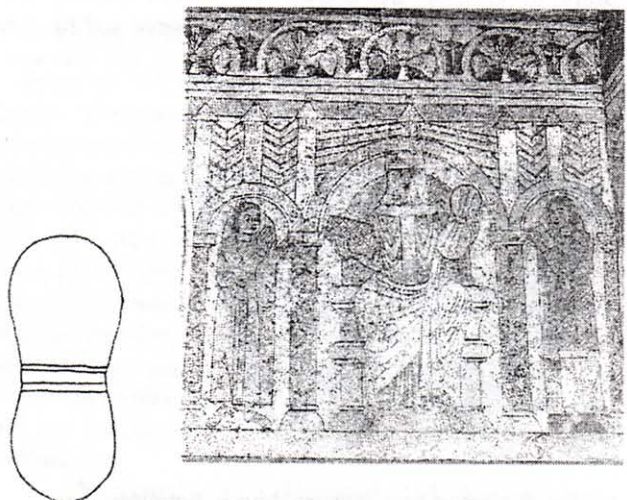


Fig. 14. Wall painting from Aal, Jutland, 1200 - 125
(Haastrup & Egevang, 1987, p. 115)

It is somewhat restored, but it is possible to date it to 1200 – 1225. King David is depicted with a book in one hand and the lyre in the other. The instrument appears less stylised than usual in such David-pictures. Its shape is of a continental kind, but it is difficult to draw conclusions about the details of it. This lyre, with rounded contours, is an example of the type sometimes called round-lyre. However, not only lyres with such clear rounded form are referred to as round-lyres. Hortense Panum (1915, p. 80) used this term for the medieval European lyres in general, as opposed to the lyres of the antiquity.

We do not know what the medieval lyre-players called their instruments, but it is unlikely that they regarded them as lyres. The word lyre does not appear in the written sources. Some researchers mean that rote refers to lyre. However, this name is only rarely found in medieval Scandinavia. But in the early texts, we more frequently find the term harp. When the sources speak about harp, they probably meant both triangular harp and lyre. Moreover, there is also a possibility that this name has covered all stringed instruments, as suggested by several writers.

The bowed lyre

The evidence shows that the plucked lyre was known in the western part of Scandinavia until the 14th century. But the popularity of the plucked lyre did not exclude the bowed version. I will introduce two iconographical sources, which indicate the existence of the bowed lyre in medieval Scandinavia.

A fragmented wall painting of a musical scene is preserved in Røldal stave church. (Lawson, 1978):



Fig. 15. Wall painting. Røldal stave church, Hordaland, c. 1200 (Photo by Historical Museum, Bergen)

It shows a person playing a lyre with something that may be a bow. Only this part of the scene has survived, but it is possible to observe that the instrument is of the rounded version as on the Hylestad and Austad church portals, but without their crowned arches of the cross-bar. The painting is dated to ca. 1200 (information from Historical Museum, Bergen).

Another source is a well-known stone sculpture from the Trondheim Cathedral, Norway, representing a figure playing an instrument which is interpreted as a bowed lyre:

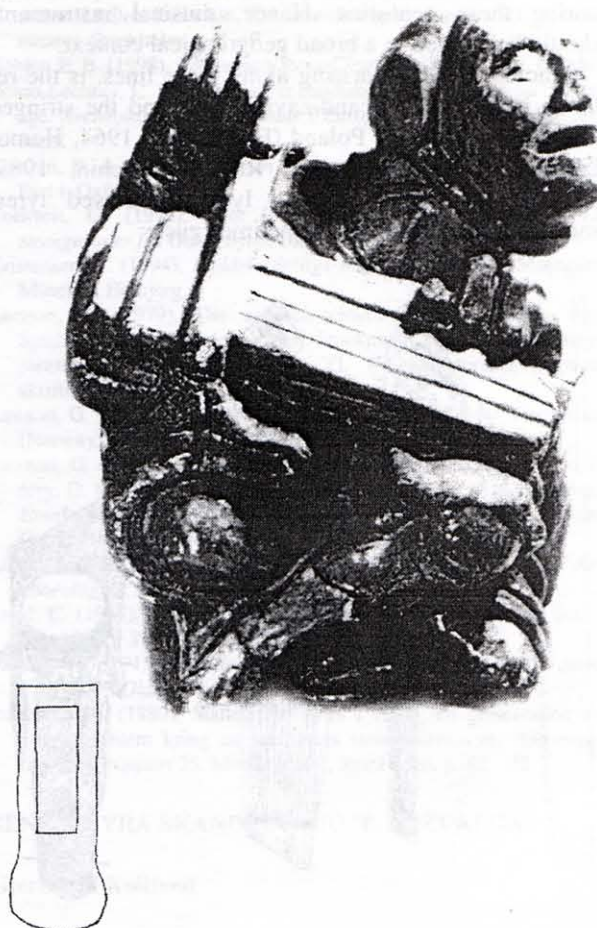


Fig. 16. Stone sculpture, Trondheim Cathedral, 1325 – 1350 (Grinde, 1991, p. 14)

The sculpture, which is dated to the second quarter of the 14th century, gives a rectangular impression of the instrument, but with few details. Otto Anderson (1923, 1956, 1970) has compared this sculpture to the Finnish *jouhikantele* and the Estonian *Talharpa*.

Anderson, who was the most prominent researcher of the northern bowed lyre, discovered the ancient and archaic tradition of this instrument on the Estonian islands with Swedish settlements, and he found parallels in Scandinavia and areas with Scandinavian connections. In Sweden and Finland we have seen a revival of the bowed lyre during the last decades, on the basis of Anderson's work and on preserved instruments in museums (Bergelt, 1986; Larsson, 1979).

Anderson's view, at least in his latest works (Anderson, 1970), was that the bowed lyre originated in Celtic areas, thus the impulse was going from west to east. There may also be the possibility of a diffusion of the bow as well as the bowed lyre from east, via the viking voyages through the Russian waterways (Bergelt, *ibid.*, p. 232ff), although the art of bowing spread slightly later than the viking period (Bachmann, *ibid.*). Others, again, suggest a continental origin of the bowed lyre (Aksdal & Hagland, 1987, p. 110). Without making judgments on these possibilities, it should be clear that Scandinavia was not isolated from the outside world

during these centuries. Hence, musical instruments should be viewed in a broad geographical context.

Another question arising along these lines, is the relation between the Scandinavian lyres and the stringed instruments found in Poland (Emsheimer, 1964, Homo-Lechner, 1996, p. 91) and Russia (Kolchin, 1989, p. 140ff), sometimes termed lyres or bowed lyres, sometimes psalteries and sometimes gusle:

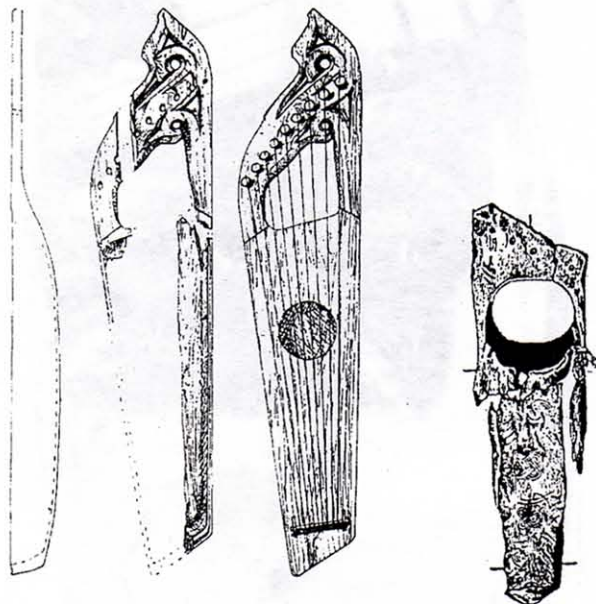


Fig. 17. Instruments excavated in Novgorod, 13th c. (left) and Gdansk, 1255 – 1275 (right) (Kolchin, 1989, p. 384, Emsheimer, 1964, p. 102)

There has obviously been connections across the Baltic sea. As regards Novgorod, the archaeologists have documented close contact with Scandinavia, from the viking period and onwards, continuing into the high middle ages. One problem is: Do these instruments represent a meeting between the lyre and the psaltery? We should also ask if the hole in these instruments imply that they have been bowed.

Social position

One topic to be briefly mentioned is the social position of the lyres and their players. It is believed that lyres belonged to the noble classes. The literary references speak about harps (i.e. also lyres) in connection with kings and other people of high position. Some of the European finds are connected to the nobility of warriors. Both in England and Germany lyres are excavated in graves of warriors, who were buried with their instrument. It is likely that they functioned as story-tellers, and that they accompanied their own singing with lyres.

The bridges found in Sweden as well as the later medieval iconography in Scandinavia indicate instruments of prominent appearance. It is most likely that these instrument were connected to high-ranking people and circles. However, the bowed lyre seems to have been

adopted by lower social groups, and this is probably one reason for the survival of this instrument into our time.

Concluding remarks.

There are indeed several interesting themes to discuss in relation to this material, for instance questions concerning the musical practice or the cultural significance in a wider perspective. Here I will only outline some possible themes, and suggest some answers.

1. What was the relation between the plucked lyres in Scandinavia and western Europe in the early period (ca. 500 – 1100)? Are we speaking of the same types of instruments, and the same functions and uses?

It has been suggested that the Scandinavian lyres were imported from the Rhine-area (Emsheimer, 1980). Before we have more substantial evidence of the lyres in Scandinavia from this period, it is difficult to prove anything regarding this. But I think we should not exclude the possibility that local musicians made their own lyres, for instance at Gotland in the 6th century and onwards.

2. What was the relation between the plucked lyres in Scandinavia and in Europe in the late period (ca. 1100 – 1400)? Did the Scandinavian round-lyres represent a separate type, not only in art, but as real instruments?

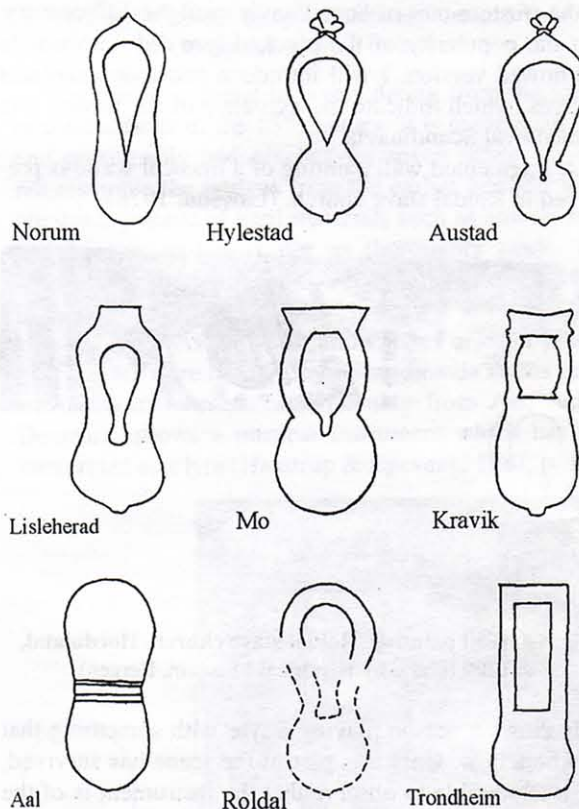


Fig. 18. Outline of Scandinavian medieval lyres

I think that the round-lyres appearing in musical iconography in Southern Norway in the 12th and 13th centuries, represented real instruments of a local tradition. The characteristic rounded shape of these instruments with the "crowned" arches was apparently a develop-

ment of a separate type. Judging from the number of strings, and the form of the survived example from Kravik, I believe most of these instruments were plucked, without excluding the possibility that some of them could be played with the bow. One interesting aspect of this, is that these plucked lyres represent the last stage in the development of the plucked lyre, if we exclude the African traditions.

3. What was the relation between the plucked and the bowed lyres? For instance: Could one individual instrument possibly be plucked and bowed?

The plucked and bowed lyre versions should probably be regarded as basically the same instrument, especially in the beginning of the period of bowing. However, a lot of problems from this period are unsolved, and one should be careful with conclusions about which instruments were bowed and plucked, and how the transition from plucked to bowed took place.

Coda:

Thoughts on tuning and playing

The tuning of the lyres and the way they were played is not the subject of this paper. However, I would like to mention one interesting possibility regarding the playing of the plucked versions: On some iconographical examples from England and the Continent, the player is sitting with the instrument on the left thigh (Lawson, 1981, p. 241), and seemingly using both hands. Perhaps one way of playing was similar to kanteleplayers today: using both hands, so that the strings are struck with the right hand, while they are stopped (muted) and plucked with the left hand.

Gauta 1999 05 11

Spausdinti rekomendavo: doc. dr. R. Sliužinskas,
doc. dr. R. Astrauskas

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SENOJI LYRA SKANDINAVIJOJE. APŽVALGA

Gjermund Kolltveit

S a n t r a u k a

Seniausias lyros tipo tradicinio muzikos instrumento konstrukcinės detalės egzempliorius Skandinavijoje yra 8 – 9 m. e. amžiuje pagamintas gintarinis stygų ramstukas, rastas Švedijoje, Gotlande. Manoma, kad graviūra ant akmeninio paveikslėlio (Gotland, 500 m. e. m.) gali simbolizuoti lyrą. Du stygų ramstukai, siekiantys gilius viduramžių laikus, taip pat buvo rasti Švedijoje, o kita šio instrumento detalė – skersinis – Danijoje. Minėtus archeologinius radinius galima būtų palyginti su analogiškais radiniais kitose Vakarų Europos šalyse (stygų ramstukais bei kitomis lyros tipo muzikos instrumentų dalimis, kurie yra paliudyti ikonografinių šaltinių).

Maždaug nuo 11 m. e. amžiaus Europoje atsiranda ir greitai paplinta strykas. Nuo to laiko lyros, kaip instrumento, kuriuo grojama stygas liečiant rankomis (gnaibomuoju būdu), piešiniai bei radiniai vis retesni. Lyrų, kuriomis grojama stryku (griežiamuoju), aprašai bei archeologiniai radiniai pasitaiko dažniau. Gnaibomosios lyros tuo metu prarado savo populiarumą daugelyje Europos šalių, išskyrus Skandinaviją ir ypač Norvegiją, kur tokio tipo lyra žinoma iki 14 amžiaus. Tai patvirtina įvairūs piešiniai, išraižyti medyje bei akmenyje, taip pat Oslo apylinkėse rastas stygų ramstukas bei išlikęs visas šio tipo muzikos instrumentas, rastas Norvegijoje, Numedal vietovėje.

Strykinės lyros istorija siekia ir mūsų laikus. Instrumentas išliko (arba beveik išliko) Švedijoje, Suomijoje ir Estijoje. Šiame straipsnyje strykinė lyra detaliau neanalizuojama.

Seniausias rašytiniais šaltiniais, kuriuose minimi lyros tipo muzikos instrumentai, remtis sudėtinga: minėtuose Skandinavijos regionuose jų aptikta ne tiek jau daug, be to, sunku teisingai nuspręsti, apie kurio tipo (gnaibomuosius ar griežiamuosius) lyros instrumentus čia kalbama. Sąvoka "arfa" ten tikriausiai apima ir lyrą, ir šiandienos arfą. Terminas "arfa" galėjo būti vartojamas ir kaip bendrinis visų styginių instrumentų pavadinimas. "Arfa" perkeltine prasme taip pat dažnai minima kilmingų žmonių gyvenimų bei jų buitės aprašymuose.