The guitar belongs to the group of the lutes, which is further subdivided into two sub-groups: bowed and plucked instruments. The oldest example of a chordophone is believed to be the musical bow, which would have been developed from the hunting bow. In its simplest form, it had one single string fastened to the ends of a flexible stick. As it developed, extra strings with other lengths allowing for new pitches, and resonators made from a gourd, or wood, or some other material, were added. The result is an instrument called the bow harp.

The typical form of the guitar with its incurved sides is similar to that of the fiddle and may point to an earlier bowed form of a lute which appeared in eleventh-century Byzantine miniatures. The back of the "normal" guitar is flat. The strings were normally made of gut. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth century the sound hole appeared as a decorated rose, then it was open like at the modern guitar. Average measurements of the Baroque guitar were an overall length of about 92 and a string length of 63–70 cm. In the performance of polyphonic music the technique of playing the guitar was similar to that of the lute: the right hand was supported by the little finger resting on or near the bridge and the strings were plucked by the thumb and the first two fingers.