



## Viking bows and arrows

### **The bow**

Viking bows were made of yew wood. Even in prehistory, yew was considered to be the classic bow wood due to its great ability to stretch and flex; together these give very special shooting power.

A very well-preserved yew bow was found at Haithabu; this has a length of 191.5 cm and a draw weight of about 45 kg. Its maximum range is about 200 m. The bow string was probably made of flax. There are also examples of elm-wood bows from Haithabu. Bows and arrows were probably also used by the upper echelons of society. This is confirmed by the fact that almost all princely graves contain bows and arrows as grave goods, for example the boat chamber grave at Haithabu.

### **Finds of arrows from Viking times**

Arrows and arrowheads have been found at more sites than is the case for bows. These include a very fine site near Trondheim in Norway, where several fascinating objects were recovered from a melting glacier. There are also finds from Dalarne in Sweden, from Novgorod, from Ireland etc. Nearer to home, the arrowheads from the boat chamber grave at Haithabu are particularly well known. The arrow shafts found in southern Scandinavia are all made of pine, whereas further to the north there are also examples of birch. The arrowheads are all of iron and there are many different types. The commoner ones have broad flesh-cutting or long slender points. Further to these, there are some rather different and strange types, including a spiral point found in Dalarne. The arrowheads terminate in a tang, which is pushed up into a hole in the shaft together with some pitch. The end of the arrow is then lashed with iron wire so the shaft does not split. The shafts taper towards each end but there is no uniformity in the thickness of the shafts and where they begin to taper.

From Haithabu there is also a special type of hunting arrow made entirely from wood. This arrow has a club-shaped tip, which had the effect of a hammer on striking its target. This avoided damage to the fur or feathers of small animals or birds.





## Make your own hunting arrow

### Materials

- 1 piece of pine roundwood, c. 70-80 cm long and 0.75 cm in diameter
- 1 "half" turkey feather, i.e. a feather that has been split along its central rib (can be obtained from most archery suppliers)
- Single-ply linen thread (used in making/repairing shoes)
- Rubber tip (a so-called "blunt" can be obtained from most archery suppliers – otherwise use a rubber bung)
- Cardboard
- Scissors
- Sandpaper
- Wood glue
- Round file, maximum diameter 3.2 mm
- Vice and a piece of leather to protect the pine shaft

### Method

- The shaft is secured vertically in the vice so that only about 2 cm protrudes (you may be able to do without the vice and hold the shaft in your hand); remember the piece of leather around the arrow shaft
- File a groove or "nock" across one end of the pine shaft at right angles to the tree rings
- The groove should be 5-8 mm deep and not more than 3-4 mm wide
- Round off all the corners and edges with the file and sandpaper to avoid wear to the bowstring
- Cut out the feather flights from the turkey feathers
- Design your own flights, but these must be a maximum of 9 cm long and no wider than your turkey feathers; cut out the pattern in cardboard
- Lay the cardboard pattern on the feather (there should be room for three on half a feather); cut out the flight always cutting against the direction of the feather fibrils
- Remove the fibrils from the last 3-4 mm at each end of the flight
- Attach the flights
- At a distance from the bottom of the nock (groove) corresponding to the length of the flight, make a lashing about 6-8 mm in length using the fine linen thread





- The first flight, the cock feather, which is often of a different colour to the other two (you could mark it with a felt pen) is placed at right angles to the nock and the tip is bound fast with one or two turns around the shaft
- Then the second and third flights are mounted, 120° apart, with a couple of turns of the thread for the second and for the third, as many necessary to cover the tips so they cannot cause cuts when shooting
- The flights are now secured at one end and now, while turning the arrow slowly, pass the thread through the fibrils on the flights about 2-8 mm apart
- For every third turn, straighten the flights so they are still sitting 120° apart
- When you reach the other end of the feather, make a similar lashing of 6-8 mm to anchor that end of the feather. It also gives it a balanced appearance to having a lashing at each end of the flights
- The lashing can be continued all the way up to the nock so the arrow does not split so easily
- Make final adjustments to the flights
- The lashing at the nock should be secured with a blob of wood glue
- Affix the rubber bung or blunt to the tip of the arrow using wood glue

*REMEMBER: Never aim at anyone. You could fill some tin cans with a little sand and use them as targets or hand up a ring and see if you can shoot through it.*

