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History of Archery Part 2 Primitive Self Bows

I stated in the last article I would discuss the various types of bows that have been used since earliest times. I will begin by listing the various types primitive bows that developed throughout the world. I will include some information on the tackle used by the diverse bowmen of the world, their area of origin and some of the specifics of the materials used in constructing the equipment.

Originally, we can be sure, bows were wooden and of simple construction. This style of bow is often referred to as the self bow. The simple wooden bow is the type that developed in Europe and amongst most tribes of savages. Even admitting the simplicity implied by all wooden construction, there is still a great diversity of styles and construction technique.

A unique form of the wooden bow, which has never been found elsewhere, is shown in the sculptures of ancient Assyria. The bow depicted is very short, appearing to be around 4 feet. It is believed that this bow, as short as it was, would still be able to fire an arrow fully a yard long without breaking. This feat appeared to be accomplished by putting a bend in the handle, so that the limbs stand apart at an angle of about 135 degrees, at rest.

When looking at the bows of Africa, it is apparent that they remained the most primitive throughout time. One type of bow predominates the entire continent, though other forms do appear, they are usually small in size. The primary bow is usually around 5 feet, cylindrical, but with a sharp taper for the last foot or so. They usually have no nocks and the string is simply wrapped and tied at the ends. Arrows were usually simple affairs with 2 feathers and primitive points.

The bows of South America, on the other hand, tend to be large, ranging from 6 to 9 feet in length. The draw weight for these large bows ranges from moderate to quite heavy. This continent's diverse number of bows vary in construction and traits such as nocks, and string attachment. However decoration and ornamentation are fairly common. Aside from the practical use of the bow, it is also quite commonly found in ceremonial roles throughout this continent, and this may account for the artistry so often displayed on these instruments. South American arrows, like the bows, also tend to be large, reaching up to

6 feet in length. The body of these arrows tend to be of reed with a hardwood footshaft. Tips range widely in design but are mostly made of wood or bone and both are almost invariably heavily barbed. Some arrows of this type will be pierced through a shell, to create a whistling sound when the arrow is fired.

Amongst the diverse cultures of the Pacific islands the bow has also found a foothold. These people became quite ingenious in their development of the primitive bow. Working with the materials at hand some tribes constructed their bows from the aerial root of the mangrove. Some of the Island bows are similar in construction to the traditional self bow except that the upper limb is curved and the lower is straight, when firing, this lower limb is rested on the ground. The arrows of the islands are diverse but highly specialized, one tribe going so far as to use arrows that are much like harpoons. They would hunt pigs with these arrows, when the hunter scored a strike the head would detach from the arrow but remain connected to the shaft by a long leather thong, this would act as a drag and wear down the pig.

The bows of the North American Indian are as diverse in shape and size as those of South America but never resemble their southern cousins in construction. Most are short, flat, and varying in weight, there are however, striking individual differences. The far western styles tended to be broad, thin and somewhat reflexed, occasional backed with sinew. One eastern bow found was nearly 6 feet long, made of hickory, with each limb being strongly reflexed by heating and bending.

The primitive bow of Japan was, like most others, simply made of wood, about 5 feet long and tapered at the ends. Other than this, we don't know much about Japan's primitive. The odd thing about the development of the bow in Japan is that it changed its pattern of development, suddenly going from wooden, self style, construction, to a more complex and advanced composite structure. It is this type of bow, the composite style, that I will elaborate on in my next article.

Next

The Composite Bow
and Its Development



Hit and Miss



I have decided to try something new in this addition of Hit and Miss. Normally I review two books on their use as historical reference, how well they are written etc. etc.. This time I think it appropriate to comment on general types of books, their merits and so forth. Keep in mind that as I speak of these books, my opinion on their

value is in reference to individuals not well versed in that books field of study. Scholars who have a good understanding of the subject matter can decide any texts merits for themselves. It is to the new students of history my remarks are aimed. It is better to learn something correctly at first, than to try and correct misconceptions later on.

What to Hit Secondary Sources, Contemporary Texts, and Overview Books

When a person wants to begin studying a new topic, I would invariably advise them to conduct their search in a way that allows them to begin learning new information immediately, and to build on this foundation by progressing through the type of study aids available in a orderly fashion. This progression would take them through the three types of text I feel are invaluable to the student of a new topic. These texts are; "Introduction Books", "Overview Books", and "Secondary Texts".

The "Introduction Books" are by necessity very basic, yet full of information. They tend to introduce you to the most prominent aspects of their topic, with information included on the peripheral development of these topics. Of course, this books very nature will also tend to make it more of a "Spark your interest book", than a "Hard fact Reference". I still recommend these books, not only for what they provide to the reader, but also because they can be used to lead into more complete studies of the topic they represent. Some good examples of these type of book are the "Eye witness to history" series normally found in the children's section of the book store.

The next step above the "Introduction Books" are the "Overview Books". This type of text is designed to give you as much information about the topic they cover, in the space they have. These books do not always fully develop the causes and affects of the information they provide, but will generally give you a good idea of most things you would want to know. There are many good sets of these type. The Time/Life series "Time Line", the Osprey "Men-At-Arms" and "Elite" series and the "Everyday Life of the:___" series fit the bill well.

Finally we come to the "Secondary Texts", these books are for the big boys so don't pick them up unless your serious. All Kidding aside these books are jam packed with information, they will elaborate down to the smallest detail. These texts are generally comprised of extensive research, done by the author into primary sources as other research sciences. Be warned however, these books tend to make dry reading, and, in some cases, will have more foot notes on a page than text. They also tend to be fairly expensive.

What to Miss Primary Sources, Historic Fiction and Heroic Poems and Sagas

When a new historian is searching for books to read and do research in, it is very easy to fall into the trap of going to the root of the problem, that is, referring to "Primary Sources". The problems with the use of primary sources are many fold. You must first acknowledge the fact that "History is written by the Victor". This simply means that most primary sources have a distinct bias weather this bias is positive or negative matters not, just be aware that it exists.

Some ancient authors use their writings to show contrast or satire and as such will magnify or elaborate on certain traits of their subject, that might have otherwise been mundane, common or even just made up. Quite often other aspects are exaggerated to make the one party or another look better, this usually happens during description of military actions, by making the enemy look stronger and more barbaric, it makes the victor look that much more valiant. It is also fairly common for the ancient authors to compile "new" texts from the writings of earlier writers, conjecture, hearsay, fables or even common misconceptions. Many authors of primary texts undertook no research themselves, instead they would rely on the reports of others.

Another problem is the use of historical fiction and heroic poems and sagas as reference guides. In the first case it should be obvious that any one writing a historical novel should be fairly well versed in the history they are writing about. You must also acknowledge that it is still a work of fiction with all the embellishment, alterations and poetic license that goes along with it. The same is true of the heroic poems and sagas. These are generally the same as historic fiction, just composed earlier and usually were written to make a point or convey a moral.

Please keep in mind that I am not saying that any of the above sources have "no value" as points of reference. What I am saying is that you should not try to use them as such until you have a good grasp of the subject they reflect upon. In this way you will know the obvious falsehoods when you see them, and will be able to look up and study new topics that these sources mention. If you should note something in one of the above sources, that you can not verify, you should not accept it as fact.