

## How to Play the Germanic Lyre

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### A Note

There is no One True Way to play the Germanic lyre. This instrument is played by historical re-enactors, by early music performers, by heathens as part of their worship, by Dark Ages metal bands, and by you. All these performers have different things they want to do, and make their decisions regarding the tuning and playing of their instrument accordingly.

The following is my set of performance decisions. I am aiming for a historically informed performance.

### Parts of the Lyre

Tuning Pegs: Pegs the strings are wound around that can be twisted to make the notes higher or lower. Period tuning pegs would have been organic (wood, bone, antler); they might have had large heads to enable turning with the fingers, and bronze tuning keys have also been found.

Tuning key: Bronze examples have been found; they are sockets into which the tuning pegs would fit, just like your tuning keys (although the shape is different).

Bridge: The part the strings go over before they are anchored at the bottom of the lyre. Bronze and (I think) amber examples have been found. They typically have an "H" shape, with grooves cut for each string. (This is one of the ways we know that most lyres had 6 strings.)

Strings: Strings were likely organic - gut, horsehair, or even silk. Your strings are fishing line: 80 lbs for the lowest 2 strings, 60 lbs for the middle two strings, and 40 lbs for the top two strings (on most of the models)

Tailpiece: I believe no tailpieces or evidence of tailpieces have survived, so modern reconstructions of this part are conjectural. The tailpiece is one or more parts that connect the strings to the instrument. On your instruments, the strings are tied with fisherman's knots to escutcheon pins (small nails) driven directly into the instrument body. This is simply a matter of expediency, not an evidence-based reconstruction.

Soundboard: The "front" of the lyre, the side over which the strings are strung. Its vibrations are what you hear when you play.

"Arms": I'm not sure if there's a more technical term for this, but that's what I call the two supports on either side of the hand-hole.

Hand-Hole: That big empty space in the middle.

### Stringing

As far as I know, we have no evidence for whether the lyre was strung low-to-high or high-to-low. I have found it most useful to have the two lowest notes near the thumb of my left hand, so my lyres are strung low-to-high (from left to right as you look at the instrument). However, if you would prefer to string your lyre differently (or play with your right hand), go right ahead.

### Tuning

Writing in the mid-9th century, a northern German monk named Hucbald describes the hexachord as 'the way you tune your lyre.' We know that the hexachord is do-re-mi-fa-so-la.

Some performers strongly prefer a pentatonic tuning of some kind. This does allow for more chords to be played, if you intend to use your lyre like a guitar.

### **Holding: The hand part**

For block-and-strum technique (what I will teach you), you need to use both hands to play. If you want to pluck your instrument only, then you only need one hand (and maybe a thumb from your other hand).

Benjamin Bagby, in his performance of Beowulf, plays like this. He holds his lyre on his left leg with his left hand, and plucks the strings with his right hand and left thumb.

For block-and-strum, a wrist strap is immensely useful. A pair of metal plates, riveted on either side of a leather strap, was found attached to one of the excavated English lyres, high up the 'arms' of the lyre. So there is some evidence for wrist straps being used.

Your wrist straps are strips of garment suede tied to your instrument. I have found that leather has enough friction or stickiness to not slip on the wood when used like this. The garment suede is maybe stretchier than I would like - on my own lyre, I use a tablet woven band of silk, tied over leather patches (to keep it from sliding). You can replace your strap with anything that works for you.

To use the strap:

- Coming from behind the lyre, put your hand under the strap so that it lays across the back of your wrist.
- Reach over the strap with your hand (either side, doesn't matter)
- Twist your hand down over the strap, then under it and back up through
- This should put an "x" of strap on the back of your wrist.
- Set the lyre on your left leg and let the weight of your left hand pull it into your leg. Your fingers should be able to comfortably touch the strings
- Adjust the height and length of the strap by re-tying it if necessary

### **Holding: The lap part**

Sound comes out of the soundboard. Try to point the soundboard at your audience. If you are playing instrumental music, the position of your body is not so important. If you are also reciting or singing, you will want your voice to also be pointing at the audience.

You can hold your lyre on your left leg, facing across your body. This will let you see your fingers and the strings. To sing or recite, you will need to turn your head (not recommended) or you can side at an angle to your audience, so neither your lyre nor your voice is pointed directly at them, but they are both angled toward them.

However, with practice, you will find that you do not need to look at your fingers. Graeme Lawson, the British Museum's expert on the Sutton Hoo lyre, has studied stone carvings of lyre players and believes that the instrument was held on the thigh, soundboard away from the body. It was rotated to the side about 20-30 degrees, tipped forward slightly, and then rotated around its long axis to give the other hand access to the strings.

Whether or not this works for you will depend upon the size of you and the size of your lyre. Other illuminations show small lyres being held on the right thigh and tilted across the body, so that the top is by the left shoulder, or held near the waist or hip by standing/walking figures.

Just be careful: Avoid placing your wrist at a sharp angle. This will put stress on it and can cause carpal tunnel if you play frequently and/or for long periods of time.

### **Playing: Plucking**

You can always pluck, even set up for block-and-strum with a wrist strap. Use your right hand to pluck individual strings, or pairs of strings. You can use a sort of a snapping motion at different points along the string to get overtones. The midpoint of the string (measuring from the bridge to the peg) gives the octave.  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the way down from the peg gives the fifth.

### **Playing: Block and Strum**

As far as I know, Master Thorfinn of the East was the first to suggest this playing technique, based on a study of manuscript depictions of David playing his lyre. These pictures clearly show one hand behind the lyre in the center of the hand-hole, with the other in front, low and to one side. It looks like one hand is being used to stop the strings, and the other to strum them. There are six strings; you (probably) have five fingers. You can stop all but one to play a single note.

#### Block and Strum: Blocking

I block with the pads of my fingers, because I keep my nails somewhat long to play wire harp. I know of at least one performer who blocks with the tips of his fingers, arching them like a piano player against the strings. This lets him pluck with his blocking hand, whereas I have to pluck with my strumming hand. Being able to pluck with your blocking hand opens up additional space for advanced technique; see Will Rowan's YouTube video in the Resources section for an idea of what you could do.

#### Block and Strum: One Note Playing

Place five fingers on five strings, leaving one note open.

Strum the strings to sound the note.

Shift 1-5 fingers left or right to open up a different note.

Strum.

#### *Example: Playing the scale.*

Begin with "do," the lowest note, open. Your thumb on re, index finger on mi, middle on fa, ring on so, pinkie on la.

Strum.

Shift your thumb down a string to do, and strum to get re.

Shift your index finger down a string to re, and strum to get mi.

Shift your middle finger down to mi, and strum to get fa. (See the pattern?)

Shift your ring finger down to fa, and strum to get so.

Shift your pinkie finger down to so, and strum to get la.

Shift your fingers back one by one to play the scale descending.

#### *Example: Playing thirds*

Begin with 'do' open, as above, and strum.

Shift your thumb and index finger down down one string each, opening up mi. Strum.

Shift only your index finger back up, blocking mi and opening up re. Strum.

Shift your index and middle fingers both down one, opening up fa. Strum.  
Shift only your middle finger back up, blocking fa and opening mi. Strum.  
Shift your middle and ring fingers both down one, opening up so. Strum.  
Shift only your ring finger back up, blocking so and opening up fa. Strum.  
Shift your ring and pinkie finger both down one, opening up la. Strum.  
Reverse the pattern to play it descending.

### Block and Strum: Open Drone Playing

The way I do it, single note playing isn't very agile. Particularly when I want to move my weaker ring finger a third or more, it gets hard to do quickly. It just so happens that there is a way to work around this which also sounds very period!

You can leave one string always open. Always. This string becomes your open drone, and it will sound together with all of your melody notes.

If you are playing a modern song in the key of Do Major, leave 'do' as your open drone. If you are doing medieval-sounding improvisation (or part of a cantiga or something) you will want to leave re open.

### *Example: Jingle Bells*

Below are some numbers that will help you play Jingle Bells with an open drone on the lyre.

Place your fingers on strings 2-6, leaving string 1 open.

Where the instructions say "None," lift no fingers.  
Where they say, "One," lift your thumb.  
"Two," lift your index finger.  
And so on.

Two two two,  
Two two two,  
Two four none one two  
Three three three, three-three two two  
Two-two two one one two one - four!  
Two two two,  
Two two two  
Two four none one two  
Three three three, three-three two two  
Two-two four four three one none!

### **Resources**

Anglo-Saxon Lyre Group on Yahoo!  
[https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/Anglo\\_Saxon\\_Lyres/](https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/Anglo_Saxon_Lyres/)

Michael J King's pages  
<http://www.michaeljking.com/>  
<http://michaeljking.blogspot.com/>

Lani Thompson, kantele music. Her arrangements for 5-string kantele work on lyre.

<http://www.kantelemusic.com/>

Greg and Carolyn Priest-Dorman's original essay, "The Saxon Lyre: History, Construction and Playing Techniques"

<http://www.cs.vassar.edu/~priestdo/lyre.html>

George Cavender's page on making a lyre. There are many other project pages out there, but Cavender's is both a comprehensive how-to guide and a history lesson.

[http://cavender.myweb.uga.edu/harp\\_project/](http://cavender.myweb.uga.edu/harp_project/)

Will Rowan ("banjoheathen"), "Advanced Block and Strum" video. Informed by kantele technique.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTxA-p6XoTQ>

Christine Ward (The Viking Answer Lady) on Viking music:

<http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/music.shtml>

### Useful Books

Jeff Opland, *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry*. I don't agree with all of his conclusions but he has a lot of good sources.

<http://www.amazon.com/Anglo-Saxon-Oral-Poetry-Study-Traditions/dp/0300024266>

Stephen Pollington, *The Mead Hall: The Feasting Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England*, 2010.

<http://www.amazon.com/The-Mead-Hall-Feasting-Tradition-Anglo-Saxon/dp/1898281548>

Christopher Page. *Anglo-Saxon hearpan: Their terminology, history, tuning and repertory of verse 850-1066*. PhD thesis. 1981.

<http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?did=1&uin=uk.bl.ethos.258618> (free registration required)

Lewis Anderson, *The Anglo-Saxon Scop*. MA thesis, 1903. This is old and a bit dated, but the references to classical sources don't go bad.

[https://archive.org/details/cihm\\_75651](https://archive.org/details/cihm_75651)

### Lyres Images



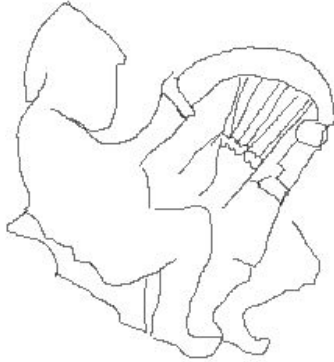
Vespasian Psalter David, early 8th cen. Seated, small oval 6-string lyre with straight sides held in lap facing front, resting on right leg and tilted toward left shoulder. Left hand blocking, right hand strumming. No straps visible.



Utrecht Psalter lyre player, 9th cen. Standing, large teardrop shaped lyre with slightly concave sides, strings too faint to count. Seems to float on left side of body. Left hand barely visible (faded in original MS) in hand-hole, right hand in front. Right hand shows thumb and forefinger arched as if to grab an interval; left hand seems to show something similar. Two pairs of lines on the top cross-bar are very clear - maybe a strap for the left hand? (The lyre seems to be set too low to be braced against waist or hip.)



Another Utrecht Psalter lyre player; figure was standing in a crowd and much of the body was obscured. Standing figure, holding instrument by bottom (not playing it; other musicians in figure also not playing their instruments); narrow small lyre with outward-arching arms connected by a fairly straight cross-piece. Three strings (or pairs of strings?) clearly represented.



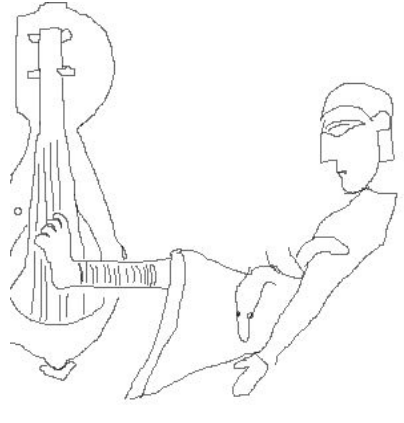
10th century sandstone cross at Durrow Abbey, Co. Offaly, Ireland. Lyre or harp? Six-stringed instrument held between the legs or on left leg of seated figure. Figure's hands both appear to be on the arms of the instrument - the right arm ends in an oblong segment that might be a hand, and from there the top arch of the instrument emerges. An oval shape on the other lyre arm could be a carved round ornament (as seen on Romanesque harps?) or a left hand holding the lyre.

The Early Gaelic Harp page has a collection of images of early stringed instruments, including more lyres from Irish stone crosses:

<http://www.earlygaelicharp.info/earlymed/>



Gunnar in the snake pit: the figure-8 thing at his feet is an instrument (a lyre?). Carved on a baptismal font, ca. 1100 CE., from Norum's Church in Bohuslan in Sweden.



Gunnar in the snake-pit again, on the door of the Hylestad stave church, late 12th-early 13th century. The teardrop-shaped instrument has many strings and tuning keys emerging from its neck. At its bottom, a separate shape (a tailpiece?) is clearly carved.



King David and musicians, from the Winchcombe Psalter (11th cen). David plays a triangular harp, but the musician on the right has a lyre. As in the Utrecht psalter, there's something on top of the lyre - maybe the fingers of a gripping hand?