

The Composite Bow
Osprey Weapon series No. 43 (2016)
By Mike Loades; illustrated by Peter Dennis
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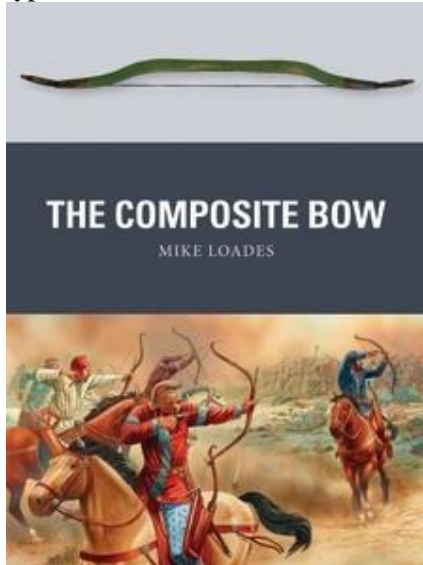
Review by Jonathan Aird

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This book is greatly helped by the author being a practising archer, experienced with the Composite Bow that he has chosen to write about. Unlike the longbow ó so beloved by the English ó which is a single homogeneous material, or the laminated bow of Japan, the composite bow is made from different material types ó wood, horn, and sinew ó and comes in different styles and sizes depending on the needs of the



originating culture. In Qing Dynasty China, heavy arrows delivered accurately were deemed the ideal ó whereas in Korea the ability to rapidly loose light arrows was valued more highly.

The bulk of the book is given over to the sections on Development and Use. Development takes the reader through the different styles of composite bows that have been developed, and explains how differences in shape and size have affected the power of the bows ó and why not all cultures required a weapon that could fire the biggest arrow the greatest distance. Plains Indians, for example, when hunting stalked their game until they were quite close ó a small bow of relatively low power was then all that they required to achieve a kill. A small bow, incidentally, also made stalking game until quite close somewhat easier. Example drawings of various styles of composite bows are given as unstrung, strung and drawn, and these show quite clearly how different bows were made to store different energy levels. The Mughal crab bow, for example, in the unstrung state almost forms a circle, stringing

puts the bow under tension whilst at full draw it is pulled to 2/3rds of its full length. That's a lot of stored energy. The drawings, it has to be said, are far clearer!

It is often repeated in this Osprey how the use of the composite bow was seen as part of a noble warrior's accomplishments ó and how the bows would as a consequence often be beautifully decorated or lacquered in order to protect the core from the effects of weather. The making of such a bow is shown, step by step, through photographs. Although the bows are important, the techniques of the draw are not ignored ó a full 7 pages cover draw techniques and various rings and gloves that were developed in different civilisations to improve the draw and release. As interesting as this is, I confess the chapter on use was more fascinating. This is lavishly illustrated with photographs of modern chariot and horse archers demonstrating techniques that go back thousands of years. Infantry tactics are also covered, including a fascinating oddity ó ice skating Manchu archers who were deployed in Northern China on frozen lakes and rivers.

The Impact section addresses countermeasures to the composite bow -- predominantly in the form of layered cloth and scale armours. As ever, there was a trade-off: how much would, or could, one carry to become arrow proof? And how much of a more powerful bow would ó or could ó one draw in order to pierce improved layers of protection? Alongside some splendid artwork -- Manchu archers participating in a siege, Parthian horse archers breaking up a Roman infantry line, Egyptians and Hittites exchanging archery

from chariots ó the author makes good points as to why the bow was deemed in different circumstances to be the right weapon -- and through this analysis also explains how the composite bow remained useful long after the coming of gunpowder.

In truth, it is the chapters on Use and Impact, along with the illustrations, that will likely appeal to the wargamer. The book covers bows of many historical eras and disparate cultures ó so is limited on detail for each individual case ó but as an overall survey of an important weapon it is very well done.