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پژوهشگاه علوم انسانی و مطالعات فرهنگی  
رتال جامع علوم انسانی

## String Instruments Depicted in the Paintings of Ancient Elam

Mostafa Rostami<sup>1</sup>, Mostafa Mansourabadi<sup>2</sup>

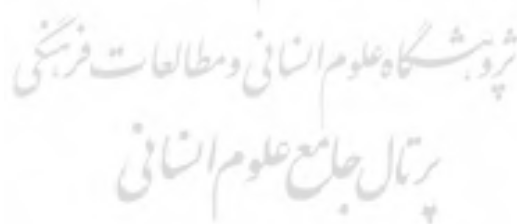
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### Abstract

The archaeological excavation of ancient Elam has led to the recovery of remnants, showing the rise and fall of a Persian civilization as well as reflecting how music and instruments (musicianship) were popular in those eras. Such archeological findings have mostly been portrayed on rock and pottery. A series of pictograms have depicted musical instruments while the majority of depicted string instruments are harps and tanburs. Wrapped in the Elamite culture, these instruments were passed on to the next civilizations, experiencing transformation over time. This descriptive-analytical research attempts to explore the string instruments in ancient Elam, thereby to review the historical roots of Iranian string instruments. The paper first provides an overview of music in ancient Elam. Then, several pictograms depicting string instruments are examined to determine their diversity and significance. The results indicate that harp and tanbur were the most frequent and diverse string instruments depicted in the paintings of ancient Elam.

**Keywords:** Ancient Elam; Musical Instruments; Paintings; Harp; Tanbur.



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## **Introduction**

Organology is one of the most important branches of ethnomusicology<sup>1</sup>. Identification of musical instruments and music making can help better understand the cultural values, aesthetic characteristics and criteria of a particular community. In other words, organology is considered one of the most important ways of understanding the history of music in different cultures and civilizations.

As far as the organology of the Persian civilizations is concerned, it has had a very prominent place in the Elamite culture, which rose five to six thousand years ago in southwestern Iran and the neighboring Mesopotamian civilization.

Dieulafoy and De Morgan argue that early inhabitants of Elamite were Abyssinians, who spoke Anzani and wrote in a specific cuneiform style (Pirnia, 2006: 119). Throughout their political life, the Elamites followed a religion with particular beliefs i.e. they worshipped multiple gods affecting their lives.

During the ancient Elamite civilization, there were constant mishaps including war and domination of conquering Mesopotamian civilization over this territory. Despite these challenges, the Elamite civilization managed to preserve its cultural and artistic originality and characteristics.

The remnants and artworks left from this civilization involve a series of pictograms, figurines, pottery reliefs and rock reliefs, including portrays from musicians of that era. Those musicians have been depicted either in isolation or as a group. String, wind, and percussion instruments are recognizable on the remaining paintings. In a gesture signifying religious traditions associated with

ancient Elam, the musicians were depicted playing and performing music.

The majority of musicians are playing string instruments. Most of such instruments involve harp and tanbur (lute).

In this study, string instruments of ancient Elamite Era were identified based on documented remnants of pictograms, while analyzing the physical characteristics of each instrument. Meanwhile, the instruments were described on the basis of their appearance in paintings and modern organological definitions.

## **Literature Review**

Given the evidence suggesting the popularity of music in ancient Elam, limited research has been conducted on the history of music during that era. This section provides a few of relevant references:

- 1) In "Sound Holes and Geometrical Figures" (1987), Lawergren and Gurney explored the instruments (particularly harp) and artifacts discovered from the Mesopotamian civilization and the surrounding civilizations.
- 2) In a paper titled "Elamite Pottery Sculptures" (2002), Giti Azarpey classified the pottery sculpture from ancient Elam, while proposing a theory on the relationship between those artifacts and the Elamite religion, as well as music.
- 3) In a book titled "Mesopotamian Music" (1997), Francis Williams Galpin explored music in Mesopotamia. The first, second and third chapters introduce the instruments played in civilizations of Mesopotamia and Elam.
- 4) In a book titled "Les figurines de Suse" (1992), Agnès Spycket explored clay figurines of the ancient Elamite Era. Among the

figurines, there is a musician holding an instrument.

### **Methodology**

This was a cross-sectional research, where data were collected through desk review of relevant studies.

### **Research Question**

Which string instruments are seen in pictograms of ancient Elam?

### **Hypothesis**

The string instruments seen in the pictograms include various types of harp such as bow harp, small harp, standing harp, lying harp and lyre. Moreover, from among string instruments, there are also tanbur, long- and short-handled harps in these pictograms.

### **Music in Ancient Elam**

Music was widely popular and meaningful during ancient Elam. Historical evidence suggest that music was associated with mythological rites and religious rituals in that era. The musical parades on artifacts depict events where songs were played at religious ceremonies, offering sheep in sacrifice and displacement of goddess statues.

Written sources suggest that Elamite people were playing music in temples and ziggurats (Majidzadeh, 2007: 54). Illustrated on a kylix is the wedding ceremony of an Elamite couple, where a musician is playing a string instrument (Amiet, 2009: 32-33).

A group of clay statues left from the Elamite era portray a person in cleric attire holding an instrument. Clay figurines depict naked shamans in trance holding a tanbur. This can provide evidence on the tight relationship between music, religion and

culture of ancient Elam about five or six thousand years ago.

### **General Categorization of Instruments in Ancient Elam**

Hornbostel classified musical instruments into several categories: chordophones, membranophones, aerophones and idiophones. Later on, Sachs added electrophones to this classification (Darwishi, 2011: 49-50).

Wherever there are images of musical instruments and players on pictograms of ancient Elam, chordophones, membranophones, aerophones and idiophones are visible. Most pictograms depicting string instruments can be found on reliefs and pottery held by figurines.

### **String Instruments (chordophones) from Elamite Era**

String instruments fall under a category of instruments in which sounds are produced by vibration of string, chord or wires. Normally, the desired sounds are produced by striking, tapping or dragging the bow or arch on the string instruments. These instruments are usually composed of chords, foot, column, rose, and plectrum (pick).

These instruments date as old as the history of civilization. The earliest remnants of these instruments are associated with the ancient Elam and Mesopotamian civilizations. In ancient times, the chords were made of sheep intestine (Galpin, 1997: 58). The body and column (neck) of string instruments were made of clay or wood. Harps and tanburs (lutes) in this category can be traced on the pictograms of the Elamite Era.

### A) Harps

Harp is an example of musical instruments whose primary footprints can be found in the Elamite civilization and the Sumerian civilization in Mesopotamia. Generally, harp is composed of a body and a column (neck) connected to each other at an acute angle. The chords are connected at an angle from the body to the column or the neck of the instrument. When playing the instrument, the chords are directly tapped by the fingers or the sounds are produced by a large plectrum. Concerning the origins of harp, a group of scholars believe it had been inspired

by hunter's bow (Shams, 2004: 119). In ancient Elam, the examples included bow harps, standing harps, lying and small harps.

#### 1. Bow Harp

The primary types of harp involved a bow. This instrument is in the shape of hunter's bow, the bottom of which holds the body while the upper part holds the column. Figure (1) illustrates a harp on a Chogha Mish seal from ancient Elam. Depicted on this seal is the world's oldest orchestra involving double-reed instruments, naqqarahs and bow harps near the singers.



**Fig. 1. Reconstructed View of Clay Tablet, Crew of Musicians, Ancient Elamite Civilization from 3100 To 3300 BC, Discovery Site: Chogha Mish Hill (Delogaz and Kantor, 1996: 155; Rahgany, 1998: 45)**

This figure displays a huge bow harp behind which there is a visible silhouette of a knelt musician. The bow harp applied on the upper part of the image resembles the Sumerian bow harp portrayed on Khafaja stone tablet (Figure 2). It is quite expected that the Elamite and Sumerian harps are structurally identical because 1) both artifacts were made on close dates (clay tablet and stone inscription) and 2) Elam and Sumer

were two interacting civilizations then. The Sumerian bow harp contains 11 to 15 strings made of animal intestines. The chords passed over metal insulators and wrapped around a fixed earpiece. The instrument could be tuned by stretching or loosening the chords. The head of Sumerian bow harp is made of lapis lazuli. The deepest bass sound of the string sounded like what is heard from bull horns (Galpin, 1997: 58-59).





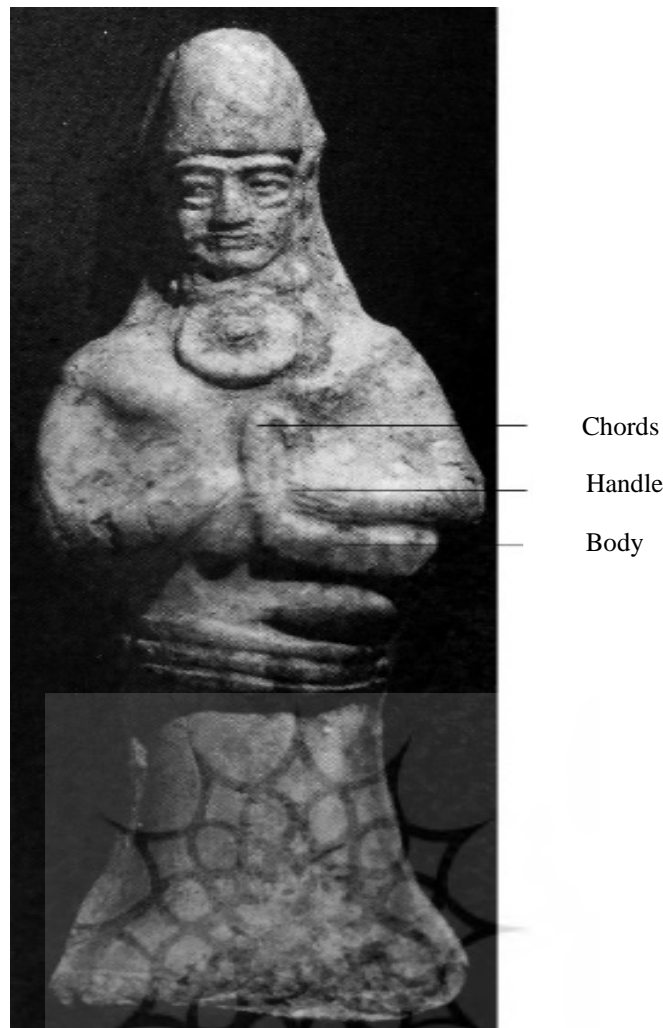
Fig. 2. Harp Player, Khafaja Stone Tablet, 3000 BC (Frakfort, 1934:50)

In Figure 1, a total of 6 chords can be considered for this instrument based on the number of grooves produced on the seal. The body lies at the bottom of the instrument, while the column (handle) is connected like an arch to the foot. The musician is holding the instrument with both hands. He is probably tapping on the plectrum with one hand and controlling the vibrations of strings with the other. According to this figure, the bow harp from ancient Elam can be

performed together with a singer, naqqara and double-reed.

## 2. Small Harp

The small harp is another type of common harps in ancient Elam. These harps were designed in sizes to be carried easily and played by the musicians in any position. In a series of figurines discovered from the Sukkalmahs Era in ancient Elam, a clergy is holding the harp (an example of such figurines can be seen in Fig 3).



**Fig. 3. The Musician Clergyman, Sukkalmahs Era, Baked Clay, Height 10.4 cm, width 3.3 cm, Discovered in Susa, Preserved at Louvre Museum (Majidzadeh, 2007: 129)**

This instrument resembles a duck whose head has rolled back. The angle between the junction of chords to body and column is approximately 82 degrees. The column of this instrument is as long as the body, roughly stretching from the player's elbow to palm. Sounds were produced by holding the instrument in one hand and tapping on the chords with other hand.

### **3. Standing Harp (angular)**

A group of musicians have been depicted on Kul-e Farah, a rock relief near Izeh, dating back to the late eighth century BC. One of the players is holding a large angular harp (Potts, 2011: 470). The translation of the

inscriptions around the relief indicates that "Sunkir" is the name of the harp player (Sarraf, 2008: 6) (Fig 4). This harp contains nine chords. The body of this instrument has been designed like an arch. The angle between the junction of chords and body and the junction of chords and column (neck) varies from 70 and 82 degrees, taking into account the body's arch. The maximum to minimum ratio of body diameter is 6 to 1. Moreover, the body tapers off from bottom to top. The height of the harp is slightly longer than the player's torso, while its width almost fits the player's waist when sitting sideways. The chords stretch toward a decorative base at the bottom of the instrument.



The performer is presumably holding the instrument with an extra object or by adjusting his body to the instrument's frame. The musician taps on the chords with the right hand and controls the vibrations with

the left hand. As shown in this relief, the standing harp was used along with flute and lyre. The Kul-e Farah's pictogram portrays musicians at a ceremony where sheep are sacrificed for the Elamite God.

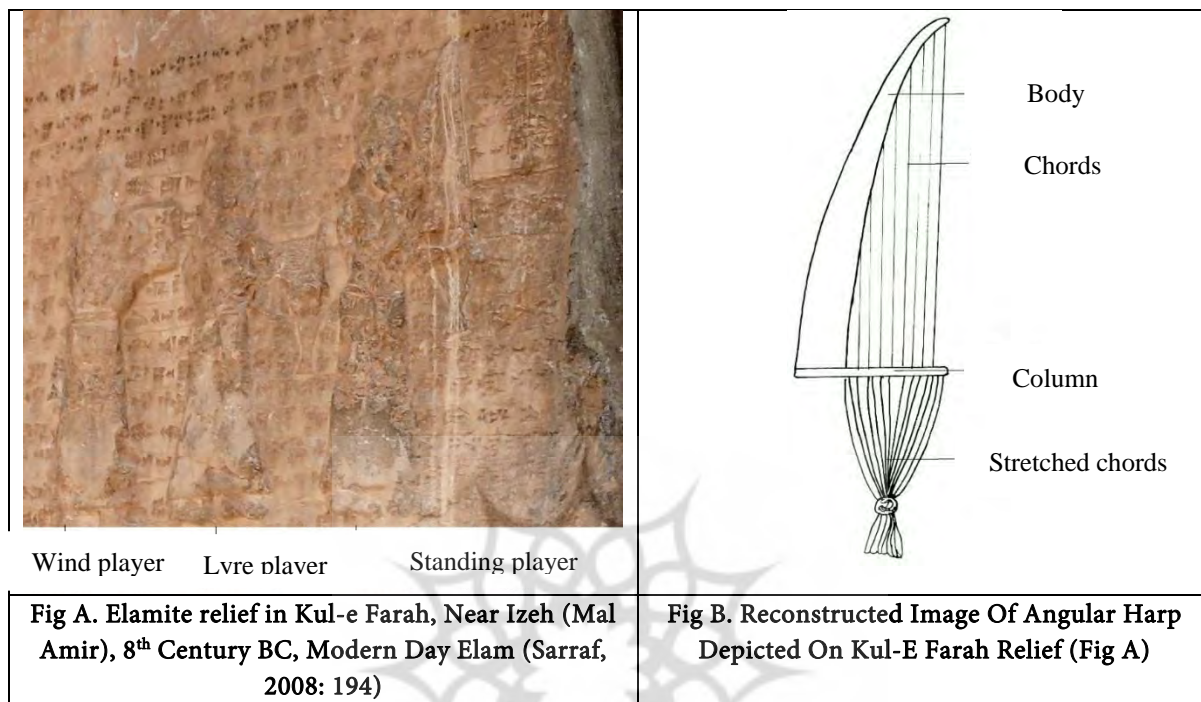


Fig. 4. Standing Harp

Another Elamite pictogram depicting an angular harp involves a slate associated with modern Elam where Assyrian conquerors can be seen in Madaktu. This slate is related to the defeat of Elamite troops against the

King of Assyria (Ashurbanipal) in 653 BC Madaktu (Amiet, 2010, photo caption 131). Depicted on this slate are seven people playing angular harps, each holding a huge one (Fig. 5).

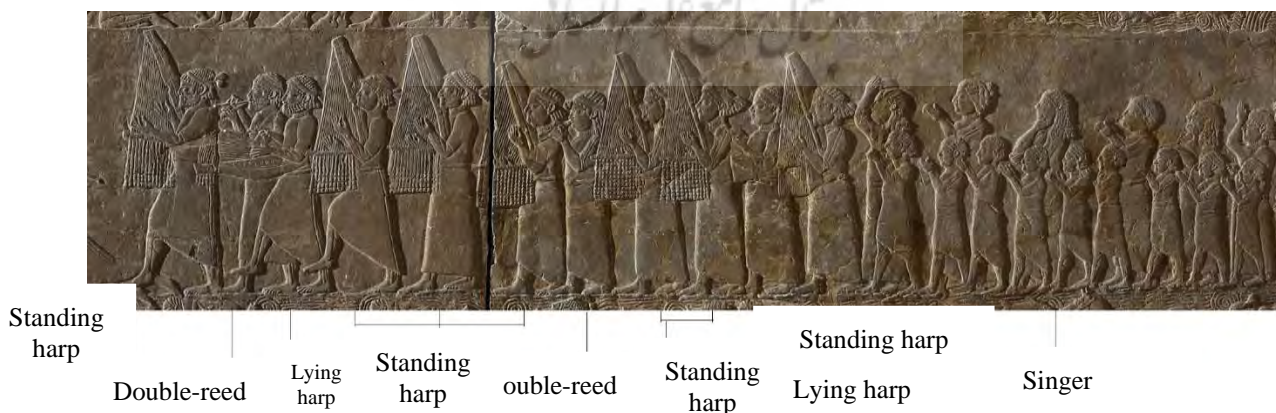
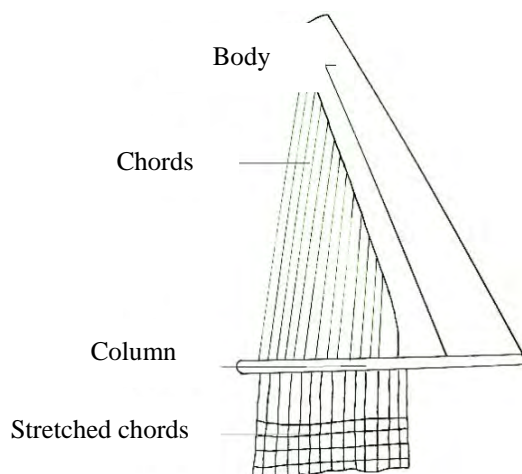


Fig. 5 Engraved Stones, Assyrian Conquerors in Madaktu, located in Elam, And Return of Conquerors in 653 BC, Modern Elamite Civilization, early 7<sup>th</sup> century, discovered in Susa, Museum of Great Britain (Amiet, 2010, Figure 131)



**Fig. 6. Reconstructed Image of Angular Harp Depicted on Assyrian Relief (Fig 5)**

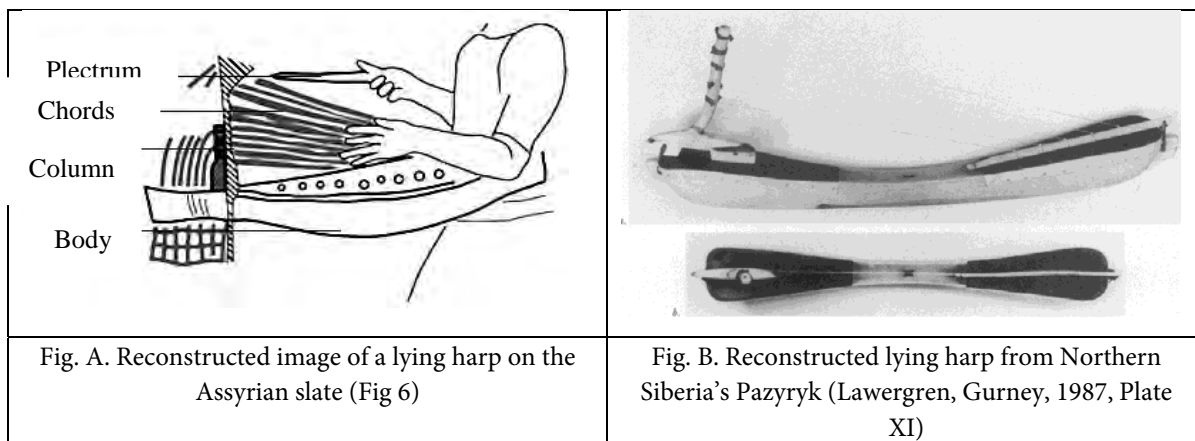
The height of the instrument covers the player's knee to head, while the width is twice the size of player's waist when sitting sideways. The angle between body and the column (neck of the instrument) is 70 degrees. The body is 1.3 times larger than the column. The maximum to minimum ratio of the body diameter varies from 4.1 to 1.7 (Fig 6). This type of instruments probably involves a higher number of chords and larger body than the harps mentioned earlier. The player on this relief taps on the chords with the right hand while controlling the vibrations with the left hand. The standing harps on this relief have been applied together with the lying harp, double-reed, clappers and singers.

According to Amiet, the musicians have been depicted at the ceremony where the Elamite Goddess is carried and surrendered to the Assyrians (Amiet, 2010, Fig 131). The pictogram reflects the musical accompaniment to honor the event is associated with the Elamite Goddess.

#### **4. Lying Harp**

The family of ancient lyre harps includes the lying type. This harp was not used similar to bow harps in the subsequent generations and eras, since it was replaced by other instruments. This harp is placed horizontally in front of the player. In this type of harp, the player taps on the chords with a plectrum. One example of this harp in ancient Elam involves a pictogram depicting two lying harp players on an Assyrian relief (Fig 5). The lying harp on this pictogram closely resembles the Pazyryk lying harp (Fig 7B).

This instrument contains nine chords connected horizontally from the bottom of the body to the column (neck of the instrument). The body is as large as the player's torso. The player puts the instrument in front and taps on the chords with a plectrum. The other hand of the player is probably involved as well (Fig 7a).

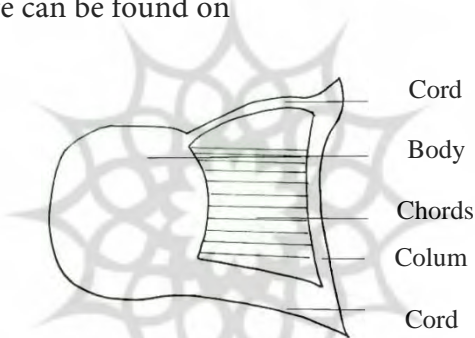


**Fig. 7** Lying harp

### 5. Lyre

Lyre is a type of harp composed of a body, two chords, column and strings. This instrument was used in ancient times. During the Elamite era, lyre can be found on

Kul-e Farah relief beside "Sukinir" who is playing a lyre. Based on the inscription on his attire, the lyre player has introduced himself as Sumumu (Sarraf, 2008: 23) (Fig. 4A).



**Fig. 8.** Reconstructed Image of Lyre Depicted On Kul-E Farahh (Fig 4a)

The chords have been tied horizontally between the body and column. The body has been depicted in an almost circular shape. The instrument is slightly shorter than the player's hand, while the width nearly covers the player's arm. Small stick-like wood or metal pieces are inserted into the column. Having been fixed around another small column, the chords could be stretched in and out by lifting or pressing one of the columns. This could tune the chords into a higher or lower pitch (Galpin, 1997: 72). As can be seen in the pictogram, the musician is holding the instrument in the right hand while tapping on the chords with the left hand.

### B) Tanbur (lutes)

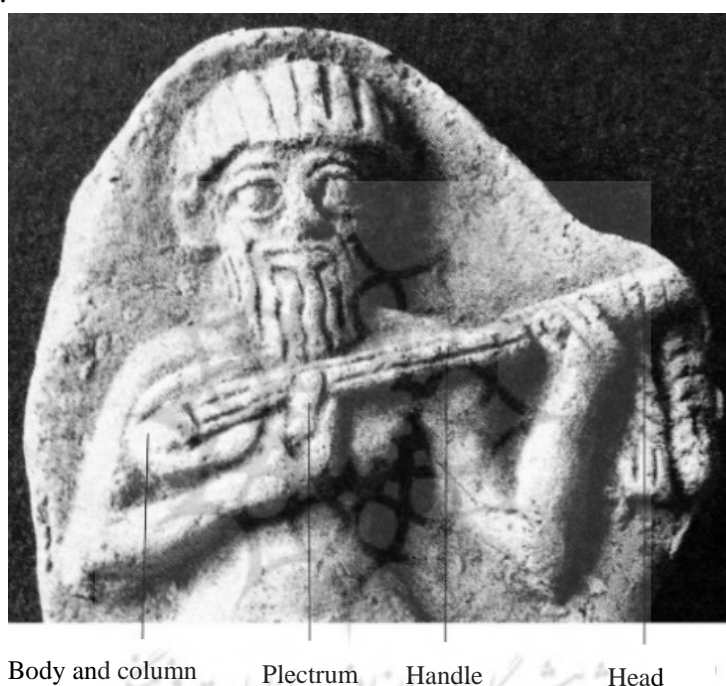
This category covers string instruments, where the chords are stretched alongside the body and column. The modern types of tanbur include tar, guitar, harp and oud. Concerning the origins of these instruments, Henry Balfour mentioned the hunter's bow to which chords were tied to produce sounds and music. He argued that the most basic type of tanbur resembles an arch on the bottom of which a pumpkin-like has been attached (Galpin, 1997: 74).

During ancient Elamite, this instrument developed into a more sophisticated form. In that era, there were two categories of tanburs: 1) long-handled instruments (usually held by

shamans or naked Elamite men), 2) long-handled, small instruments (usually held by middle Elamite clergymen). There are handles, heads, columns, bodies and necks recognizable on the pictograms of these instruments. These instruments have been depicted in isolation. The players of these instruments have been depicted in isolation for several reasons such as the low pitch of this category of instruments in ancient Elam, and shamanistic and ritualistic attitude to these instruments.

### 1. Long-handled Instrument

Nowadays, this category covers several instruments such as sitar, dutar, tanbur, tar and guitar. In the Elamite era, numerous figurines can be observed dating back to Sukkalmahs and middle Elam periods, where a naked shaman or half-naked clergy is usually holding the instrument (Azarpei, 2002: 23). Figure (9) provides an example of these figurines.



**Fig. 9 A Male Player, Sukkalmahs Period, Baked Clay, Discovered in Susa, Location: Louvre Museum**  
(Spycket, 1992:1263; Majidzadeh, 2007: 131)

Based on its appearance, this instrument can be compared to tanbur (dutar) and modern sitar. Containing three and more chords, this instrument was widely used as tanbur in the Middle East. In the primitive era, however, this instrument was called pandur (Galpin, 1997: 75). The ratio of player's height to the instrument's length is 4.5 to 2.2. Moreover, the ratio of instrument's length to body's diameter is 2.2 to 0.7. The chords are mounted on the body and then

tied along the handle, similar to what are found now in Africa (Galpin, 2008: 74) (Fig 9). This instrument should be considered modern sitar, given the modern organology, as well as the appearance and structure of current sitars and tanburs. There is a protrusion between the player's right-hand fingers, indicating it could be the plectrum for tapping the instruments.



## 2. Short-handed Instrument

The statute in Figure (10) illustrates a clergy holding a small string instrument. Built at a smaller scale, this instrument is similar to those played by naked men. The handle and the body are almost of equal lengths, while

the instrument is generally larger than the player's elbow to fingertips. The instrument player taps on the chords without a plectrum in the right hand while controlling the vibrations with the left hand.



Fig. 10. The Musician Clergyman, Middle Elamite Era, discovered in Susa, Location: Louvre Museum, (Spycket, 1992: 790)

### Data Analysis

An overview of the above images reveals the string instruments from the Elamite civilization under a specific categorization. The string instruments on Elamite pictograms include harp and tanbur. According to pictograms, harp has been divided into several subcategories including bow harp, small harp, standing harp, lying harp and lyre. Similarly, tanburis divided

into two categories of long-handed and short-handed instruments. Table (1) displays the spring instruments from the Elimate Era.












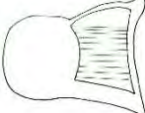



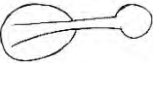
Figure (1) illustrates the bow harp in pictogram of Chogha Mish seal. This instrument resembles a bow and contains six strings. The small harp has been depicted in the hand of figurines as Elamite clergymen (Fig 3). This instrument resembles a duck

with its neck turned back. The standing harp can be seen in Kul-e Farah pictogram and Assyrian tablet (Figs 4 and 5). The harp portrayed in Kul-e Farah involves nine chords, stretching up to the player's torso. The angle between the body and column on the Assyrian harp varies from 70 to 82 degrees. The Assyrian tablet depicts the largest harp in the Elamite pictograms. Besides the players of standing harps on the Assyrian tablet, there is a player of lying harp (Fig 7). The player keeps the instrument in

front and taps on the chords with a plectrum. Lyre can be seen in Kul-e Farah pictogram (Fig 4). This instrument is similar to the Egyptian lyre.

Long-handled tanburs have been depicted in the hands of Elamite figurines (Fig 9). This instrument is similar to modern sitar. The player taps on the chords with a plectrum. Short-handled tanbur has been held by figurines of Elamite clergymen (Fig 10). The handle is as large as the player's hand.

**Table. 1. String Instruments Depicted On Pictograms of Ancient Elam**

No.	Musical Instrument		Image	Reconstructed Image	Description
1	Harp	Bow			Depicted on Chogha Mish pictogram, the bow harp resembles an arch and contains six chords.
		Small harp			Small harp held by the figurine of a clergyman. This instrument resembles a duck whose head has rolled back.
		Standing			Kul-e Farah standing harp involves nine chords, whose angle varies between the body and column from 70 to 82 degrees.
					The angle between the body and column is 70 degrees in the Assyrian standing harp.
		Sleeping			The lying harp on the Assyrian tablet, a musician is tapping on the chords with a plectrum
		Lyre			In Kul-e Farah's lyre, the body is circular and the column is led by two cords.
2	Tanbur	Long-handled instrument			Tanbur held by a figurine. This instrument has a long handle, and the player taps on the chords with a plectrum.
		Short-handled instrument			The tanbur held by a figurine has a short handle.



## Conclusion

In ancient Elam, there were parading musicians visible on pictograms, where the link between the string instrument and the Elamite culture is evident.

String instruments in the Elamite civilization were divided into two categories: harps and tanburs (lutes). The instruments under this category included bow harp, standing harp, lying harp, small harp and lyre. For example, the standing harp, lying harp and lyre can be recognized on stone reliefs, while bow harp and small harp are visible on pottery and figurines. There is a category of tanburs with long handles and those with short handles held by clay figurines.

The harps observed in the remnants of the ancient Elamite period have generally

been used in a music band to orchestrate the crew and produce songs alongside other instruments such as naqqara and double-reed. However, in the majority of pictograms, the harp players have been depicted in isolation. The use of string instruments, in two categories of harps and tanburs (lutes), in ancient Elam represents the growth of musical understanding in this civilization. The people of ancient Elam not only knew the structure of these instruments, but also demonstrated the influence of these on their lives and culture, based on the numerous pictograms portraying the instruments left from that era.

## Endnotes

1) Ethnomusicology refers to the study of music in cultural contexts.

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## سازهای زهی نقش شده بر نگاره‌های ایلام باستان

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### چکیده

با کاوش‌های باستان‌شناسی که در رابطه با ایلام باستان صورت گرفته است، آثاری از طلوع تا غروب این تمدن به دست آمده است که نشان‌دهنده رواج موسیقی و نوازندگی در این تمدن است. عمده این آثار نقش‌هایی هستند که بر سنگ و سفال ترسیم شده‌اند. گروهی از نگاره‌ها، سازهای زهی را به تصویر کشیده‌اند. غالب سازهای زهی تصویر شده بر نگاره‌ها چنگ و تنبور است. این سازها همچون فرهنگ ایلامیان به تمدن‌های پس از خود انتقال یافته و در طول زمان دستخوش تغییرات شده‌اند. هدف از این پژوهش که به روش توصیفی و تحلیلی انجام پذیرفته است، بررسی و مطالعه سازهای زهی در ایلام باستان است، تا در پی آن ریشه‌های تاریخی سازهای زهی ایرانی در این دوره مورد بازبینی قرار گیرد. این نوشتار ابتدا نگاهی به موسیقی در ایلام باستان دارد و پس از آن به مطالعه نگاره‌ها با تصویر سازهای زهی می‌پردازد تا در پی آن تنوع و جایگاه این سازها مشخص شود. نتایج پژوهش حاکی از آن است که در نگاره‌های این دوره، از مجموعه سازهای زهی ساز چنگ و تنبور کاربرد و تنوع زیادی داشته است.

واژه‌های کلیدی: ایلام باستان، سازهای موسیقی، نگاره‌ها، چنگ، تنبور

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