

“The earliest representations of the Celtic harps were found sculpted on stone in Scotland dating from the eighth or ninth century.

By the year 1000, early forms of the Celtic harp were widespread all over Ireland, Wales and Scotland. Harpers abounded, and the music of the harp was important to the people. The reign of the harp in the music of the British Isles was noted by learned Europeans. These early writings span several hundred years and hint at that marvelous music which is now lost. For example, Polydore Virgil, who lived in England during the first half of the sixteenth century states "...that the Irish practice music, and are eminently skilled in it. Their performance, both vocal and instrumental is exquisite, but so bold and impassioned, that it is amazing how they can observe the rules of their art amidst such rapid evolutions of the fingers and vibrations of the voice: and yet they do observe them to perfection."

But we can't know what they played, or how they sounded for we have no examples written down, they were oral only.

Long before the arrival of the bagpipe, the Celtic harp was the mainstay of Gaelic courtly music in Scotland.

The Celtic harp came in two different forms: the earlier Pictish harp, which became known as a “harp” and was strung with gut or horsehair, and the Gaelic clarsach, strung with wire.

The clarsach was the primary instrument of the Gaelic courts until the introduction of the bagpipe in the 15th century and remained central to Gaelic courtly music until the mid 18th century. It also played a key role in the music of the early Celtic church.

So what did the earliest Celtic, or Gaelic harps, or more accurately “Clarsachs” look like, and how were they played?

They were smaller, lap harps, with 15-22 strings, and held on the lap. They were played with a different technique than used today. They were traditionally held against the left shoulder, the left hand playing the upper strings and the right hand, the lower strings. Today, harps are held against the right shoulder and the hands' playing positions are reversed. The old harps were strung with thick brass wire and plucked with long, crooked fingernails which resembled quills. These harps had a loud, full, rich, bell-like sound. The upper strings, often a thin steel wire, had a sweet tinkling sound. The bass register could growl and roar. The sound of the old harps would ring for a long time so, sometimes the strings were stopped to provide clarity of tone and to avoid muddying fast passages.

The Gaelic word for wire-strung harp is CLAIRSEACH and was used throughout Ireland and Scotland. At this time, the softer, Pictish harp would have been played for celebrations or entertainment.

In ancient times in Scotland, harpers were the counselors of kings and were given the chair of honor, titles and wealth for their services. They were considered second in rank to the clan bard or filidh.. These benefits were not inherited by their children but went to the best harper.

In Ireland, the harpers were consulted before going to war and often in both Ireland and Scotland, led the troops to battle with harp and sword, singing of victory and slaying his share of the enemy. His harp was often heavily decorated and highly revered.

It's hard to imagine that the harp could be seen as, or sound like, an instrument of war, but it's important to remember that with all wire strings, the sound would ring out and carry across the hills.

The Irish Triads tell us more information about how the Harp was regarded in the Early Medieval period (ca. 920 CE):

Three things that are essential to a Lord:

A Harp, A Cloak and A Chessboard.

Three things necessary for happiness:

A faithful Wife, a well-padded Chair, and a Harp well-tuned.

Harpers and bards told the stories of history, and the people. Music accompanied everything in the Scots and Irish life: birth, work, death, celebrations, mourning.

Ireland's National symbol, the harp on the Guinness bottles, and on the coins is called the "Brian Boru" Harp. As the official emblem of Ireland it also appears on the Presidential seal, every Irish passport, and is used in the coat-of-arms of the National University of Ireland. And is based on a real harp that was built in 1220, and is now housed at Trinity College in Dublin.

Since Celtic harp music was an oral tradition, and not written down, until fairly recently it was believed most of the music to be almost entirely lost. The reason Celtic music was nearly lost is because when Britain took over Scotland and Ireland they banished all music of the harp, all harp players, and had the harps burned. They saw the harp in Ireland as a traditional symbol of Irish heritage and they were turning them into British subjects so this was a real threat. Likewise in Scotland, while it was not considered treason and punishable by death to play the harp as it

was in Ireland, it was a symbol of Scotland people and just like the kilt was banned, the music of the harp was frowned upon.

However, there has been a revival of the music and with Celtic Harpers themselves. Musicians who perform and teach about this ancient instrument help to keep this beautiful and historical music alive!”