

## Harps

The Ancient Egyptian harps varied greatly in form, size, and the number of their strings. They are represented in the ancient paintings with 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 17, 20, 21, and 22 strings.

The harp was thought to be especially suited for temple service. It was even shown in the hands of the deities themselves.

There were basically two types of harps:

1. the small portable (shoulder) harp (shallow arch). Shoulder harps are found in large numbers in museums throughout the world. Like all instruments of the sort, they had a setting that could be moved from front to back, from top to bottom or vice-versa. It was a kind of suspension rod for the strings, which allowed for a quick tuning to different pitches.



2. the larger, arched (bow) harp or angular harp. There have been several variations of the large harps in Egypt, such as in their structures and sizes, depending on the string holder and whether it lies on the top or bottom, and whether the resonator is straight-lined or bent.



[Shown herein is a scene from the tomb of Amenemhet, Beni Hasan, 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty—c. 1850 BCE.]

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There is barely any difference between the bow (arch) and angular harp, as far as their sound is concerned.

A few examples of found and depicted Ancient Egyptian harps are listed below:

- The tomb of Debhen from Giza [c. 2550 BCE] depicts two bow harps, with well defined sound bodies.
- A huge bow harp is depicted in a relief from the tomb of Seshemnofer [Giza, 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, c. 2500 BCE].
- A bow harp is depicted in a scene from the tomb of Ti [c. 2400 BCE] at Sakkara.
- A bow harp is depicted in the Ptah-hotep tomb [c. 2400 BCE]. The scene shows 2-tone playing [also see page 73].
- A harp is depicted in a relief from the tomb of Nekauhor [2390 BCE, Sakkara, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York]. The scene shows 3-tone playing of music [also see page 73-4].
- 5 harp players in polyphonic playing are depicted in Idut's tomb, [c. 2320 BCE] at Sakkara.
- The wife of the deceased Mereruka [c. 2290 BCE] is shown playing a large harp in Mereruka's tomb in Sakkara. She is playing two different strings of the harp—polyphony [also see page 73].
- A bow harp is depicted in Rekhmire's tomb [c. 1420 BCE], in **Ta-Apet** (Thebes). The string pegs are neatly depicted in the form of a modern trumpet mouthpiece.
- A bow harp is depicted in the tomb of Nakht [15<sup>th</sup> century BCE], **Ta-Apet** (Thebes).

- Two musicians are shown playing two huge forms of the bowed harp in the tomb of Ramses III [1194-1163 BCE], **Ta-Apet** (Thebes). Because of the two harp players, this tomb was called *The Harpers Tomb*, and the harps are known as *Bruce's Harps*. One harp is shown herein. [The other harp is shown on page 31.]



- Ramses III is depicted offering a harp, in the sanctuary of the temple of Medinet Habu, in western **Ta-Apet** (Thebes).

### Harp Playing Techniques

The strings of harps were always plucked with the fingers or a plectrum.

Ancient Egyptians were familiar with a whole series of playing techniques, as evident from tombs throughout Ancient Egypt's dynastic history. Both one-handed and two-handed playing techniques are presented, as follows:

#### 1. One-Handed Playing

With harps, every note has an individual, 'open' string. The one-handed technique is based on the *divisive* method of obtaining musical notes by stopping the string at certain proportional lengths. When this method is applied to the harp, only one hand is manipulating (shortening) the string for a specific ratio, which allows the other hand to pluck the shortened string (providing the note).

In order to locate the exact proportioned length of the string, and to ensure a firm contact at the proportional point,

one of the left-hand fingers stretches and presses the string for the proportioned distance against a rod-shaped object (like a fingerboard), thereby shortening (stopping) the vibrating length of the string. The left hand was guided by frets, which were loops tied about the fingerboard at given points. This shortened length of this particular string can then be struck to produce the sound.

This one-handed technique allows an unlimited possibility of tones.

There are many examples shown of harpers performing this technique. They clearly show that the plucked string forms a slight angle. Examples:

- In a relief [shown herein] from tomb 11 in the **Ta-Apet** (Thebes) area [New Kingdom 1520 BCE], a harper shortens the string with one hand, and plucks with the other. The bent string is clearly shown.
- In Idut's Tomb [c. 2320 BCE], two of the five depicted harpers pluck with only the right hand, while the left one holds down the string.



## 2. Two-Handed Playing

The two-handed technique is based on the ability to pluck each open string with one of the player's fingers. Both hands can pluck the strings either individually, simultaneously, or one after the other, i.e. playing a chord or polyphony. Unwanted strings can be further dampened (muted) with the palm of the other hand.