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Mamluk archery manual

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Writings on Archery from the Islamic and Western Worlds by Mr. Malcolm Wright* Table of contents 1. Introduction 2. The Corpus 3. Historical Overview 4. A Short Introduction to Shooting an Arrow 5. Detailed Analysis of the Corpus 5.1 Stance 5.2 Nocking 5.3 Draw 5.4 Aiming 5.5 Loose 6. Conclusion 7. Appendix 8. Bibliography 9. Further reading 10. References *** 1. Introduction Figure 1: Miniature painting of the Ottoman Sultan Murad II during archery practice. From Huner-nama ('Book of Skills'), Istanbul, 1584. MS Hazime 1523, folio 138a. Library of Topkapı Palace Museum, Istanbul. (Source) It may seem that shooting an arrow is a simple process. As children, we would make simple bows from a piece of wood and string, an arrow out of a twig, and away we would go. However when it is crucial to hit the target, to win a competition or to injure an enemy, then a simple activity is transformed into an extremely complex one. In the process of shooting an arrow, the archer faces many different factors, some external such as wind, and some internal, such as the archers skill, his level of concentration and his physical strength. He must hold all these factors in mind and eventually express them in a physical manner with the perfect shot. If any one of these factors goes wrong, then there is a good chance that the arrow will not hit the target. To become a good archer we must first of all be trained and then we must practice. Part of our ongoing education as archers will be to read what other archers have written on the subject. Some people might argue that there is little point in reading books written hundreds of years ago. However if you are interested in any subject, it is useful to learn about its history so that you can put it in context. Also today there is a great interest in "traditional" archery and there is a healthy trade in building and selling traditional bows. This ranges from the English Longbow to Mongol and Hun composite bows. I myself shoot a bow whose original design was created more than two thousand years ago. However, if we use traditional equipment in a modern way, we are getting only half the experience. If we can see archery through the eyes of ancient archers, learn their techniques, learn to handle equipment that is strange to us, then we become more rounded archers. In this article we will be looking at several handbooks on archery written in both the Islamic world and in the West, with the aim of determining which is the oldest useful manual on archery. To do this, we need some criteria to be used in the selection of material. The criteria used were: They had to be originally written in English or have been translated into English.



The book had to be easily available. The book had to be comprehensive; that is, it had to cover archery techniques in some detail. Having selected the material, we need to test it to qualify it's "usability". In any modern manual we would expect to see certain characteristics.

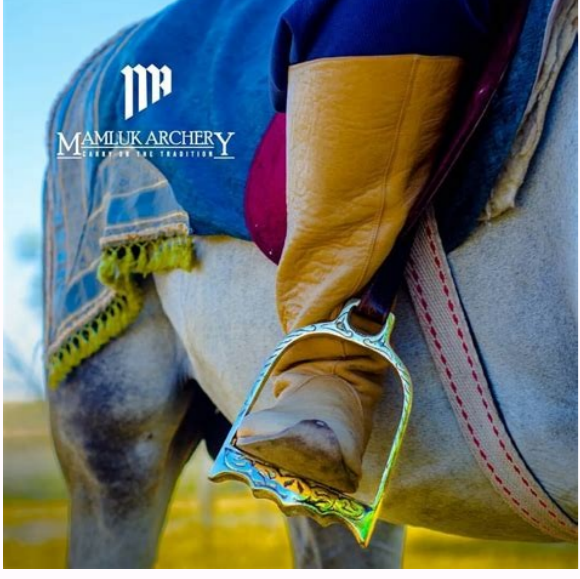


These might be defined as: The material is comprehensive and organised in a logical sequence. Access to a specific subject must be easy. Complex procedures are broken down into a series of steps.



Illustrations are available to make the text clearer. 2. The Corpus Figure 2: Miniature showing an Ottoman horse archer, one of the most feared warriors of the middle ages. Note the archer's skill at shooting behind him while riding a horse. (Source) On the basis of this set of criteria, the first selection suggested itself. It was a book written around 1368 by Taybugha Al-Ashrafi Al-Baklamishi Al-Yunani. In the translated form, the book is known today as Saracen Archerybut its original title in Arabic is entitled Kitab Ghunyat al-Tullab fi Ma'rifat Rami an-Nushshab, whilst the English translation is The Complete Manual of Archery for Cadets. An Arabic manuscript copy of this book is held in the British Library (Manuscript Additional 23489), but the version used in this article is the translation and commentary compiled by John Latham et al. and published in 1970 by The Holland Press (London). We know very little about the original author, except that he wrote his book in the 14th century and that he was a Mamluk.[1] Mamluks were slaves who were bought to be trained as soldiers. Once their training was completed, they were given their freedom and then employed in the Mamluk armies. Mamluk training was well organized and thorough – and documented. On the battlefield, the Mamluk armies were formidable opponents. During the period of the Mongol invasions of Syria, between approximately 1240 to 1300, the Mamluk armies held off the Mongol invaders. Eventually, the Mamluks forced the Mongols to change their tactics and even their life style. The name Taybugha is of Turkic origin, which suggests that the author might have come from what is now central Turkey. However his name, Al-Yunani, "The Greek", also suggests that he might have been of Greek origin. Arabic was certainly not his native language, as he states at the beginning of his book and apologises for his bad Arabic. We can assume that Taybugha Al-Ashrafi Al-Baklamishi Al-Yunani had retired from the Mamluk forces by the time that he wrote his book. His book was written while the bow was still a weapon of war and his book was influenced, not only by his personal experience, but by his training as a Mamluk. He must have drawn on Mamluk documents relating to the training of an archer and the writings of earlier Arab scholars on archery.[2] The second book in our corpus also comes from an Islamic source. Its title in English reads A Book On The Excellence of the Bow and Arrow and the Description Thereof. This is an Arabic manuscript of about 1500 CE. Its title is Kitab fi bayan fadhil al-qaws wa'-l-sahm wa-awassafihma. The name of the author is unknown, but he is thought to be a North African from Morocco. The version we used is a translation by Nabih Amin Faris and Robert Potter Elmer of the original manuscript held in Princeton Library (Garrett Collection MS 97, 353 pp.) and published by Princeton University Press in 1945. It covers much the same ground as Saracen Archery but there are some substantial differences.

When it comes to Western manuals of archery, perhaps the most famous is Toxophiluswhich was written in England in 1545 by Roger Ascham. The version used is the 1868 reprint edited by Edward Arber. Ascham was a scholar during the last years of the reign of Henry VIII and he wrote Toxophilus primarily as a present for the king, and for which he was rewarded with a pension. It covers all the archery techniques but in a more discursive manner. The bulk of the book takes the form of a Platonic dialogue between Philologus and Toxophilus and is written in "Middle English". Ascham is more generally known for his book The Schoolmaster, though his name is still remembered in British archery circles and there are several archery clubs which use his name. Also a cupboard that is used to hold bows and other archery equipment is known as an "Ascham". The final book is Theory and Practice of Archery, written by Horace Ford in 1856. The version we used is a new edition revised and rewritten by W. Butt after Horace Ford's death and published in 1887. This appears to be the earliest practical manual on archery published in English. When looking at the books we must be aware that they come from two different cultures and cover a period of about 500 years. We will have to ignore elements of literary style and concentrate only on how the facts and techniques are presented and to the degree of detail that the books go into.[3] In addition, as a Western trained archer, I will be trying out some of the techniques described in these books. This will mostly apply to the Islamic techniques as they are the ones that are most different to modern Western techniques. I will be trying some techniques that I am not familiar with to see if the books give enough information to follow the technique through to its conclusion. The conclusion is, of course, that the arrow hits the target! In this article we refer to "Islamic Archery". This is primarily because the sources we will be discussing from the Eastern World are Islamic sources. However most of the techniques that are described under the term of "Islamic Archery" would also apply to the archery practised in the Near East, Far East, India and the way that some native North American tribes shot a bow. 3. Historical Overview Figure 3: Islamic composite bows depicted in this mystical scene from an 18th-century manuscript detailing the life of a Persian prince. Source: Charles E. Grayson, Mary French, Michael J. O'Brien, Traditional archery from six continents: the Charles E. Grayson Collection, The University of Missouri Press, 2007, p. 60 Before examining our sources in detail, it will be useful to put archery into its historical context. While Western Europe was going through what has generally been called "The Dark Ages", the Islamic nations were going through a period of cultural, scientific and artistic expansion. While European scholars discussed how many angels could sit on the head of a pin, Arab scholars were investigating all aspects of the physical world from medicine and psychotherapy to astronomy. Much of our modern science has its basis in discoveries made in cities like Isfahan, Cordoba and Baghdad. Islamic scholars mixed abstract ideas with practical results. Surgery using anaesthetics was being practised in the Islamic world hundreds of years before it appeared in the West. The methods of theory, research and experimentation form the basis of all modern science. Islamic scholars used these tools but did not restrict them to what might be called the "Physical Sciences". In later years they extended these methods into archaeology and the discovery of their past. All of these discoveries were written down to produce an extensive body of documentation. Amongst these texts there are writings that specifically relate to archery, both in war and as a sport. This is not in the least surprising as archery is embedded deeply into Islamic culture. According to Islamic teachings, God sent Gabriel to give a bow and two arrows to Adam to kill two birds that were stealing Adams crops. The Prophet Mohammed was a keen archer – three of his bows are still kept in the Topkapı museum in Istanbul.



The Prophet said "The hand of man has wielded no weapon which was not excelled by the bow." [4] In Islamic archery practice, the area between the shooting line and the target was considered to be holy ground. Another demands that the archer walk barefooted when he is picking up his arrows for shooting. This is in accordance with a tradition ascribed to the Prophet, which regards the course between the archer and his aim as a strip of Paradise.[5] However Faris and Elmer in Arab Archery have a slightly different slant on the practice of walking barefoot between the shooting line and the target. They say "Although a mystical significance is assigned to this act of walking barefooted to the target, the practical value of it is so apparent to an archer that he may wonder if such a law of religious observance did not arise as a corollary of empiricism. The compelling motive is the fear of stepping upon a snake; not on a serpent, but on a hidden arrow that is technically called a snake because it has missed the target and has buried itself so invisibly under the grass or in the sand that its presence cannot be detected by the eye. It is impossible for the layman to realize how absolute this concealment can be. An archer may hunt an hour or more for a snake arrow-perhaps crossing and recrossing it many times-and even then may find his search to be unsuccessful; unless he finally resort: to the use of a rake or hook to scratch up the ground or should happen to tread upon the shaft and probably crunch it. To avoid this latter catastrophe the Asiatics developed the propriety of kicking off their loose shoes, so that the snake in the grass could be felt, but not broken, by their sensitive feet." [6] Scholars think that the bow is amongst the earliest machines invented.[7] In essence, a bow is a device that stores energy and then releases it in one instant. It allows an archer to apply force gradually and store the energy in the bow as potential energy and then by allowing the bow to release it almost instantaneously converts it into kinetic energy. The first real evidence of the use of a bow comes from the Stone Age, possibly as long ago as 20,000 BCE. The evidence is indirect and comes from the assumption that if you have flint arrowheads you will probably have bows and arrows. The invention and use of the bow appear to be one of those events that happened in many different places at roughly the same time. In subsequent periods, developments spread so that, for example, techniques developed by the Mongols were assimilated into Islamic bow technology. Figure 4: Self Bow In practice – ignoring the compound bow which is a very recent development – every bow is a variation of one of two forms. The simplest is known as a "self" bow and it is made from a single piece of wood. The English longbow is a self bow and is the most common type of bow in the Medieval Western World. Originally the materials used to construct a bow depended mainly on what was available locally. Later, as specific materials showed their superiority for bow construction, a trade in these materials developed. For instance, the original English longbows were constructed using English Yew but later it was discovered that Spanish and Italian Yew performed better and made the best bows. As a result a trade in foreign Yew developed. This trade became so important that, for a time in the Middle Ages, it became compulsory for British trading vessels to carry a certain quantity of bow staves on every trip to England. A bow needs two completely different types of material. As you pull the bowstring back the bow will deform. The material on the inside of the bow will compress, while the outside of the bow will extend and will be in tension. The best longbows use Yew wood cut so that the sapwood, i.e. the outer part of a branch, is on the outside of the bow while the heartwood is on the inside.



Sapwood takes tension while heartwood takes compression. Figure 5: Composite Bow The other type of bow is the composite bow. These are made from different types of material, where each is chosen for their compression or tension capabilities. They were also generally recurved. Self bows take the form of an arc when strung. On a recurve bow, the top and bottom parts of the bow are curved in opposition to the main body of the bow.

This allows for extra compression and tension to be available in the bow, and therefore a recurved bow can store more energy for its length than a non recurved bow. Generally, composite bows are shorter than self bows and are therefore easier to use on horseback. Many eastern bows are composite and specifically designed for horsemen.

Traditional bows were made from organic materials and unless they were preserved, by being put into a tomb for example, then they rarely survive into the archaeological record; therefore it is difficult to say exactly when the first composite bows were made. However, we do know that some of the bows in the tomb of Tutankhamun were of the composite type, which means that they were in existence around 1300-1200 B.C.E. Many of the bows used in the Middle and Far East were possibly based on the Scythian bow, which itself dates back to around 700 B.C.E. To use a bow and shoot correctly takes training and physical strength. To produce a man who can fulfill the duty of an archer in battle takes hundreds of hours of training and practice. In cultures where the bow was an important weapon, archery training schools became very important. In England, it was compulsory for certain classes of people to train every week at archery. State controlled prices were set for bows so that everyone could afford one. Henry VIII required "under penalty of default of 12d per month – all subjects under 60, not lame, decrepit, or maimed, or having an other lawful impediment, the Clergy and Judges & c excepted: to use shooting in the long bow. Parents were to provide every boy from 7 to 17 years, with a bow and two arrows: after 17 he was to find himself a bow and four arrows. Every Bower for every Ewe bow he made was to 'at the lest ij Bowes of Elme Wiche or other Wode of mean price' under penalty of Imprisonment for 8 days.

Butts were to be provided in every town. Aliens were not to shoot with the long bow without licence" [8] In the beginning of Henry's reign (1511-12), even though at that time the bow was beginning to be supplanted by firearms. The last battle fought in England using bows was in 1513. However, even as late as 1541 Henry brought out "An Acte for Mayntenance of Artyllarie and debarringe of unlaful Games." [9] As part of this act, no bowyer should sell a Yew Bow to anyone between 8 and 14 years for more than 12d. In Islamic tradition, archery training was part of the duties of a Muslim. "The Prophet himself, furthermore, was an archer and possessed three bows. The terms in which he urged his community to practise riding and archery – preferably the latter – amount to a standing order, and archery is a... religious obligation incumbent, nor upon each individual, but upon the community by representation." [10] As a result of these measures, there was always a large body of trained men available to armies as archers. Their accuracy may not have been to "Robin Hood" standards, but a trained archer was incredibly strong, capable of loosing many shafts during a battle.

Skeletons of archers retrieved from the "Mary Rose" show significant distortions to the shoulders, arms and back. An English war bow at the time of Agincourt would need a pull of around 120 pounds for the full draw. That is equivalent to holding sixty bags of sugar on the first three fingers of the right hand and pulling it up to shoulder height, time and time again. It took at least ten years to develop the muscles and the technique to go with it. And that is why England, with its intensive training starting at the age of eight, could supply so many fully trained archers. The use of the "arrow storm", where each side would put as many arrows in the air in the shortest possible time, was common to most armies. An Egyptian Mamluk was said to be able to loose three arrows in a second and a half. There are reports of a Mamluk who was able to put fifteen arrows in the air at the same time! A highly trained English archer would be expected to be able to loose twenty arrows a minute. However, these rates of fire would soon exhaust both the supplies of arrows and the archers, so it is unlikely to continue for long periods of time. The basic design of both bows and arrows are fairly simple and there have been no major changes over thousands of years. There were very small improvements, but it was not until the 1960's, with the invention of the "Compound Bow", that the first major change to the design of the bow arrived. A modern archer, even with no knowledge of archaeology, would be able to look at the archery equipment in the tomb of Tutankhamun and be able to identify every piece and be able to describe how it was used. 4. A short introduction to shooting an arrow Any treatise on archery, ancient or modern, breaks down the act of shooting an arrow into several discrete stages. However, in practice the five stages described below are part of a continuous sequence of actions, with the possibility of a very short pause at one point. The five stages are: Stance: It is crucial that the archer takes the correct stance before lifting the bow. Nocking: The act of taking an arrow and placing it on the bow and string. Draw: Pulling back the string and preparing to aim. Aiming: Ensuring the arrow hits the mark. Loose: The act of releasing the string. 5. Detailed Analysis of the Corpus We will see what each of the four bows

