

HOW WERE THROWN WEAPONS USED IN PERIOD?

by

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Thrown weapons had four main types of use prior to about 1600 CE:

Warfare - Covert Operations - Self-Defense - Hunting

In many cultures, thrown weapon use (except for specialized applications) generally ended around 1100-1200 CE, although some less advanced cultures used them into the 1800's.

Thrown weapons are practical for warfare only in specific cultural and technological settings. These include the following:

- (1) Iron and steel is expensive. Armor and swords are very expensive and need skilled artisans to make them, thus they are fairly uncommon (only wealthy nobles or renowned warriors have them). Spears, javelins, axes and knives use only small amounts of expensive iron or steel and can be made by the local blacksmith.
- (2) Limited, fairly unorganized warfare is the norm and heavy cavalry is rare. Throw weapons need close contact with the enemy in order to be effective, and cavalry usually prevented this.
- (3) Infantry shield wall tactics are common.

When a culture develops to the point where it can afford heavy cavalry, steel or iron armor for most of its fighters and advanced weapons like archery and firearms, thrown weapon use becomes relegated to:

- (1) Use by nearly everyone in desperate self-protection situations (military and civilian)
- (2) Specialized use by highly skilled people (spies, assassins, criminals)
- (3) Use by the poorer segments of the society.

THROWN WEAPON TYPES

Percussive Weapons - Percussive weapons (throwing sticks and clubs) were among the first weapons developed by humanity. They were usually used by cultures without an iron technology, by cultures where iron and steel was

extremely expensive, or by the poorer segments of a developing society. Percussive weapons were used for hunting (including poaching!), self-protection and occasionally for war.

Javelins and Spears - Javelins and spears were the premier thrown weapons prior to about 1100 CE. In many cultures they were a primary weapon for warfare, self-defense, livestock protection and hunting.

Axes – In some cultures, the axe was used as auxiliary or back-up weapons for the primary weapon (usually a spear or sword). In some northern European cultures (e.g. the Franks) and in some African cultures, the thrown axe was a primary battle weapon. Thrown axes are reasonably practical thrown weapons.

Knives – In most cultures the knife was strictly a back-up weapon and was rarely thrown. For most people, a thrown knife is not a practical weapon, unless the thrower has trained extensively in its use.

THROWN WEAPON USE

The javelin and spear were the most effective thrown weapons in early to mid-period. Unless the thrower was a highly trained warrior or an assassin, thrown sticks/clubs, axes and knives were mostly used either as diversion weapons or as weapons of last resort. These thrown weapons can be lethal, but they were used as much to distract and confuse the enemy as to kill. While the enemy was stunned or disoriented by pain, the thrower had an opportunity to either: (1) escape; (2) attack with a more efficient melee weapon; or (3) attack from a better tactical position. A thrown axe or knife for most people tended to be an act of desperation, done when there were no other options.

A 6th century Frank warrior attacking his enemy's shield wall with thrown *angon* (a javelin) and *francisca* (a throwing axe), a 12th century Samurai-class woman fending off an assassin with a thrown *tanto* (a knife) or a 16th century Sikh covertly dispatching an enemy sentry with a *chakram* (a steel throwing ring) all have one thing in common: they are buying time to deploy a more efficient melee weapon or to obtain a tactical advantage.

For the Frank, the *angon* hopefully will stick in his opponent's shield, weighting it down and making it useless and the *francisca* will gash his opponent's face. These thrown weapons render his opponent unprotected and confused by his wounds when the battle lines close and opens a gap in the enemy's shield wall.

For the Samurai women, the quick knife draw from her sleeve and its throw hopefully will allow her time to seize the spear lying next to the pillow and dispatch her assailant.

For the Sikh, the chakram thrown into the sentry's face from 10 feet hopefully will stop the sentry's sword draw long enough for him to be dispatched with a knife thrust.

All of these throwers hope that their thrown weapon will kill or disable their opponent, but they realize that this might be unlikely unless they are both very skilled and have some luck!