

Historical Archery Quotations - Thorvald Grimsson

[Note: This is a collection of quotations about archery during the Middle Ages, particularly from Norse (Viking) sources.]

The archer seems to have been well regarded by the Norse. For a start, one of the (variously nine or seven) valued abilities of the well-rounded Norse nobleman was skill with a bow. Rognvald Kali, earl of Orkney 1135-1158 wrote:

At nine skills I challenge –
a champion at chess [literally *tafl*, probably meaning the game *hnefatafl*]:
runes I rarely spoil,
I read books and write:
I'm skilled at skiing
and shooting [archery] and sculling [rowing]
and more! I've mastered
music [harping] and verse. (Orkneyinga, page 108)

Under King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway one of "the four great lords of the Trondelag and Uppland [was] Einar Thambarskelfir" (Jones, page 407). He was the king's archer. King Olaf Haraldsson later said that Einar was the most senior noble who was not an earl (Sturluson, page 325). Einar took part in the year 1000 in the Battle of Svolder during which King Olaf Tryggvason lost his life.

A man knew his own worth. At the Battle of Svolder, in which the other famous Olaf met his death, his court poet Einar Thambarskelvir, a great archer, stood beside the monarch on the deck of his flagship, loosing his arrows at the foe. Suddenly an enemy arrow smote Einar's powerful, bended bow in the middle so that it broke in two. 'What broke there with such a crash?' 'Norway, King, from your hands,' came the proud, laconic prediction. (Wahlgren, page 73)

Here is another snippet, this showing that in 1098 King Magnus Olafsson Bare-Legs of Norway considered it in no way demeaning to be an archer.

[The King] sailed south to the coast of Wales and fought a fierce battle in the Menai Strait against two Welsh earls, Hugh the Stout and Hugh the Proud. It was a long, hard battle, fought first with bows, then hand-to-hand. King Magnus was using a handbow and there was another archer with him, from Halogaland. Hugh the Proud was putting up a brave fight, and was so well-armoured that only his eyes were exposed, so King Magnus suggested to the archer that

they should both shoot at Hugh together, and that is what they did. One arrow struck Hugh's noseguard, but the other entered the eyehole and pierced his head, and there Hugh the Proud fell. The King got the credit for it. (Orkneyinga Saga, page 84)

Here is some information about a battle in southern Norway, the date 1030.

They who stood in front hewed down with their swords; they who stood next thrust with their spears; and they who stood hindmost shot arrows, cast spears, or threw stones, hand-axes, or sharp stakes. (Heimskringla, page 619)

Here is a quotation about an English law concerning archery that shows that normal target practice had to be at ranges **exceeding** 220 yards.

That young archers might acquire an accurate eye and a strength of arm, none under 24 years of age might shoot at any standing mark, except it was a rover, and then he was to change his mark at every shot, under penalty of four pence for every shot made contrary to the regulation. It was also enacted that no person above the said age should shoot at any mark not above eleven score yards distant under pain of forfeiting for each shot, six shillings and eight pence. (source of quotation lost)

Longbows similar to those used in the Hundred Years War were in use in Great Britain from prehistoric times. Yew bows found in peat bogs in Somerset and Cambridgeshire range in length from 61 inches to 75 inches, and in date from about 1595 BC to 3470 BC. Arrow shafts range in length from 34 inches to 40 inches. The arrowheads were flint. (Burl, page 38)

Here is a story about archery during the First Crusade at the siege of Nice (Nicaea) in 1097, involving Godfrey of Bouillon who was later elected as the ruler of Jerusalem (he refused the title 'king' on religious grounds).

One Turk, of gigantic stature, took his station day by day on the battlements of Nice, and, bearing an enormous bow, committed great havoc among the Christian host. Not a shaft he sped but bore death upon its point; and although the Crusaders aimed repeatedly at his breast, and he stood in the most exposed position, their arrows fell harmless at his feet. He seemed invulnerable to attack; and a report was soon spread abroad, that he was no other than the Arch Fiend himself, and that mortal hand could not prevail against him. Godfrey of Bouillon, who had no faith in the supernatural character of the Mussulman, determined, if possible, to put an end to the dismay which was rapidly paralysing the exertions of his best soldiers. Taking a huge crossbow, he stood forward in front of the army, to try the steadiness of his hand against the much-dreaded archer:

the shaft was aimed directly at his heart, and took fatal effect. The Moslem fell amid the groans of the besieged and the shots of *Deus adjuva! Deus adjuva!* the war-cry of the besiegers. (Mackay, page 384)

Here is a quotation about archery used by the Vindlanders (Finns) against the Norwegians at Konungahella (on the river Gotha in present-day Sweden) in 1135.

While the Vindlanders were storming the castle, their king and his chiefs were out of the battle. At one place there was a man among the Vindlanders shooting with a bow, and killing a man for every arrow; and two men stood before him, and covered him with their shields. Then Saemund Husfreyja said to his son Asmund, that they should both shoot together at this bowman. "But I will shoot at the man who holds the shield before him." He did so, and he knocked the shield down a little before the man; and in the same instant Asmund shot between the shields, and the arrow hit the bowman in the forehead, so that it came out at his neck, and he fell down dead. When the Vindlanders saw it they howled like dogs, or like wolves. Then King Rettibur [King of the Vindlanders] called to them that he would give them safety and life, but they refused terms. The heathens again made a hard assault. One of the heathens in particular fought so bravely, and ventured so near, that he came quite up to the castle-gate, and pierced the man who stood outside the gate with his sword; and although they used both arrows and stones against him, and he had neither shield nor helmet, nothing could touch him, for he was so skilled in witchcraft that weapon could not wound him. Then priest Andres took consecrated fire; blew upon it; cut tinder in pieces, and laid it on the fire; and then laid the tinder on the arrow-point, and gave it to Asmund. He shot this arrow at the warlock; and the shaft hit so well that it did its business, and the man of witchcraft fell dead. (Heimskringla, page 922)

Here are two quotations showing King Robert the Bruce (1274-1329) using the bow and arrow in 1307.

He knew it was Bruce's custom to retire each morning into a covert out of sight of his men for his private purposes, accompanied only by a page. He and his two sons decided to surprise him as he was about his business. However, Bruce had become intimate with one of the women of the country who had warned him of his kinsman's treachery. When he saw the three approaching, he said to his page, as Barbour relates:

'What weapon do you have, for I fear that these men wish to kill us?'

'I have but a bow and arrow.'

'Then give them to me quickly and stand far back, for if I win you shall have weapons enough, but if I die make haste away.'

As the three men approached, the father with a sword in his hand, one son with a sword and an axe and one with a sword and a spear, Bruce called on them to halt but they still advanced saying that they had come to help him with fresh news of the English. Bruce raised his bow and when they did not stop let fly with an arrow that pierced the father through the eye with such force that he fell backward. When the elder son saw his father fall he sprang at Bruce with his axe but

Bruce, who wherever he went carried his great sword hanging from his neck, had it ready drawn and cut him down with a single blow. He then turned on the younger son who was running at him with a spear, sliced off its point and dispatched him before he could draw his sword. (Scott, page 94)

Hastily he armed and summoned his 300 men. They had hardly formed up when the English broke out of the nearby wood. Bruce, seizing a bow and arrow from an archer by his side, let loose the shaft at the enemy leader, transfixing him through the throat. His followers, already aghast at finding the Scots armed and waiting for them instead of unaware in their camp, came to an abrupt halt. (Scott, page 101)

King Harold Hardrade used the bow at the battle of the River Nissa in 1063.

It was late in the day when the battle began, and it continued the whole night. King Harald shot for a long time with his bow. So says Thiodolf: --

"The Upland king was all the night
Speeding the arrows' deadly flight.
All in the dark his bow-string's twang
Was answered; for some white shield rang,
Or yelling shriek gave certain note
The shaft had pierced some ring-mail coat,
The foemen's shields and bulwarks bore
A Lapland arrow-scat or more." (Heimskringla, page 756)

The Battle of Maldon in 991 was fought between Vikings and Saxons.

Thus the hostage himself willingly helped;
he was a Northumbrian of a brave family,
Ecglaf's child; he was named Aescferth.
He hesitated not at the play of battle,
but shot forward many arrows;
here striking a shield, there cutting down a warrior,
at almost every moment giving out some wound,
all the while with his weapon he would wield.
(<http://www.wmich.edu/medieval/mdv1145/sections/35545/Maldon.htm>)

At the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada, there is a label for a Chinese lacquer box from the 17C or 18C.

The middle scene depicts Li Yuan, founder of the Tang Dynasty, winning the hand of his wife in an archery contest by piercing the eye of a peacock painted on a screen.

Here is an example, possibly of legendary rather than of historical origin, of a Norse archer continuing to use his bow after having his feet cut off. It appears in the Olaf Tryggvason saga in connection with a battle in about 995.

Earl Hakon, and many with him, were sitting upon a piece of wood, and a bow-string twanged from Bue's ship, and the arrow struck Gissur from Valdars, who was sitting next the earl, and was clothed splendidly. Thereupon the people went on board, and found Havard Hoggande standing on his knees at the ship's railing, for his feet had been cut off, and he had a bow in his hand. When they came on board the ship Havard asked, "Who fell by that shaft?"

They answered, "A man called Gissur."

"Then my luck was less than I thought," said he.

"Great enough was the misfortune," replied they; "but thou shalt not make it greater." And they killed him on the spot. (Heimskringla, page unknown)

Here is an example of a Central Eurasian people making defensive circles of specially prepared wagons with archery loopholes. The date is approximately 1160, well before the more famous wagon castles of the Hussites after 1415.

It happened once in the Greek country [Byzantine empire], when Kirjalax was emperor there, that he made an expedition against Blokumannaland. When he came to the Pezina plains, a heathen king came against him with an innumerable host. He brought with him many horsemen, and many large waggons, in which were large loop-holes for shooting through. When they prepared for their night quarters they drew up their waggons, one by the side of the other, without their tents, and dug a great ditch without; and all which made a defence as strong as a castle. (Heimskringla, page 1007)

There is an illustration of a David's sling being used by a French soldier to throw a jagged rock at an English army that includes longbowmen. The original illumination is in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Koch does not give a full reference for the illustration, but I assume that it was intended to represent an incident in the Hundred Years' War, and from the style it appears to have been an illumination from a manuscript of Froissart's *Chronicles*. (Koch, page 75)

There is an illustration of staff slings, recurved bows, and a crossbow being used from siege towers mounted on the backs of elephants. The illustration is from Catalonia in the 10th or 11th century. (Koch, page 143)

The majority of the archers illustrated in Koch are not shown with quivers, or indeed with any spare arrows. Archers are shown with spare arrows on the ground at their feet or stuck into the ground on pages 123, 158, 165, and 178. Waist quivers are shown in illustrations on pages 1, 4, 7, 31, 82, 122, 158, 212, and 245. There is no contemporary illustration of a shoulder quiver that I can see. The shoulder quivers shown on page 50 are by a modern illustrator.

Last but not least is the famous quotation from Gerald of Wales, written about his Journey through Wales with Archbishop Baldwin in 1188. The events described probably happened in 1182.

[The people of Gwent] ... in particular, are more skilled with the bow and arrow than those who come from other parts of Wales. I will give you a few examples to show just how true this is. In this capture by stratagem of Abergavenny Castle which I have just described to you, two men-at-arms were rushing across a bridge to take refuge in the tower which had been built on a great mound of earth. The Welsh shot at them from behind, and with the arrows which sped from their bows they actually penetrated the oak doorway of the tower, which was almost as thick as a man's palm. As a permanent reminder of the strength of their impact, the arrows have been left sticking in the door just where their iron heads struck. William de Braose also testifies that, in the war against the Welsh, one of his men-at-arms was struck by an arrow shot at him by a Welshman. It went right through his thigh, high up, where it was protected outside and inside the leg by his iron cuishes, and then through the skirt of his leather tunic; next it penetrated that part of the saddle which is called the alva or seat; and finally it lodged in his horse, driving in so deep that it killed the animal. An arrow pinned the thigh of another soldier to his saddle, although the tassets of his leather tunic were there to protect him outside and inside the leg. He tugged on the reins and pulled his horse round in a half-circle, whereupon another arrow, shot by the same bowman, hit him in exactly the same place in the other thigh, so that he was skewered to his horse on both sides. It is difficult to see what more you could do, even if you had a ballista. The bows they use are not made of horn, nor of sapwood, nor yet of yew. The Welsh carve their bows out of the dwarf elm-trees in the forest. They are nothing much to look at, not even rubbed smooth, but left in a rough and unpolished state. Still, they are firm and strong. You could not shoot far with them, but they are powerful enough to inflict serious wounds in a close fight. (Gerald, page 113)

See also the many quotations about archery in [A Study of Weapons Effects on Chain Mail](#).

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