

# ANCIENT WEAPONS OF OMAN

## VOLUME 2 – FIREARMS

Vincenzo Clarizia





The Archaeological Heritage of Oman

*ANCIENT WEAPONS OF OMAN*  
*VOLUME 2 – FIREARMS*

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## Introduction

Considering that weapons changed little from the times of antiquity through the period of the Middle Ages, the invention of gunpowder and firearms opened a new era in the warfare and marked an important step in the development of human history. Gunpowder was probably discovered in the East, but it was in Europe that its explosive power was applied to weaponry, leading to the supremacy of the European industrial and military power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The possibility offered by artificial weapons to increase the offensive or defensive area of their users was one of the first results of the development of these arms, which was achieved using projectiles that could be thrown: stones, shots, arrows, javelins, etc. However, effectively shooting an arrow or hurling a javelin required strength, skill, and practice. Sustaining skilled fighting men was a common problem, from Greek hoplites to English longbowmen. With the advent of the crossbow, which required less personal skill and strength, every man could shoot a knight in armor. Because of its intrinsic distancing from the rules of chivalry, the use of crossbows against Christians was forbidden by the Pope and only recommended against unbelievers. The Pope's encyclical however had little to no effect, and all combatants regularly hired Genoese or German crossbowmen. More than crossbows, the introduction of portable firearms radically changed the social structure and caused the end of the feudal world. In warfare, it was the end of the chivalry that had based its supremacy on the warriors' skills in the use of the arms, achieved after years of training. For this reason, firearms were first regarded as the "*devil's instruments*" and fiercely opposed by the castes of warriors.

The Mamluks in Egypt considered firearms a filthy and obnoxious innovation (Elgood 1995: 16), and the generalized refusal to use them among the Muslims is epitomized by the words that the defeated Mamluk Amir Kurtbay said to the Ottoman Sultan Selim I after the battle of Marj Dabiq in 1516: "*you have brought with you this contrivance artfully devised by the Christians of Europe when they were incapable of meeting the Muslims' armies on the battlefield. The contrivance is that bunduq which, even if a woman were to fire it, would hold up such and such a number of men. Had we chosen to employ this weapon, you would not have preceded us in its use. But we are the people who do not discard the Sunna of our Prophet Muhammad which is the jihad for the sake of Allah with sword and lance. And woe to thee! How daarest thou shoot with firearms at Muslims?*" (Ayalon 1956: 94, quoted in Elgood 1995:15).

In 1544, after having seen the effect of the wars fought in Europe, German cosmographer Sebastian Münster wrote about gunpowder: "*the villain who brought such a noxious thing to earth is not worthy of having his name retained on earth in the memory of man*" (Guttman 1895: 1). Still, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of Zulu warriors did not use firearms: "*the arms of a coward, as they said, for they enable the poltroon to kill the brave without awaiting his attack*" (Bourquin 1978: 150).

Another relevant change due to the introduction of firearms concerned the characteristics of the warriors themselves. Physical strength was not their main quality anymore,<sup>1</sup> as nerve and discipline became more important than pugnacity. The bravery of the individual was thus more and more replaced by technology and organizational skills in a process that is, indeed, still ongoing.

In addition, the emotional aspect changed: killing a man shooting him from a distance of 300 or more meters has a much less emotional impact than stabbing him in a hand combat, and recently the remote-controlled drones have transformed war in a sort of tragic videogame.

Nevertheless, the introduction of firearms was a slow process, and bows, crossbows and pikes remained in use for centuries. It was only towards the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that muskets became prevalent in the infantry armament, also due to the appearance of the bayonet.<sup>2</sup>

In the East, the process was slower than in Europe and Ottoman army, so that bows, lances and swords were still in use at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The adoption of firearms by the Ottomans largely contributed to their victories over the Mamluks and the Safavids.

In Europe, the improvement of firearms coincided with the development of the art of navigation and shipbuilding that enabled European vessels to sail the oceans. The evolution of artillery and ships proceeded with synergistic outcomes. New artilleries, lighter and longer than the mortars, and with higher muzzle velocities were developed, thanks to the discovery of new methods to produce gunpowder. These guns of unprecedented effectiveness began to appear aboard European warships at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In the same years, the caravel, with its speed and maneuverability, became an effective platform for the new gun ordnance. New tactics in the use of warship fleets, specifically built for guns, changed the sea warfare entirely. The heavy armed caravels<sup>3</sup> and carracks<sup>4</sup> (later galleons) played an important role in the colonization of the American continent and the expansion of European powers in the East: the Portuguese at first, the British and the Dutch later, thus becoming the instrument of European hegemony for over three centuries.

Beginning in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the pace in the development of such weapons increased enormously thanks to the industrial revolution and the wide dissemination of technical journals that hastened the time it took for innovations in one discipline to have an impact in another related field. The result was a rapid development of weapons, more lethal and mass produced by machined factories.

In Oman, as well as in other regions of the world, the concept of the right for every free man to be armed lasted until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For this reason, swords, *khanjars*, and Martini Henry rifles are still present in the national culture and heritage.

Because of its harbor, Muscat was a crossroad of trade routes that linked Persia with Egypt through the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea, and India with Africa via the Indian Ocean. Between 1890 and 1914, Muscat was the major rifles warehouse in the Arabian Gulf, with hundreds of thousand breech loading rifles being re-exported in the entire region up to Afghanistan and Persia.<sup>5</sup> The Martini Henry rifle (and its variants) was by far the most common weapon, and Belgian made Martini Henry were specifically engraved for the Muscat market.

The introduction of artillery in warfare undoubtedly had a more significant impact than portable firearms. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when trunnions and wheeled carriages made it possible to move and aim artilleries in every direction, battle tactics changed radically. Previously, arrows and charges of cavalry preceded the massive hand combat, where the strength of the troops and their compactness were decisive for the victory. With the introduction of cannons and the use of grenades invented in 1452, the troops were smashed from a long distance, and hand combat with swords and pikes became the last stage of the battle. Moreover, cannons had an important impact in war strategy: great efforts and commitment of resources became necessary to develop and maintain expensive artillery corps, and the existing fortresses suddenly became obsolete.