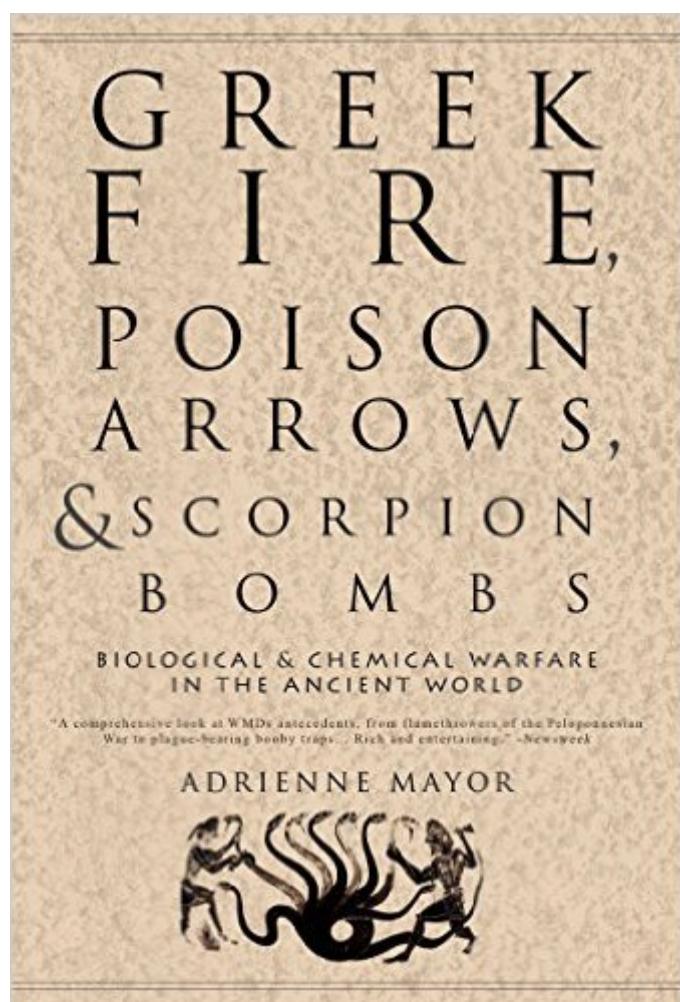


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Greek Fire, Poison Arrows, And Scorpion Bombs: Biological & Chemical Warfare In The Ancient World



Synopsis

"A comprehensive look at WMD's antecedents, from flamethrowers of the Peloponnesian War to plague-bearing booby traps.... Rich and entertaining." -Newsweek Featuring a new introduction by the author. Flamethrowers, poison gases, incendiary bombs, the large-scale spreading of disease... are these terrifying agents and implements of warfare modern inventions? Not by a long shot. Weapons of biological and chemical warfare have been in use for thousands of years, and Greek Fire, Poison Arrows & Scorpion Bombs, Adrienne Mayor's fascinating exploration of the origins of biological and unethical warfare draws extraordinary connections between the mythical worlds of Hercules and the Trojan War, the accounts of Herodotus and Thucydides, and modern methods of war and terrorism. Greek Fire, Poison Arrows & Scorpion Bombs will catapult readers into the dark and fascinating realm of ancient war and mythic treachery-and their devastating consequences.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This was a quick, light read. Finished it in two days, but a more diligent reader could easily finish this in an afternoon. **PROS**:- Accessible; writing was clear, vocabulary and references were written for general consumption- Notes; almost an 1/8th of the bound pages are dedicated to notes for additional info (...YMMV on their usefulness)- Entertaining; it was Discovery channel-ish. There aren't many five-syllable words aside from almost every Greek name mentioned.- Reference; it contains a lot of information that can be kept on the back burner to do further research on later if there are particular things you find interesting. **CONS**:- Sourced material; there is no shortage of using myths for citations. This would probably not be an ideal primary source for serious research

purposes, but some of the bibliography certainly could. Serious historians could easily take offense.- Definitions become a little muddy; there were times I thought a couple of the "weapons" were really pushing the boundaries of contemporary definitions of chemical/biological weapons, BUT this isn't a book about contemporary definitions, so it has that much going for it.- Repetition; I could swear there are a few paragraphs that are repeated almost verbatim throughout the entire book. It's not REALLY noticeable, but I remember having a sense of déjà vu on more than one occasion.- Images; I can't speak for the hardcover version, but the paperback's images were almost worthless. There may have been a 10-20 images in the entire book, and less than half were actually of relevance as they relate to the text. For instance, when talking about poisoning wells, there was an image of women holding water jugs, and a caption that said, "People typically collected water from wells in antiquity," or something equally useless. I'd recommend this to people into bizarre or occult sort of history, but PhD's may find it intolerable. I'll probably hang on to it for its novelty more than its historical merit. I think the most valuable thing you can do to calibrate your expectations of the book is to remember the title contains the phrase, "scorpion bombs". ;)

Excellent history of the use of ancient bio-chemical weapons which belies the fact that the ancients fought only in a fair manner. Tho the rules of engagement in antiquity stated that battles must be "fairly fought", the use of biologic and chemical weapons often dipped in poison (from serpents and human remains or excrement) was not uncommon, tho considered not "manly". Also shooting arrows from afar as opposed to combat face to face was frowned upon, even tho it was widely used (often by mercenaries) It would appear from mythology that those Greeks who used biochemical warfare were then made to suffer from it themselves, proving that the Gods really did frown upon that usage. Armies in ancient times used not only personal types of bio weapons, but also made great use of poisoning water supplies to effect victory. I came across this book's title in the back of a novel by the American author of thrillers, Brad Thor, who used it in reference for background for his novel. Thanks to Brad Thor for this and the other great book to which he made reference in the same novel, Hannibal Crosses the Alps, another wonderful history and analysis of an event in antiquity. I highly recommend this book for the history and veracity on this topic--well annotated and illustrated w/ancient Greek pottery of the periods in discussion.

Aside from a new preface, the book is a reissue of the first edition (Greek Fire, Poison Arrows & Scorpion Bombs: Biological and Chemical Warfare in the Ancient World, 2003). Most of the historical examples come from the Greek world, the Roman empire and Asia Minor, yet the reader

can also encounter other cases from the Middle East, China and India, although those related to this latter country are almost exclusively based on Kautilya's (4-3rd c. BCE) The Arthashastra (Penguin classics) ('Treatise on Statecraft') and on the accounts of Alexander the Great's experiences. Overarching Greek mythological themes include Hercules's Hydra-venom arrows and his gruesome death owing to a poisoned shirt, in similar vein to the gown received as a gift from the sorceress Medea and donned by the Corinthian princess Glauke; and the accidentally self-inflicted wound of Philoctetes on his way to the Trojan War. Among the historical personages and locations that come up frequently we find Alexander the Great, Mithridates VI of Pontus (d. 63 BCE), and Syracuse (Sicily). Topics discussed: poison arrows, especially those of the Scythians and the related toxin known as "scythicon" (drawing on sources from Herodotus, Aristotle, Theophrastus, and Aelian; pp. 77-86); venomous plants used in warfare (hellebore species, aconite, nightshade); poisoning drinking water, toxic honey, contaminated wine, etc.; plagues as weapons of war, i.e., driving disease-ridden animals to enemy land or sending 'poison maidens' to their camp; the idea that certain temples in the ancient world were utilized for storing contagious pathogens (and their antidotes?); deployment of chemical incendiaries and protective measures against them; and much more. While certainly interesting, the inclusion of war dogs, elephants, camels, etc. (chapter 6) in a discussion about bio/chemical weapons is quite a bit of stretch for me. Corrigenda:+ I don't think it's wise to call the respective territory of the Iberian Peninsula Spain and its inhabitants Spanish or Spaniards in the context of Carthaginian and Roman campaigns (pgs. 14, 72, 108, 155, 203, 225), but rather Iberians or, as the author does on one occasion (p. 155), "Celtiberians" or Ibero-Celts.+ A. Mayor asserts that Hungarians catapulted beehives at the Turks in 1289 (p. 180). Hardly so... Ottoman Turks first set foot on the European continent in the 1350s. One of the first major battles in the Balkans was fought between a Serb-led multi-ethnic Christian army and the Muslims at Kosovo Polye in 1389. Endnotes (pp. 259-93); bibliography (pp. 296-305). The illustrations are carefully selected; an historical time line (pp. 11-17) and an incomplete index facilitate navigating in the book.

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