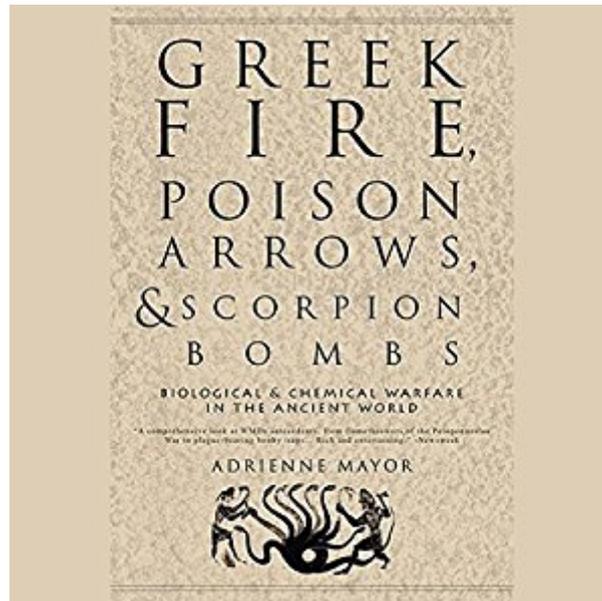


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# Greek Fire, Poison Arrows, & Scorpion Bombs



## Synopsis

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.

## 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.

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.

Hercules was probably one of the most famous early practitioners of biological weapons, and one of its most prominent victims...Slayer of the Lemean Hydra, Hercules's dipped his deadly arrows in the Hydra's blood, creating a fatal weapon - one that echoed down through Greek history claiming myriad lives. Eventually the Fates drew him full-circle and Hercules is destroyed by the gift of a cloak from his wife. The garment, secretly poisoned with the blood of Nessus, a centaur that Hercules has shot with his envenomed arrows, "burns like fire" until Hercules, in agony, begs his own son to burn him in a bonfire. The legendary story of the 12 Labors of Hercules serves as both metaphor and warning in Adrienne Mayor's fascinating and highly readable examination of the usage and prevalence of biological and chemical warfare in the Ancient World. *Greek Fire, Poison Arrows and Scorpion Bombs* is a timely and relevant eye-opener, touching on the practical usages

of such tried and true weapons such as poisoned food, tainted water, bug bombs (scorpions and bees were apparently popular tools to loft onto besieging armies), snake bombs, burning oil, pestilence-ridden corpses, maddened cattle, pitch-covered pigs (ignited of course) and, of course, the precursor of modern napalm, Greek fire. Of special note is the "mad honey" that Xenophon and the Ten Thousand encounter on their trek to the sea. Mixed from the rhododendron plant, the honey of Pontus is a famous and lethal toxin causing hallucinations and often death. Mayor carefully outlines the often ambiguous nature of chemical and biological weapons, particularly the fact that the ancients recognized the double-edged sword that they wielded had terrifying implications for their own populations if used unchecked.

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