



Historically Speaking

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Archery and the Gods



The Long Bow

One type of bow common to the Greeks consisted of two horns of a kind of antelope, or arms of wood shaped like them, joined together by a bridge which served both as a hold for the hand and as a rest for the arrow. The string, made of plaited horse-hair or twisted ox-gut, was fastened to each end. Arrows were made of a stem of reed or light wood, with a triangular metal tip at one end and feather fletching on the other end which also had a notch that fit on the bowstring. These arrows were usually carried in a quiver made of leather, wood, or even metal. The Cretans were considered the best archers among the Greeks.

Nubia was also called Ta-Seti, which means 'land of the bow' and these were the best archers among the African cultures.

Apollo was the god of archery, and his sister, Artemis, was the huntress of the gods. There is symbolism in these two being associated with archery in that when an arrow is shot into the air, it travels in an arc. Apollo is the god bringing the light of the sun and Artemis is the goddess of the moon. The sun and moon travel in an arc like the arrows. The rays of the sun were considered the arrows of Apollo. They could bring health or disease, depending on the mood of the God.

Another god associated with archery is Eros (better known by the Roman equivalent, Cupid). His arrows usually bring love not death. He is specifically the god of romantic love. Aphrodite is the goddess of all forms of love, and Eros is her constant companion and in later tradition is depicted as her son, as in the story of Cupid and Psyche.

Archery plays a key role in some of the myths. One example was that of Artemis and Orion. Artemis, as huntress of the gods, was the patron protector of hunters. One such hunter was the mortal, Orion. Artemis loved Orion and they would often hunt together. Apollo grew jealous of Orion and tricked Artemis by challenging her to shoot at a distant object in a lake. That object was so distant that Artemis could not see it was Orion who was swimming to escape a scorpion sent by Apollo. She hit her target and so killed Orion. Another example of archery playing a key role is found in the twenty-first book of the Odyssey. Odysseus has returned home after twenty years, disguised as a beggar because suitors have taken over his palace. They have forced Penelope, Odysseus wife, to choose one of them to replace Odysseus as king because they are convinced he is dead. She sets a nearly impossible challenge to the suitors. The man who can string the bow of Odysseus and shoot an arrow cleanly through twelve axe heads will win the right to replace him. When the suitors complain that it is impossible, she informs them that Odysseus did it long ago. Odysseus son, Telemachus, tries to do it but cannot. One by one the suitors try, but none of them can even string the bow. Finally the 'beggar' takes the bow and strings it effortlessly and then proceeds to shoot an arrow through the axes. At that point he is revealed to be Odysseus and he proceeds to kill the suitors for their treatment of Penelope and Telemachus. Other stories involving archery are found throughout the mythology and legends of the ancient Greeks.

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