The History of the Bow & Arrow

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Archery, or the use of the bow and arrow, is one of man's most ancient war-making and hunting technologies. Despite its age, or perhaps because of it, archery remained popular even into the early 21st century. Knowing the history of the bow and arrow can explain this continued fascination with one of the most primitive technologies known to man.

History

1. Stone age humans were the first to use bows and arrows, though the first people to "invent" the bow and arrow are lost in the shrouds of time. In the early years, bows were relatively simple affairs being constructed out of a pliant wood and strung with a string made out of animal gut. Arrows, too, were relatively simple requiring a relatively straight body (called the shaft), a stone tip and feathers for stability while firing. The bow and arrow allowed humans to kill from a great distance with a fair degree of accuracy which most likely saved many lives. Prior to the invention of the bow and arrow, animals such as mammoths, cave bears, and saber-toothed tigers were killed at relatively short range with spears. Bows and arrows put a larger distance, and the possibility of shooting from a ambush, between the prey and the hunter. As human technology advanced, first to the copper age, then to the bronze, and finally iron age, bows and arrows evolved at the same pace. Stone arrow heads were replaced by bronze which in turn was replaced with iron, for example.

Identification

2. Though arrows have remained essentially the same in terms of basic design, they are nonetheless as technologically advanced, and specialized, as the bows that fire them. Arrow heads of distinctive styles were produced by certain people as a cultural identifier. Scythians, for example, tipped their arrows with distinctive trifoil (clover-shaped) arrowheads. English longbowmen during the hundred years war made long, thin arrows called "bodkin" arrows to better punch holes in French knights' armor. Also Native Americans could identify each other by the styles of arrowheads used even if no other evidence was available.

Time Frame

3. Bows may have began as simple wooden staved with gut strings, but they did not remain so. Sometime before 1200 BCE, composite bows appeared on the battle field. Composite bows use a wood core with horn glued to the interior curve and sinew glued to the exterior curve. Since horn compressed and sprang back into shape and sinew stretched and snapped back into shape, the power derived from a composite bow was much more powerful than most simple wood bows. For example, Assyrians attacking Egyptian
armies were so impressive that within a few years, Egyptian armies had their own interpretations of composite bows. Composite bows either filtered through Europe and Asia or were discovered independently within a few centuries of their appearance on the battlefields of Asia Minor (the Middle East). China, Japan, Korea, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Eastern Europe, and the Mediterranean basin societies all developed their own versions of the composite bow within centuries of each other.

Types

4. Arrow heads evolved to meet different needs as humanity adapted bows and arrows over the centuries. Standard arrowheads are "V" shaped, but those used for target practice (training new archers) were often just caps with no barbs. This allowed archery instructors to reuse arrows multiple times and cut down on the cost of training new archers. Bird hunting required a different adaptation; blunt heads that would not pass through the bird (and possibly allow it to continue flying for at least a little while) but would break the brittle hollow bones upon impact. Fishing arrowheads were barbed in such a way as to stick into the fish's flesh and were often attached to line to reel the fish in.

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