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SUMMARY

A musical instrument of substantial importance in the history of Christianity, specifically in the visual arts and music culture of Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance Italy, is the subject of the present study. The cetra (in Italian, *cetra*, also spelled *cetera*; in Latin, *cithara*) was the forerunner of the stringed instrument known in English since the 16th-c. as “cittern”. Because no historical artifacts or specimens predating the 16th c. have survived in instrument collections or museums, the first objective of this research has been to establish a definitive catalog of iconographical material featuring the cetra. The catalog is comprised of 52 entries, each entry referring to a monument of Italian visual art, in any medium, from c. 1100 - c. 1535. Numerous entries feature multiple depictions of this plucked instrument, bringing the total number of *cetra* images to well over 100 (more than half of which hitherto unpublished in organological or music history literature).

The field of iconographical data presented in the catalog is then analyzed, together with relevant literary and music theory sources from the same period, to give a definitive account of the instrument’s morphology, evolution, construction, cultural identity and musical function. The conclusions thus arrived at are finally tested and put into practice on stage: four cetre have been built for this research project by three different luthiers, and have been used in concerts of early Renaissance music given in 2017/2018.

Historians, musicologists and players of medieval and Renaissance instruments may be startled by some of the essay’s conclusions, which both support and oppose current thinking on many aspects concerning the history of the cetra/cittern: regarding its relation to the citole, which until now has been seen as the predecessor of the cetra; regarding the role of the instrument in the Christian Church, which adopted the cetra as its own; and regarding the background of physical characteristics, such as the wooden block frets, which until now have remained unexplained in origin and musical function.

This study provides answers to long-unanswered questions about a chordophone which time has forgotten...a stringed instrument recalling Classical Antiquity, and one of quintessential importance to both Christians and Humanists: made in Italy.