



Summary :

The barbitos was a stringed instrument related to the common lyre but with longer necks and deeper tonality. It is found mainly in Athenian art around 520 BC, but it is considered as an instrument which originated in Asia Minor and is connected with the lyrical poets of Ionia and Lesbos.

Date

Archaic and Classical period

Geographical Location

Asia Minor

1. Origin – naming

The barbitos is a stringed musical instrument which originated in Asia Minor. The Attic name “barbitos” is most commonly used but it is also found referred to as “barmos” and “baromos” (in the Aeolian dialect), and in the neuter as “barbiton”, “barmiton” or “barymiton”.¹ According to [Strabo](#), the name is not Greek. Linguists believe the term has a Phrygian origin, although a different non-Indo-European origin cannot be ruled out.² Three derivatives are also encountered: “barbistes”, “philobarbitos”, which is used by the Athenian Critias to describe Anacreon, and the verb “barbatizein”.³ The first reference to the instrument is found in an excerpt by Alcaeus. Pindar, however, ascribes its invention to the Lesbian 7th c. BC poet [Terpandros](#), who was inspired by the unknown [Lydian](#) instrument “piktis”. Certain sources ascribe the invention of the barbitos to Anacreon, while the instrument is also linked to other famous poets such as Sappho, Bacchylides and Simonides from [Kos](#), something which demonstrates its use in accompanying [lyrical poetry](#).⁴ The barbitos became known in mainland Greece at around 520 BC, the period during which Anacreon took refuge in Athens after fleeing [Samos](#).

2. Representations – description – function

The barbitos is only known from representations. It was identified already in the 18th c. with the instrument held by [Alcaeus and Sappho](#) on an Attic red-figure kalathos in Munich. It is connected mainly with Anacreon and his followers in a group of around 70 vessels, while the poet’s name is inscribed on the instrument represented on a [crater](#) in fragmentary condition now in Copenhagen.⁵ The barbitos was a particularly popular theme in Attic vase painting until 430 BC, accompanying [komasts](#) and symposiasts, even women musicians,⁶ as well as gods and mythological figures connected to [music](#), singing and the symposium.⁷ Aristotle excluded the barbitos from the education of the youth as it was destined only for recreation and indeed, there are very few representations showing the teaching of the instrument in music schools.⁸ Outside Attica the barbitos is found on engraved gems and rings in eastern Greece, on wall-paintings in the tomb of the Diver in Poseidonia, on certain red-figure vessels from South Italy and, more rarely, on Etruscan works of art.⁹

Typologically it is connected to the common [lyre](#) with which it shared several features: the turtle-shell, wood or bronze resonator covered by animal skin, the wrest and the bridge upon which the strings rested on the resonator, the zygon, a cylindrical component positioned transversely upon which the holes for the rivets or keys were and through which four to eight (usually seven) strings passed. The most important difference between the two instruments was the longer length of the barbitos’ necks, which reached 70cm, ¾ of the total length of the instrument. In eight black-figure Attic vessels from the end of the 6th c. BC, the necks are not oblong but wavy.¹⁰ Tuning happened by turning the rivets with the right hand while the left strung the strings with the plectrum, testing the sound.

Thanks to its longer necks, the barbitos produced music of extremely low tonality, appropriate for accompanying the male voice. Its sound was clear and sounded like a bird’s song although because of its relatively small resonator it was not very loud.¹¹ Thus, the instrument was appropriate for accompanying songs but also dancing. The musician held the instrument tightly beneath the left armpit



at a 45 degree angle or even in a horizontal position. He struck the strings with a plectrum – made of bone, bronze or ivory – which was held in the right hand and which was attached by a cord to one of the instrument's necks. This position allowed the musician to play the instrument seated or standing or even in movement or lying down.

1. "Barmos": Alc., 12.4. "Baromos": Ephorion in Athen. 4, 182 f. "Barymiton": Polyd. 4.59. In the neutral gender ("barbiton") is found in Roman literary sources.
2. Str. 10.3.17. See Frisk, H., *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch 1* (Heidelberg 1954), p. 220; Chantraine, P., *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque 1* (Paris 1974), p. 165.
3. "Barbistis": comment to Ar., Eq. 522 "Filobarbitos": Critias, 8 in Ath. 13.600d-e. "Barbitizein": Ar., 752· Pi. 124 d.
4. Alc. 12.4. Terpanthos: Pi., passage 125. Anacr.: Cleanth. in Ath. 4.175e· Critias, passage 8 in Ath. 13.600δ·e· *Anth. Pal.* 7.25· *Anacreont.* 2.7, 15.34, 23.3, 43.4 and 60.1. Sapph. and Anacr. : Ath. 4.182· Bacchylides 20 C 1-2· Simon.: Theoc. 16.42-47. Lesbian poets: Hor., *Od.* 1.1.32-34. Ionian poets: Ar., Th. 138.
5. Munich Kalathos: Picard, C., "Art et littérature I: sur la rencontre d' Alcée et de Sappho", *REG* 61 (1948), p. 338-344. Sappho and barbitos: McIntosh Snyder, J., "Sappho in Attic Vase Painting", in Koloski-Ostrow, A.D. – Lyons, C.L. (ed.), *Naked Truths* (London 1997), p. 108-118. Copenhagen Krater: Immerwahr, H.R., "Inscription of the Anakreon Krater in Copenhagen", *AJA* 69 (1965), p. 152-154, plate 47. Anakreon and his companions: Boardman, J. – Kurtz, D.C., "Booners", *Greek Vases in the Getty Museum 3* (1986), p. 35-70.
6. Maas, M. – McIntosh Snyder, J., *Stringed Instruments of Ancient Greece* (New Haven – London 1989), p. 130-131, fig. 3-8 (komasts/revellers), p. 133, fig. 9 (symposiasts), p. 134, fig. 11, and p. 136, fig. 16 (seated women).
7. Paquette, A., *L'instrument de musique dans la céramique de la Grèce antique* (Paris 1984), p. 183, fig. B14, (Muses), p. 185, fig. B19 (Hercules), p. 203, fig. A38 (Dionysus). Maas, M. – McIntosh Snyder, J., *Stringed Instruments of Ancient Greece* (New Haven – London 1989), p. 133, fig. 10 (Eros), p. 129, fig. 1 (satyrs, see also Eur., Cyc. 37-40), p. 137, fig. 19 (maenads). Boardman, J., *Αθηναϊκά ερυθρόμορφα αγγεία. Η Κλασική περίοδος* (Αθήνα 1996), fig. 204 (Hephaestus). *AA* 10 (1926-1927), p. 114 (Helen). *LIMC* 2.2, see entry "Aphrodite", plate 10, no. 1694 (Aphrodite). *LIMC* 5.2. see entry "Hermes", plate 227, no. 317 (Hermes). McIntosh Snyder, J., "Aigisthos and the Barbitos", *AJA* 80 (1976), p. 189-190 (Aigisthos). See Eur., Alc. 343-347 (Admitos).
8. Ar. Pol. 134 a-b. See Paquette, A., *L'instrument de musique dans la céramique de la Grèce antique* (Paris 1984), pl. VII, fig. B.
9. Boardman, J., *Archaic Greek Gems. Schools and Artists in the Sixth and Early Fifth Centuries BC* (Evanston 1968), pl. 9, no. 133, pl 11, no. 163 (eastern Greek), pl. 12, no. 180 (western colonies) and pl. 19, no. 279 (possibly eastern Greece). Tomb of the Diver: Pugliese Carratelli, G., *The Western Greeks* (Venecia 1996), p. 459. Vessels from Southern Italy: e.g. Trendall, A.D., *The Red Figure Vases of Lucania, Campania and Sicily* (Oxford 1967), pl. 11.6. Etruria: Palottino, M., *La peinture étrusque* (Genève 1953), p. 73 (tomb of Triklinios); Richter, G.M., *The Engraved Gems of the Greeks and the Etruscans* (New York – London 1968), no. 758 (seal gems).
10. Boardman, J. – Kurtz, D.C., "Booners", *Greek Vases in the Getty Museum 3* (1986), p. 63; Fournier-Christol, P., *Catalogue des olpes attiques du Louvre, 550-480 environ* (Paris 1993), pl. 29, no. 47.
11. Low tonality: *Μέγα Ετυμολογικόν Λεξικόν*, see entry «βάρβιτος»; comment in Eur. Alc. 345. Clear sound: Simon. 20 B.2 and 20 C.1. Bird song: Ar. Th. 138. In Anacreont. 15.33-34 its sound is compared to a lullaby.

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Glossary :

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| | crater, the from the greek verb "κεράννυμι" (to mix). Big, open vessel for mixing wine with water. The wine was then poured into oinochoae. There are various craters' forms depending on body and handle shape: column-, volute-, calyx-, and bell crater. They were usually placed in the middle of the room where symposia were held- |
| | Komastes, the The person participating in the "Komos", the orgiastic dance in honour of Dionysus. For the archaeologists, the komastai are the dancers related to the symposium and the wine-drinking. |