

THE BOW AT NIGHT: AN INAPPROPRIATE WEAPON?

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IN THE DOLONEA, *Iliad* 10, Odysseus and Dolon each carry a bow (10.260, 333). In due course Dolon's is stripped from him (459), and Odysseus uses his to whip the horses of Rhesus (500, 513–514). Is there something amiss here? Miss Lorimer's *Homer and the Monuments* is the place to start. She discusses the episode twice, both times in much the same terms. For her, the Dolonea is "late," later than the *Odyssey*, because here alone in the *Iliad* is there any hint of Odysseus the bowman. In both discussions, as a confirmatory detail, she insists that the bow is "a strange weapon," "surely a peculiarly inappropriate weapon," to take on a night reconnaissance.¹ One would infer from her remarks that it cannot be used at night. The topic is hardly one of the burning issues in the poem. Still, from time to time in conversation with colleagues, one may gain the impression that Lorimer has settled the matter. She is in fact unequivocally wrong, and we might as well dispose of her misapprehension for all time.

The evidence comes from other societies in which the bow was at home. We begin with England, in the late eighteenth century. Sir Foster Cunliffe (1755–1834) tells of a meeting at Hardwick, Buckinghamshire, in 1792, at which, after the evening meal, when it was quite dark, the host set up archery targets lit by candles in paper lanterns. "At first," reports Sir Foster, "it was difficult to hit the boss . . . All [the] arrows went to the left, but in a short time, by paying attention to that circumstance, the difficulty was overcome." The source that quotes the memorandum remarks, "An interesting entry, as it is perhaps the only contemporary record of this class of shooting, though we know it was practised."²

Likewise in England, in 1545 Roger Ascham (1515–1568), who later became Queen Elizabeth's tutor, recommended a technique to train an archer to look at the target instead of his arrow. "Let him take his bowe on the night, and shoot at two lightes, and there he shall be compelled to looke alwayes at his marke, and never at his shafte: this thinge, ones or twice used, will cause him to forsake looking at his shafte."³

¹H. L. Lorimer, *Homer and the Monuments* (London 1950) 296–297, 483. The writer expresses his gratitude to Sterling Dow, who discussed these matters with him thirty years ago; to Caroline Alexander, who persuaded him to return to them anew; and to the journal's referees, who suggested improvements in the presentation of this discussion.

²C. J. Longman and H. Walrond, *Archery* (London 1894, The Badminton Library of Sports and Pastimes) 206–207.

³Roger Ascham, *Toxophilus: The Schole, or Partitions, of Shooting, Contayned in Two Bookes* (first published 1545; Wrexham 1788; facsimile reprint, Wakefield 1968) 228.

From the Moslem world, where bowmanship has long been cultivated, we have an Arabic archery manual, composed in Morocco at some date close to 1500. The nineteenth chapter, entitled "On Aiming," includes the following advice. "A person desiring to practice his aim should obtain . . . a lantern, place it at a distance, pick up a weak and flexible bow, and take his position for shooting . . . Then let him align the arrowhead with the flame and focus his sight upon it . . . and, drawing the limit of the arrow, continue so to practice."⁴

About 1368/69 in Egypt a Mameluke warrior named Ṭaybughā (a Greek by birth) composed an archery manual, and in it we read: "The art of sighting can be acquired in the following manner . . . Using either one or both eyes, train your sight on a lamp, and any disparity of vision which you may experience will become apparent to you. What you do first is to place a lamp at a distance . . . Then, taking a gentle bow, you squat . . . You next nock an arrow and align its head with the flame . . . While so doing, you keep one eye closed and the other open, then open both together and draw to the limit of the arrow, all the while keeping your sight on the light until the disparity is corrected to your satisfaction."⁵

Ancient Greece provides further testimony. According to the Townley scholion to *Iliad* 10.260, "[Meriones gave Odysseus a bow] in order that, without being seen, he might shoot those who were in the light."⁶ And again, Thucydides recounts how, one dark and stormy night in the winter of 428/7 B.C., a party of Plataeans attempted to break through the siegeworks that encircled them. As they reached the final obstacle, the enemy reserves, to the number of three hundred, arrived with torches. "The Plataeans, standing on the edge of the trench, saw them more clearly from the darkness, and shot arrows and hurled javelins at their unarmed sides; and being themselves in the dark, they were less readily seen through the torches"⁷

⁴Nabih Amin Faris and Robert Potter Elmer, *Arab Archery: An Arabic Manuscript of about A.D. 1500, "A Book on the Excellence of the Bow & Arrow," and the Description Thereof; Translated and Edited* (Princeton, N.J. 1945) 55.

⁵J. D. Latham and W. F. Paterson, *Saracen Archery: An English Version and Exposition of a Mameluke Work on Archery (ca. A.D. 1368), with Introduction, Glossary, and Illustrations* (London 1970) 58, with n. 2 at the top of 201.

⁶Μηριόνης δ' Ὀδυσῆϊ δίδου βίον: ὅπως βάλλοι λαυθάνων τοὺς ἐν φωτί. Ernestus Maass, *Scholia graeca in Homeri Iliadem, ex codicibus aucta et emendata* 5: Townleyana 1 (Oxford 1887) 358, ad 10.260; Hartmut Erbse, *Scholia graeca in Homeri Iliadem (scholia vetera)* 3 (Berlin 1974) 53, ad 10.260; on the separation of this part of the entry from another explanation that appears with it in the same sentence, see M. van der Valk, *Researches on the Text and Scholia of the Iliad* 1 (Leiden 1963) 196–197; an abbreviated form of the same notice appears in the Genevan scholia: ἵνα βάλλων λαυθάνη. Jules Nicole, *Les scolies genevoises de l'Iliade* (Geneva 1891; reprinted Hildesheim 1966) 129, ad 10.260; and Erbse *loc. cit.*

⁷οἱ μὲν οὖν Πλαταιῆς ἐκείνους ἑώρων μάλλον ἐκ τοῦ σκοτῶτος ἐστῶτες ἐπὶ τοῦ χεῖλους τῆς τάφρου, καὶ ἐτόξευν τε καὶ ἐσηκόντιζον ἐς τὰ γυμνά, αὐτοὶ δὲ ἐν τῷ ἀφανεί ὄντες ἦρσαν διὰ τὰς λαμπάδας καθεωρῶντο . . . , Thuc. 3.23.4.

Here we have half a dozen sources, spread over two millennia, testifying to a recurrent connection between the dark of night, the bow, and aiming at lights. The situation in the Dolonea fits the pattern. It is night. There are plenty of watch fires and cooking fires, particularly on the Trojan side. Hector has told the Trojans to “gather much wood, so that all night long until early-born dawn we may burn many fires, and the gleam may reach to heaven” (8.507–509). They have obeyed, and “sat all night long, and many fires were burning for them” (8.554). “A thousand fires were burning in the plain” (8.562), and Agamemnon “wondered at the many fires that were burning in front of Troy” (10.12). Dolon mentions “the fire hearths of the Trojans” (10.418). The Achaean campfires are less in the poet’s mind, but no less required by the narrative. The sentinels prepare their meals (9.88), and Patroclus broils his mixed grill *en brochette* (9.211). The Greek leaders hold council (10.195), and are still in session when the patrol returns (10.533); they are able to recognize each other, as well as newcomers. After the expedition the two heroes sit down for dinner (10.578). All this bespeaks fire. In short, the lights in darkness are amply attested, and the bow is appropriate in such situations. If our sole purpose were to refute Miss Lorimer, the task is done.

Simply for the record, we go a little further. One would naturally assume that a practised instinctive archer could aim at sounds as well as lights, and there may be occasional hints that fires are not indispensable for shooting at night. The bow was a favoured weapon of the Byzantine soldiery, and finds mention in a whole series of military textbooks. In a manual composed in catechetical form, ascribed to Leo VI the Wise (reigned 886–912), we read: “By whom are night attacks fittingly made? By foot and horse archers, or javelin men, against infantry and cavalry forces who are not in a camp with a palisade and formal discipline, but who are tenting scattered and unprotected, and who do not know how to use bows or other missiles, but rather fight hand to hand.”⁸ There is no mention of lights.

Another handbook apparently compiled at the command of Nicephorus Phocas (reigned 963–969) tells how a general should establish his piquets both at night and in the day: “One must make the usual outer sentries, and the inner sentries who are posted even closer, from spear-throwers and archers who are on foot . . . This even at night.”⁹ Again, no lights.

⁸ἐκ τίνων αἱ νυκτεριναὶ ἔφοδοι ἀρμοδίως γίνονται; ἀπὸ τε πεζῶν καὶ καβαλλαρίων τοξοτῶν, ἥτοι ἀκοντιστῶν κατὰ ἔθνων πεζῶν καὶ καβαλλαρίων, τῶν μὴ ἐν φουσσάτῳ καὶ τάξει ἀπληκευόντων, ἀλλὰ σποράδην καὶ ἀφυλάκτως σκηνοῦντων, καὶ κατὰ τῶν μὴ εἰδῶτων τόξους κεχρησθαι ἢ ἄλλοις ἀκοντίοις, ἀλλ’ ἐκ χειρὸς μάλλον τὴν μάχην ποιουμένων. Alphonse Dain, ed., *Leonis VI Sapientis Problemata* (Paris 1935) 9.4. The words are borrowed almost *verbatim* from ps.-Mauricius (Urbicius), *Tactica* (sixth century); in the edition of Joannes Schefferus Argentoratensis, *Arriani Tactica et Mauricii Artis Militaris libri duodecim* (Uppsala 1664) 9.2, p. 207.6–17 Scheffer.

⁹τὰ δὲ ἐξ ἔθους ἐξώβιγλα καὶ ἐσώβιγλα τὰ καὶ πλησιέστερον ἰστάμενα δεῖ ποιεῖν ἀπὸ

Perhaps a hint is provided as well by a late variant (perhaps tenth-century) of an old strategem passed down from antiquity. When Autophradates, the Persian satrap of Lydia in the mid-fourth century B.C., wanted to invade Pisidia, he found the passageway to be narrow and well guarded. He brought his own army up, and then feigned withdrawal. "When night came, those of the Pisidians who were guarding the pass departed, thinking that the enemy had retired. But Autophradates, taking his archers and the lighter-armed of his hoplites, and running with great speed, went through the pass." Only this late version explicitly mentions archers in the night attack; earlier accounts omit them.¹⁰ The sources are not as conclusive as we might have wished; but the possibility remains that archers could be effective even in total darkness.

Two other texts seem at first glance to suggest that the bow is not useful at night, but the first glance is deceptive. One comes from an Iliadic scholion. "[Dolon is] foolish, because he takes a bow when the enemy are not lighting a fire."¹¹ We see now that the commentator is mistaken, first in believing that the bow cannot be used in the dark, and second in asserting that the Greeks do not have fires; but even he knows that the bow is serviceable where there *are* lights.

Again, another Byzantine military handbook, of about the year 950, says: "Concerning Fighting at Night: . . . In any battle that takes place at night, since the fighting is inevitably at close quarters, the throng of so-called 'light-armed,' that is, archers and slingers, is of no use; for in that situation everyone is fighting hand to hand."¹² No hint here that the bow is worthless in the dark. It is to be avoided in a night *mêlée*, not because it is ineffective, but because it is indiscriminate.

ἀκοντιστῶν καὶ τοξοτῶν πεζῶν . . . καὶ ταῦτα μὲν ἐν νυκτί . . . , Rudolfus Vári, ed., *Incerti scriptoris byzantini saeculi x liber de re militari* (Leipzig 1901; reprinted Stuttgart 1970, as a supplement to the reprint of Ioannes Melber, *Polyaeni Strategematon libri viii* [Leipzig 1887]) 11.17–19; 12.23.

¹⁰νυκτὸς δὲ γενομένης, οἱ μὲν φυλάσσοντες τὰ στενὰ τῶν Πισιδῶν ἀνεχώρησαν νομισάντες τοὺς πολεμίους ὑποστρέψαι. ὁ δὲ Αὐτοφραδάτης τοὺς τοξότας καὶ τοὺς ἐλαφροτέρους τῶν ὀπλιτῶν ἀναλαβὼν μετὰ πολλῆς σπουδῆς δραμῶν διήλθε τὰ στενὰ . . . This version comes from the *Parekbolai* 27.3; earlier versions may be found in the *Strategemata Ambrosiana* 31.7 (after the mid-ninth century; both this text and the *Parekbolai* are edited by J.-A. de Foucault, *Strategemata* [Paris 1949]); the so-called *Hypotheses* 31.15, published under the title "Excerpta Polyaeni" as an appendix to Melber, *Polyaenus*; Polyaenus 7.27.1; Frontinus *Strategemata* 1.4.5.

¹¹ἄφρων, ὅς μὴ κα(υ)όντων πῦρ πολεμίων τόξα ἔχει. Maass (above, n. 6) 363, *ad* 10.333; Erbse (above, n. 6) 70, *ad* 10.333.

¹²περὶ νυκτομαχίας . . . ἄγχεμάχου δὲ τοῦ πολέμου αἰὲ καθεστῶτος ἐν πάσῃ νυκτομαχίᾳ τὸ τῶν ἐλαφρῶν καλουμένων πλῆθος, δηλαδὴ τοξοτῶν καὶ σφενδονητῶν, ἄχρηστον ἐνταῦθα· πάντες γὰρ ἐκ χειρὸς πολεμοῦσιν. Alphonse Dain, ed., *Sylloge Tacticorum, quae olim "Inedita Leonis Tactica" dicebatur* (Paris 1938) 48.7.

"He [Odysseus] thought that the bow would be useful because, while remaining himself unseen in the darkness, he would be able from afar to shoot the enemy by the light of their campfires." So, in 1912, Joannes van Leeuwen, Professor of Greek at Leiden University, guided by the scholiast on *Iliad* 10.260.¹³ Though he did not persuade Miss Lorimer, he is now vindicated. Without in any way suggesting that the Dolonea is an historical episode, we can at least deliver the poet from the charge of writing nonsense. The bow is indeed a practical weapon to take on a night expedition. It is entirely fitting for Dolon to carry one, and perhaps even more so for Odysseus the bowman, who had left his own at home, to borrow from another archer. Those who want to alienate the Dolonea from the *Iliad* may well have some decisive arguments on their side. The use of the bow at night is not one.

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¹³"*Arcum autem sibi utilem fore putabat, quo eminus per tenebras peteret hostes ignium flammis illustratos, ipse latens;*" J. van Leeuwen, *Homeri Carmina: Ilias, cum prolegomenis, notis criticis, commentariis exegeticis* 1 (Leiden 1912) 356, *ad Il.* 10.260 sq.