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The Guitar in the Middle Ages and Renaissance

By

Julie Carmen

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In the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) world there are high standards for recovering and reconstructing the truth in history. Recorded history determines how we re-create the Middle Ages, and it is with much determination that we search for as many facts as possible for each of our varied interests. This article seeks to clarify the historical authenticity of one of the most popular musical instruments, the guitar.

In preparation for this search, guidelines had to be set as to what the Society deems “authentic”. Is it more aesthetically pleasing to see an instrument as identical as it would have been in the Middle Ages, even if the materials used to create it may not allow for the best tone, or would it be permissible to use finer or modern materials to keep a longer-tuned, better tonality instrument when performing? It is the opinion of this author that modern materials do not ruin or change the sound or purpose of an instrument, and that a guitar should be treated as an equal representation of a medieval instrument if used in a performing arts competition, say, up against a plastic recorder, a modern-day lute or a ceramic drum.

It is commonly believed that the lute is far older than the guitar. Although the focus of this article is on the latter instrument, occasional comparisons to the lute are included to assist the reader in a better understanding of the evolution of medieval stringed instruments. Despite the lute’s stronger claim to precedence, however, there is evidence to suggest that the guitar – or the ancestor of the guitar – is far older than is commonly realized.

Properties of the Guitar

For the purpose of this article, “guitar” is defined as an instrument with a flat back, which produces acoustic sound by means of strings stretched over wooden sound box and a fretted neck.¹

Robert Paul Clarke, in his master’s thesis, *A Musical History of the Guitar*, notes that the guitar seemed to appear and disappear throughout history. He has also found that the names of identical instruments are less than consistent throughout history.

Not only were there a great many variations in the nomenclature in the past, but the variety of spellings for guitar, lute and Pandora in present day works has not been standardized for future generations.²

This dilemma is not exclusive to the instruments mentioned by Clarke. An excellent example can be found in approximately 600 A.D., when music developed in Japan while it declined in China. The Chinese instrument known as the ch’in was named the *koto* in Japan. This instrument has also been named a “Chinese lute” but we would name it a “long zither”. The Japanese instrument, *biwa*, was actually the Chinese *p’ip’a*. The stringed instrument used by street singers and geishas was called the *samisen* and it is a guitar.³ Over the centuries, such name-changing makes it very difficult to follow a steady lineage of many of the stringed instruments.

In the 14th century in Spain, the guitar had three other names: the *guitarra Latina*, the *guitarra moresca*, and the *guitarra saracena*. These instruments are also seen in the very elaborate Spanish manuscript of the thirteenth century *Las Cantigas de Santa Maria*. This manuscript is comprised of four codices. In the Escorial Codex B.I.2, fol. 140, musicians are

depicted playing plucked lutes, but a source describes the instruments as examples of *vihuelas de penola*.⁴ In the same codex, fol. 147, musicians are shown playing plucked lutes, and the same source describes them as examples of the *guitarra Latina* and the *guitarra morisca*.⁵ Another source, however, describes the same miniature as: “Waisted guitar with five strings an oval guitar with five divergent strings.”⁶ As indicated above, instruments are frequently named “lutes” with guitar names added in brackets or vice-versa.

To understand the difference between the lute and the guitar, it is helpful to know some lineage of both instruments. The kithara, from approximately 2500 B.C. would be considered the most ancient of the guitar family.⁷ An example can be seen on an Attic vase, c. 500 B.C., at Kassel, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen.⁸ Although it had no neck, it did possess seven strings stretched over a wooden body with a flat back.

The kithara supports strings on a frame and the guitar supports its strings on a neck, which has no bearing on the acoustics of the instrument; only in the appearance.⁹

The ancestor of the lute family is considered by some to be the lyra from 1250B.C. The lyra first developed by tying strings across a tortoise shell, thus creating a rounded-back instrument which (so the theory goes) later developed into the lute. An example of the long-necked lute can be seen on a tomb of Nakhat near Thebes, 15th B.C.¹⁰

Although many authors will call the same instrument either a “guitar-like” or a “lute-like” instrument, it can be safe to consider an instrument with a flat back, strings, fretted neck, and sound holes to be a member of the guitar family. An instrument with the same attributes save for a *rounded* back would be considered to be of the lute family. The shape of the back is the distinguishing feature, as the acoustic effect is shared by both types of instrument.

It may be argued that another factor to consider when characterizing an instrument is the manner in which it was tuned. The *kithara* was tuned in what are called “tetra chords,” a succession of four descending notes consisting normally of a whole tone. A standard tuning of the present-day guitar is much the same, but with a 3rd thrown in.¹¹ The six-string guitar, when strings are played open, is tuned as follows: E A D G B E (three fourths, one third and another fourth).

A popular tuning of the lute is almost the same, except that it has one less fourth.¹² Thus, if the guitar and the lute have basic tuning similarities, it is therefore possible to strum the same chord or pick the same notes on either instrument. For example, the chord “C” can be played on either a lute or a guitar, although a different form is required. “Form” is the word used to describe the shape that is made by the left hand on the neck of the guitar or lute when playing a certain chord. Since different instruments may produce the same sounds with different forms, and since the same instrument may be tuned in more than one manner (thus requiring the use of different forms to produce the same sound) it may be safely judged that tuning is not a sufficient method for characterizing different musical instruments.

Another challenge states that in order to be considered a guitar, an instrument must have six strings. The number of strings or courses, however, does not change the instrument. Throughout history, just about every imaginable combination of strings and courses have been tried. When an instrument is described as being a “four course” guitar, this means that the strings are doubled. For example, our modern day 6-string guitar has six strings. If it is a 12-string guitar, it would be described as a six course guitar.

Moreover, the same challenge has not been applied to other historical instruments. One type of lute has five courses, with a final single string, for total of eleven strings. The *vihuela*

became very similar to the modern 12-string guitar, and many sources claim that they are the same instrument.¹³ In his treatise, *Tratado de Instrumentos*, (published in Osuna, Spain 1555), Fray Juan Bermundo made a comparison of the two instruments by implying that when you want a guitar or a *vihuela*, you take off or put on courses, (take or add strings) and keep the corresponding tuning identical.¹⁴

Confusion abounds, because stringed instruments throughout the centuries have been forever changing by adding or taking away strings, and by tuning them in creative ways. Any instrument maker will tell you that each instrument is different, and that making a very special instrument is part of the challenge and thrill of being the creator. Based on this, how can it be said that a six-stringed, flat-backed, waisted instrument with a fretted neck has not existed before the sixteenth century?

The similarities between the *guitarra Latina* in *Las Cantigas de Santa Maria* (1221-1284), and the guitar-like instrument depicted on a stone-relief on a gate of 1400 B.C. are worthy of notice. The latter is said to be one of the earliest known representations of the guitar with all of its basic characteristics. This stone relief is found at the New Hittite Empire settlement at Alaja Huyuk which is located in Anatolia¹⁵The following features are found on both instruments: curved or waisted sides, held against the body (showing that it has a flat back). The instrument is held by a neck, which appears to have frets. Sound holes are evident, with the *Cantigas* showing a single central sound hole, and the Hittite stone relief showing eight to ten small sound holes. In the latter, the holes number four or five above and below the neck and strings are stretched along the neck on the flat body of the instrument.¹⁶ These two figures indicate that the guitar has been around since 1400B.D, and developed even more popularity during the 13th century.

The Guitar Throughout History

The name guitar is a modification of the Greek work *kithara*. Its present-day form is more likened to the late Roman *kithara* form, which dates from around 2500 B.C. There is a carving from the first century A.D. of a guitar-like instrument found in the Russian Buddhist monastery at Airtam near Termez. It can now be located in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad.¹⁷ An excellent example from the 3rd century A.D. can be seen from a limestone sarcophagus found near Arles. It shows a *kithara* beside a side view of a full-bodied lute. This tomb appears to be that of a musician, and the remains of a plectrum were also found.¹⁸ From this it is clear that an instrument with a flat, wooden back and strings over a sound hole existed in the time period leading up to the Middle Ages.

Bowed and plucked stringed instruments with flat backs have been used for thousands of years. The *rebec*, *crowd*, *chrotta*, and Welsh *crwth* all enjoyed popularity in the Middle Ages. The lineage of such instruments seems to start with the *rotta* or *chrotta*.

Venantius Fortunatus mentioned the *chrotta* in the sixth century.¹⁹ An example of a seventh century *chrotta* can be seen at the London, British Museum. It was excavated at the Sutton Hoo ship burial, and shows a rectangular wooden instrument with a flat back and six strings. There are two small sound holes on the lower half of the flat body.²⁰ The *rotta* was plucked with a plectrum, with the fingers or was bowed. The Sutton Hoo *chrotta* was also called a *choros*. The 'w' was pronounced as 'oo' in Welsh, hence the many names for the same type of instrument have been identified as: *chrotta*, *rotta*, *cruit*, *rerotte*, and *croud*.²¹

The examples above trace the lineage from the Greek *kithara* and the Roman *kithara* down to the modern-day guitar, so far as the question of a flat back and strings over sound holes are concerned. Note also that during this same ancient time there existed the Egyptian instrument referred to above as the long-necked lute.

In approximately 800 A.D. the bow became popular, developing into many stages and sizes with no set tuning as standard. Bowed, instruments from this time can be classified into several groups: the *rebec*, the *croud*, the medieval viol, and the fiddle. The word 'fiddle' was used to cover all these categories throughout this time period. There is much pictorial evidence showing instruments which were normally picked being bowed, and vice versa. In essence, it depended on what effect the musician wanted to achieve.²² For example, a manuscript from 1000 B.C., depicts King David with a 3-stringed bowed *rotta*, with a flat back. This manuscript is now in the collection of the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.²³

The *crwth* is recorded as a six-stringed bowed instrument, and the earliest illustration is from the 11th century A.D. Later, in the 12th century, illustrations depict the rectangular-shaped *crwth* with a fingerboard and a bow. This instrument is generally considered part of the violin family, and was used in Wales up until the nineteenth century. Other names for this type of instrument include: Irish-*crot* or *cruit*, Latin-*chorus*, and the Anglicized version-*crowd*.²⁴

In relation to the wooden, flat-backed concept, we can look to the *Rerotte*, which was used from approximately the eighth to the fourteenth centuries and has been described as a type of psaltery. Psalteries were also called zithers, and were plucked and/or hammered.²³ the psaltery is an instrument of various number of strings, the most popular had ten. The two forms known possessed either a square box or triangular box and of course, the flat back. A typical description of the shape of the psaltery can be found in biblical references as well. For our purpose, we can also see the psaltery many times in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*.

In addition to the *crwth*, the *croud* or *crowd*, the *rerotte* or *psaltery*, the *kithara*, and the *chrotta* or *rotta*, SCA members can also look to the *vihuela*, the *citole*, the *gittern*, and the *guittara Latina* to see the process of the guitar.

The Gate of Glory by Master Mateo (1188 A D), located at the Church of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, shows a guitar-shaped instrument believed to be the original *viheuela*.²⁷ Although there are sources that relate the guitar to its bowed cousins the viol family, there is no bow with this instrument on the Gate. It is noted that after 100 years there were many different *vihuelas*, and some did not use a bow. The *vihuela* was actually a guitar, but had a shorter and wider neck. It also had the waisted or curved sides and a flat back. The tuning was identical to the Renaissance lute.²⁸

The *citole* is described as a stringed instrument, sometimes made with a flat back and sometimes with a vaulted back, depending on the preference of the creator.²⁹ It is said by some to be the ancestor of the *gittern* and is noted for its apparent holly-leaf shape, with a flat back.³⁰ It is seen quite frequently throughout documents from the 13th through the 16th centuries. Tinctoris (1435-1511), a music theorist of his day from Italy, mentions the *citole* in a list of various instruments.³¹ Another reference suggests that the *citole* is the ancestor of the cittern.³² Tinctoris, in his treatise *De Inventive et Usu Musical* (1487) describes the *citole* as having four brass or steel strings, a flat back, and a fretted neck.³³ Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400 A.D.) mentions the *citole* in his Canterbury story, *The Knightes Tale*.³⁴

The *gittern* is northern Europe's version of the southern guitar. It too is described as possessing holly-leaf or winged-shaped upper bouts with a flat back, fretted neck, and (usually) four strings. A picture of the Coronation of the Virgin (1310 A.D.), depicts an angel with a four-stringed gittern.³⁵ One source states that the *citole* was called a *gittern* prior to 1977.³⁶

Juan Ruiz (1280-1350), Archpriest of Hita, names two instruments in his *Libro de Buen Amor*, the *guitarra morisca* and the *guitarra latina*. "They were both know to have been played

at the court of the Duke of Normandy in 1349".³⁷ The *guitarra latina* is described as possessing curved sides or parallel sides and a flat back and is also said to have been called a *gittern*. An example of a *gittern* can be seen on a roof boss of the mid-14th century A.D. in the Angel Choir of Gloucester Cathedral.³⁸ Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400 A. D.) mentions the *gittern* in his Canterbury story, *The Miller's Tale*.³⁹

The *Cantigas de Santa Maria* has splendid examples of the instruments played in the court of Alfonso the Wise, King of Castile and Leon (1221-1284). Several examples of the *guitarra Latina* can be seen as well as the *citole*, *lute*, *cittern*, and all sizes and shapes of medieval fiddles, and psalteries.⁴⁰ A stone carving of the *guitarra latina* can be seen in the West Portal of Leon Cathedral. It is of a crowned musician playing the *guitarra latina* from the 14th century A.D.⁴¹

More information about the *vihuela* is mentioned in the poetry of the Archpriest of Hila (1283-1350). He lists many instruments, among them the *vihuela* and the *atambores* (called the Moorish and the Latin guitar).⁴² In the Renaissance there were three popular *vihuelas* in use in Spain, each played a bit differently: the *vihuela de pendula* (played with a plectrum), the *vihuela de arco* (played with a bow), and the *vihuela de mano* (played by the hand). By the sixteenth century the popular one, the *vihuela de mano*, was used the most.⁴³ Note again that the *vihuela* was actually a guitar.⁴⁴

A mural painting by Anton Sanchez of the 14th century, illustrates a guitar. It is entitled *Angel playing a guitar*, and can be viewed at the Old Cathedral, Salamanca.⁴⁵ An angel musician plays a six-course *viola de mano* which is from the painting *Madonna and Child with St. Anne* by Gerolamo dal Libri(1474-1555 A.D.)⁴⁶ A picture showing the *vihuela* is seen from Luis Milan's

music book, *El Maestro*, or 1535 A.D. entitled *depicting Orpheus serenading animals and birds on a vihuela*.

More examples of the guitar in the 16th century can be seen in the following:

- An engraving by Morcantonio Raimondi, 1510 A.D. showing the poet Philotes playing an arched-back *viole de mano*;⁴⁷ Another source for the same engraving says the title is called *The Guitar Player*.⁴⁸
- An engraving attributed to Tobias Stimmer (1539-84), called, *A Lady Playing a Four-Course Guitar*.⁴⁹
- An angel musician playing a *vihuela de mano*: detail from the 15th century retable, attributed to Maestro Perea, in the Hermitage of St. Anne, Jative, Valencia.⁵⁰

There appears to be less documentation about the guitar than the lute throughout history. This could be because of culture, gender, and religion. Some instruments favored in court while others were used more often by common folk, and were thus more likely to be documented. There is evidence that the four course guitar was popular in the city and country, but the six course guitar, the *vihuela*, was the instrument most likely used for courts and royal musicians. The common folk used the four-string guitar whereas the *vihuela* is noted as being the instrument of “elegant and polite society”.⁵¹

By 1555 A.D., there appears to be a transition of the *vihuela*. It had six courses, the five lower strings doubled and top one single, just like the lute. It is referred to as the Spanish guitar. However, the guitar of the common folk – the four course guitar – eventually had a fifth string added, a total of eleven strings, and was called the Spanish

guitar.⁵² Hence the vihuela, the six-course guitar, of the lute (all names for a similar instrument), has more documentation than the common four-course guitar.

Religion is also a possible factor, as can be seen when the lute was introduced to Spain and was considered by the Spanish to be “heathen”. The evidence suggests that the guitar was favored over the lute in 8th century Spain.⁵³

Gender may well have been another factor. Ancient African drawings depict the long-necked lute, and it is usually played by a woman. This could be a result of the apparent lightness of the instrument.⁵⁴ Tinctoris (1435-1511), mentions in his 12th treatise, book IV, chapters 4 & 5, that the guitar was not used very much because it had a thin tone. He adds that it seemed to be played by women rather than men, and that the Catalans used the guitar mainly in accompaniment for love songs.⁵⁵

Conclusion

There is widespread evidence throughout history to suggest that the guitar qualifies as an authentic instrument for the Society’s period of re-enactment. Indeed, it may be argued that the guitar is even an *ancient* instrument which has been identified by many names throughout many countries, always evolving with the cultures that dominate it. As the history is continually investigated, more evidence may yet come to light.

I also ask others to share what they may find to add to this brief collection for the “authentic guitar”. I hope these few pages will encourage more A & S competition with the guitar, and more research into music written for the instrument. There is much that has not yet been translated, including ancient music. I encourage anyone who has the

ability, to bring to us the transcripts of music that included the guitar. Be proud as you perform with this venerable instrument; it has survived much.

Notes

¹Michael Kasha has used the *tar* family to categorize the lute, the guitar, and the tanbur in the same family structure. The *tar* family is based on instruments which possess a single fretted neck with strings. I encourage anyone who has interest to read his article. It can be located in the *Guitar Review*, CR-30, 1968.

²Clark, 1983, p.6

³Clark, 1983, p.25

⁴Katz and Keller, 1981, p. 201

⁵Katz and Keller, 1981, p. 221

⁶Montagu, 1976, p. 28

⁷Remnant, 1978

⁸Geiringer, 1943

⁹Clarke, 1983, p.72

¹⁰Sahs, 1943

¹¹Finney, p.12, 1935

¹²There were several popular tunings of the lute during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The example used here is just one of several possibilities.

¹³Evans and Evans, 1977

¹⁴Clarke, 1983

¹⁵Clarke, 1983; Sendry, 1969; Katz and Keller, 1981; Kasha, 1968

¹⁶Kasha, 1968

¹⁷Remnant, 1978

¹⁸Huges and Abraham, 1964

¹⁹Clarke, 1983

²⁰Geiringer, 1943, p. 20; Montagu, 1976, p. 13; Remnant, 1978, p. 20

²¹Montagu, 1976

²²Remnant, 1978

²³Montagu, 1976, p 14

- ²⁴Huges and Abraham, 1964
- ²⁵Clarke, 1983
- ²⁶Huges and Abraham, 1964
- ²⁷Clarke, 1983, p 72
- ²⁸Kasha, 1968
- ²⁹Montagu, 1976
- ³⁰Wilkins, 1980
- ³¹Gustave, 1959
- ³²Monrow, 1976
- ³³Monrow, 1976; Wilkins, 1980, p. 150
- ³⁴Wright, 1883, p 67
- ³⁵This picture is now at the British Library (Montagu, 1976)
- ³⁶Wilkins, 1980
- ³⁷Remnant, 1978, p 36
- ³⁸Remnant, 1978
- ³⁹Wright, 1883, p 101
- ⁴⁰Montagu, 1976; Katz and Keller, 1981
- ⁴¹Evans and Evans, 1977, p 19
- ⁴²Ribera, p 156
- ⁴³Montagu, 1976
- ⁴⁴Kash, 1968
- ⁴⁵Evans and Evans, 1977, p 19
- ⁴⁶Evans and Evans, 1977, p 20
- ⁴⁷Evans and Evans, 1977, p 18
- ⁴⁸Geiringer, 1965, plate XXII
- ⁴⁹Evans and Evans, 1977 p 22
- ⁵⁰Evans and Evans, 1977, p 20
- ⁵¹Evans and Evans, 1977
- ⁵²Clarke, 1983
- ⁵³Hughs and Abraham, 1964

¹⁵⁴Sahs, 1943, p 65

⁵⁵Gustave, 1959

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