

An Unknown Cycladic Marble Harp Player in the Netherlands*

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I. Introduction

The harp, specifically the frame harp, is among the most ancient musical instruments to be found in Europe. According to contemporary archaeological discoveries a prototype of this stringed instrument was already known approximately 4,500 years ago on a group of small islands called the Cyclades, a part of modern-day Greece. Although it remains unclear whether the Cycladic people built the frame harp themselves, Cycladic craftsmen certainly used the prototype to make small marble statuettes of seated harp players. These were given to the deceased as grave gifts and served as idols. I will refer to these models as Cycladic harps; they represent the earliest known stage of stringed instruments in European culture.¹ Since the 19th century, ten of these harp figurines are known.² Except one,³ each of the remaining harp statuettes can be considered a principal product of the so-called Keros–Syros culture. The culmination of Early Cycladic marble objects is represented by this culture. The harp statuettes are variously dated between c. 2700 and 2300 B.C., a phase designated as Early Cycladic II. They are located in museums and private collections in Europe and the United States and have been extensively discussed in various scholarly studies and art publications. Besides a few figurines of male harp players, a very large number of statuettes of female idols have been preserved. The objects were frequently excavated in the 19th and 20th centuries. Because of their modern and stylized appearance, there was significant interest from museums and the international art trade in characteristic specimens for many years. That desire even led to large-scale illicit excavations and antiquities trading on several Cycladic islands, like the island of Keros, in the mid-20th century. The “Keros hoard” is well known and is said to have included at least 350 fragments of Early Cycladic artifacts.⁴ These objects were smuggled out of Greece in the 1950s and 1960s and were distributed to various museums and private collections. A lot of information about the context of these finds has been lost due to the illegal digging in the absence of trained archaeologists. Not only in

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¹ Van Schaik 1998, pp. 7-10.

² Another harp figurine was reportedly excavated on the peninsula of Knidos, at Cape Krio (western Turkey), but it has been missing ever since. Bent 1888.

³ New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 47.100.1. This artifact whose authenticity is in question is dated to the Late Early Cycladic I phase (c. 2800-2700 B.C.).

⁴ *Keros Hoard* 2023.

the previous century, but still today, Cycladic figurines are popular and sought after by art collectors. In the well-known tourist areas Plaka and Monastiraki in Athens, one may still come across large numbers of replicas of Cycladic figurines in many souvenir and art shops, as well as sometimes harp figurines. Almost always, the famous Keros harp figurine in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens has served as a model for these.⁵ However, modern replicas are usually made from materials other than marble from the Cyclades.



Fig. 1. Harp figurine. Left side. A brown corrosion layer is clearly visible. Heerlen, coll. B. Blok.

Surprisingly, a previously unknown Cycladic harp figurine was recently found in the art collection of Bastiaan Blok, a well-known Dutch art collector. As the statuette does not have an inventory number, it will henceforth be referred to as the 'collection Bastiaan Blok' (coll. B. Blok), after its owner and indicating that it is part of his private collection.⁶ Determining the object's authenticity is an important part of an unidentified archeological discovery.

This figurine is no exception. As a musicologist, I am not qualified to conduct focused research on its authenticity. The observations of a specialized test and research laboratory that has carefully examined the figurine serve as the foundation for this examination. The viewpoint of archaeologists who focus on ancient Cycladic art is quite significant also. The subsequent section provides the available and crucial information on the object's origin and the environment in which it was discovered. Because it concerns a harp figurine that is of significance for Western music history, organology, and music archaeology, the emphasis in this article will mainly be focused on the music archaeological aspects of this object, comparing it to previously studied Cycladic harp statuettes.⁷ For the first time, the academic world can take notice of this artifact.

⁵ Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 3908.

⁶ For privacy reasons, personal data of the present owner is not made public.

⁷ Van Schaik 1998: New York, MET, 47.100.1; Karlsruhe, Badisches Landesmuseum, B 863 (254) and B 864 (255); Athens, NAMA, 3908; New York, Shelby White collection (formerly on loan to MET, SL 1990.1.11a and SL 1990.1.11b); Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum,

II. Description of the Figurine

Dimensions

The marble statuette depicts a seated stylistic figure, exhibiting signs of restoration (broken and glued parts), with a brown corrosion layer on the left side. The statue's style can be compared to that of existing marble figurines from the Cyclades, as well as to a male harp player figurine found on Keros (2700-2300 BC) in particular.⁸ Its dimensions are as follows: height: 17.3 centimeters; length: 14.7 centimeters; width: $\pm$ 8.5 centimeters.⁹ A comparison of the statuettes reveals that the height of the subject in question is closest to that of the harp player from Amorgos, measuring 17.2 centimeters.¹⁰ It also resembles the figurines from Naxos and Thera, both measuring 16.5 centimeters in height.¹¹

The Harp Player

The harpist is holding a frame harp. He sits upright on a chair with his back detached from the backrest. His head is tilted slightly backward. The harpist seems to be gazing into the sky. The triangular stringed instrument is not being played. His right arm is depicted in a flowing, curved form. Five fingers on his right hand are clearly visible (Fig. 1);¹² his thumb appears to be missing, which is probably the result of an anatomical mistake by the sculptor. The right hand clutches the front of the harp's frame. The back of the frame rests against the harpist's left chest. The left lower leg is detached from the rest of the body due to a fracture. This broken part has been examined separately. The harpist's feet have five toes on each foot. The harpist's nose is rendered abstractly. Other nuances of the face are absent. The harpist's right arm is bent at a right angle. The left forearm and hand, with fingers, are extended against the left outer edge of the soundbox.

Soundbox and Harp Frame

The widened soundbox is clearly visible compared to the harp frame. The soundbox rests on the left side of the thigh. The harpist's sharply carved legs are slightly apart and have been sharply carved on the inside. When viewed from the front, the soundbox appears slightly rounded at the bottom (Fig. 2). There is a missing portion at the bottom front of the harp frame.

On the front of the harp frame, there are outlines of what might have been a frontal ornament. As is the case with many Cycladic harp figurines, a beak of an aquatic bird was likely attached to the top of the harp frame as a frontal ornament (Fig. 3). It is missing in the Blok figurine. Vague remnants of it are perceptible (cf. Fig. 4).

85.AA.103; US, Private collection (formerly on loan to MET, L 1982.27.13); Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 65.42; Athens, NAMA, 8833.

⁸ Athens, NAMA, 3908.

⁹ Data are based on the HEBOLABO Analysis Report from 04-17-2022.

¹⁰ New York, Shelby White coll. (formerly MET, SL 1990.1.11b).

¹¹ Richmond, VMFA, 65.42; Karlsruhe, Badisches Landesmuseum, B 864 (255).



Fig. 2. Harp figurine. Front side.
Missing portion at the bottom front
of the harp frame. Heerlen, coll. B.
Blok.



Fig. 3. A frontal aquatic bird ornament.
Athens, NAMA, 3908 (detail).



Fig. 4. The aquatic bird ornament (a duck's
bill or a swan's head) is missing. Heerlen, coll.
B. Blok (detail).



Fig. 5. Right side of the harp figurine. A space between the backrest and the back of the harpist. Heerlen, coll. B. Blok.

There is a clearly visible fracture plane between the harpist's head and torso. Other fracture planes are visible on the rear right chair leg and in the curved backrest (Table 1). There is a clear indication of a fracture between the lower right thigh and the chair. The harpist's torso and right thigh are rather robustly rendered.

Chair and Backrest

The chair has four rounded legs that are flattened at the bottom. The legs flare slightly toward the seat at the back of the chair. The rear of the seat is not perpendicular to the legs but is wider at the back and sides. The backrest is high enough to reach the middle of a harpist's shoulders. The underside of the chair shows that all the legs have fractured surfaces just below the seat. The openwork backrest leaves a space between it and the back of the harpist (Fig. 5).¹³ Inside the openwork section is a smaller, semi-oval, raised section attached to the chair's seat. However, it should be noted that the design of the chair differs from that of the studied harp figurine in both mentioned objects. The backrest of the Keros figurine most closely resembles the displayed object. One exception is the New York harp player; he is connected to the chair by his back.¹⁴ Other statuettes depict harp players sitting on stools without a backrest.

¹³ This is also the case with the figurines from Keros (Athens, NAMA, 3908) and Naxos (Richmond, VMFA, 65-42).

¹⁴ New York, MET, 47.100.1.



Fig. 6. Back side of the harp figurine. A semi-oval backrest with an openwork section inside. Heerlen, coll. B. Blok.

Paint Residues

Apart from a stylized nose, the vast majority of marble harp players have no further accentuation for the eyes and ears. Remarkably, microscopic examination has revealed the presence of paint residues on this harp figurine (Fig. 7).¹⁵ So far, faint traces of paint residues on Cycladic harp statuettes have only been demonstrated on the statuette in New York.¹⁶ Such residues are not unusual, as there are several marble female idols which bear traces of blue and red paint, or ghost areas where the paint has left a different surface texture.¹⁷ Although chromatic effects were not uncommon in Cycladic sculpture, it is highly unlikely that paint ghosts were part of the forger's craft in the 1950s or early 1960s. It is believed that the craftsmen used red and blue accents to emphasize facial details, especially around the eyes and mouth. The widespread use of the color red, particularly in funerary contexts by various people in different periods is well attested. Ritual painting was easier and more striking to the eye than carving, especially for small facial features. The limited handling the figures received reflects the symbolic extensions of the coloring.¹⁸ The visible paint residues on the studied harp figurine are the same color, but it is unclear what they were highlighting.

¹⁵ HEBOLABO, Analysis Report 28_8_81, p. 11: "Details of the surface (x200, incident light): few traces of paint could be observed." Unfortunately, the report does not specify the precise location of the paint residues on the figurine. The paint residues themselves have not been examined any further.

¹⁶ New York, MET, 47.100.1. A paint ghost is perceptible on the head of the harp player in Malibu, JPM, 85.AA.103. Van Schaik 1998, p. 24.

¹⁷ Gill-Chippindale 1993, p. 97; Getz-Preziosi-Weinberg 1970, p. 11.

¹⁸ Van Schaik, p. 48.



Fig. 7. Paint fragments of probable visual accents on the harp statuette. Heerlen, coll. B. Blok.

Fracture Surfaces

As with all known Cycladic harp figurines, this figurine also has various visible fracture surfaces. The cause of these breaks is difficult to determine, given that the statuette is about 4,500 years old. After once being made as a burial offering, it lay in the ground for millennia. In modern times, experts or forgers excavated it, and it traveled the world as an artifact. Damage could have occurred during any of these phases.

Table 1. Breaks and Missing Parts in the Marble Harp Figurines.

Present Location	Harp F S	Figure										Seat		
		LL	RL	LF	RF	LA	RA	LH	RH	N		F	R	B
1. New York 47.100.1	+	+								+				
2. Karlsruhe B 863 (254)	– +		+	–				–						
3. Karlsruhe B 864 (255)	–			–	–							±		
4. Athens 3908	+	±	+		±	–	–	–	–				+	
5. US (White coll.) [a]	+	+	+		+	–		–		+		+	+	
6. US (White coll.) [b]	±	+			+	+		–		+		+		
7. Malibu 85.AA.103	+	+												
8. US (Private coll.)	+	+	+			–		–		+		±		
9. Richmond 65-42				±	±	+	+		–	+			±	
10. Athens 8833	–	–	–	–	–	–		–	–	–		±	±	
11. Heerlen (coll. B.Blok)	–	x	+							+		+	+	+

F frame; S soundbox; LL left leg; RL right leg; LF left feet; LA left arm; RA right arm; LH left hand; RH right hand; N neck; F foreleg; R rear legs; B back (of the chair).

+ mended break; – missing part; ± restored part; x loose part

Compared to other Cycladic harp figurines, this object does not show any unusual patterns in its fracture surfaces. Nearly all of the harp figurines have damage to the harp frame and the legs of the harpist. The neck of the harp player and the chair legs are also weak points (Fig. 8). This is the only statuette with a loose left lower leg. Crystal formation is clearly visible on the fracture surface.

Authenticity

When an archaeological object is discovered, one of the most crucial aspects is ascertaining its authenticity. At the request of the current owner, a recognized Belgian testing and research laboratory examined the chemical composition and the surface of this figurine.¹⁹ To accomplish this, a sample was taken from the inside of the left lower leg using a cobalt drill for X-Ray Diffraction (XRD) spectrometry. The sample was then analyzed using an XRD goniometer.²⁰ The report states: “The stone sample is marble (mainly calcite–dolomite/quartz)”.²¹ The chemical composition of the sample solution was examined by ICP analysis. The results of the ICP analysis showed that the composition is similar to that of Cycladic marble.

The surface was examined using a microscope. Surface observations revealed wide, rough chisel marks, indicating that the surface was carved by hand using stone tools. The fingers of the harp player were carved using a wide stone chisel. The chisel passes are rough with repeated impact marks. There are typical stone chisel carving marks between the left arm and the harp. The edge of the nose was repeatedly cut with a sharp stone shard made of silex or obsidian. Furthermore, the report states that various sanding marks from a quartz sand finish are present.



Fig. 8. Ingrown oxidation (brown) into the marble core, indicating a long-term process. Heerlen, coll. B. Blok.

The microscopic examination also aimed at observing the weathering layers on the surface. The left half of the figurine particularly shows such layers in several places.²² The development of this weathering process depends on the type of soil in the surrounding area and the amount of moisture present. It is a slow process that occurs over many years. Prolonged weathering (thousands of years) causes brown iron oxide from the surrounding soil to deeply penetrate the surface between the crystal planes in the stone.

¹⁹ HEBOLABO, Analysis Report 28_8_81.

²⁰ Cu-tube, 30 kV, 10 mA.

²¹ See footnote 19, p. 3.

²² Examined using IR radiation.

This ingrown iron oxide is clearly visible in the marble core of the left leg (Fig. 8). According to the research, the surface of the object has not been treated. No modern binders have been impregnated. The weathering layers have not been applied artificially. According to the report, "it is a feature of great age and cannot be faked." The final conclusion of the analysis report is as follows: "None of the observations and analyses give rise to suspicion of forgery or a contemporary copy."²³

Provenance

For archaeologists and art historians, knowing the origin of an archaeological find is very important and, rightfully so, there is much discussion of this in the scientific literature. Provenance partly determines an object's authenticity and whether it was obtained legally. This object's traceable history seems to go back to the 1950s. As mentioned in the introduction, there was significant trade in illegally obtained marble artifacts from the Cyclades in the last century. In the Western world, there was significant demand for these objects among art dealers and collectors, and that demand still exists today. Unfortunately, the origin of this harp figurine is also unclear. The statuette is a family heirloom passed down from a Greek immigrant to his son, who lived and worked in Paris in the 1950s. Both men were art lovers, but not art dealers. The father had obtained the figurine from a Greek art dealer and jeweler from Athens named Stavros Ketsis, "or something like that".²⁴ He was a family friend. While living in Athens, he maintained business relations with the Greek islands, as well as with London, Paris, Rome, and Jerusalem. According to the former owner in the US, the Greek art dealer passed away in the 1970s.²⁵ It is not known how he acquired this archaeological object. The statuette came into the hands of the Dutch art collector Mr. Bastiaan Blok through a public auction in 2007. In brief, this is all that is known about the origin of this archaeological object. Many questions remain. Which Cycladic island was it found on? In which cemetery? And in what context? We do not know. The harp figurine is not unique in this respect; it aligns with the incomplete origin history of most other Cycladic harp figurines.²⁶

III. Some Music-Archaeological Observations

The stylized marble figurine fits within the tradition of Cycladic marble sculptures from the third millennium B.C. and is consistent with the depiction of certain musical figures from that culture. The seated figure appears to be holding a closed frame, the shape of which is reminiscent of a stringed instrument known in the field of music organology as a "Cycladic harp". The triangular frame is formed by a post that connects the soundbox and the neck, thereby reinforcing the structure to support higher string tension.

²³ See footnote 19, p. 15.

²⁴ For obvious reasons, the previous owner is unsure about the correctness of the name "Ketsis" given that he was a child at the time. Despite extensive research, no additional information has been found about an art dealer from Athens named Stavros Ketsis.

²⁵ This information is based on personal email exchanges between the current and former owners of the figurine in the US. These exchanges took place at the end of 2025 and the beginning of 2026. For privacy reasons, the full text is not publicly available.

²⁶ Van Schaik 1998, p. 24, Table 1, Reliability of Provenance.

The music archaeologist Professor Joachim Braun has pointed out that the triangular harp may be considered an ancient Near Eastern phenomenon.²⁷ The strings appear to be stretched between the horizontal resonator and the curved side arm. The shorter strings are therefore on the side opposite the musician. The back of the harp frame rests against the harpist's chest and shoulder. This positioning is also evident in other harp figurines. The top of the frame extends up to the harpist's chin, which is a common feature of most well-known harp figurines. However, two statuettes in New York and Malibu are exceptions to this²⁸; on those figurines, the top of the harp frame is significantly higher.

From the top of the front of the harp frame the beak of the aquatic bird (probably a duck or a swan) is missing. The place where it was once located can be seen vaguely. The aquatic bird motif occurs on all (undamaged) harp figurines. It fits into a magico-religious context of the Cycladic culture.²⁹ In cosmological terms, the aquatic bird has access to two types of worlds: the present world and the "otherworld." It can make a cosmogonic dive into the depths of the primordial lower waters and fly to the upper waters beyond the clouds. Since the Paleolithic era, the aquatic bird seems to symbolized rebirth, victory over death.³⁰ This meaning fits well within the context of the harp figurine as a grave offering.

Compared to existing figurines, there are striking differences in posture of the harpist and how the instrument is held. The most interesting difference compared to other preserved harp figurines is the positioning of the harp. In the figurine under discussion, the harp rests on the left thigh of the player. This feature makes the "unknown" Cycladic harp figurine unique, because in all other harp figurines, the soundbox rests on the right thigh.³¹ Later replicas and forgeries consistently depict a harp player with the soundbox on the right thigh. It is possible that the Keros harpist in Athens was the model for this placement. Most harp statuettes depict the forearm resting on top of the soundbox. The representation of the harp on the left thigh suggests an unusual playing technique. That assumption is reinforced by the position of the outstretched left forearm next to the soundbox.³² It appears that the strings were plucked using the left hand, while the right hand held the frame upright. It is possible that this harp statuette is an abstraction of a left-handed harpist whom the sculptor may have observed in everyday life. In most other harp figurines, the hands are positioned in the opposite way: the right-hand rests on top of the soundbox while the left arm holds the frame.³³ A clear exception to this is the statuette in New York, where the harpist holds the curved frame with both hands.³⁴ A few of the harp figurines have lost their left arm (see Table 1).

²⁷ Braun 2002, 62; Lawergren 1996.

²⁸ New York, MET, 47.100.1 and Malibu, JPGM, 85.AA.103.

²⁹ Van Schaik 1998, pp. 32-45; Van Schaik 2002.

³⁰ Armstrong 1958, p. 14; Dunnigan 1987, pp. 188-189; Gimbutas 1990, p. 112.

³¹ Some images of the Keros harp figurine (Athens, NAMA, 3908) on the internet show a mirror image of the piece. This creates the misleading impression that the harp also rests on the left thigh.

³² In Karlsruhe, Badisches Landesmuseum, B 863 (254) the extended right forearm is placed alongside the soundbox.

³³ Karlsruhe, Badisches Landesmuseum, B 864 (255); New York, Shelby White collection (formerly MET, SL 1990.1.11a and SL 1990.1.11b); Malibu, JPGM, 85.AA.103; US, Private collection (formerly MET, L 1982.27.13). In Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 65-42 the left hand is holding the frame, while the final part of the right forearm is missing.

³⁴ New York, MET, 47.100.1.

It is striking that the right hand of the present harp player has been inaccurately depicted. In fact, the hand has five fingers. The thumb would traditionally grasp the frame. In this respect, too, the sculpture differs from other known figurines, which correctly depict this feature. When viewed from the front, the slightly rounded shape at the bottom of the soundbox corresponds with that of other harp figurines.³⁵ The backward-tilted position of the harp player's head fits well within the tradition of the Cycladic musical figurines. To some degree all harp players seem to gaze into the sky.³⁶ As non-musical figures usually look straight ahead, the harp player's inclined head position was apparently a deliberate choice by the sculptor. There are several hypothetical explanations for the head's position, but not all of them are equally plausible. The most likely option seems to be the reference to the magical sound of music. This would emphasize the presumed function of the harp statuettes as symbols intended to please the gods and secure their favor in order to ensure the deceased's rebirth in the hereafter. The various options are discussed in detail in my study *The Marble Harp Players from the Cyclades*.³⁷

Conclusion

The presence of an unknown marble harp figurine from the Cyclades in the Netherlands is remarkable for several reasons. First, the figurine is a valuable addition to the ten known Cycladic harp statuettes that have withstood the test of time. The figurine seems to fit into the Keros–Syros culture, suggesting a date within the Early Cycladic II phase (c. 2700–2300 BC). Additionally, from a music-historical and organological perspective, the figurine is unique because it is the only surviving harp figurine that appears to depict a left-handed harp player. The marble harp itself represents an existing stringed instrument that must have been known in Cycladic culture.

Based on the current provenance information, it is impossible to prove whether the unknown object is the same harp figurine that the English explorer and archaeologist James Theodore Bent described in 1888 and that has not been traced since. From his description, it only appears that he saw a marble seated harpist “similar to that in the Museum in Athens”.³⁸ As with most harp figurines, the exact origin of the present object is unknown. Only the history of the last eight decades is known and verifiable. However, the Belgian analysis report of the statuette leaves no doubt that the object is real.

Archaeologists from the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens share this opinion.

Of course, there are aspects that require further research. For example, a follow-up study should take a detailed look at the paint residues observed on the object. This could provide more clarity about the exact location of these remains and also make it possible to compare them with similar paint residues on other Cycladic idols. That could lead to further insights into its origin. Nevertheless, it would be gratifying if this marble harp figurine, after approximately 4,500 years, could be incorporated into the extant music-archaeological heritage from the Cyclades.

³⁵ Athens, NAMA, 3908; Karlsruhe, Badisches Landesmuseum, B 863 (254) and B 864 (255); Malibu, JPGM, 85.AA.103; US, Private collection (formerly on loan to MET, L.1982.27.13).

³⁶ Except for the harp figurine with the missing head in Athens, NAMA, 8833.

³⁷ Van Schaik 1998, pp. 41–44.

³⁸ Bent 1888, p. 82.

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