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A "CYCLADIC" HARPIST IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Bo Lawergren

Harp-player statuettes are among the most remarkable examples of Cycladic art in modern assemblages. However, all but possibly two lack definite provenience. This state of affairs caused Gill and Chippindale to express misgivings about the whole corpus, and they seem to suggest that many harp figurines might be modern forgeries, even those that surfaced in the early nineteenth century.¹ I am less skeptical inasmuch as two fragmented harp players, both in Athens's National Archaeological Museum, were probably excavated. In 1910, one was claimed for Grave 40 at the Aphantika cemetery on Naxos (number 1; Fig. 1D).² The other (number 2; Fig. 1C) was reported in 1884 to have come from a tomb on Keros, although the writer did not witness the excavation.³ The evidence (circumstantial but not absent) indicates that Cycladic harp figurines existed but cannot by itself authenticate other individual pieces. The earliest published harpist is in the Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe, reported in 1853 to have been found in 1840 on Thera (number 3); another appeared in Karlsruhe sometime before 1884.⁴ But no information surfaced about the circumstances of the finds. These early dates do not guarantee authenticity. As Gill and Chippindale point out, forgers were already busy in the nineteenth century.⁵

Seven other Cycladicleike harpists are known today, but none has an archaeological provenience: a pair (numbers 5–6) in the

Levy-White Collection, New York ("reputedly found on Amorgos");⁶ single examples (number 7) in the Getty Museum, Malibu, California ("reputedly found on Amorgos");⁷ number 8 in the Virginia Museum, Richmond;⁸ number 9 in the Gallimonopoulos Collection (on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, L. 1982.27.13);⁹ number 10 (Figs. 1I–K) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹⁰ Another example (number 11) surfaced in the New York City antiquity market in recent years.¹¹ Furthermore, Bent reported in 1888 that a harpist "similar to that" in Athens (number 2, above) was found at Cape Crio (southwest Anatolia); but it was not illustrated, and no one has ever seen it.¹²

These eleven statuettes reflect a steadily rising curve that began with Getz-Preziosi's report of "seven well-preserved" and, in her opinion, genuine harp players in 1980¹³ and continued with Schaik's¹⁴ compilation of ten harp statuettes in 1988, of which he considers numbers 8 and 9 (above) doubtful.¹⁵ Although these two scholars have been the main writers on the subject of Cycladic harp statuettes, neither has provided much evidence for their authenticity. We might say that no Cycladic harp statuette is definitely known to be genuine, but numbers 1 and 2 are our best candidates.¹⁶

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's harpist was acquired in 1947, and since that time a number of scholars have considered it suspect¹⁷ because of numerous uncharacteristic details of the harpist: hollow eyes,¹⁸

square mouth, prominent ears, long and muscular arms, distinctive nails, feet off the ground, legs that are too vertical, a body that is too thick and heavy, groin and back joined to the chair, and a belt.¹⁹ But Getz-Preziosi declared it genuine twenty years ago,²⁰ and Schaik followed suit.²¹ Ten years earlier, Getz-Preziosi and S. S. Weinberg had noticed “paint ghosts” on the marble.²² During burial in the soil, unpainted marble darkens slightly whereas painted parts may be protected and produce a ghost. Indeed, the top of the Metropolitan harpist’s head has an area lighter than the rest, and the scholars assumed it to be a ghost. Forgers, they argued, could not produce the effect since they did not know about paint ghosts in 1947. But Getz-Preziosi and Weinberg’s argument is unconvincing since forgers may be as observant as (or more observant than) art historians, and abrasive cleaning agents might produce the alleged ghosts. To evaluate their argument, one needs to know the erosion mechanism and the possibility of modern imitations.²³

Even if we assume that the head is ancient—albeit without ancient parallels for its form, face, and ghost—the rest of the statuette could still be modern since the neck is broken. To assess this possibility, one would have to disassemble the neck joint and check how well the two surfaces fit and whether modern hands have “made” them fit. In 1980, Getz-Preziosi addressed some (suspect) features of the Metropolitan’s harpist. “The muscled arms and the thumbs are the features singled out by those who question the harper’s authenticity. Actually, arm musculature is shown on two other harpers though to a less pronounced degree of development. The articulated thumbs may be unique to this piece only through an accident of preservation: the

hands of other harpers shown in the act of plucking the strings of their instruments (as opposed to merely holding the frames) are in every case missing. As the thumb is very much used in harp playing, it is quite possible that clearly defined thumbs were carved on these other figures as well.”²⁴ But one fails to see arm muscles on other harpists, and most of the remaining arguments are equally unconvincing.²⁵ However, one argument appears relatively solid: the Metropolitan’s harpist sits on a chair similar to (but not the same as) one on an excavated (non-harp) statuette published in 1971. A forger may have had difficulties guessing the shape in the late 1940s, when the harp was acquired.

A final decision of the authenticity of the Metropolitan’s harpist must consider carefully the pros and cons. Here I advance one of the most important cons, one based on an analysis of the harp itself, aspects that have not been considered so far. Problems arise that go well beyond the anatomical oddities noted above.

I now wish to discuss ancient harps, leaving the Metropolitan’s harp until the next section. The uniqueness of the Cycladic harp (numbers 1 and 2) emerges when it is put in historical and geographic context. Since around 3000 B.C.E. harps have been common in the Near East, and since around 2500 B.C.E. in Egypt. Until 2000 B.C.E., all harps had a soundbox from which an arched rod protruded. The rod had various lengths and curvature, but only the Cycladic rod was long enough and curved enough to emerge at one end of the box and proceed to the other end. The rod and box form a closed frame, and although the instrument is often called a “frame harp,” structurally it is just a member of the arched harp family,

distinguished by an unusually long and persistently curved arch.²⁶

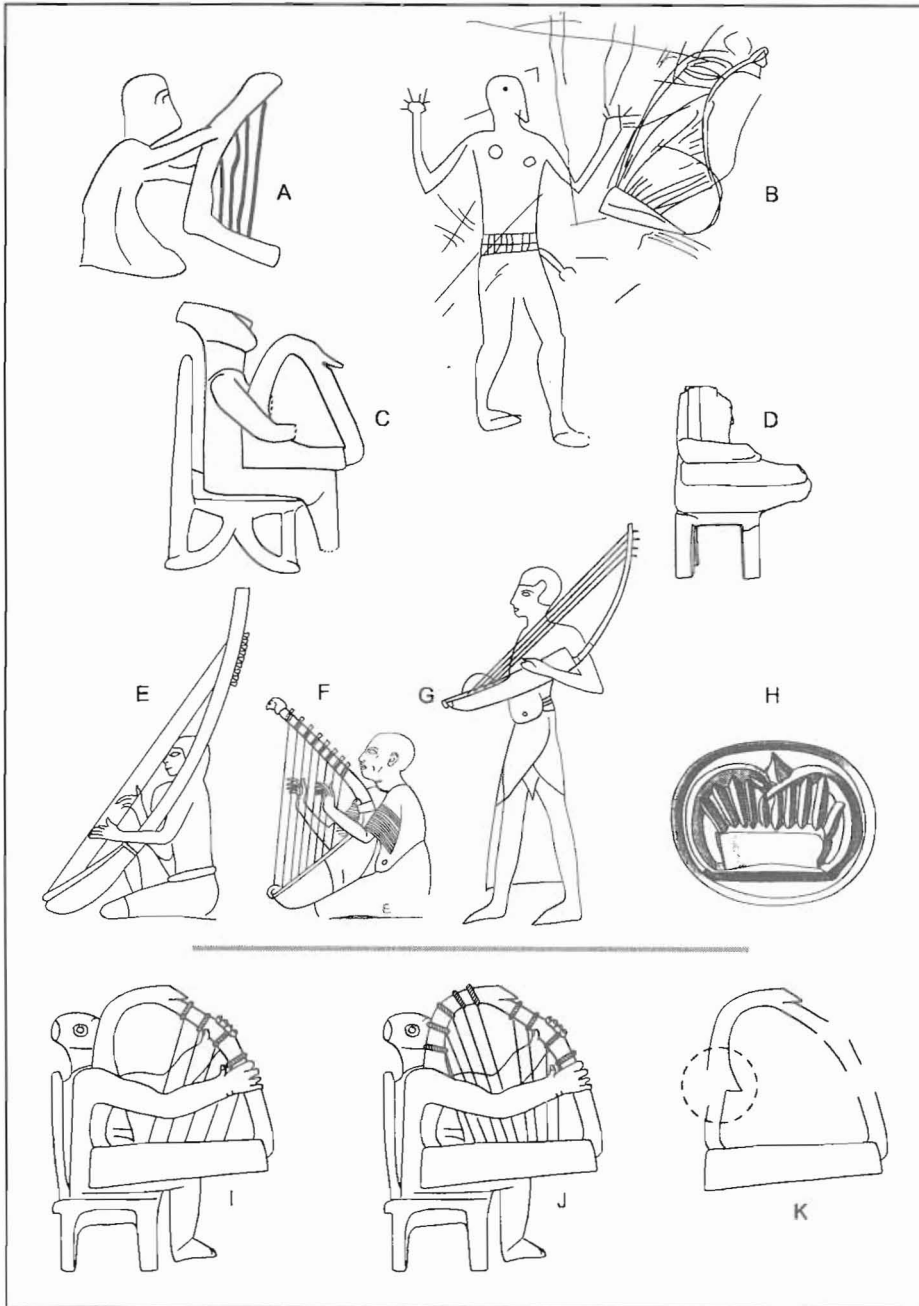
Figure 1 shows arched harps from related areas and periods. The basic structure is an oblong soundbox extended by a narrow arched rod at the end. On the earliest harp known (Fig. 1A), the rod and box form a smooth arch without distinct joint. The harp in Figure 1B is scratched on a stone surface. A wedge-shaped box appears to abut a narrow rod bending upward, and a mass of strings occupy the intermediate space. Perhaps a bent stick is placed between the left edge of the box and the top of the rod, in which case the contraption would form a solid frame—a premonition of Cycladic harp number 2 (Keros).²⁷ Egypt has yielded many types of extant harps, including the “shoulder harp,” illustrated in Figure 1G. Its box abruptly terminates at the right end, where a thin rod emerges along the axis of the box.²⁸ This construction resembles the Keros harp. All Egyptian harps (Figs. 1E–G) have shorter arches than the Keros harp, but the arch in Fig. 1F is just as tight as the Cycladic one. The object in Fig. 1H is uncertain but may be an instrument, as Evans thought eighty years ago,²⁹ perhaps a Cretan survival of the Cycladic harp.³⁰ The

triangular shape at the top may correspond to the bird’s beak on Cycladic harp number 2.

Extant Egyptian harps reveal the soundbox structure, and ample representations elsewhere (but few extant samples) are consistent with the Egyptian evidence. The boxes have rigid wooden walls on all sides except one, which is covered by a flexible membrane (leather or thin wood) usually called a soundboard. The strings are attached to a long, thin stick that presses against the latter. Without the stick, the strings would pull directly on the membrane and easily tear it. In ancient Egypt, the stick was placed above the sound surface (visible as thin slivers in Figs. 1E–G), but it could also lie below the surface, as on current African harps.³¹ Since Cycladic soundboxes have smooth surfaces, the stick was probably hidden inside.

Strings are missing from Cycladic harps and need to be put in place to allow an understanding of playing techniques. They must have run from the horizontal box³² to the arched rod, where they were tied to tuning collars encircling the rod.³³ Tuning was probably accomplished by rotating the collars or by sliding them up or down. Taking a

Fig. 1 Cycladic harps and comparanda. (A) Harp on sealing from Chogha Mish (Iran), 3300–3100 B.C.E. From P. Delougaz and H. J. Kantor, *Chogha Mish I: The First Five Seasons of Excavations 1961–1971*, ed. A. Alizadeh (Chicago: 1996), pl. 45:N. (B) Harp on paving stone at Meggido (Palestine), c. 3000 B.C.E. (C) Harp statuette from Keros, c. 2600 B.C.E. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, inv. no. 3908. (D) Harp statuette from Naxos, c. 2600 B.C.E. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, inv. no. 8833. (E) Shovel harp, wall relief in Giza mastaba (Egypt), c. 2400 B.C.E. (F) Arched harp, wall relief at Saqqara (Egypt), c. 1350 B.C.E. (G) Shoulder harp, wall painting at Thebes (Egypt), c. 1500 B.C.E. (H) Harp or lyre in the oval frame of a seal, Mallia (Crete), c. 1725 B.C.E. From N. Platon, I. Pini, and G. Salies, *Iraklion Archäologisches Museum, Die Siegel der Altpalastzeit: Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel*, II, no. 2 (Berlin: 1977), no. 86. (I) Harp statuette in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, c. 2700 B.C.E. Hypothetical strings. (J) As in I, alternative stringing. (K) As in I, harp alone.



hint from other arched harps, we might expect a stringing like that in Figure 1I. But if we consider the Cretan instrument in Figure 1H relevant, Figure 1J would be more appropriate. Whatever the case, all strings emerge from the *top* of the soundbox, an arrangement that defines the instrument as a harp. (If the strings run along the *side* of the box, the instrument would be a lyre. But that is impossible since the Cycladic right hand is usually placed on top of the soundbox, where it cannot pluck side-mounted strings.)³⁴

On the Keros statuette (Fig. 1C), 90 percent of the soundbox covers the player's thigh, and 10 percent juts out in front of the knee. The Naxos box (Fig. 1D) is broken, and the length cannot be ascertained; but all others have lengths and proportions similar to the Keros harp. The Keros box rests on top of the right thigh, and this position is adopted by all others except for a Karlsruhe harpist (number 3) who holds the box diagonally across both thighs. But either position is musically acceptable, although the majority placement seems more comfortable. Near Eastern and Egyptian arched harps universally pointed straight ahead.

The Keros harp has a clear division between box and rod at the right end, where the rod exits horizontally and bends abruptly upward to a peak located slightly below the top of the player's raised head. It then descends smoothly and apparently joins the box near its left edge. A bird's beak embellished the front of the arch.³⁵ All Cycladic harps are consistent with this design.

The rod of the Keros harp has a near-circular cross section, as does the right end of the box. This feature is present in all harps. Although only a small part of the Naxos arch survives (Fig. 1D), the straight vertical rise would have led to an arch shape slight-

ly different from that on the Keros harp. In this respect, the Naxos harp resembles harps numbers 3 and 5. The difference between the Keros and Naxos harps indicates the extent to which we would expect genuine statuettes to differ.

The Keros harpist has incomplete arms (Fig. 1C), but his right hand seems to have been located slightly above the soundbox and his left probably seized the front part of the arch. All statuettes are consistent with that posture. It is a reasonable playing position: the fingers of the right hand pluck the string near the box,³⁶ and the left hand grips the most distant point of the arch, where it balances the harp (or keeps the strings tuned). This is a natural division of manual labor for a right-handed person. Plucking near the box is to be expected, for it puts the upper arm in a restful vertical alignment and produces a sharp sound.

The statuettes have varied details and diverging sizes, but all, except the example from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, remain within plausible range of each other. Many features of the Metropolitan's harp exceed these ranges.

First, no ancient harp—whether Near Eastern, Egyptian, or any of the other "Cycladic" ones—is ever plucked close to the rod. It is not a sensible technique: the arms are extended uncomfortably, and the hands have to shuttle up and down the rod to reach all strings. The Metropolitan's harpist has adopted a unique and uncomfortable playing technique that is hard to reconcile with that of a genuine harpist.

But perhaps he is not playing at all but is merely portrayed in uncomfortable repose. That, too, would be unusual since most ancient instruments are shown played³⁷ and are not simply displayed as mute objects.

Not until the Hellenistic period were instruments commonly shown hanging on walls, lying on floors or tables, or fulfilling some symbolic function.

Second, all harps rest on the player's thigh except the Metropolitan's, which levitates outside the right thigh, partly penetrating its flesh. It is not supported by the thigh or the seat of the chair, and one can hardly expect it to be wrenched aloft by the hands gripping the front arch. The impossible situation seems to imply that the sculptor (whether ancient or modern) had not seen a live model.

The deep penetration into the thigh lacks precedent. However, there are some instances in which chest and shoulder are occasionally amalgamated with the back of the arch, but this is only apparent when the harpist is viewed from his front and left side. It is not so much a case of inaccurate anatomy as of indistinct modeling, an effect already noted by Getz-Preziosi: "There can be a lack of precision and clarity in the execution of certain areas of the body that is not visible when the work is viewed from the right."³⁸ This imprecision does not apply to the hovering soundbox starkly visible from the right side.

Third, all rods form a smooth and continuous arch except that of the Metropolitan's harp. Its rod has a bulge, as is illustrated in Figure 1K, where the offending part is en-

circled. The player's arm obscures the rod in this view, but the bulge is apparent from other viewing angles. This detail of the Metropolitan's harp is inconsistent with all other Cycladic harps.

Fourth, as is already stated, Cycladic harps have approximately the same length as the player's thigh. Not so the Metropolitan's harp: 40 percent of its soundbox extends beyond the player's kneecap. It is also taller than the player, while other Cycladic harps reach no higher than the level of the player's nose. (Not only is the Metropolitan's harp unusually large relative to its player, but the statuette is among the largest in absolute terms.) The cross section of the Metropolitan's soundbox is nearly square, whereas it is nearly circular on the other Cycladic harps. None of these unique features would by themselves prevent the harp from functioning, but the sheer number of abnormalities induces suspicion.

One might argue that the evidence outlined here does not prove the Metropolitan Museum of Art's harpist to be a forgery, but most surely neither do the assertions of Getz-Preziosi, Weinberg, and Schaik show it to be authentic. To reach scholarly consensus, it is necessary to take all facts into account. Those derived from music archaeology and organology, presented here for the first time, are significant facts in the argument.

NOTES

1. D. W. J. Gill and C. Chippindale, "Material and Intellectual Consequences of Esteem for Cycladic Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 97 (1993): 601-659, esp. 619.

2. According to G. A. Papathanassopoulos ("Kyk-ladika naxou," *Archaiologikon leltion* 17 [1961/62]: 148-149), the statuette was discovered in museum

storage next to the old director's office. It was assumed to be an object originally described by K. Stephanos ("Ἀνασκαφικαὶ Ἔργασια ἐν Νάξῳ," *Πρακτικά της εν Αθήναις Αρχαιολογικῆς Εταιρείας* [1910]:270-273), who found it under rubble in a looted tomb.

3. U. Köhler, "Praehistorisches von den griech-

ischen Insel," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung* 9 (1884):156–162.

4. C. Walz, *Über die Polychromie der antiken Skulptur* (Tübingen: 1853). The second statuette is mentioned and illustrated; Köhler, p. 158, n. 1. Good pictures may be found in E. Rehm, *Kykladen und Alter Orient* (Karlsruhe: 1997), fig. IX.

5. Gill and Chippindale, 619 and n. 171.

6. P. Getz-Preziosi, *Early Cycladic Art in North American Collections* (Seattle and London: 1987), nos. 90–91, pp. 262–265, pl. X; *id.*, in *Glories of the Past*, ed. D. von Bothmer (New York: 1990), pp. 20–22. No explanation of "reputedly" is vouchsafed here and below.

7. *Id.*, *Early Cycladic Sculpture: An Introduction* (Malibu: 1985), pp. 17, 44; *id.*, *Early Cycladic Art*, no. 92, pp. 268–269.

8. M. van Schaik, *The Marble Harp Players from the Cyclades* (Utrecht: 1998), p. 72.

9. Getz-Preziosi, *Early Cycladic Art*, no. 91, pp. 266–267.

10. Schaik, pl. 1; P. Getz-Preziosi, *Sculptors of the Cyclades: Individual and Tradition in the Third Millennium B.C.* (Ann Arbor: 1987), pl. III; *id.*, "The Male Figure in Early Cycladic Sculpture," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 15 (1980):figs. 16–19.

11. In a talk at the "Aegean Bronze Age Seminar," New York City on January 23, 1991, P. Getz-Preziosi declared a harp figurine on the art market to be a forgery.

12. J. I. Bent, "Discoveries in Asia Minor," *Journal of the Hellenic Society* 9 (1888):82–87.

13. Getz-Preziosi, "The Male Figure," 7.

14. Schaik, table 1.

15. But J. G. Younger, *Music in the Aegean Bronze Age* (Jonsered: 1998), p. 13, suspects that numbers 9 and 10 are forgeries because of their large size.

16. G. Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic and Cycladic Civilizations*, trans. A. Doumas (Athens: 1981), figs. 119–123; color pictures in Schaik (see n. 8, above).

17. M. Wegner, "Griechenland: griechische Instrumente und Musikbräuche," *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 5 (1956):cols. 865–881; esp. col. 881. B. Aign, *Die Geschichte der Musikinstrumente des ägäischen Raumes bis um 700 vor Christus* (Frankfurt: 1963), p. 33; C. Renfrew, "The Development and Chronology of the Early Cycladic Figurines," *American Journal of Archaeology* 73 (1969):1–32, esp. 14; O. W. Muscarella, "Review of G. Herrmann, ed., *The Furniture of Western Asia Ancient and Traditional*,

Mainz 1996," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118 (1998):452–453; Younger, p. 11.

18. Slit eyes, a rarity in Cycladic art, where almond-shaped ones are the norm (see, e.g., Getz-Preziosi, *Early Cycladic Art*, pp. 53, 66, pls. I, II, and V), may be meant to indicate blindness; M. van Schaik, "Ancient Marble Harp Figurines: The Search for a Stratified Context," *Music in Art* 23 (1998):11–18, esp. 14. But blind harpists are only known later, beginning in the Amarna period, c. 1355 B.C.E.; L. Manniche, "Symbolic Blindness," *Chronique d'Égypte* 53 (1978):13–21. Did the sculptor have the blind Homer in mind?

19. The list arose from discussions between O. W. Muscarella and the author.

20. Getz-Preziosi, "The Male Figure," 14.

21. Schaik, *Marble Harp Players*, esp. p. 24. J. Timme likewise finds nothing suspicious; *Art and Culture of the Cyclades in the Third Millennium B.C.*, trans. P. Getz-Preziosi (Chicago: 1977), p. 494.

22. P. Getz-Preziosi and S. S. Weinberg, "Evidence for Painted Details in Early Cycladic Sculptures," *Antike Kunst* 13 (1970):4–12.

23. Paint ghosts are studied by E. Hendrix, "Painted Ladies of the Early Bronze Age," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 55 (1998):4–15.

24. Getz-Preziosi, "The Male Figure," 14, n. 20. Her last sentence reveals a misunderstanding of harp playing: although thumbs are just as likely to be used as any other finger, it is not their use but their placement that is shown wrongly on the Metropolitan's statuette.

25. Schaik, *Marble Harp Players*, pp. 65–73; Getz-Preziosi, *Early Cycladic Art*, pp. 263–269, pl. X; Papathanassopoulos, nos. 119–123.

26. Because the arched rod and box form a frame around the strings, Cycladic harps have been called "frame harps," but the term covers a variety of harps and is avoided here. It applied to modern harps introduced c. 1000 C.E. in Europe, instruments with little historical and structural connection to Cycladic ones. Angular harps (introduced in 1900 B.C.E. in Mesopotamia) briefly (c. 400 B.C.E. in Greece and Italy) became frame harps when a stick was inserted between the distal ends of box and rod; B. Lawergren, "Harfe," in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 4, ed. L. Finscher (Kassel and Stuttgart: 1996), pp. 39–62, and *id.*, "Harp," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. S. Sadie and J. Tyrrell (London: 2000).

27. A coarse figure on a terra-cotta from Arslantepe (south Anatolia, c. 2000 B.C.E.) resembles the

Keros harp; W. Bachmann, "Frühbronzezeitliche Musikinstrumente Anatoliens," in *Music Archaeology of Early Metal Ages, Kloster Michaelstein, 18.-24. Mai 1998*, ed. E. Hickmann et al. (Rahden: 2000).

28. W. C. Hayes, *The Scepter of Egypt, II* (New York: 1959), p. 24, fig. 9.

29. A. Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos, I* (London: 1921), p. 276. Several variants of the instruments are known on Cretan stamp seals, where they function as a hieroglyphic sign; see G. Neumann, "Zum kretischen Hieroglyphenzeichen H 29," *Kadmos* 21 (1982):5-8.

30. Aign (see n. 17, above).

31. G. Kubik, *Ostafrika* (Leipzig: 1982), p. 10, fig. 46.

32. As on every known type of harp, strings must touch the box since it is the sound amplifier.

33. Tuning pegs (like those on violins, guitars, etc.) were not introduced until the Hellenistic period; see B. Lawergren, "To Tune a String: Dichotomies and Diffusions between the Near and Far East," in *Ultra Terminum Vagari: Scritti in onore di Carl Nylander*, ed. B. Magnusson et al. (Rome: 1997), pp. 175-192.

34. The Karlsruhe harpist (no. 3) holds his hand slightly lower but might quickly raise it to pluck a string.

35. Much attention has been paid to this detail by scholars, beginning with L. Vorreiter ("The Swan-Neck Lyres of Minoan-Mycenaean Culture," *Galpin Society Journal* 28 [1975]:93-97), followed by Getz-Preziosi (*Early Cycladic Art*, p. 261 [duck's bill or swan's head]), Schaik (*Marble Harp Players*, p. 40 [water bird's head]), and Younger (p. 11 [duck's bill]). Speculations about religious significance abound (Schaik, *Marble Harp Players*, pp. 37-41), but most likely the bird motif is just a natural association of birdsong with music; B. Lawergren, "Distinctions among Canaanite, Philistine, and Israelite Lyres, and Their Global Lyrical Contexts," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 309 (1998):41-68, esp. 53.

36. This point is misunderstood by Getz-Preziosi, who thinks that the right hand "steadies the instrument" (*Early Cycladic Art*, p. 261) while the left thumb plucks the strings at the front of the arch (cf. n. 24, above).

37. Figure 1B seems to show an unplayed instrument, but it is produced in a primitive fashion probably by an artist who was unable to distinguish among playing conditions.

38. Getz-Preziosi, *Early Cycladic Art*, p. 261.