

Origins of the Guitar

There has been much speculation on the origin of the guitar, and several theories have been proposed to account for its presence in Europe. Some have regarded it as a remote development from the Ancient Greek kithara – as suggested by the etymological relationship of ‘kithara’ and ‘guitar’; others have seen guitar ancestors among the long-necked lutes of early Mesopotamia and Anatolia or in the flat-backed ‘Coptic lutes’ of Egypt. One subject of disagreement has been whether the guitar was of indigenous European development or was instead among the instruments introduced into medieval Europe by the Arabs; but the application of the name ‘guitar’, with its overtones of European musical practice, to ancient and oriental lutes betrays a superficial acquaintance with the instruments concerned.

Short-necked lutes, among which the European guitar is classed, appeared many centuries later than the long-necked type. The earliest representations of the guitar shape in a short-necked lute appeared in Central Asia in the 4th and 3rd centuries bce. From that time until the 4th century ce Central Asian lutes were of many kinds; the guitar shape is found in examples dating from the 1st to the 4th century ce (fig.2). The type is not met again until its appearance in Byzantine miniatures of the 11th century as a bowed instrument, and from this time the guitar form was similarly depicted in medieval iconography (see Fiddle). Plucked lutes appeared in a variety of shapes in the Middle Ages; some citoles (which were plucked with a plectrum) approach guitar shape and are depicted with frets (see Citole).

The history of the guitar in Europe can be traced back to the Renaissance. Guitars from this period were constructed with both curved and flat backs and the main identifying feature of the Renaissance guitar is the characteristic outline of its frontal aspect, a shape it shared with the vihuela.

Instrument names related to ‘guitar’ occur in medieval literature from the 13th century onwards, but many are now thought to refer to the gittern, which differed in several respects from the Renaissance guitar (for a discussion of some of these early names, see Gittern). However, the late 15th-century gittern was, according to Tinctoris (c1487), tuned 4th–major 3rd–4th, a tuning used also for the contemporary four-course lute and some four-course guitars. Iconographical evidence suggests that the extension of the range of the European lute dates from the beginning of the 15th century (paired strings having been introduced in the 14th). A fifth course was added in the treble, and later in the 15th century a sixth course was added in the bass, resulting – to judge partly by 16th-century musical evidence – in the tuning G/g–c/c’–f/f’–a/a’–d’/d’–g’. This interval pattern, but with all the courses tuned at unison, was shared by the vihuela de mano, which replaced the lute in Spain. ‘Vihuela’ was first qualified by de mano (finger-plucked) in the 15th century; earlier related names were Vihuela de peñola and vihuela de arco. It seems clear that the finger-plucked vihuela was an adaptation of the guitar-shaped bowed instrument. The basic form was retained, but features better suited to a plucked instrument were adopted, namely a lute-type bridge and a central rose.

It was also during the 15th century that the Renaissance four-course guitar appeared, an instrument which had much in common with the lute and the vihuela. The strong influence from these two instruments is attributable to their artistic superiority to the guitar: the wider range afforded by their extra strings would have allowed more ambitious music to be played on or composed for them. Depictions of the four-course guitar from various regions have enough in common to indicate that a single type of instrument had been established in general usage; the complete outline of the guitar is apparent in them all, as are the central rose, the lute-type bridge and frets. In 16th-century depictions the guitarist's right hand approaches the strings from above (fig.3); no plectrum is used (as this would not allow polyphonic music to be realized). One of the four-course guitar tunings had doublings at the upper octave in the lowest course. Other features of the lute that appeared in the guitar were the rose, the bridge (fixed to the table) and the rounded, ribbed back. The flat back was shared with the vihuela, as was the waisted frontal outline (for illustrations, see Vihuela).