THE ARCHERS OF ISLAM

BY

W. F. PATERSON

‘... archery is dependent on five articles: the bow, the string, the arrow, the thumb guard and the archer’. 
Tâybughâ al-Ashrafi 1)

1. Introduction

Though the bow is one of the most important early weapons devised by man and its impact on history has been considerable, it has rarely been given the detailed attention that it deserves. It merits study as it has a degree of complexity which can only be appreciated by actual use and an understanding of its basic mechanics. One may add to this an understanding of the vocabulary and technical terms, as and when they may appear, and a fuller appreciation of the actions of archers in miniature paintings.

Success with the bow results from hard work and regular practice, for only by these means can a degree of mastery be achieved, enabling the archer to draw to the limit of his strength and yet shoot under full control. If one watches an experienced archer, his actions appear smooth and effortless, which is as it should be, but to the onlooker this can give a false impression, as the considerable effort needed to draw a bow is hidden by skill and training.

While the history of the old English longbow represents the finest tactical use of this weapon in a defensive role, the composite bow in the Middle East was of no lesser merit in the hands of the mounted archers when used as a weapon of offence.

2. The Composite Bow

The composite bow, as used by the Islamic horse-archers, represents one of the most efficient forms of this weapon ever devised and its

1) British Museum MS Additional 23489, fo. 19b.
construction is worthy of detailed consideration. The most important source of information is Mustafa Kani, *Telchis Resail er-Rumat*, Istanbul, A.D. 1847, with Joachim Hein’s dissertation on this work in *Der Islam*, xiv (1925), pp. 289-360, on which P. E. Klopsteg based his translation and commentary in *Turkish Archery and the Composite Bow*, which appeared as a private edition in 1934 with a revision and reprint in 1947. This work is mainly concerned with the flight bow of the Ottoman Turks, which is a specialised form of this weapon devised for sporting purposes. Flight shooting was a favorite pastime among most archers in the Middle East, and its sole object is to achieve maximum distance without regard to accuracy. The techniques involved require special skill, and exponents of this art among the Turks, where it reached its highest perfection, could send their light and delicate little arrows over 600 yards. However, neither the bows nor the arrows used with them were suitable for war, though this method of shooting has an obvious application in the long-range barrage against a massed target up to a limiting range of about 400 yards.

Valuable contributions have also been made by Henry Balfour 1) and Commander H. S. Hamlin, Jr. 2). Their published works give a very complete picture of the internal structure of the Eastern bows. During recent years painstaking and careful dissection of a number of Oriental composite bows have been made by Edward McEwen to determine the exact details of their construction, followed by the making of replicas, using the original materials, to prove the accuracy of his observations. Discussions with him have added considerably to our knowledge of the finer points in the art of the craftsmen who made these weapons.

With reference to fig. 1 the construction of a typical bow was as follows. The craftsman started with a wood core, the main requirement of which was that it should absorb glue well. Varieties of maple, cornus,