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*Etruscan musical instruments
and their wider context
in Greece and Italy*

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The Etruscans left many painted scenes of musical performances, but no texts about music. Their Greek and Roman neighbors wrote a few comments, but most of our information must be drawn from Etruscan depictions. Descriptions of such scenes abound (few popular texts¹ pass them by) but valid analyses are rare.² The most complete review of the evidence is that of Fleischhauer,³ but even he hardly goes beyond the surface of images and texts. When studied more closely, the monuments reveal substantial differences to the Greek world. Many emerge in Jannot's series of precise studies of Etruscan instruments⁴ and musicians.⁵ An examination of the Cylinder Kithara,⁶ reveals its unique intercultural distribution of which Etruria was but one part, albeit the most important one. Here I extend the approach to a broader range of Etruscan instruments.

As noted before, Greece provides the main comparative material but several nearby cultures have distinct musical profiles. These belong to Lucania (as seen on tomb paintings at Paestum)⁷ and Magna Graecia (on South Italian vases),⁸ and both contrast sharply with Etruscan usage. To my knowledge, neither has been discussed before. Here they are seen from an Etruscan perspective, but both are rich sources that deserve specialized studies.

STATISTICAL APPROACH

Before considering detailed designs, I take a more macroscopic approach based on statistics. Even without precise numbers, musical subjects seem unusually common on Etruscan tomb paintings and stone reliefs. Statistics backs the impression. To see this, we define a "density of instruments,"⁹ and apply it to the scenes painted in tombs at Tarquinia¹⁰ and carved on cippi at Chiusi.¹¹ Etruscan densities are compared with Greek,¹² South Italian, and Lucanian ones. Figure 1 gives the results at different times and

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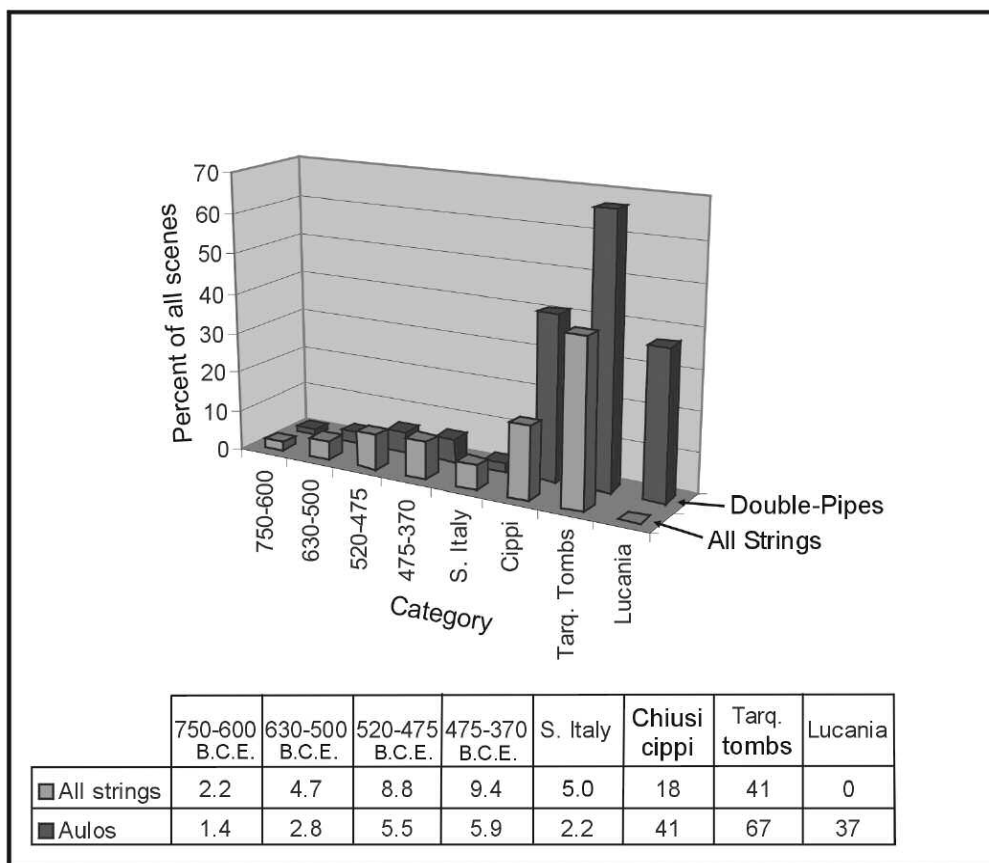


figure 1 – The relative numbers of instruments (string instruments and double-pipes) illustrated at various dates in Greece and Italy. The numbers are “relative” (expressed as percentages) since in each category the number of scenes that show instruments is divided by the number of total scenes (with and without instruments); this procedure tends to eliminate fluctuations between categories due to the survival rate of – and differences among – the various media. The data from Athens (750 – 370 B.C.E.) appear on figured vases and so do the data from South Italy (400 – 300 B.C.E.). The data from Chiusi derive from cippi (510 – 450 B.C.E.). In Tarquinia (650 – 300 B.C.E.) and Lucania (400 – 300 B.C.E.) the data appears in painted tombs. The graph at the top of the figure and the table at the bottom present the same data in two forms.

regions.¹³ Only “string instruments” and “double pipes” (the aulos, a composite reed instrument, fig. 3) are distinguished. In Athens both types start at low values in the 8th century, peak in the Classical period, and decline thereafter both in Athens and among Greek settlers and descendants in southern Italy. The trend is smooth and consistent. The Etruscan data, on the other hand, yield significantly higher densities.¹⁴ The Lucanian densities are extreme: strings are absent but double pipes abundant.

Next, string instruments are split into four easily distinguished types, all members of the Lyre family.¹⁵ The **Lyra** (*chelys*) has a body made from a tortoise carapace (or a wooden structure of similar shape) with ox-hide stretched over its concavity. Two wooden arms and a yoke rise above it (fig. 4). When buried, the carapace decayed less easily than the wood of other lyres, and several have been excavated in Greece and Magna

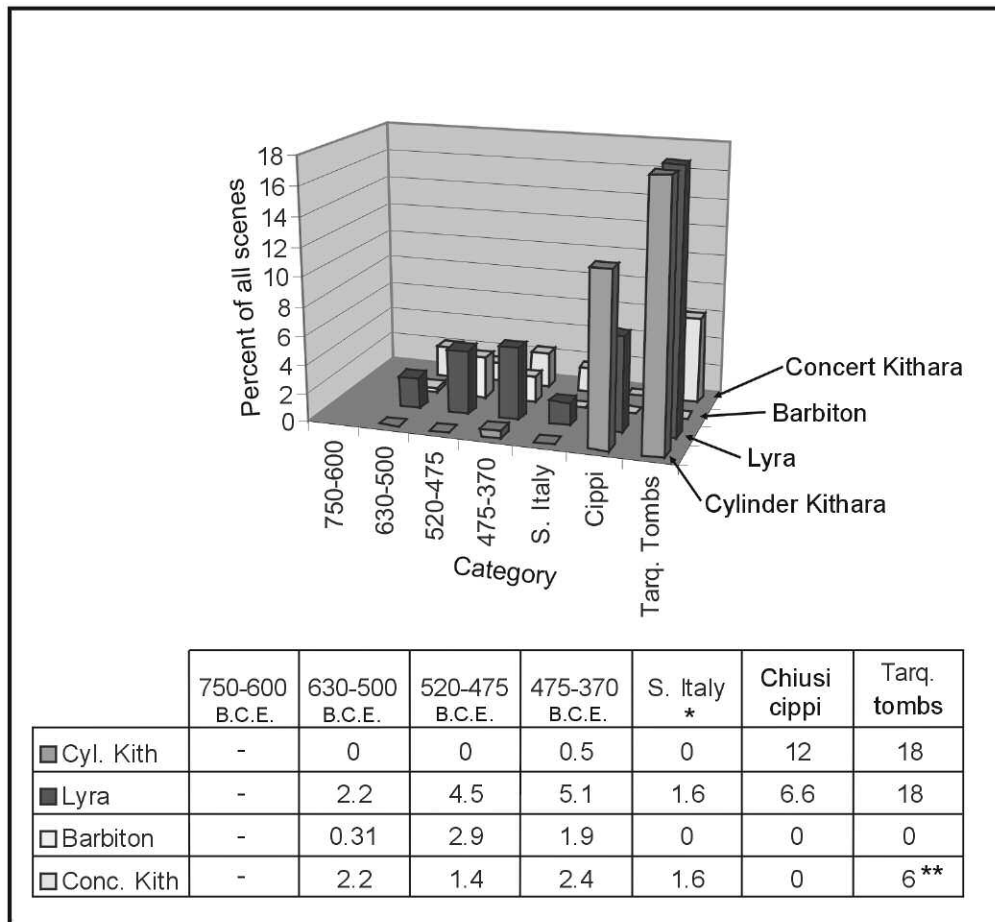


figure 2 – The relative numbers of string instruments derived from the same data pool as in Fig. 1. Note that (*) South Italy also has a few harps (0.7%) and some irregular Hellenistic models (1.3%) are hard to classify. Moreover, (**) Tarquinian Concert kitharas (fig. 5, Tomba della Fustigazione and della Pulcella) differ considerably from Athenian ones. Arguably, they should be classified as special instruments.

Graecia¹⁶ — although none in Etruria.

The **Barbiton** is similar to the Lyra, but its arms (and strings) are longer. The yoke is attached in a characteristic way — as on the Barbiton in fig. 13 (middle row, left). The **Concert kithara**¹⁷ is a much more elaborate contraption with flat bottom (fig. 5). Each arm has a lower and upper part with a narrow joint (elbow) between. Below the elbow the arm is tapered and bent; above the elbow the arm is broad and straight. The yoke connects the broad arms above the elbow. A complex mechanism (spring-like and hinge-like) is lodged in the corner between the yoke and lower arm. The **Cylinder kithara** is an elaborate lyre with round bottom, a pair of broad arms, and a yoke resting on their upper ends (fig. 6). There are cylinder-like protrusions¹⁸ at the joints between body and arms.

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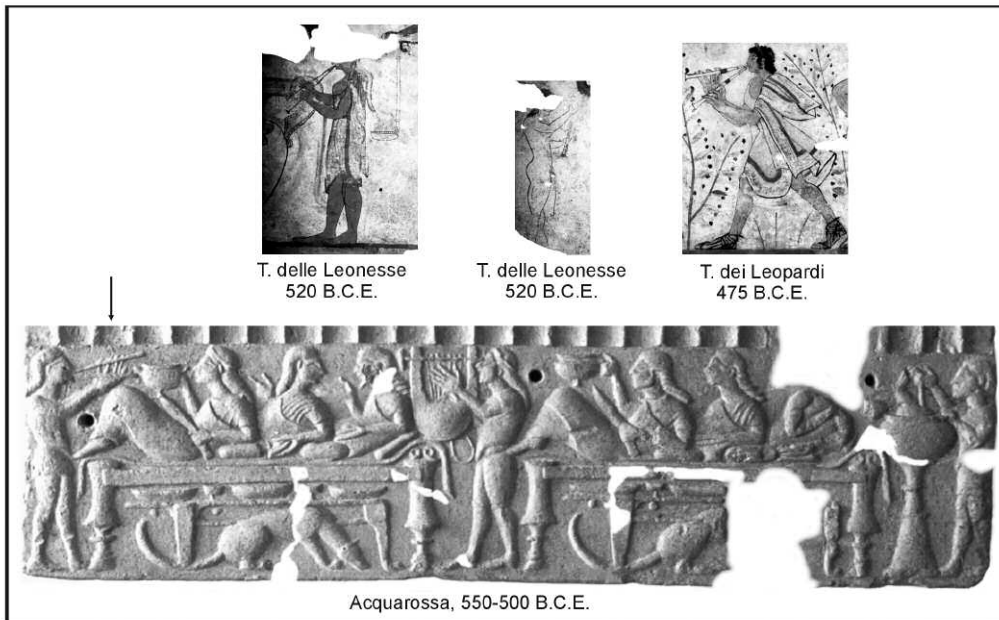


figure 3 – *The Double Pipes in Etruria. The instrument consists of two divergent pipes with vibrating reeds at the mouthpiece.*

According to fig. 2 the Lyra was the most common string instrument anywhere, and its density had a spatio-temporal pattern similar to that of pipes in fig. 1 (except in Lucanian Paestum which has no stringed instruments). In Greece the Lyra peaked during the Classical period, but it was never as popular there as in Etruria and Lucania. The most surprising instrument is the Cylinder kithara which was often shown in Etruria but rarely in Athens. As noted earlier,¹⁹ it can be called the “national instrument” of Etruria. The Concert kithara, prominent in Athens, hardly ventured abroad and Etruscans are unlikely to have played it. The examples shown in Tarquinia are suspect. They look odd, as if the painter tried to imitate Athenian Concert kitharas but misunderstood essential details. The Barbiton achieved great popularity in Athens around 500 B.C.E. but declined thereafter. Its rise may have been prompted by the arrival of Anakreon in Athens around 520. On later Attic vases he was often shown playing the Barbiton, and through him it became associated with cross-dressing young men who enjoyed Athenian high-life.²⁰

In spite of the above-mentioned caveats (that the different sampling methods associated with different media may slightly bias the densities),²¹ it is clear that many instruments are represented more often in Etruria than in Athens and Southern Italy. (An exception is the Concert kithara.) On the other hand, Lucanians at Paestum had fewer stringed instruments than Etruria and Greece (none, in fact) but used more double pipes than the latter region.²² If Etruscan artists helped paint the Lucanian tombs, they put Etruscan musical taste aside.

Depictions of unplayed instruments (as in fig. 4, *Tomba della Caccia e Pesca* and

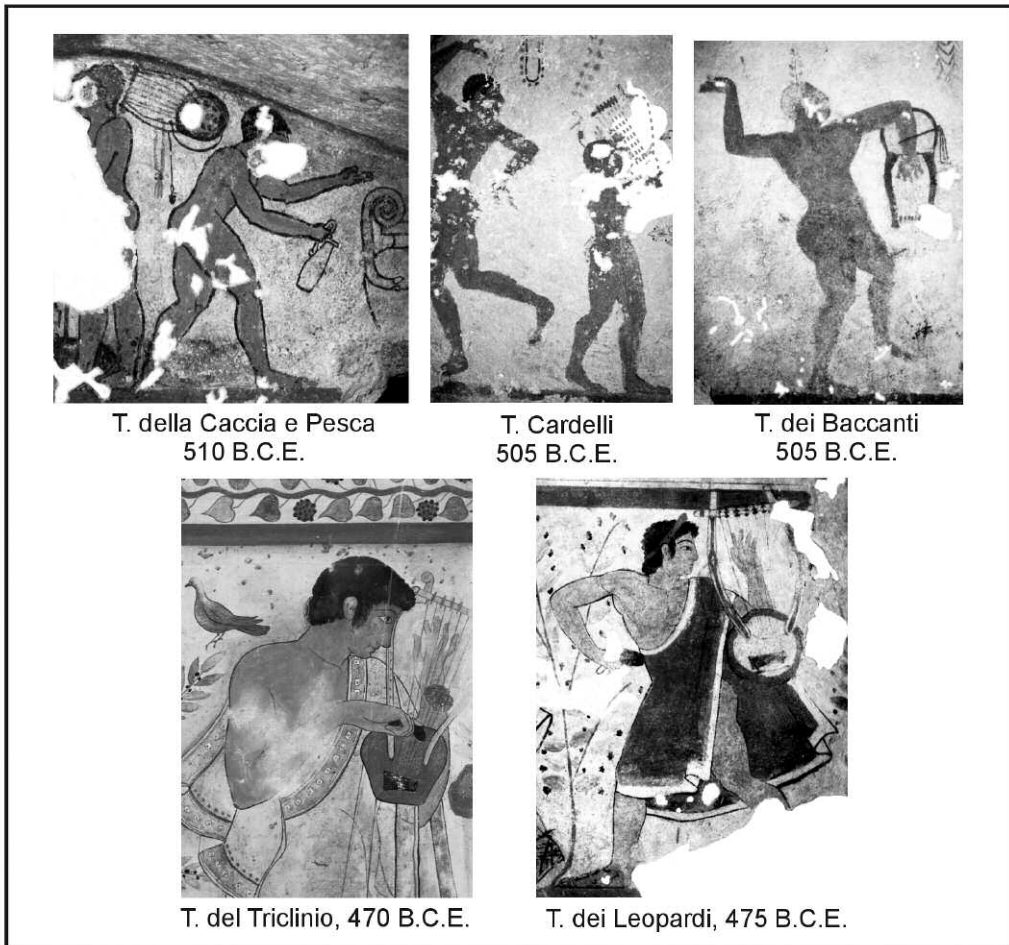


figure 4 – *The Lyra in Etruria, an instrument with round bottom. Aspects of the lyre in Tomba del Triclinio resemble a Barbiton (i.e. the top of the arms), but the size agrees with the Lyra.*

in the *Tomba del Pulcinella*²³) are rare on Attic vases at the time of the Etruscan examples (late sixth century), but with time such displays became increasingly frequent on South Italian vases. Figure 8 has data from Apulian vases.²⁴ Lyres appear less frequently at this time and place, but most are shown in regular performance: the player's left hand touches the strings from behind and the right hand strikes them with a plectrum. However, on a small fraction of scenes lyres are merely held and displayed, not played.²⁵ In some cases they hang unplayed on walls or stand on floors. We notice the increasing rate of such "display lyres" in fig. 8. Perhaps the trend implies that instruments gradually became symbols. The ultimate example is the "Apotheosis of Homer," a Hellenistic relief (3rd or 2nd century B.C.E.).²⁶ There are four lyres, none is played and one leans against a cliff. Without textual evidence there can be no certainty, but lyres appear to have become objects of nostalgia and symbols of the 'mother-country' for Greek settlers and their descendants.

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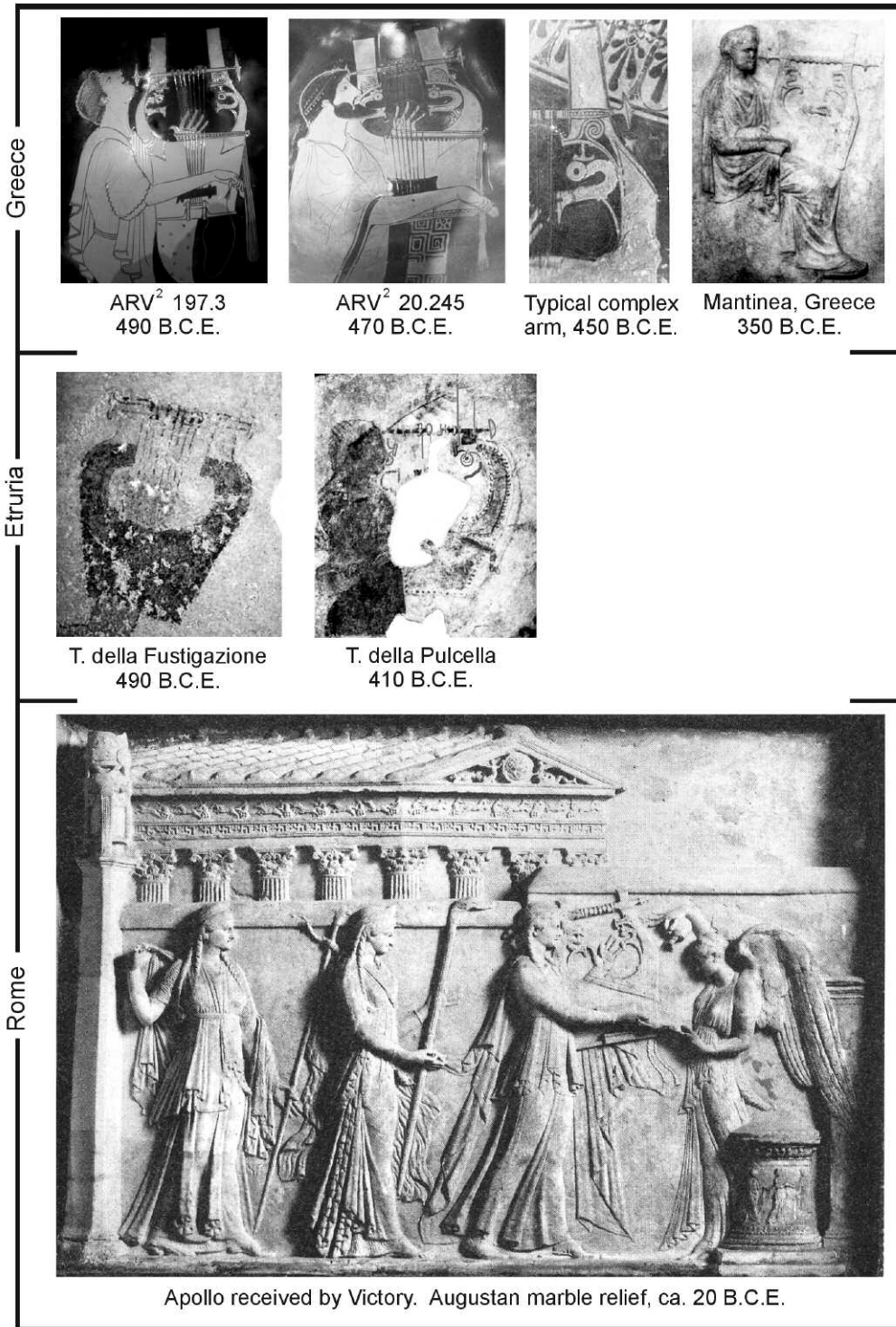


figure 5 – The Concert Kithara in Greece, Etruria and Rome. In Greece it was the most prestigious type of lyre and its large size and complex arm structure underscored its status. The most conspicuous parts of the complexity were thick U-shaped parts, supported above and below with thinner straps and spirals.

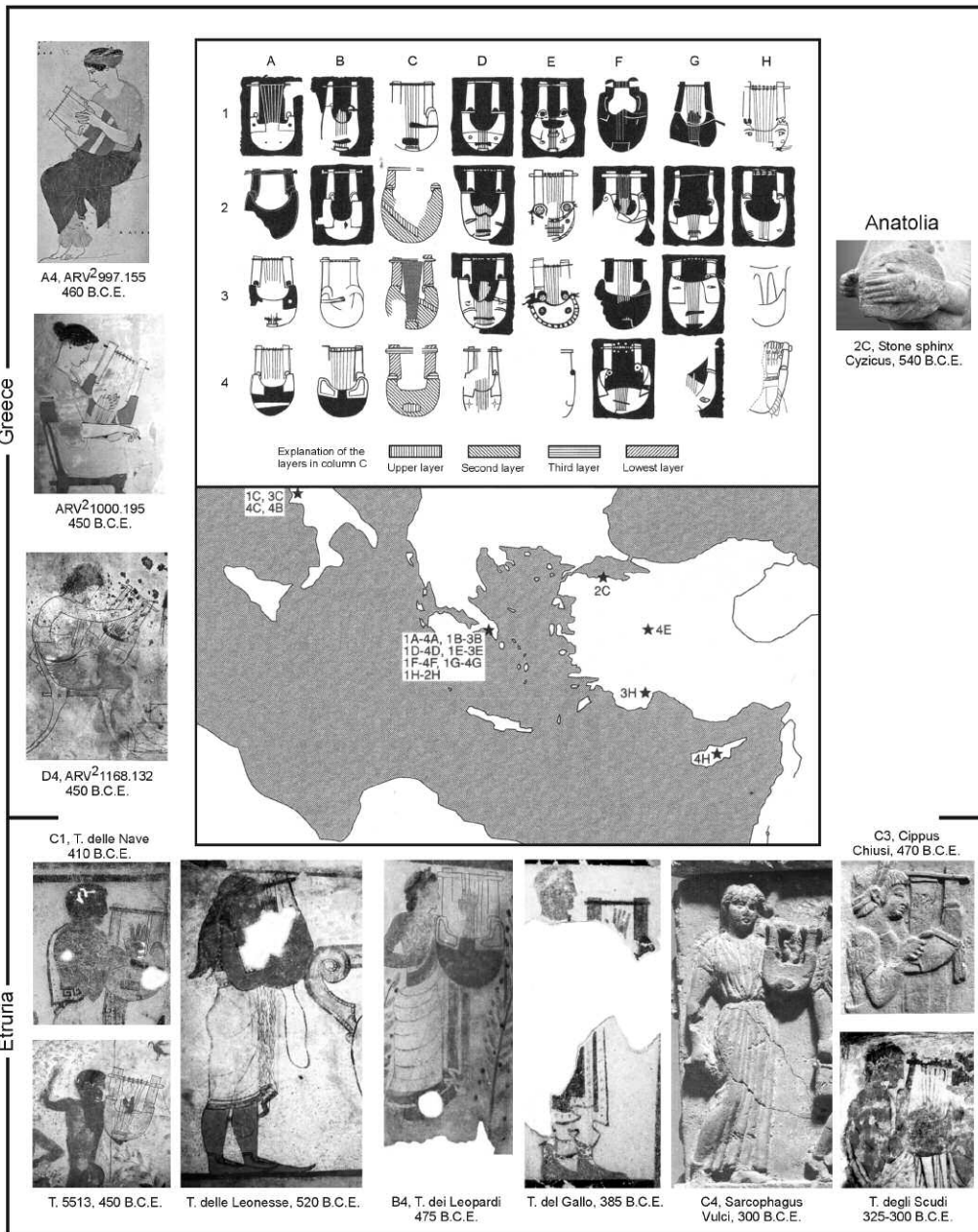


figure 6 – The Cylinder Kithara in Anatolia, Greece, and Etruria. It has distinct cylindrical parts at the joint between the sound box and the arms. The central section of the figure shows most of the known corpus and the unique geographical spread (Lawergren 1984, fig. 5). Coordinates used in this section are retained on illustrations in the periphery of the figure.

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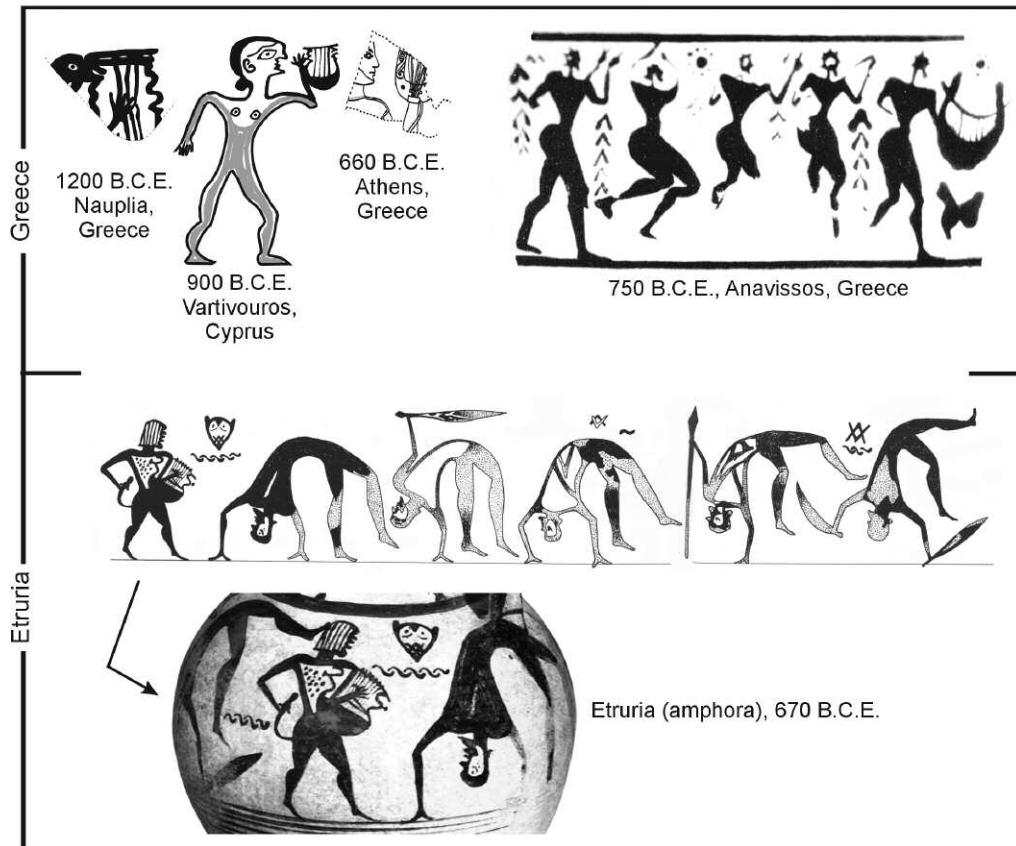


figure 7 – The earliest lyres in Etruria, ca. 700 B.C.E. Instruments with round bottom and complex arm-structures existed first in Greece and then in Etruria. In both places it played for acrobatic dancers. The complexity seems unlike those we find two centuries later on Cylinder or Concert kitbaras. (For the Etruscan amphora, see Martelli 1987: fig. 38; for the Greek images, Aign 1963: 379 and Lawergren 1998: fig. 5p.)

ICONOGRAPHIC/ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACH

Now we take a closer look at some distinct groups of instruments while continuing in the comparative mode.

1. THE EARLIEST LYRES IN ETRURIA. In Greece and on Crete lyres first arrived during the second millennium B.C.E.,²⁷ and the instrument at Ayia Triada (fig. 10) is among the earliest. All had round bottoms and many show structure at the elbows (cf. Nauplia, Vartivouros, and Athens in fig. 7, top row). At this time drawings are not realistic representations. Still, the artist went to some effort indicating the complex arm-structure. Likewise, when lyres entered Etruria, their arms possessed complexity (fig. 7, lower part). Both the round bottom and the arm-structure of the lyre are borrowed from Greece. In addition, the social setting relates to Greek conditions: the Anavissos lyre player accompanies a troop of high-jumping males; the Etruscan player leads a band of acrobatic men.

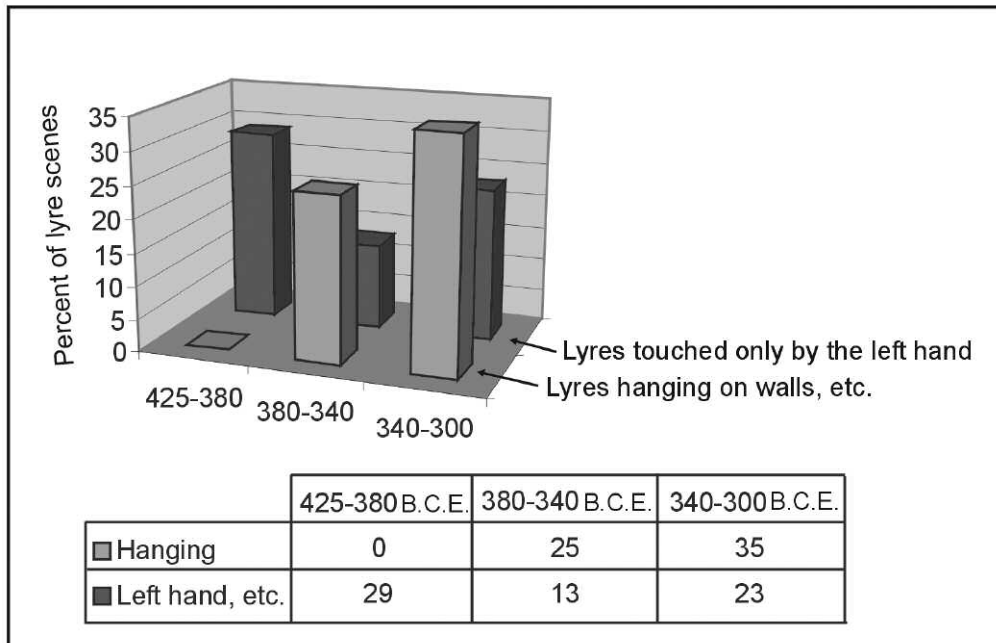


figure 8 – Histograms based on representations of played and unplayed lyres on the South Italian vases.

2. THE CYLINDER KITHARA (fig. 6). This is the dominant kithara in Etruria. With its complexity (cylinders) at the arms and its round bottom, it follows Aegean Bronze Age traditions. In Etruria Cylinder kitharas were often shown on a variety of media (painted vases and walls, sculpted stone reliefs) and they retained a fixed design for a long time (520–300 B.C.E.).²⁸ Their first appearance occurred in Anatolia around 540 B.C.E., (fig. 6, top right) and they spread to several Ionian centers. In Athens they were briefly fashionable (fig. 6, top left), but in Etruria they played a more sustained role (fig. 6, bottom). During their Athenian phase, shapes began to vary slightly, but the cylindrical knobs remained.²⁹ The historical and geographic pattern of the migration and adoption is similar to that of some types of Ionian dress.³⁰

3. THE CONCERT KITHARA (fig. 5).³¹ Although this was the most prestigious lyre in Athens, it had a modest role in Etruria. The two examples identified here (*Tomba della Fustigazione* and *Tomba della Pulcella*) illustrate a problem. In outline each instrument is similar to the Athenian model, but they lack the complex arm-structure always seen in Athens. The picturesque instrument in *Pulcella* has some complex features, but they appear in the wrong places. Apparently, the Etruscan instrument-maker (or painter) misunderstood the Athenian design.

The absence of Concert kitharas in Etruria, contrasts starkly with their abundance in Athens. They survived on South Italian vases but with declining frequency and with large variations in design. This virtually changed them into new instruments, and a plethora of designs arose during the late Hellenistic and Roman periods. Although con-

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T. Cardarelli, 505 B.C.E.



T. 5591, 495 B.C.E.



T. della Fustigazione, 490 B.C.E.



T. 3713, 395 B.C.E.

figure 9—Lyres held aloft in Etruria.

spicuously different from the Athenian model, they were probably inspired by the latter, and it seems appropriate to label them using the Latin term “cithara.” Such citharas also entered late Etruscan tombs.³²

In the late first century B.C.E. “Athenian” Concert kitharas were reintroduced to Italy as part of the Augustan renaissance, an effort to emulate classical Greek customs. A fine example is given by marble relief of Apollo holding a large instrument (fig. 5, bottom). The scene may allude to a Palatine festival where Victory received Apollo in the presence of the Emperor.³³ The instrument may have been modeled after the Mantinea (Greece) altar piece (fig. 5, top right).³⁴ In turn, it inspired many Roman copies.³⁵

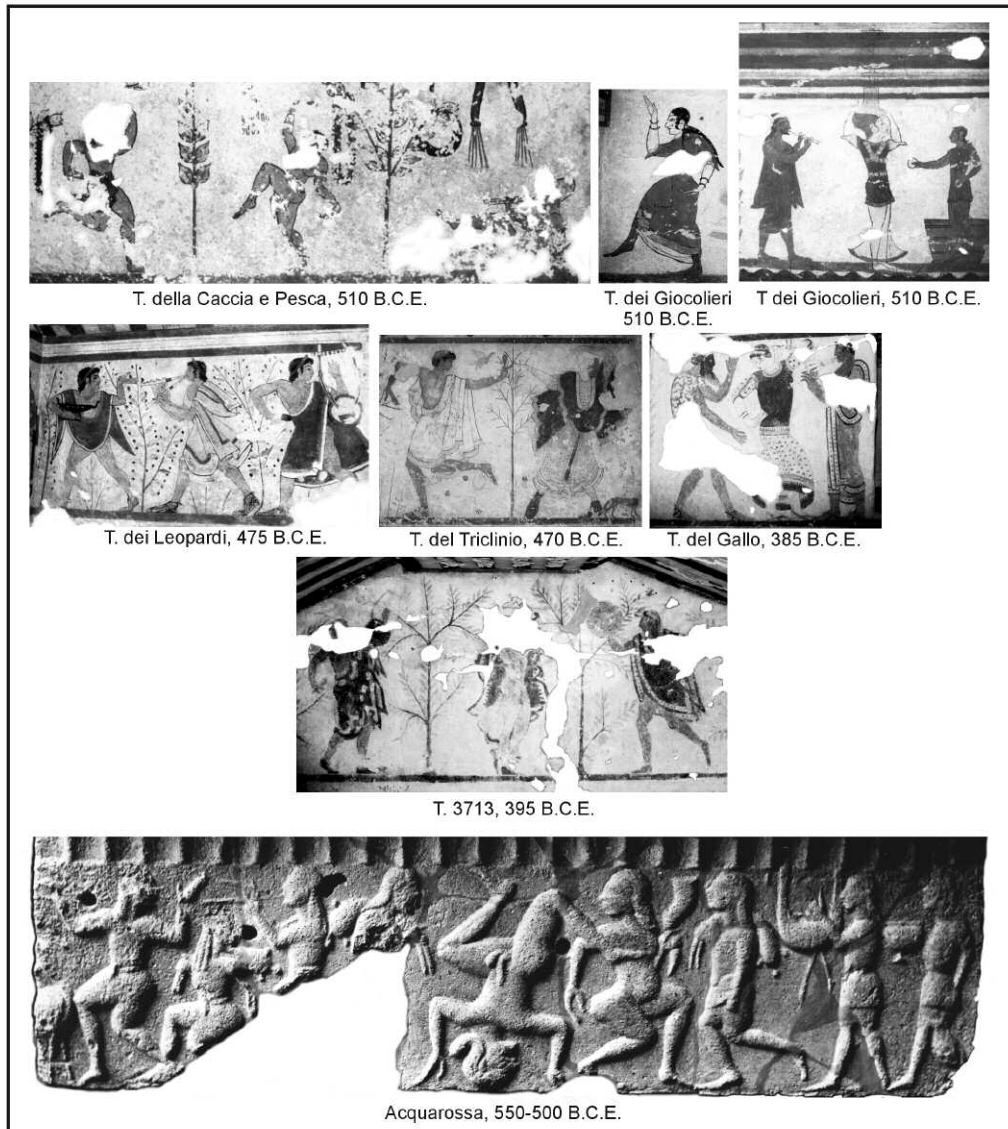


figure 10– Music for dance and acrobatics in Etruria.

4. THE LYRA (fig. 4). This instrument is no different from its Greek relative, but circumstances may differ.³⁶ As in Greece, it provided entertainment for symposium participants (often accompanied by double pipes), exciting rhythms for dancers, dramatic strains at boxing matches,³⁷ and funereal music at the *prothesis*. In Greece it was held at a relatively low position with the top end of the arms near the player's head, but in Etruria it was often shown at a much higher position (fig. 9). The posture brings to mind the high jumps of Etruscan dancers (fig. 10). In both cases performers appear more vigorous than do their Greek counterparts.³⁸ Most likely the upside-down Lyra in *Tomba dei Baccanti* (fig. 4) is caught in the midst of an equilibristic maneuver.

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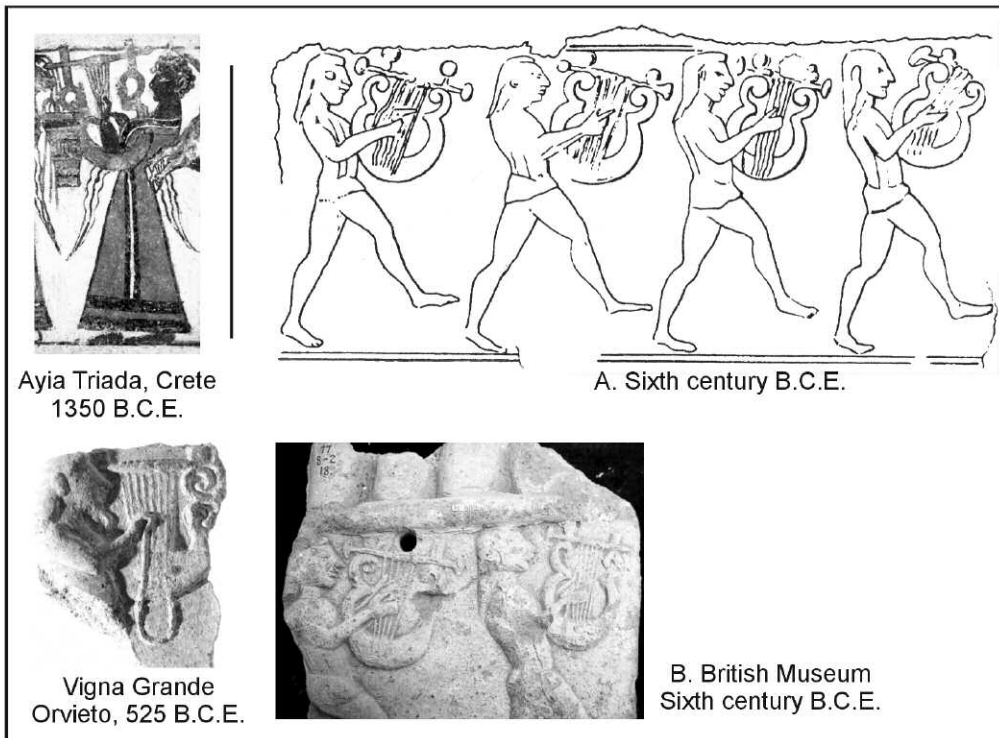


figure 11—Late echos of an ancient (Aegean Bronze Age) lyre in Etruria. The lyre painted on a sarcophagus in Crete, ca. 1350 B.C.E. has a thin moon-like sound box surmounted by curved arms. These, in turn, support straight vertical arms. This design disappeared until it crops up eight centuries later at several places in Etruria. (For Vigna Grande, see Stopponi 1993.)

5. ARCHAIC LYRES. Several illustrations of Etruscan lyres lack close parallels,³⁹ and without confirming examples, it is hardly worth discussing them. But one unusual type, known from three similar images on architectural terracottas (fig. 11), deserves attentions.⁴⁰ Its arms are shaped like two C-shaped parts mounted one on top of the other. On top is a short and broad upper arm. The yoke rests directly on the upper C. Oddly, the only known lyre with similar features is from Bronze Age Greece (Pylos) and Crete (Ayia Triada and Sitia).⁴¹ Since the Bronze Age lyres are 800 years older, the similarity may be illusory. There is also a visual similarity (again perhaps deceptive) to lyres illustrated on Etruscan/Alpine situlae and instruments engraved on Middle Minoan seals a millennium earlier.⁴²

6. DOUBLE-PIPES, fig. 3. Whenever shown clearly (e.g., *Tomba dei Leopardi*), Etruscan double-pipes⁴³ cannot be distinguished from contemporary pipes in the Aegean, a region where they had existed since the Bronze Age⁴⁴ following their invention in third millennium Mesopotamia.⁴⁵ Each Etruscan pipe is a narrow tube with finger-holes, and each is joined to a double-reed⁴⁶ mouthpiece. The pipes in *Tomba delle Leonesse* provide a curious exception. They are drawn as long narrow lines terminated with short perpendicular finials at the far end. At first glance one might conclude the artist wished to show

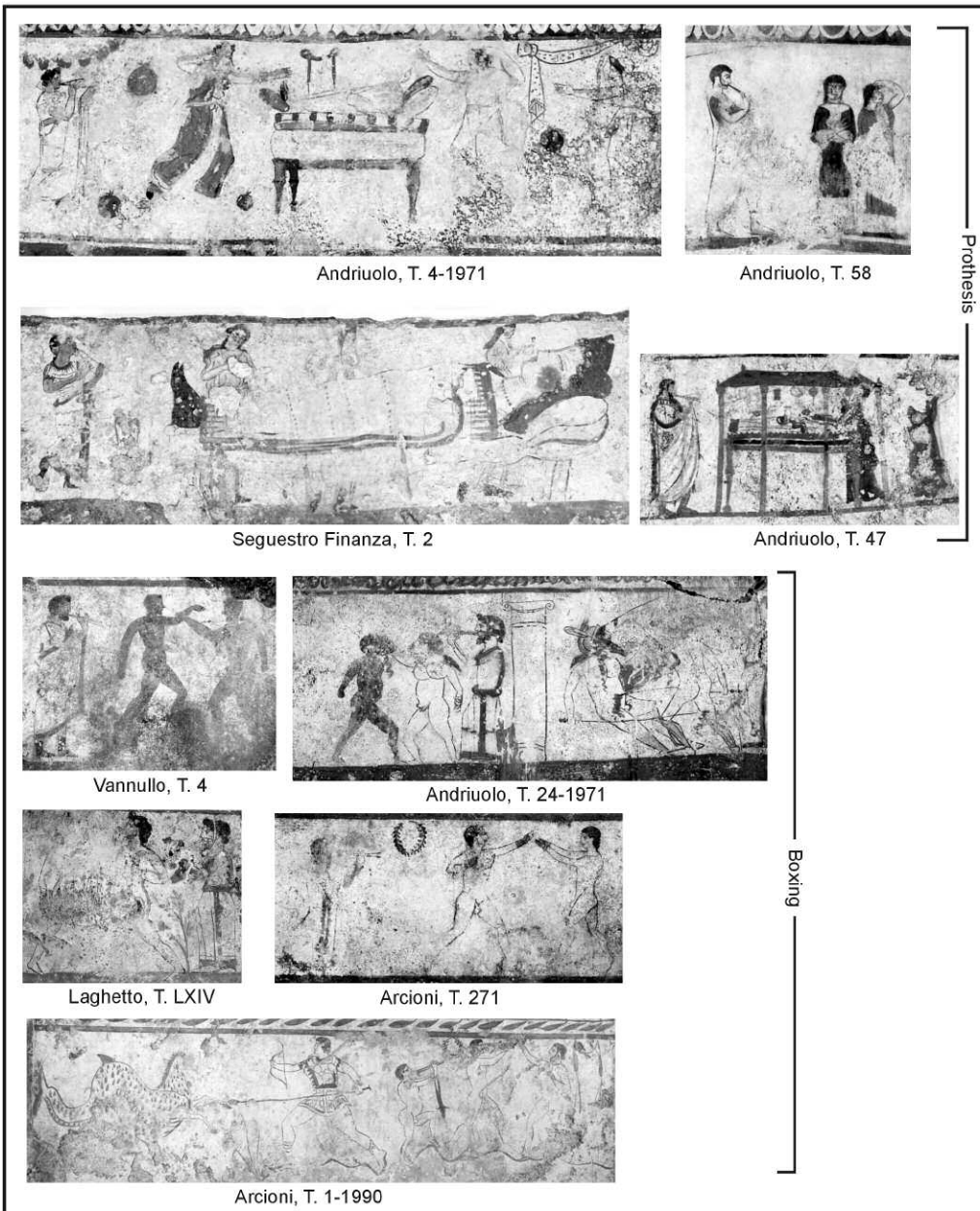


figure 12– Lucanian tombs in Paestum, 400–300 B.C.E. Only double-pipes were used.

schematic pipes, but he or she drew the ladle behind the player with great care. This design is enigmatic.

Although double-pipes were imported instruments, Etruscan players gained great renown as players, and their reputation spread far and wide, e.g. an Athenian philosopher of the third century was given the nick-name “Tyrrhenos” because he fancied pipe playing.⁴⁷

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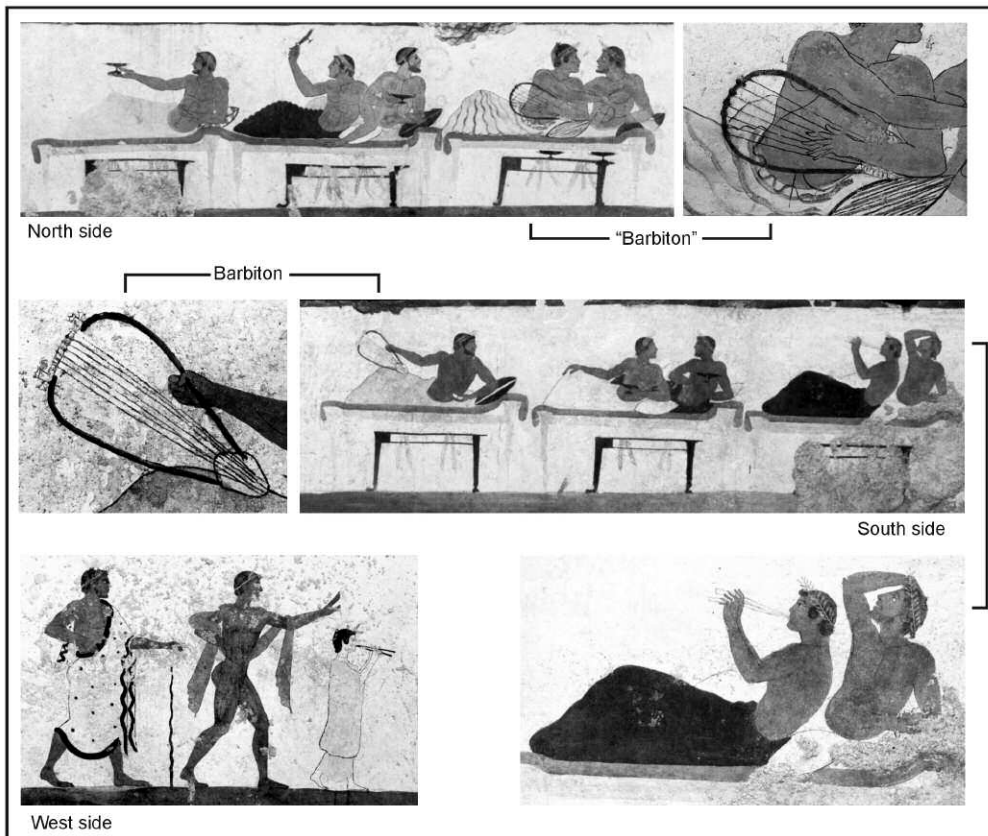


figure 13—Tomba del Tuffatore, 480 B.C.E. The tomb found near Paestum betrays strong influences by the Greeks that governed this city before the Lucanian conquest.

7. LUCANIAN TOMBS, fig. 13. Compared to Etruscan musical usage, the Lucanian setting is drastically circumscribed. Only double-pipes are illustrated, and the social context is narrow. Two ceremonial occasions favor music: pugilistic combat and the *prothesis*. Boxers were always nude while most pipers were heavily dressed (except Arconi, Tomba 1–1990 with a nude piper). Blood may gush from boxers (as in Andriuolo, Tomba 24–1971), but the musician pipes on without flinching. They remain equally calm at funerals. Although some bereaved people are visually upset (Andriuolo, Tomba 58), the player remains unaffected.

8. TOMBA DEL TUFFATORE, fig. 14. Prior to its conquest by the Lucanians, Paestum was a Greek colony, and ties with the mother country seem strong, not least in the *Tomba del Tuffatore*, 480 B.C.E.⁴⁸ Five stone slabs (four sides and the lid) of the tomb have figurative scenes, and three feature splendid music-making. The north and south sides each have a group of five male symposium guests, and each group includes a Barbiton player.⁴⁹ There are also two pipers, one on the western side, the other on the south side. The high visibility of the Barbiton proves that the tomb is uninfluenced by Etruria. Instead,

its ties are with Greece where the Barbiton was in ample supply at this time (fig. 2). On the other hand, the aulos was used in all cultures discussed here. Its ubiquity is likely to have brought an element of commonality to the musical cultures of Etruria, Greece and Italy.

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NOTES

1. E.g. Heurgon 1964, 195–204; Pallottino 1978, 155–157; Stützer 1985, 57–77.
2. Even a subtle observer like Pallottino draws suspect conclusions: “The instruments (and, consequently, the rhythms, harmonies, and melodic arrangements) are manifestly the same in Etruria as in the musical world of the Greeks.” (1978, 155).
3. Fleischhauer 1964, 7–10 and Pls. 1–20. Several highly condensed versions have recently appeared (Fleischhauer 2001, 408–412; Fleischhauer 1995, 188–199).
4. Jannot 1979, 469–504; Jannot 1974, 118–142.
5. Jannot (1990, 43–51) and (1994, 65–81) deals with the social position of musicians.
6. Lawergren 1984, 147–174; Lawergren 1998, 41–68. The Cylinder Kithara was called “Cradle kithara” by some earlier scholars who grouped several categories together. Usually this name was applied to any lyre with round bottom during the second and first millennium. But that corpus included many amorphous-looking lyres roughly drawn on Geometric-style vases (800–600 B.C.E.) and all plainly lacked the details that define the Cylinder kithara. Just as in the case of the Concert kithara, the latter is well-defined and distinct from other types. It deserves its own name. Since “Cradle kithara” never was defined beyond the round bottom, and the name has been applied to many distinct types, I find this terminology unclear and avoid it.
7. Pontrandolfo and Rouveret (1992) compiled a list of 51 tombs with figurative drawings. 37% have aulos players, generally unaccompanied. Most play at boxing scenes, a few at biers for the dead (the prothesis).
8. Trendall (1989) gives 451 illustrated vases painted between 400 and 300 B.C.E. in Apulia, Sicily, Campania, Paestum, and Lucania.
9. To obtain the density, I count the total number of depicted instruments in a particular medium and during a particular time period; the number is divided by the total number of scenes (with and without music) in that medium and period.
10. Steingraber (1986) includes color photos from 49 tombs. I personally inspected and photographed 20 tombs (including 2 not given in the book). This gives a total of 51 tombs. The large walls can accommodate more scenes than vases and cippi. On the

other hand, many scenes have disappeared. Because of the difference in the nature of the media, the frequencies may not be directly comparable to those of vases and cippi. However, the densities at Tarquinia are so much higher than on Greek vases that uncertainties become insignificant.

11. Jannot (1984) lists 122 scenes with or without instruments. Numerical uncertainties arise from scene selections. Unlike the case of Greek vases, there are many fragments with partial scenes. I eliminate those — unless they show instruments. Another difference is the four-sidedness of cippi, all reproduced here. This tends to produce larger frequencies than on vases, but can hardly account for the much higher density value here. Chiusi cippi with instruments are dated 510 – 450 B.C.E. (Jannot 1984, 301).
12. Four easily accessible books give compendious surveys of Greek vases in sufficient numbers. In the period 750–600 B.C.E. there are 511 vases (Boardman 1998). The period 630–500 B.C.E. has 321 vases (Boardman 1974). For 520–475 B.C.E. Boardman has 277 vases (1975). In 475–370 B.C.E. there are 371 vases (Boardman 1989). In the latter compilation I exclude vases labeled Later Classical II, i.e. those after 370 B.C.E. In the earliest period, lyres cannot yet be divided into the classes distinguished here, e.g. there are no Concert kitharas like those in fig. 5. Systematic uncertainties are recognized: the compilations have only one photo per vase and the hidden side of a vase may have instruments.
13. I.e. 750–600, 630–500, 520–475, 475–370 B.C.E. for Attic vases; 400–300 B.C.E. for South Italian vases; 650–300 B.C.E. for Tarquinian tombs; 400–300 B.C.E. for Lucanian tombs.
14. Even with the caveats listed in notes 10, 11, 12.
15. Other types of strings, such as harps and lutes were rare, the former only gaining ground on South Italian ware.
16. Greece: Argos (Courbin 1980, figs. 5ff); Arta (Phaklaris 1977, fig. 4, pl. 79); Delos (Daux 1965, 981; Bruneau 1970, 233, pl. 38); Bassae (Phaklaris 1977, fig. 2, pls. 77–78). — Magna Graecia: Locri (Phaklaris 1977, fig. 7); Paestum (Cipriani 1989, 87 & fig. 10); Metaponto (Carter 1998, 820–3). Even Tomba del Tuffatore (fig. 13) contained carapace fragments of a lyre or barbiton, but the find has never been published.
17. In modern usage, “kithara” merely means “a large type of lyre.” It has little to do with ancient usage which began with Homer. The Lyra or Barbiton, being small and/or narrow, can never be called Kithara. It is helpful to distinguish the Greek kithara (ca. 650–400 B.C.E.) from the Roman cithara (ca. 200 B.C.E.–300 AD), two very different types of lyre.
18. For evidence on the structure, see Lawergren 1984 and Lawergren 1993.
19. Lawergren 1984, 169.
20. Kurtz and Boardman 1986.
21. Note 14.
22. For “Lucanian” vases produced in the south (near Metaponto) the conclusion does not hold, witness nos. 20 and 98 in Trendall 1989.

23. Moltesen and Weber-Lehmann 1991, 123.
24. Trendall and Cambitoglu 1978 and 1982.
25. They are held by a strap attached between the player's left wrist and the Lyra's right arm.
26. Richter 1967, 171.
27. I.e., a millennium after lyres had first appeared in Mesopotamia. For general accounts of early developments, see Lawergren 1996 and Lawergren 2001.
28. Lawergren 1984, 166–8.
29. The central line-drawings in fig. 6 display most known representations and clarify the wide geographical spread throughout the Aegean world. Many in columns D–H come from Attic vases. Their shapes increasingly deviate in the representations towards the right columns of the line-drawing.
30. Bonfante 1975, 38.
31. The name was popularized by Winnington-Ingram, e.g. in 1958, 14.
32. Blanck and Weber-Lehmann 1987, fig. 139 from Tomba Querciola (410–350 B.C.E.).
33. Galinsky 1996, 217.
34. Athens, National Museum, inv. no. 216.
35. Now shown in Villa Albani, Rome (Bol 1989, pls. 218–21), Millesgården, Stockholm (Andrén 1965, 112–113, and pl. 37), The British Museum (Inv no. GR 1805.7–3.333) and Musée du Louvre (Héron de Villefosse 1896, 59 [no. 965]).
36. One exception is the hybrid instrument in Tomba del Triclinio (fig. 4) which Steingraber calls a barbiton (1986, 352). Indeed, its shape is Barbiton-like but its size Lyra-like.
37. Thuillier 1985. Also wrestler and pipes in Tomba delle Iscrizioni, 520 B.C.E., Moltesen and Weber-Lehmann 1991, 102.
38. The evident energy was praised by Lawrence (1994, 73): “This sense of vigorous, strong-bodied liveliness is characteristic of the Etruscans, and is somehow beyond art. You cannot think of art, but only life itself, as if this were the life of the Etruscans, dancing in their colored wraps with massive yet exuberant naked limbs, ruddy from the air and the sea-light, dancing and piping (originally ‘fluting’) along through the little olive trees, out in the fresh day.” Heurgon (1964, 202–3) also remarks on it.
39. E.g. those on Acquarossa tiles, see figs. 3 (middle of the bottom row) and 10 (right side of bottom row).
40. The line drawing was published by Behn (1954) as coming from Capua, and Aign (1963, 187) asserts it belongs to a chest, but neither piece of information can be verified. However, it is similar to the scene on the British Museum plaque (B 603), evidently unknown to them. The terracotta was published long ago, Walters 1903, 170. According to Koch (1912, 19, 94, and pl. 30) it surfaced in 1873 in Campania.
41. Younger 1998, pls. 10, 13 and 14.
42. Boardman 1971, 134. Here the parallels are instruments carved on Knossos seals. Most likely they show harps, not lyres, see Lawergren 2000a, fig. 1H.
43. Etruscan: subolo; Greek: aulos; Latin: tibiae.

44. Younger 1998, 28–33.
45. Lawergren 2000b.
46. Incorporating reed mouthpieces, they are not flutes (Becker 1966), although often misnamed by classicists and museum curators.
47. Heurgon 1964, 198.
48. Napoli 1970.
49. Since the Barbiton on the tomb's north side lacks a yoke, tuning collars sit on the upper, strongly curved, part of the arm. The construction is precarious, for the collars might easily slide downward. But the Barbiton on the south side adopts a perfectly normal Athenian design.

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