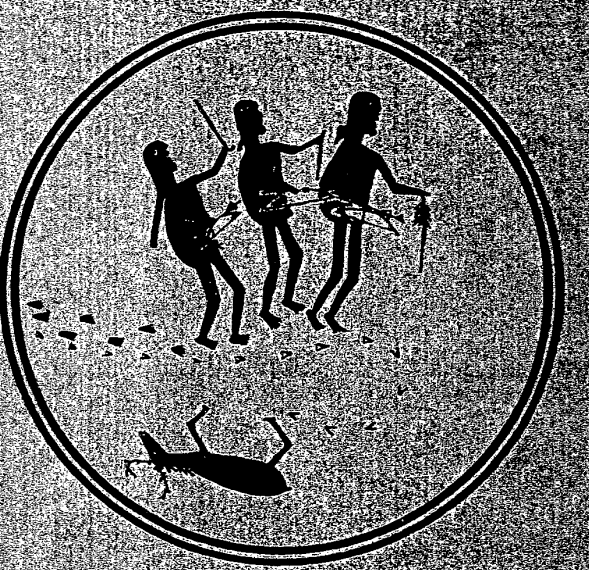
# PREHISTORIC WEAPONS

## IN THE SOUTHWEST



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# PREHISTORIC WEAPONS IN THE SOUTHWEST

*by*

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## INTRODUCTION

The finding of an Indian arrow point, whether by the amateur or the professional archaeologist, always brings a moment when the past seems somewhat closer to the present. Although the arrow point may be scarcely the size of a thumbnail, it represents an important aspect of prehistoric Indian life that is too often minimized; that is, hunting. In the American Southwest we are constantly reminded that the economy of the early Indians was based on the agricultural triumvirate: corn, beans, and squash. Of course there were the early hunters who roamed the Southwest tracking down mammoths, giant bison, camels, horses, and other now extinct mammals, but we often forget that the sedentary farmers who lived in the Southwest before the arrival of the Spaniards also relied on the flesh of animals and birds for some of their food. How do we know all this?

Certainly the countless thousands of arrow points that have been found in the Southwest indicate that hunting was an important adjunct to prehistoric economy. Archaeologists frequently turn up huge quantities of animal and bird bones in their excavations. Presumably these bones were discarded on the trash heaps of prehistoric camps and villages after the Indians had stripped all the useful meat, hides, and sinew from them. On rarer occasions the excavator may find complete weapons preserved by the arid Southwestern climate coupled with some protecting natural feature; for example, a cave. In some areas the Indians have left behind pictures of their weapons painted on pottery vessels or on the walls of their religious chambers, or pecked and scratched into surfaces of rocks. Documents written by the early Spanish explorers give us some idea of the weapons carried by the Indians they encountered. Even stories passed down from generation to generation and retold by present-day Indians may describe the weapons and hunting

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*Figure 12. Mimbres pottery design showing birds being caught with slip loop snares.*

Burrowing rodents were probably taken on occasion by shoving a burred stick or an arrow into a rodent burrow until it touched the animal. Twisting the stick or arrow until it was engaged in the animal's fur would enable the hunter to pull the animal from the hole.

In the northern Rio Grande area of New Mexico, eagles were trapped by Pueblo Indians in an ingenious but rather dangerous way. A pit was dug in the ground large enough to hold a man. The pit was covered with reed matting, and freshly-killed or live game was placed on top of the matting. As the eagle descended to take the bait, the concealed hunter seized its feet and pulled it through an opening into the pit where the space was too confined for the bird to use its wings to escape.

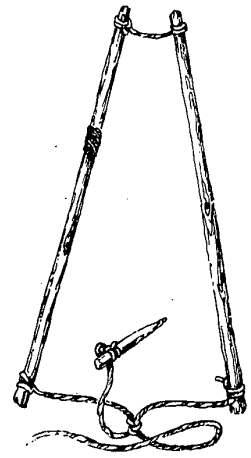

*Figure 13. Hinged stick snare.*

If we digress farther from actual hunting weapons, we may include such things as game calls and disguises, since they were often resorted to so that a hunter might kill game at close range. Using contemporary Pueblo Indian dances as a source of data regarding the fashioning of masks or head and and body coverings to simulate such animals as deer, antelope, elk, and buffalo, we may suppose that these masks, or some like them, were worn by the Indians to permit them to sneak up on grazing deer, antelope, or buffalo. Besides the masks, the Indians no doubt imitated the movements of the animals so that their presence would not be detected by their quarry.

A cave of the Basket Maker Period in northeastern Arizona yielded a game call made out of a short piece of wood that had been split and then tied together with sinew at each end. Blowing on the crack between the two pieces of wood produced a high pitched reedy sound similar to that which would be uttered by an injured rabbit. A hunter using such a game call could attract other rabbits or some predatory animal which feeds on rodents and disabled game. Stubby whistles made of bird bones have been found in many prehistoric ruins and may have been used as bird calls.

We may consider also such items as hunting fetishes, since the Indians who carry them believe the fetishes to be vital to the successful hunt. Hunting fetishes are generally small, carved stone representations of predatory or other animals (Fig. 15), and many such examples have been found in Southwestern archaeological excavations. Although to us these good luck charms would seem to be of little use in killing game, to the prehistoric Indian they

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