So did they use Barbed Arrows or Bodkins...?

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A question guaranteed to ignite a heated debate amongst medieval archery re-enactors is always: "What kind of war arrows did they use in medieval times?" Did they use barbed arrowheads or bodkin arrowheads? (Pictures 1 and 2) On one Living History website one re-enactor states:

"There is also no good evidence to suggest military archers used anything but bodkins for warfare. Swallow-tails and Fowling (crescent) heads are for hunting, not military use." **(http://www.livinghistory.co.uk/forums/viewtopic.php?f=18&t=26904)**

Picture 1: Barbed Arrowheads by Hector Cole

Picture 2: Bodkin Arrowheads by Tom Mareschall

While others debate the reliability and validity of the two available typographies, The London Museum (Ward Perkins 1940) and Jessop

(1996), forwarding findings from medieval battlefields along with medieval pictures.

However, archers weren't the only group who dealt with arrows. One source frequently overlooked, that provides a great deal of information about arrows and their forms are the accounts of surgeons and physicians from the past.

The *Susruta Samhita*, (Bhishagratna 1907), one of the major texts of Ayurvedic medicine (3rd-4th Century BC), divides arrows into two classes, *feathered* or *unfeathered*, (i.e. fletched or unfletched), while arrowheads are described as being made in the shape of: trees, leaves, flowers or fruits or being made to resemble the mouths of birds and wild and ferocious animals.

The great Byzantine 7th Century physician Paulus Aeginata or Paul of Aegina (c.625–c.690) in his *De Re Medica Libri Septem* or Medical *Compendium in Seven Books* describes arrow shafts as being made from wood or reed and arrowheads from: iron; copper; tin; lead; horn; glass; bone; reed and wood. The heads had a variety of appearances: round; triangular; pointed and lance-shaped. Some had three points; some were barbed and some were without barbs. They differed in size from three fingers breadth to the size of one finger. Some arrowheads were attached by a tang, others by a socket.

He also noted that some tribes would go to great lengths to make their arrows difficult to remove. He described four such types (Adams 1844):

(i) Arrowheads attached loosely to shafts, which separate when extracted, leaving the arrowhead inside the wound
(ii) Arrowheads possessing barbs moveable by hinges that would unfold at an attempt to withdraw the arrow.
(iii) Some having barbs diverging in opposite directions like forked lightning, so when pulled or pushed they fastened in the wounded person's flesh.
(iv) Composite arrowheads which had small pieces of metal set into grooves at the side of the point which would remain inside the wound when the point was removed.

While no arrowheads corresponding to these descriptions in (ii), (iii) and (iv) have been found, Salazar (2000) observes there are some pyramidal arrowheads in the collections of the British museum which have a small hole, that may not necessarily have served for attaching the head to the shaft, but may have held an extra piece of metal. Alternatively, they could have been arrowheads that were disintegrating due to poor manufacture.

The 13th Century Bishop and medical writer Theodoric Borgognoni, or Theodoric of Cervia (1205–1298), observed that: "*Some* [arrows] *have large heads; some small, some concave, some blunt, some barbed, some have two angles, some have four, some three*"

(Campbell and Colton 1955, p.83), while the French surgeon Henri de Mondeville (1260 – 1316), observed that some arrowheads were attached to the wooden shaft with a socket and others with a tang which entered the shaft (Nicaise 1893).

The famous illustration of Roger Frugard removing an arrow (below) shows a barbed arrowhead, although it could be argued this is artistic license.

Picture 3: A 13th Century illustration of Roger Frugard (c1140 – c.1195) removing a barbed arrow

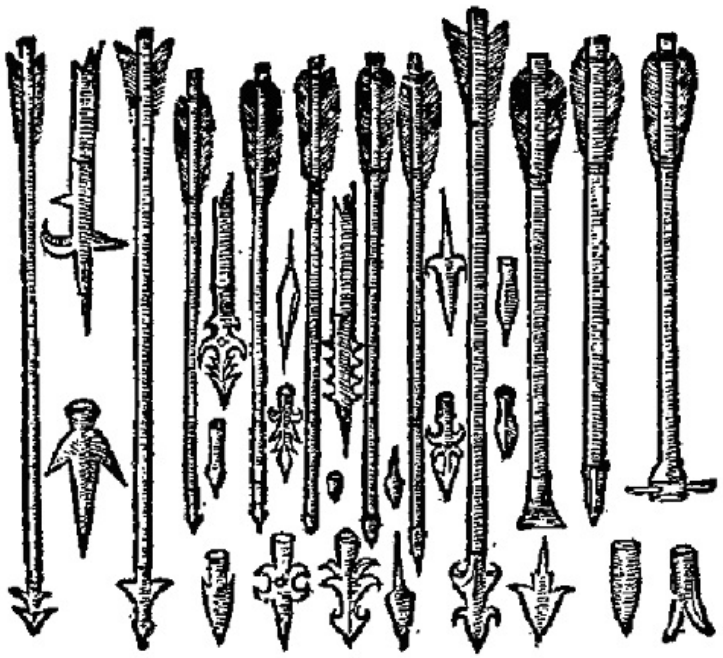
De Mondeville and the Flemish surgeon Jehan Yperman (1320-25) noted that English arrows were notorious for their barbs, (Nicaise 1893; Rosenman 2002c), thus confounding the theory that only bodkins were used in warfare during the medieval period. We even know what kind of arrowhead was embedded in the young Henry V's face during the Battle of Shrewsbury (1403), the surgeon who removed it, John Bradmore, described it as a *"bod"* or bodkin (Cole and Lang 2003)

The 16th Century surgeons Hieronymous Brunschwig (1450-1512), Giovanni Andrea Della Croce (1509 -1575) and Ambroise Paré (1510-1590) acknowledge the variety of arrow that exist, for example:

"*Some of them are of wood, others of canes or reeds: some of them have their extremities or heads garnished with iron, tin, lead, brass, horn, glass or of bone…some are round, others angular, others sharp, others barbed, some of them having their points turned backwards and some have it divided into two parts: some are made broad in their heads and cutting like a knife …some of their heads are of three fingers in length; others of smaller size…*[some] *are simpl , having but one point only; others are composed into two or many…some of them have the iron or head inserted within the wood of the arrow,* [tanged] *and of others the arrow is inserted into the head* [socketed]*.*

***Some heads are fixed and nailed onto the shaf , and others not...*" (Paré 1617).**

While in the New World, Herman de Soto who explored the Mississippi in 1539 described native arrows:



Picture 4: A variety of arrowheads from Paré (1617)

"*Arrows are made of certain canes, like reeds, very heavy and so stiff that one of them, when sharpened, will pass through a target. Some are pointed with the bone of a fish, sharp and like a chisel; others with some stone like a point of diamond; of such the greater number, when they strike upon armour, break at the place the parts are put together …and will enter a shirt of mail, doing more injury than when armed."*(p.228, Worcester 1945).

By the 19th Century surgeons were still providing information regarding arrowheads. The U.S. Army Surgeon, Joseph Bill (1862) reported that Indian arrowheads were made of flint, obsidian, agate, wood, iron, horn, antler or glass and were attached to the shaft by wrapping them with animal tendon, while Elliot Coues observed that Apache arrowheads were held in place with gum at the end of a small hardened stick which was set in a hollow arrow shaft, (possibly a reed), (p.90 Broadhead, 1973).

Granted, in many cases, few of the arrows so described have been found, but does this render the accounts invalid? I would argue not. Such physicians and surgeons often described arrowheads and their inherent problems in their writings for the benefit of their students, so there would be little benefit from making fraudulent claims, (although it could be argued that those in the illustration from Paré, above, may be subject to a degree of artistic interpretation).

This also shows the inherent dangers of sticking too narrowly to a particular subject. By not exploring a wide range of sources a great deal of valuable information that brings new light upon a subject can be overlooked and a skewed - and inaccurate - view of history recounted.

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Kevin Goodman aka "Owain Leech: Surgeon" is the Author of the book "*Ouch! A History of Arrow Wound Treatment from Prehistory to the Nineteenth Century*" available from Amazon Books:
http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/offer-listing/0957137702/ref=dp_olp_new?ie=UTF8&qid=1331193260&sr=1-1&condition=new

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