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Summary Article: **bow and arrow**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

weapon consisting of two parts; the bow is made of a strip of flexible material, such as wood, with a cord linking the two ends of the strip to form a tension from which is propelled the arrow; the arrow is a straight shaft with a sharp point on one end and usually with feathers attached to the other end.

The use of the bow and arrow for hunting and for war dates back to the Paleolithic period in Africa, Asia, and Europe. It was widely used in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, the Americas, and Europe until the introduction of gunpowder. Arrowheads were first made of burnt wood, then stone or bone, and then metals. Various woods and bones were used for the bow itself. However, it was not a powerful weapon until the invention of the compound, or composite, bow around 1500 B.C. on the steppes of Central Asia. A composite bow is made of various materials (wood, horn, sinew) glued together so as to increase their natural strength and elasticity. Bows and arrows were among the dominant weapons used by Assyrian chariots, Parthian cavalry, Mongol horsemen, and English longbowmen. At other times they have been used more as auxiliary weapons for massed infantry or cavalry.

The crossbow, although known in Roman times, was not widely used in Europe until the Middle Ages. In China, however, where it developed at the same time, the crossbow revolutionized warfare. A crossbow is a bow set on a stock. It fires missiles propelled by mechanical energy and released by a trigger. It could be more powerful than the ordinary bow and could fire arrows, darts, or stones. It was, however, slower to fire than the longbow and almost as difficult to wield; even the arbalest, a later crossbow, was clumsy and slow. By the end of the 13th cent. use of the crossbow had declined. At the battle of Crécy (1346) English longbowmen, firing from fixed positions, proved far more efficient than Genoese crossbowmen fighting for the French.

The longbow, which was in use in Wales in the 12th cent. became prominent in the Welsh Wars of Edward I in the late 13th cent. For the rest of that century, the English emphasized skill with the longbow; it was inexpensive, mobile, and easily adapted to a peasant army. Only in England did the longbow survive the introduction of gunpowder; it was superseded gradually by firearms. It was a powerful weapon, but it took great strength to pull and years of practice to master. The Chinese also developed a longbow, which proved much less effective than the English variety. The Asian bow, designed for use on horseback, was shorter and lighter than the English longbow and could be more rapidly fired. The Chinese later developed the repeating crossbow, an ingenious weapon that proved ineffective against repeating rifles in the First Sino-Japanese War.

Since bows and arrows are relatively easy to make and can produce a rapid rate of fire, they were used in warfare long after gunpowder was introduced, for primitive firearms required much time to load, were hard to manufacture, and often failed. In Japan and North America archery was very important culturally as well as militarily. See archery; hunting.

See Hardy, R. , *The Longbow* (1976);

Payne—Galway, R. , *Crossbow* (1988).

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