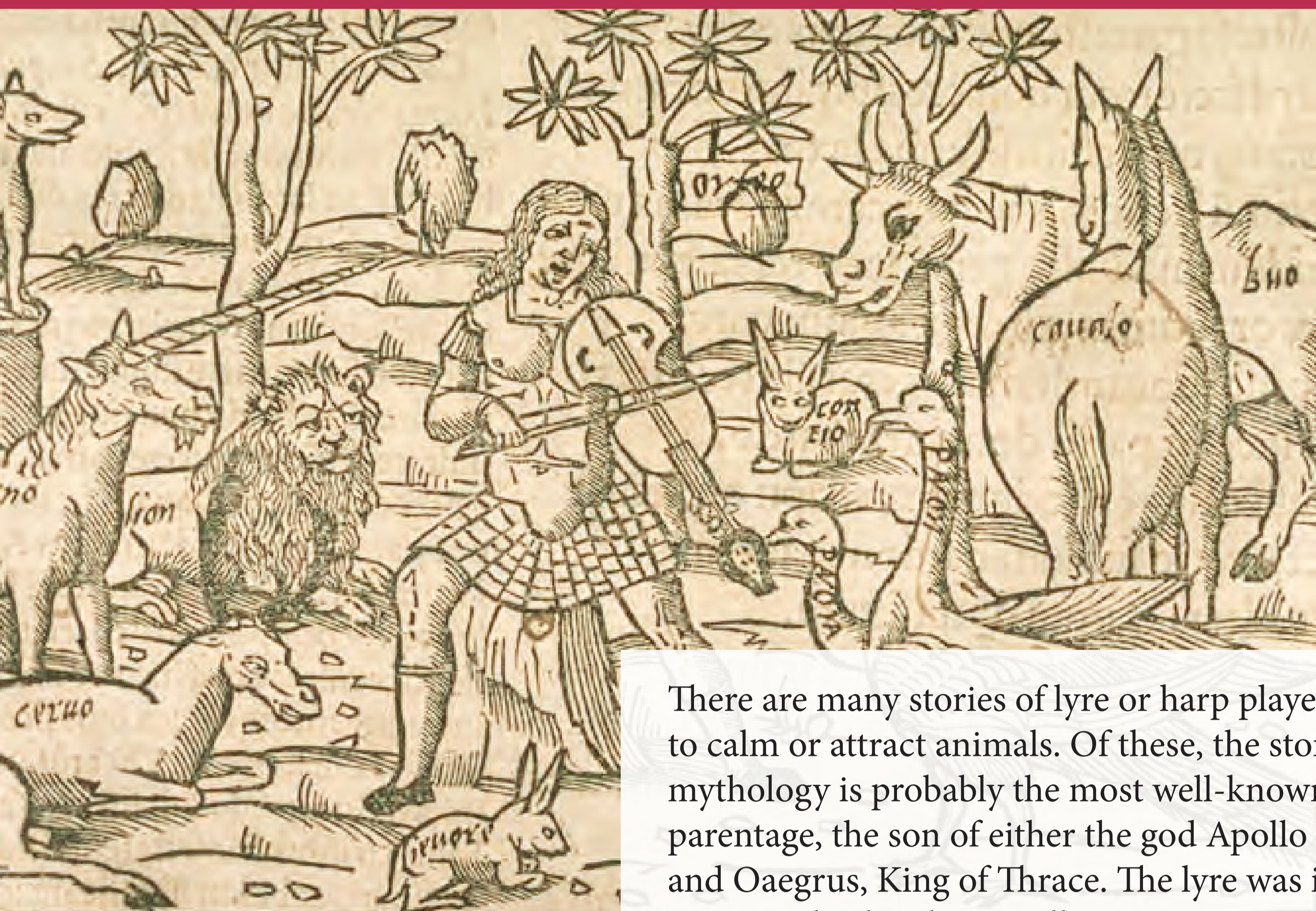


THE POWER OF THE LYRE

Orpheus, David, Gunnar, Arion



Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, ed. Raphael Regius, Parma 1505, Book X, 143



Orpheus-Plate, Attica. Halle, Robertinum K 81

Animals are not insensitive to human music making. Almost all musicians can tell stories of their interactions with animals. The sound of a violin or hurdy-gurdy can send a dog into paroxysms of pain. Cows are attracted to the sound of bagpipes. Deer can be calmed by the sound of a song. Shepherds throughout history have been pictured with flutes or bagpipes. Herders in Scandinavia use a special type of vocalizing called *kulokk* in Norway and *kulning* in Sweden to lure cows back to the barn. Gaelic songs of endearment to calm a cow while milking are common in Scotland and similar songs are probably found throughout the world. Scottish fishermen used seal songs to attract and kill the seals threatening their fish.

There are many stories of lyre or harp players, who used their music to calm or attract animals. Of these, the story of **ORPHEUS** from Greek mythology is probably the most well-known. Orpheus had a musical parentage, the son of either the god Apollo or of the Muse Calliope and Oeagrus, King of Thrace. The lyre was invented by Hermes, who gave it to his brother Apollo as recompense for stealing Apollo's cattle. Orpheus received his golden lyre from Apollo, who also taught him to play. Orpheus is most famous for his descent into the Underworld to retrieve his wife Eurydice. There, he melted the heart of Hades with his lyre playing. Hades was willing to release Eurydice on the condition that Orpheus not turn to look at his wife before leaving the Underworld. Tragically, Orpheus was not able to resist turning for a glimpse, so Eurydice was lost to him forever. Not only could Orpheus cause the rocks and trees to dance and the rivers to change their courses, he could also calm the wild beasts with the music of his lyre.

The story of Orpheus was widely known and was reworked into the Medieval English romance *Sir Orfeo*, found in the 14th century Auchinlek manuscript. When King Orfeo's wife Dame Heurodis is abducted by the King of Faerie, Orfeo forsakes his kingdom and lives as a hermit in the forest for 10 years. His only comfort is his harp:

*Into alle þe wode þe soun gan schille
þat alle þe wilde bestes þat þer bep
For ioie abouten him þai tep;
& alle þe foules þat þer were
Come & sete on ich a brere
To here his harping afine*

Into the forest the sound of his harp playing rang out so that all the wild beasts therein would gather around him and all the birds therein would come and sit on the branches to hear his fine harping.

The story survived in ballad form in *King Orfeo*, which was sung on the Shetland Islands. Shetland is strongly Scandinavian, and the ballad has a refrain in Norn, an early form of the Norse language. In both the romance and the ballad, Orfeo succeeds in rescuing his wife, not only with his harp playing but also through cunning and trickery.

HARPANS KRAFT

In *Harpans Kraft*, a ballad found throughout Scandinavia, the hero appears to be a direct descendent of Orpheus. In trying to win back his bride from the evil water spirit Nök or Näkken, he first plays his harp so that the trees dance and fling off their bark and the babies fall off their mothers' knees. His second tune attracts all the beasts of the forest, who are charmed by his playing. Only after the third tune, does the river stop flowing, so that Nök must leave the water and relinquish the bride. The parallels to the Orpheus story are quite remarkable.

ARION

When the crew of his ship threatens to throw the Greek singer Arion overboard and steal the riches he had won at a lyre playing competition in Sicily, Arion asks permission to play his lyre one last time. His music lures a dolphin to the ship, so that when he springs overboard, the dolphin takes Arion on his back and carries him home.

GUNNAR

In the *Völsungasaga*, Gunnar refuses to reveal to Atli the secret hiding place of the dragon Fafnir's horde. Atli throws Gunnar into a snake pit, but has the foresight to have Gunnar's hands bound, because Gunnar could calm wild animals with his lyre playing. Gunnar, however, is so accomplished that he can play with his feet. He calms all the snakes but one, who bites him in the heart.

DAVID

King David began his life as a simple shepherd before he calmed Saul with his lyre playing. According to the Quran and the *Arabian Nights*, David's playing was a God-given power that could charm birds, beasts and the natural world.



Stave church portal, Uvdal in Numedal, Norway (13th-14th century)

Gunnar with a harp in the snake pit. At first sight, it looks as if he were standing on the harp but, in reality, he is playing with his feet, the harp below him.



Hylestad stave church portal, Setesdal, Norway (ca. 1200),

Gunnar lies on his back in the snake pit with his hands bound, playing the lyre with his feet. Photos: Wikimedia

ARION

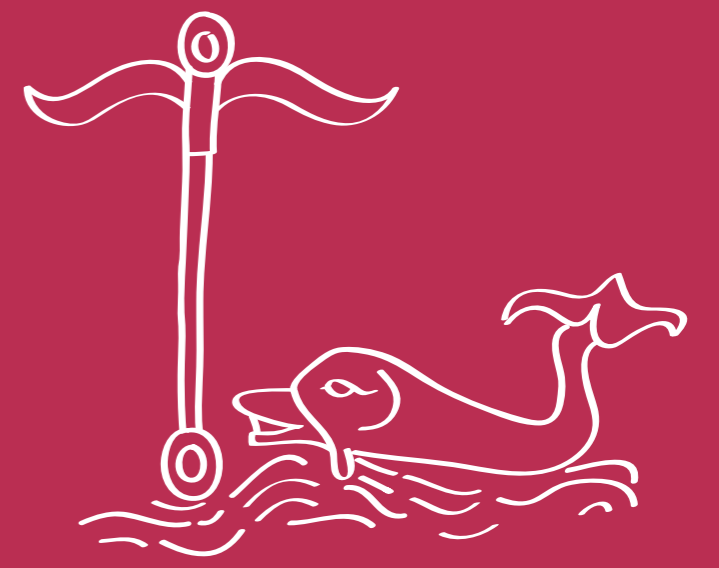


According to Herodotus, the poet Arion spent the greater part of his life at the court of Periander of Corinth. When he wanted to return there after a voyage from Taranto, the Corinthian sailors robbed him and forced him to jump into the sea. Allowed to give a farewell concert, he sang to the cithara the *Orphic Nomos* (attributed to Terpander). A dolphin rescued him and carried him ashore. Thus Arion survived and denounced the sailors before Periander.



Prophet Jonah, spit out by the great fish—end of a rite of passage.

Mattheus Merian, *Icones biblicæ*, vol. 3, Frankfurt a.M. 1627.



Dolphin motif from a tomb closure plate from the Praetextatus Catacomb, Rome, 3rd century.

(left) Ernest-Eugène Hiolle, *Arion* (marble), Postcard from the Paris world fair 1878

The dolphin is considered the savior of the shipwrecked. *Delphis*, in Greek, is related to *delphys*, the womb. In Christian symbolism, the dolphin stands for the savior of souls.

Coincidental zoomorphism:

The North African *rabāb*, a bowed short-necked lute with a boat-shaped body, is played in a vertical position. Seen from behind, it resembles a dolphin—sometimes it is compared to a hare.

SMM De 397: *Rebab andalusi*, Morocco, 20th century.

