

THE DRESDEN BIRDSHOOT

by Dick Salzer



A 19th century magic lantern slide: (left to right) the first panel shows shooting a fixed target, in the second, shooters awaiting their turn at the bird, on the third panel they are shooting at the Bird. Final panel, the winner gets his prize from a local maiden. Dick Salzer Collection

A Brief Background on Crossbows

Crossbows were the first ranging weapons in history. It is generally accepted that they were first developed as early as 500 BCE. At some point, some inventive genius realized that if you attached an archer's bow to a transverse length of wood it could be fired with more accuracy than by holding the bow at arms length. This simple invention started an evolution that continues to this day. The concept quickly caught on throughout Europe, the Middle East and Asia. It took a lifetime of rigorous practice with the archer's bow to become proficient but with a crossbow, a warrior could master the device within a few days of practice.

The first crossbows were simply standard yew bows affixed with sinew or hemp cord to what would later be called a "tiller". They were spanned (cocked) by hand and the bowstring held in ready position by a release device. The history of the crossbow can be told by the evolution of the bow itself (called a "lath"), the devices developed for spanning the lath and the triggers that released the projectile (called a "bolt" or "quarrel").

Wooden laths evolved into more and more complex composites of wood, horn, leather and other natural materials. As they evolved, they became more powerful and could no longer be spanned by hand. The first steel lathed crossbows were documented in 1346 and the necessity for assistance in spanning became essential. Where the power and range of conventional bows were limited by the arm strength of the individual archer, even a man of average strength could span the most robust bows by using one of the variety of mechanical spanners consisting of levers, pulleys or gears that had been developed (Figure 1). Siege bows like the one shown in Figure 2 – required about 1250 pounds of pull for spanning.

Crossbows became very popular with all classes of personage during the Medieval period (5th Century Through 15th Century). Though they were mostly known as weapons of war, they were popular hunting weapons, especially among the noble classes. As one might expect, competition between rival factions quickly became a means of honing skills and assuring that "a well-regulated militia" be maintained to protect communities and to project power. At the end of the Medieval period, firearms had made their debut and the use of crossbows for military purposes came to a

gradual end. By and large, by the mid-1500s, the crossbow was relegated to a sporting device and that is the story to be told here.



Figure 1. The windlass type spanner, shown in part, here, was detached after spanning. A single windlass was shared by several shooters.

Crossbow Competitions

The first crossbow competition probably took place the day after the second primitive crossbow was assembled. By the 1300s crossbow and archery guilds began to appear in parts of Europe. Most cities, towns and villages encouraged competitions among citizens and contests were a matter of community pride and fellowship. Many of the larger cities like Bruges, Ghent and Brussels that were also textile centers promoted their wares by outfitting participants in colorful costumes and provided elaborate draperies to show off their wealth and products.



Figure 2. A 1250 pound draw siege crossbow shown here with both windlass and cranequin type spanners. Spanners were removed from bows after spanning (left). The author spanning his 1250 pound, circa 1560 siege crossbow with its windlass spanner (right). Dick Salzer Collection.



Figure 3. The cranequin was a precisely-made geared machine capable of spanning the most powerful crossbows; the date “1558” appears on the hook end. The armorer’s mark indicates that it was made in Zurich. An identical one, dated 1556, is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection. Dick Salzer Collection.

Teams from neighboring communities fielded crossbow teams (arbalists, as they were alternatively called) and participants were often compensated with money, wine and privileges such as special tax relief. Many of the larger communities sponsored two guilds—one for archers, the other for crossbowmen. The festivals at which these competitions were held were elaborate affairs with celebrations, often lasting for days or weeks and, in addition to the competitions, they usually involved amusements and promoted general merriment for all townspeople (Figure 4).

Targets consisted of multi-ringed design, usually having a single center hole the exact diameter of the bolt or quarrel. The hole was covered with parchment paper so there could be no question about whether a clean hit had been made. Only a perfect, dead center hit would pass through that hole and should a competitor achieve that shot, great honors were bestowed. *Much like a “hole in one” at a golf tournament.*

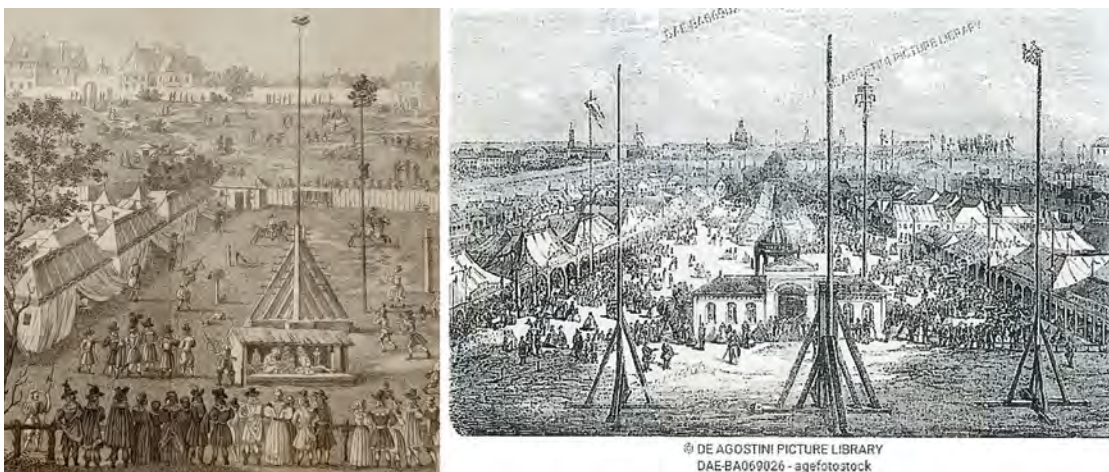


Figure 4. The Dresden Birdshoot, (Vogelwiese), a drawing from 1612, showing the vista of the festival (left). Note the taller mast with the bird target on top as will be described in detail in this article. Another image of a Birdshoot (right).



Figure 5. Clockwise, upper left: The bird was mounted on a slender pole about 135 feet in length. This post card from the early 1900s shows a method of erecting the bird. Various struts and rope held the mast in place. Another view of the festivities in Dresden during Vogelwiese from an 1830 period drawing. A group of Dresden crossbowmen ready to compete. A turn of the century postcard with a picture of the Dresden site and the bird.



The Privileged Archery Society of Dresden

As the crossbow gave way to firearms for the military, crossbows gradually went out of favor. Crossbows became relegated to competitive sporting events throughout France, Germany and the Low Countries. Organized events were documented as early as 1330 and probably were held even earlier. As these events gained in popularity, they became more elaborate and formalized, often becoming the centerpieces for festivals. Societies and Guilds were formed in towns and villages and most were very democratic in their membership requirements. Membership only required was the ownership of a crossbow, a good reputation and a certain level of skill. Commoners mixed with nobles in these organizations. Basic crossbows could be obtained at reasonable costs but, as with other things though, wealthy members could afford to commission very elaborate pieces.

Starting in 1547, the Privileged Archery Society of Dresden was formed and introduced a new type of competition. A large wooden bird target was constructed of many pieces and raised above a field on a tall mast. The event was called the “Dresdener Vogelwiese” (“Vogelwiese” translates literally to “Bird Meadow”; Figure 5). It was held, starting on Whitsun (the seventh Sunday after Easter) and lasted throughout the following week. Competitors, using crossbows, stood at a shooting line about 180 feet from the base of the mast and took turns shooting blunt-headed bolts at the bird target (Figure 6). Hits usually resulted in parts being knocked off. Specific values were assigned to the various parts. A point score was tallied by each shooter based on the number of parts he dislodged and the point value of each part. Certain parts, like the plume on top, had special value and instant rewards were made when they were knocked off. The heart was most difficult and knocking it off produced an instant winner. The bolts used in these competitions had crown-shaped points as the object was to destroy the bird. At the competitions end, the one with the most points was crowned “king” and received prizes and special privileges throughout the year. He was also charged with overseeing the construction of the Bird for the next year’s competition.

Note: In order to get a sense of the difficulty of the birdshoot, I went to a highway near my home where a high-mast lighting cluster was located. I paced off about 180 feet. Looking upward at about a 40 degree angle toward the light standard, gave a sense of what the crossbow shooters faced in that competition.



Figure 6. The Dresden Bird was an elaborate composition of wood shingles or tiles that had been joined together to form a target which loosely resembled the German eagle. It was gaily colored and some of the shingles were decorated with glass jewels. The size was typically about 13 feet in height and 8 feet in width. Weight of the bird would have been about 200 pounds.



Figure 7. The ultimate Dresden type crossbow, made in 1726 by the premier maker of the period, Gottfried Hanusch the Elder. It is decorated with numerous inlays, carvings and engravings. The inlay on the cheekpiece depicts a period crossbowman (bottom left). The release nut features a chiseled grotesque face. The double set triggers are nested in the cheekpiece. Dick Salzer Collection.



Since its beginning in the 16th century, the event has been held annually at various locations in or near Dresden along the banks of the Elbe River. The several drawings that accompany this article indicate that in addition to the tall mast with the Dresden bird, other lower masts were erected with larger targets, perhaps for younger, less skillful contestants or women (Figure 5).

The festivals continued over the next centuries and the crossbows became more and more elaborate such as the example shown in Figure 7 and 8.

After the War

During the air raids of February 1945, the bird shooting equipment was destroyed along with most of Dresden. In 1947, a small group of enthusiasts tried to resurrect the bird meadow against the backdrop of the bombed out city. Numerous attempts to revitalize the festival, over the ensuing years, resulted in a much watered down version and although bird shooting continued, it became a minor part of the festival which by now resembles an amusement park.



Figure 8. The fabric strip on the front of the lath serves two purposes, first the decorative colors of Bavaria, yellow and blue, but also is a safety factor to control backlash should the lath break during use.

Further Reading

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