



HISTORY of WEAPONS

*Crossbows, Caltrops, Catapults
& Lots of Other Things that
Can Seriously Mess You Up*

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INTRODUCTION

REMEMBER the events like they happened yesterday: some lady got kidnapped by an omnipotent space demon, and in order to rescue her, her space prince had to retrieve a magical multi-bladed throwing star from a dark, misty cave. The name of that movie was *Krull*, and I didn't give two shits about the rest of the plot. The weapon, on the other hand, was called the Glaive. It came with five rotating switchblades and could be steered by the user's mind. I wanted one in the worst way.

But it was not to be. I would soon discover that the *Krull* throwing star was a Hollywood invention. The closest I could come was a three-inch shuriken that I convinced my mother to buy from a local weapons dealer (we lived in the rural South). I adored it and took it everywhere . . . until a Korean friend of our family told my mother that this throwing star could put someone's eye out. It was quickly taken away.

Then came the BB gun, every boy's first weapon. Mine was a fairly basic model. You could only pump it once, which meant it had limited power. But it packed enough punch to put holes in things like aluminum cans, particleboard, and my sister's ass. The BB gun was taken away from me, too.

Fast-forward 25 years, and what do we have? Me writing a book chock-full of every blade, club, and firearm ever to put a dimple on anyone's sister's backside. Well, maybe not every single one. For the sake of my sanity, I've had to prioritize. Every culture has a spear. Every culture has a bow and a dagger or saber or club of some kind. Some weapons didn't make the cut. The only weapons included are ones that I deemed interesting, unique, or important enough to take up book space. Remember this before you send me hate mail saying, "You forgot all about the tree pangolin trap of the Baka Pygmy tribe!"

Another thing I "forgot" is armor. This is a weapons book, and as such, it doesn't include entries on helmets, chain mail cuirasses, or any other protective clothing. The only shields you will find are ones that have a distinct offensive purpose, such as the Greek *aspis* or the crazier-than-batshit lantern shield. So if you're looking for *A History of Armor*, you'll have to look elsewhere.

You will also notice that this book ends around the time of the Spanish-American War. There are two reasons for this: (1) I had to stop somewhere. And since every war of the 1900s has already been covered to death by Steven Spielberg and Oliver Stone, what more can I really add anyway? (2) The point of this book is to have fun engaging your inner geek, not to make light of someone's tragedy. So I pussed out and decided not to cover Vietnam, nukes, or anything else that's "too soon." (My apologies to any readers who lost loved ones in the Spanish-American War—you must be really old!)

Rest assured, this book will still knock you all onto your collective ass. You will (hopefully) laugh, (probably) cry, and (God forbid) even learn a thing or two. In fact, people who read this book will undergo a transformation: Their IQ's will increase by at least twenty points. They will automatically gain the ability to wield battle-axes. This book can also cause the reader to grow a second pair of testicles, except for women, who will grow their first pair.

EASE OF USE KEY

Less than ★ - Easy! Even your cat could use it.

★ - Requires two opposable thumbs and as many brain cells

★★ - Requires depth perception and practice

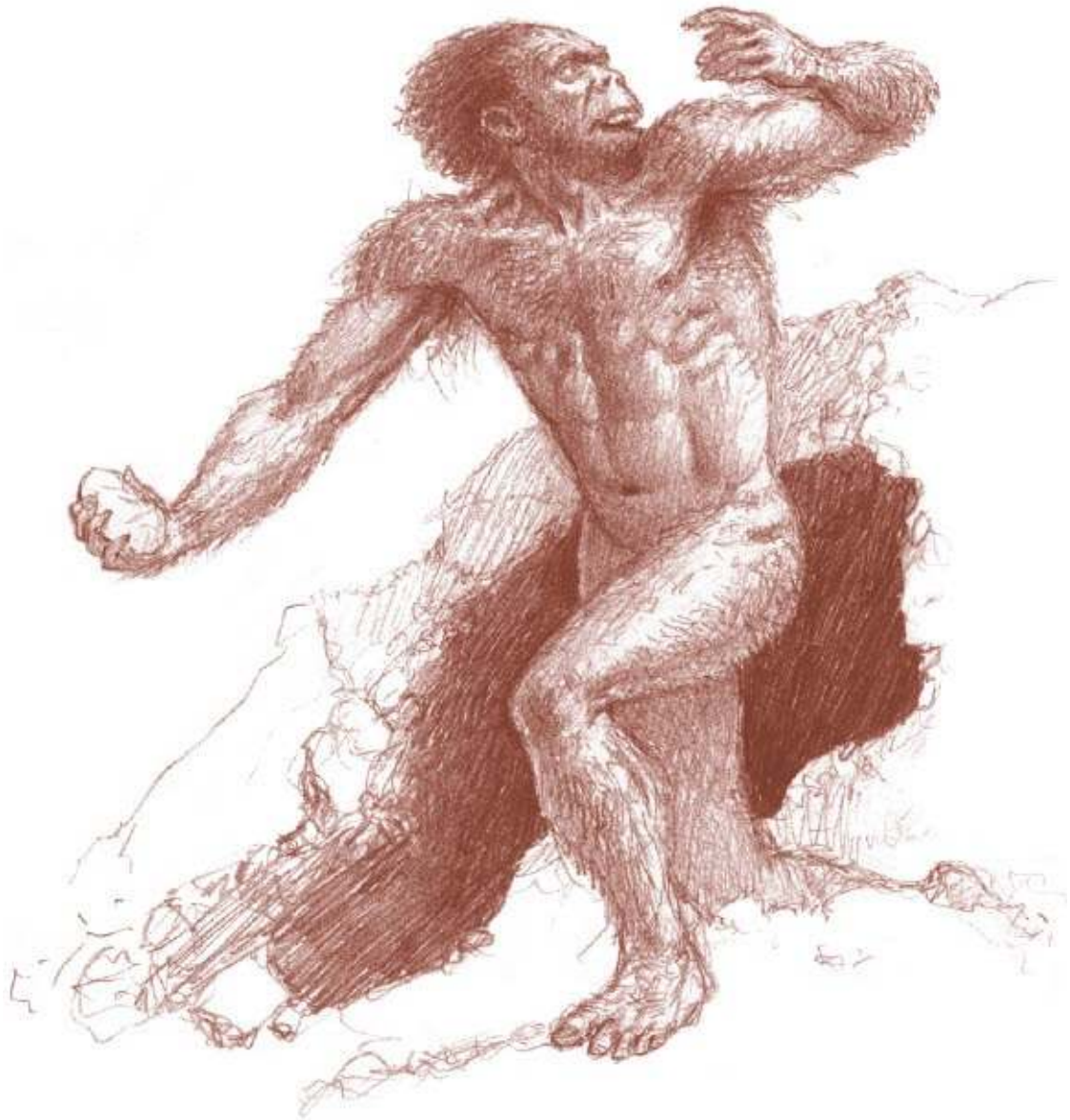
★★★ - Sophisticated weapon; wielder must spend some time in the dojo

★★★★ - Only for masters

★★★★★ - Impossible; nobody but Bruce Lee and Batman could use it

THE FIRST WEAPONS

5,000,000–6000 BCE



OUR SPECIES has always been itching for a fight. Some say we started strangling each other with our fish fins as soon as we crawled out of the primordial ooze. It had to be that way. Without this instinct, we never would have made it out of the ooze in the first place. In fact, we humans (or something related to us) began murdering each other with weapons about five million years ago. We know this because we've observed chimpanzees using weapons, and they're roughly five million years behind us on standardized tests.

So what caused these early prehomnids to make the leap to murdering each other with hand tools? Well, put yourself inside the feeble mind of this early man-ape. It's the beginning of the Stone Age, so obviously there are very few resources (other than an inexplicable surplus of stone). You can't make anything. You can't talk. You can't even keep yourself from standing in your own feces. You're not really out of apedom. You're a scavenger, feeding on nuts, berries, dodo bird eggs, shellfish, and anything else you can pick out of the dirt. But you've been walking upright for a while now, and that's freed up your front limbs. Before long you'll develop opposable thumbs, which allow you to pick up your feces before you step in it. Not only that, you can pick up lots of objects and throw them with greater dexterity. This opens up a whole new realm of possibilities—the realm of throwing things at people who piss you off. And boy, does it feel good!

STICKS & STONES: THE FIRST GENERATION

ROCK We can't say for certain, but we're pretty sure this was "the original." The Grandmaster Flash of weapons. The first object ever used to crack a person over the head. After all, it's heavy. It's hard. It fits in your hand perfectly. You haven't yet mastered rock propulsion via sling or learned to sharpen the rock to form arrows or spears. You aren't as fast, nimble, or strong as your would-be predators. But you do have something they don't: thumbs. This means you can find rocks and throw them with remarkable accuracy, sometimes even killing your target. Defending yourself against the more athletically gifted organisms is a fulltime job. And as if dealing with lions and bears weren't enough, you've got to deal with competition from your fellow knuckle-draggers, who are constantly trying to steal your food (and your wife) while you sleep. But thanks to those opposable thumbs, you can use a rock to bash your adversary's skull when he's asleep and steal all of his nuts, berries, dodo bird eggs, and shellfish. Not only do you get to keep your wife—you get to take his as well. Now your DNA will be passed down to the next generation of hominids, while your adversary's will not. And it's all thanks to the rock.



EASE OF USE: ★★ (some calluses will result)

DATE OF ORIGIN:

Four billion years ago

PRECURSOR TO: Hand axe

BEST DEFENSE: Get out of the way!

USER REVIEWS: “Grrrr . . . Rock smash! Make dead! Thumbs good!”

FIRE Early man knew the power of fire. He'd seen it spread naturally and devastate the landscape overnight. Homo erectus (the early hominid, not the gay porn film) wanted this power for himself. He would spend millennia attempting to harness it. Eventually, about 790,000 years ago, one of our knuckle-dragging ancestors succeeded. Whoever he was, this early man was known as Lord Bigshit in the caveman community. Thanks to fire, Lord Bigshit could keep wild animals at bay. He could use the fire to harden his rocks, making them even more effective at collapsing enemies' skulls. He could make light after the sun went down. And he could cook his shellfish before eating it, ensuring that he wouldn't be dead after dinner. But most importantly (for the sake of this book anyway), Homo erectus now had the power to wipe out large numbers of other cavemen. He could torch entire settlements in a matter of minutes, especially with fire codes not having been invented yet. He could also asphyxiate cave dwellers by pumping smoke into their domiciles. He could instantly turn anything to ash. Everyone wanted what Lord Bigshit had. His "hot red flower" was about to change the world forever.



EASE OF USE: ★★★★★ (especially if you're rubbing sticks together)

DATE OF ORIGIN: 200,000 to 790,000 years ago

DISCOVERED BY: Lord Bigshit

COUNTER WEAPON: Water

USED WITH: Arrows, marshmallows

CLUB Now picture yourself two million years ago. You've evolved slightly. You're now Homo habilis. (Think Homo sapiens with even smaller brains.) You don't have sharp claws, giant saber teeth, or poison quills like some of the other members of the animal kingdom, but you do have intelligence—just enough of it to turn anything into a weapon. That tree branch lying on the ground? A ready-to-use truncheon. That mammoth femur? Even better. (In fact, according to the noted historical source 2001: A Space Odyssey, a bone was the first weapon ever used to commit homicide.) In the centuries before mankind learned the sophisticated art of stick sharpening, he relied on crude, blunt objects to do his bludgeoning. In the case of the club, its effectiveness hinges on its mass. The heavier the club, the more force it carries when you wield it. So swinging a tree branch at another creature isn't exactly sophisticated, but it's more than the other beasts of earth can do. When was the last time anybody saw a lion pick up a club and whack a hyena? This ingenuity is precisely what made early man the real king of the jungle. Once he learned to swing a club, he could kill the lion and build several more clubs from its bones. In your face, lion.



EASE OF USE: ★★ (some strength required)

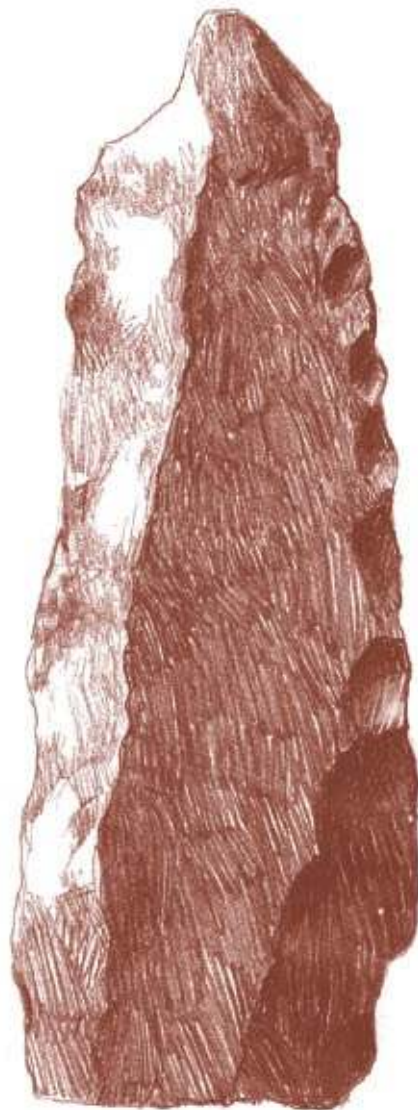
DATE OF ORIGIN: Two million years ago

MADE FAMOUS BY: Captain Caveman

PRECURSOR TO: Mace

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH: Club sandwich, which is not an effective weapon

STONE BLADES So you're climbing the evolutionary ladder, and you've just begun to break the chains of apedom. You've spent a few millennia smashing things with rocks, and it's starting to dawn on you—some rocks have narrow edges that make it easier to saw through other objects. The principle of physics that you don't yet grasp is this: a force increases exponentially when it's distributed over a smaller surface area. Make the point of your weapon smaller, and you can actually cut somebody and spill his blood. You've just discovered sharpness, and the way you achieve it is by flaking bits of rock off a bigger rock by hitting it with a piece of antler. Hooray for technology! These rock blades took many shapes in the Paleolithic era: knives, wedges, spikes, etc. Most were made from flint, due to its predictable cleavage (write your own boob joke here). All started out as crude, hand-held blades. Sure, they got the job done. But they were seriously lacking in style, and could also hurt the user's hand. One day, however, one of the smarter cavemen—probably their valedictorian—made a startling discovery: he could attach a piece of wood or bone onto the blade, and voilà . . . it's got a handle! This would usher in the hand axe, one of the most important tools of early hominids. Not only that, the new handle allowed the user to strike harder without injuring his tender hominid hands.



DATE OF ORIGIN: 1.5 million years ago
BIRTHPLACE: Kenya
INVENTED BY: Homo habilis

ALSO USED TO: Skin animals, cut uncomfortable tags off caveman T-shirts

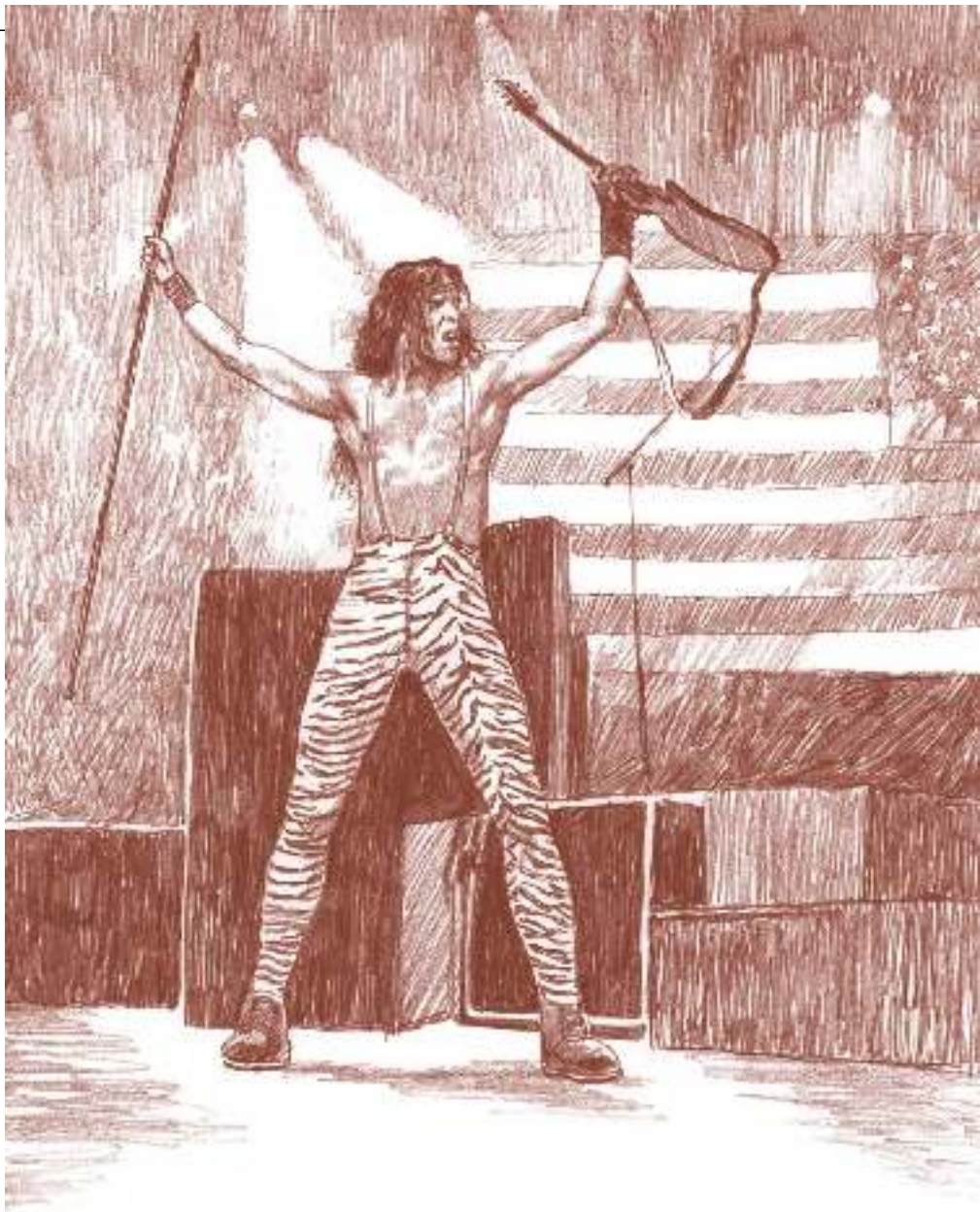
Obsidian

The Black Glass of Death

The sharpest blades in history were not made of steel. Oh, no. They were crafted thousands of years ago from a naturally occurring material called obsidian. This jet-black mineral forms in the lava flow of active volcanoes. The rapid cooling of this material means it solidifies with very few crystals. It's hard and brittle and therefore breaks into very sharp pieces. In fact, well-crafted obsidian blades are said to be many times sharper than modern surgical scalpels. I know what you're thinking, smart-ass—"If obsidian's so great, how come doctors don't make scalpels out of it?" Even though the edge it produces is second to none, obsidian isn't the most durable substance. It chips and loses its edge much more easily than any metal, so it has to be replaced frequently. It's also difficult to mass-produce, unlike metal items that are made from a mold.

Another drawback: it's only found near volcanoes, and most people prefer not to go anywhere near those. But if you were a guy who lived thousands of years ago and needed to slice someone open, obsidian was the way to go. Just ask the conquistadors who saw one of their horses decapitated by an Aztec obsidian blade. It's no wonder the Aztecs considered such a material to be sacred. Obsidian was also highly valued by the ancient Egyptians, who probably used it to cut open mummies and make shiny trinkets for their gods to play with.





SPEAR ~~Now that you've got fire, you have the ability to harden wood and forge it into sharp~~ points. It's taken your simian brain millions of years to figure this out, and the result is the spear. This is arguably the first serious weapon. Granted, it doesn't take much to learn how to sharpen a stick. Scientists in our time have seen chimpanzees stripping the bark from tree branches to use as weapons (once again supporting my theory that you should never fuck with chimp). But once fire was added to the equation, spears became harder, sharper, and much more effective at penetrating flesh. Early man could now heat stones, making them easier to chisel into sharp blades and points. Some cultures, such as the pre-Columbian Mesoamericans, chiseled their spear tips from obsidian (see page 15). Rest assured, these early fire-hardened spears could cut through animal hide like a hot poker through an ice cream sundae. Alas, despite its awesomeness, the spear has all but vanished from modern arsenals. Though it is still utilized by certain primitive cultures, such as Ted Nugent.



EASE OF USE: ★★★

DATE OF ORIGIN: Five hundred thousand years ago

MADE FAMOUS BY: Achilles, before he got one in the heel

BEST DEFENSE: Shield, armor

FUN FACT: As awful as it was to get stuck with a spear, it was even worse to see it pulled out with your guts on the end of it

BOOMERANGS & THROWING STICKS When you think of boomerangs, you probably picture a V-shaped Australian object that magically returns to the hand of the sender. Or maybe you think of the three-pronged Nerf toy that always gets stuck on your roof. Fact: none of these returning boomerangs were intended to be used as weapons. Never go hunting with your Nerf boomerang. Another fact: most boomerangs were non-returning and were made exclusively to maim other people or animals. Non-returning boomerangs—and their older cousins known as throwing sticks—were typically used by ancient hunters to kill fowl and small mammals, but they saw action in combat as well. The “hooked” boomerangs, in particular, were said to be especially effective against shields, as they hooked the shield and swung around to the other side, knocking the opposing warrior senseless. Not all boomerangs were thrown. Some were used as clubs in hand-to-hand combat, some were used as scraping tools, and some were even used as musical instruments. And they weren’t exclusively Australian, either. The oldest throwing sticks were used tens of thousands of years ago by primitive man in what is now Poland. They were also used by the ancient Egyptians to hunt ducks, and by ancient Native Americans to hunt rabbits (hence their other name, rabbit sticks). The throwing stick may have been the first weapon ever to be made airborne. It’s also probably how humans first made friends with dogs.



EASE OF USE: ★★★ (throwing sidearm puts strain on your joints)

DATE OF ORIGIN: At least 23,000 years ago

MADE FAMOUS BY: Some Australian guy

USED WITH: Koala bear, didgeridoo

JAVELIN Who hasn't watched the javelin throw during the Olympics and thought, "Man, I'd like to see that fucking thing kill somebody." Well, once upon a time, javelins did exactly that. Now, you might think that the spear and the javelin are the same thing. But you'd be dead wrong. Try to throw a spear, and you'll find yourself having to stand still and balance the shaft in your fingers. You're also likely to find that the spear is too heavy to throw very far. If this were a battle, you'd already be a casualty. The spear's primary purpose is to remain firmly in your grasp and serve as a melee weapon. Now pick up that javelin (assuming you have one nearby). It's much lighter, isn't it? And its weight is distributed differently, with the bulk of it lying in the tip. This front-heaviness allows it to become airborne, ensuring a much smoother flight. It also allows the weapon to be thrown on the fly. Javelins can be launched without having to plant your feet and find your balance. Eventually the Greeks and Romans would amend them with metal tips, making them even deadlier. In addition, a string called an amentum was sometimes wrapped around the shaft, allowing the hurler to put spin on the javelin and make it fly even farther. But the original javelin—the one that started it all—was born in the lower Paleolithic era some 400,000 years ago, long before the ancient Greeks thought of the Olympics. It was little more than a sharpened piece of throwable wood, but it put a lot of woolly mammoths on our ancestors' tables.

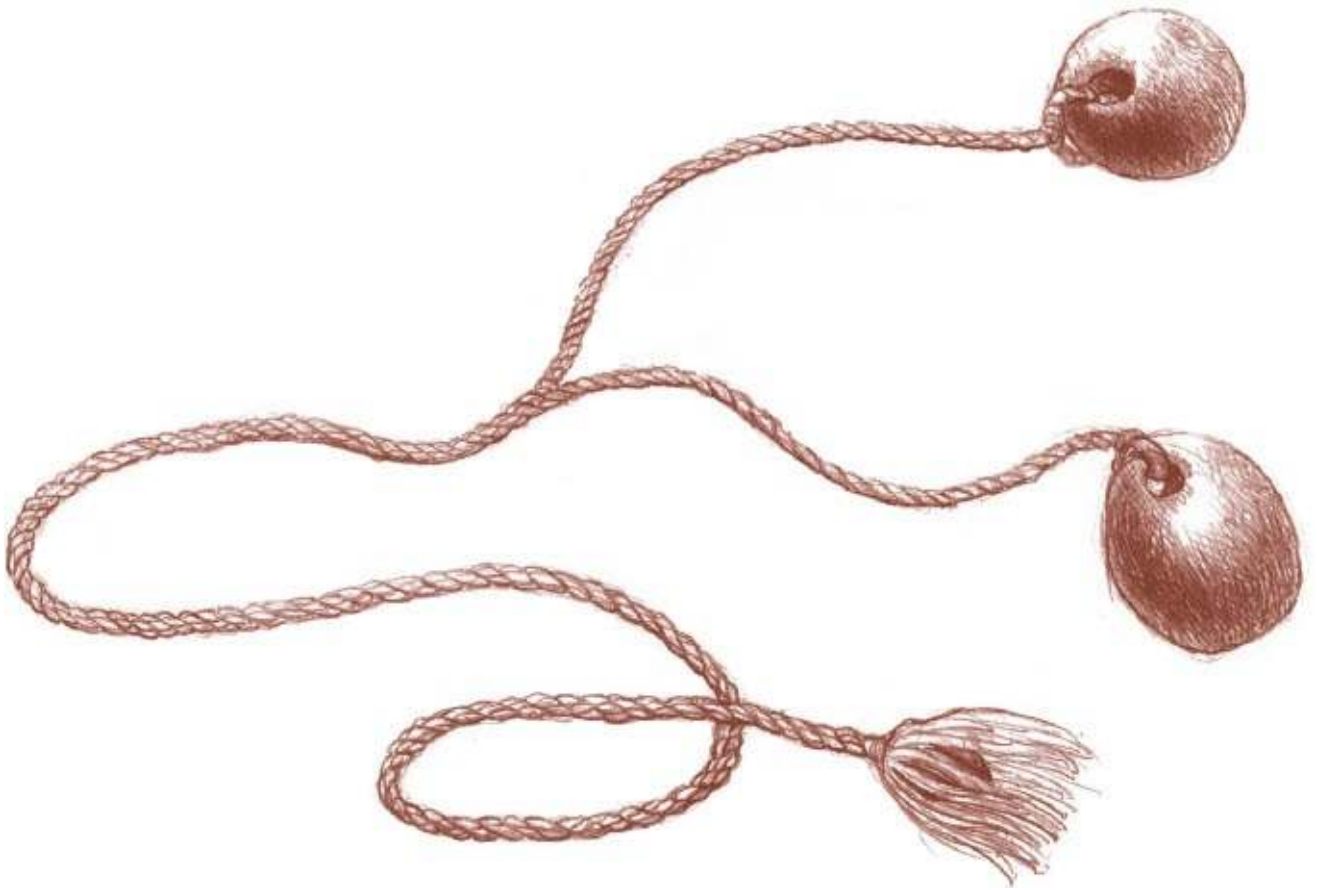


EASE OF USE: ★★★

PRECURSOR TO: Roman pilum

MADE FAMOUS BY: Hercules, who was the strongest guy ever, so of course he could throw the hell out of the javelin

BOLA (BOLEADORA) When the Spanish conquistadors arrived in South America, they reported that they didn't trust the natives in this new land, partly because they fought with "arrows, and stone bowls that are fixed at the ends of a cord." Indeed, the South American Indians did use such a weapon (as did the Inuit and Chinese simultaneously), and that weapon was the bola. The concept began simply as a single rock on the end of a string, swung over one's head to build momentum and then released toward the target, hopefully crushing his skull. The "single-ball" bola would later become known as the bola perdida. One day the Indians of Las Pampas, Argentina, made a groundbreaking discovery: if you want to capture your prey alive, all you have to do is add more strings and a couple more weights. The result was a multipronged bola that could wrap up an animal's legs and immobilize it rather than kill it. This was an ideal tool for the South American gauchos, who spent their entire day herding cattle. North American cowboys may have had the lasso, but the gauchos had the much cooler bola.



EASE OF USE: If you don't mind injuring your target: ★★

If you want the target unharmed: ★★★

MADE FAMOUS BY: South American gauchos

PRECURSOR TO: Medieval flail; tying someone's shoelaces together

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