

# MEIBUKAN MAGAZINE

House Of The Pure Martial Arts

## European Medieval and Renaissance Martial Arts

Courtesy of the Musée du Louvre, Paris. Entry of the Crusaders into Constantinople on 12 April 1204

THE INTERNATIONAL WEB BASED MARTIAL ARTS  
MAGAZINE AS A PDF DOCUMENT



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## MISSION STATEMENT

Meibukan Magazine is an initiative of founders Lex Opdam and Mark Hemels. Aim of this web based magazine is to spread the knowledge and spirit of the martial arts. In a non profitable manner Meibukan Magazine draws attention to the historical, spiritual and technical background of the oriental martial arts. Starting point are the teachings of Okinawan karate-do. As 'House of the Pure Martial Arts', however, Meibukan Magazine offers a home to the various authentic martial arts traditions.

## FORMAT

Meibukan Magazine is published several times a year in an electronical format with an attractive mix of subjects and styles. Each issue of at least twelve pages is published as pdf-file for easy printing. Published editions remain archived on-line. We have chosen a low picture resolution for easy downloading.

Readers of the webzine are enthusiasts and practitioners of the spirit of the martial arts world wide.

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## HISTORY

*A Short Introduction to Historical European Martial Arts*

2

## REVIEW

*Renaissance Swordsmanship* by John Clements

*Medieval Swordsmanship* by John Clements

*Medieval Combat* by Hans Talhoffer

4

## FEATURE

*Renaissance Martial Arts Literature*

5

## FEATURE

*How to tell if your Fencing is a Martial Art or a Combat Sport*

8

## FEATURE

*Consideration of Grappling & Wrestling in Renaissance Fencing*

11

## ORGANISATION

*ARMA: The Association for Renaissance Martial Arts*

18

## HISTORY

*The Grand Assault: Notes on Its History*

20

## HISTORY

*Daggers of the Mind: Towards a Historiography of Fencing*

25

## REVIEW

*The Sword and the Centuries* by Alfred Hutton

*The Book of the Sword* by Richard Burton

26

## REVIEW

*The Secret History of the Sword* by Christoph Amberger

31



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# A Short Introduction to Historical European Martial Arts

- by John Clements -

Despite the fact there is a more than 2,400-year-old military tradition within Western civilization of close-combat proficiency, few subjects have received as unfortunate neglect by historians and academics than the martial arts of Western Europe. But a growing amount of modern research has centered on the historical methods of using various types of Medieval and Renaissance swords and weaponry in historically accurate and martially sound manners. This emerging study of historical European martial arts involves a fascinating combination of military history, fencing history, literature, art, language, and archaeology. The history of European arms and armor is itself one of established continuity marked by sudden developments of necessitated innovation. As new tools were devised, so too were new methods for using them. These methods in turn influenced still newer designs. By studying the historical systems for employing such arms and armor, we come to the best possible understanding for how and why they were designed as they were. This further leads to a greater appreciation for the little known martial arts of the age.

While the term "martial arts" today is typically synonymous with "Asian fighting art", for centuries highly sophisticated European martial systems existed. It is from the Latin that we actually derive

the English term, "martial arts" - from "arts of Mars", the Roman god of war. The term "martial art" was used in regard to fighting skills as early as the 1550s and an English fencing manual of 1639 referred specifically to the science and art of swordplay. In reference to Medieval and Renaissance combat systems the terms "fencing" and "martial arts" should thus be viewed as synonymous. Fencing was in essence the "exercise of arms" - and arms meant more than just using a sword.

Prior to the advent in the mid 1500s of specific civilian weapons for urban dueling, the use of personal fighting skills in Western Europe were primarily for military purposes rather than private self-defense, and fencing was therefore by definition a martial (i.e., military) art. The study of arms in the Middle Ages and Renaissance was for the large part not exclusively fixed upon either judicial combat or the duel of honor, or even on the knightly chivalric tournament. Yet neither was it intended for battlefield use alone.

## A Medieval Heritage

From about the 12th century, professional instructors of fencing existed across Europe. Many of these "Masters of Defence", or instructors in arms, became highly regarded international experts. Over time they uniquely produced

hundreds of detailed, often well-illustrated, technical manuals on their fighting methods which reveal their craft to be one of sophisticated and systematic skill. When studied from within their own cultural context these little known surviving manuals present a portrait of highly developed and innovative European martial arts. Today, dozens of these obscure manuscripts and printed books provide an unequaled resource for modern students and practitioners.

The popular myth of untutored knights clumsily swinging crude swords while lumbering around in heavy armor is shredded by the actual evidence. The unequivocal picture presented by historical sources is one of trained warriors expertly employing skillfully-designed weapons with brutal efficiency. But these masters were no mere "fencers". Theirs were complete fighting systems as suited to armored as to unarmored combat. They taught integrated martial arts of both armed and unarmed components. Grappling and wrestling techniques were vital elements. The weapons of dagger, staff, and axe were studied as vigorously as pole-weapons, shields, and especially all manner of swords. Their methods were specialized for foot or mounted, single combat or group.

By the early 1500s, the transformation of warfare by firearms and the breakdown of the old feudal order limited the avenues for both redress of personal grievance and exhibition of martial skill. Social and technological changes in the Renaissance accelerated experimentation in fighting arts and civilian schools of fence proliferated. The result was an explosion in the popularity of dueling, first as an augment of common street fighting and vendetta brawling, and later for private affairs of reputation and honor. Into this environment the systematic study of fencing grew into a new "Science of



Defence" emphasizing urban self-defense. The modern obsession with the formal duel as depicted in period literature as well as in modern recreation popular media, and sport fencing has tended to obscure the larger context of urban combat and the general armed violence inherent in the age. The romanticized view of gentlemen defending their reputations and character is dwarfed by accounts of sudden assaults, vicious ambushes and general street-fighting among all classes.

Renaissance fencing masters were commonly soldiers and scholars as well as accomplished men of learning. Among their patrons were nobles, princes, and kings as well as commoners, knights, and soldiers. Geometry, mathematics, anatomy, and philosophy played major roles in their teachings. The early Spanish master Pietro Monte was a theologian, mathematician, scholar and even taught darts to Leonardo Da Vinci. He was a prodigious writer on martial arts, military theory, theology, and eventually produced volumes on wrestling, health, gymnastics, ballistics, and swordsmanship. The fencing author Camillo Agrippa was an engineer, mathematician, and fencing instructor to the artist Michelangelo. The Frenchmen Girard Thibault was a painter, architect and even a physician.

### Renaissance Adaptations

Renaissance Masters systematized and innovated the study of Western fighting skills into sophisticated, versatile, and

highly effective martial arts eventually culminating in the development of the penultimate weapon of street-fighting and dueling, the quick and vicious rapier. Through experiment and observation they discerned that the thrust traveled in a shorter line than the arc of a cut and against an unarmored foe would strike sooner and reach farther. The rapier was developed along these principles. Thrusting was already well known in Medieval combat and the new style of foyning fence was thus not any "evolution", but rather an adaptation to a changed environment. Rather than for war or battlefield, the slender, deceptive rapier was a personal weapon for civilian-wear and private quarrels. It was first designed for the needs of back-alley encounters and public ambush. Indeed, it was the first truly civilian weapon for urban self-defense developed in any society. It rose from practical tool, to popular "gentleman's art". Elegant in its lethality, it represents one of the most innovative and original aspects of Western martial culture and one with no parallel in other cultures. While never eclipsing cutting swords entirely, as a specialized weapon for personal single-combat, it was unequalled for almost 200 years until the widespread adoption of effective and reliable handguns.

Like much of progress in Renaissance learning and science, advances in self-defense were based on what had already been commonly established for centuries. They were not able to achieve their



progress in a vacuum. There is an obvious direct and discernible link between the brutal, practical fighting methods of the Middle Ages and the more sophisticated, elegant Renaissance fencing systems. No tradition of fighting or methodology of combat exists by itself. It comes into being due to environmental pressure as only a processing or refinement of what existed previously. So it was with the fencing arts of the Renaissance. They followed a more than 2,000-year-old military tradition within Western civilization of close-combat proficiency. The techniques developed and taught by the Masters of Defence were not "tricks" nor merely based only on brute strength. They were moves they knew worked in combat, that they had discerned, had named, and had taught to others. But, to fencers in much later centuries, (bound by rules of deportment and the etiquette of convention) these earlier fighting styles (designed to face a range of arms and armors) would naturally seem less "scientific". With the disconnection that occurred between older traditions and the precise sporting swordplay of later gentlemen duelists, it is reasonable that the earlier, more dynamic, flexible, and inclusive methods would incorrectly seem to only be a mix of chaotic gimmicks unconnected by any larger "theory". Eventually, due to changing historical and social forces, the traditional martial skills and teachings of European Masters of Defence fell out of common use.







Little to nothing of their methods actually survive in modern fencing sports today which, based on conceptions of 18th century small-sword combat, are far removed from their martial origins in the Renaissance. Later centuries in Europe saw only limited and narrow application of swords and traditional arms, only some of which survived for a time to become martial sports.

### Modern Research & Practice

In a sense, our European martial culture is itself something still very much with us today. But it now bears little resemblance to its Renaissance heritage. The technological revolution in Western military science which swept the 18th century left behind the old ideas of an individual, armored warrior trained in personal hand-to-hand combat. It was replaced with the new "Western Way of War" utilizing ballistics and associated organizational concepts. This very approach itself, emphasizing more and more a technical, mechanical, and industrial method of armed combat, is the Western martial "tradition" now. Indeed, it is this very martial way that is now the model for all modern armed forces the world over. In a sense, to see a modern aircraft carrier, fighter squadron, or armored battalion is very much the embodiment of a continuing and ever evolving European martial tradition.

From the time of the ancient Greeks onward Western Civilization has always been a source of uniquely resourceful ideas and specialized innovation. For better or worse, the same technical in-

genuity that was applied to classical arts and sciences was directed equally towards the weapons of war and skills of battle. In short, the Western world's contributions to martial arts are far-ranging and far-reaching. Modern boxing, wrestling, and sport fencing are the very blunt and shallow tip of a deep history which, when explored and developed properly, provides a link to traditions which are as rich and complex as any to emerge from Asia. Today, as more and more students of historical European martial arts ("HEMA") earnestly study the subject they are reclaiming it from fantasy, myth, and misconception. This is not about costumed role-play or theatrical stunt shows, but scholarly research combined with genuine martial arts training. As a result a more realistic appreciation of our Western martial culture is now emerging full force.

**John Clements** is a professional writer-researcher and leading authority on historical fencing and one of the world's foremost practitioners of Medieval and Renaissance fighting methods. John Clements is director of the well known ARMA - Association for Renaissance Martial Arts.

Link to ARMA webpage  
to read more articles  
from the hand of John Clements  
[www.thearma.org](http://www.thearma.org)



**Renaissance Swordsmanship**  
The Illustrated Use of Rapiers and  
Cut-and-Thrust Swords  
by John Clements

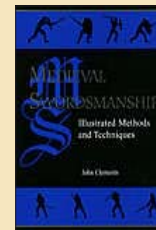
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### RENAISSANCE SWORDSMANSHIP

This is the most thorough work ever about historical swordsmanship. It is both a general reference and an instructional guide for advanced and beginning sword enthusiasts, students of military history and martial artists. Includes rare historical info and 100 original drawings.

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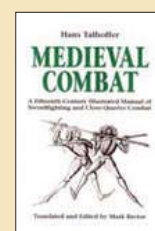
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### MEDIEVAL SWORDSMANSHIP

From the author of Renaissance Swordsmanship comes the most comprehensive and historically accurate view ever of the lost fighting arts of Medieval knights, warriors and men-at-arms. Based on years of extensive training and research in the use of European swords, it contains highly effective fighting techniques for the sword, sword & shield, long-sword, great-sword, pole-arm and more. And with more than 200 illustrations and rare historical documents, it is a scholarly reference as well as a hands-on training guide for martial artists of all levels.

*By Paladin Press*



**Medieval Combat**  
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of Swordfighting and Close-  
Quarter Combat  
by Hans Talhoffer

9 x 6, hardcover, 320 pp.

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### MEDIEVAL COMBAT

Now one of the most influential and lavishly drawn fencing manuals of the Middle Ages is available in English for the first time. Halhoffer's professional fencing manual of 1467 reveals the intricacies of the medieval art of fighting, covering both the "judicial duel" (an officially sanctioned fight to resolve a legal dispute) and personal combat. In illustrated detail, it provides careful instruction in footwork, avoidance and the ability to judge and manipulate timing and distance to exploit and enhance the sword's inherent cutting and thrusting capabilities. In addition, it covers the supplemental skills of grappling, kicking, throwing and disarming an opponent, plus the techniques of mounted combat and unarmoured fighting with the long sword, long knife, pole-axe, dagger, sword and buckler.

*By Paladin Press*

# Renaissance Martial Arts Literature

The little known surviving treatises and guidebooks of fighting skills produced by European authors are numerous and diverse. Books and manuscripts on personal combat skills flourished in the 15th and 16th centuries.

- by John Clements -

The oldest known European fighting text is an anonymous German sword and buckler manual (*MS I.33*) produced around c. 1295. Its watercolor pages feature a series of images of a monk and his partner performing various attacks and counter attacks and has recently come to be more appreciated as a source for study of historical European martial arts. The writings of the great Swabian master Johannes Liechtenauer in the 1380s were highly influential among German masters for the next two centuries. His teachings, as chronicled by the priest and master-at-arms, Hango Doebringer, were expanded and written on by many others throughout the 1400s and early 1500s including Paulus Kal, Peter Falkner, Hans von Speyer, Ludwig Von Eyb, Gregor Erhart, Sigmund Schining, Andre Pauernfeindt, and others. Two major commentators were Sigmund Ringeck and Peter Von Danzig in the 1450s. Among their teachings, these *Fechtbuchs* ("fight books" or "fencing books") present a consistent

emphasis on unarmored foot-combat with long-swords that incorporate grappling techniques.

With the development of printmaking in Europe during the 1400s, there also came a revival of science and classical humanism. Both prints and drawings were integral in the effort to communicate rediscoveries as well as new ideas.

**"Princes and Lords learn to survive with this art, in earnest and in play. But if you are fearful, then you should not learn to fence. Because a despondent heart will always be defeated, regardless of all skill."**

*Fechtmeister Sigmund Ringeck, 1440*

In 1410 the Bolognese master Fiore dei Liberi produced a systematic work, *Flos Duellatorum* in Armis, which represents the major Italian contribution to 15th century martial arts literature. Three different editions of Fiore's work survive and have become major resources for modern students. *The Fechtbuch* of Hans Talhoffer, covering, among other things, swordplay, judicial combat, dagger fighting and wrestling was also influential. It was produced in several versions from the 1440s to 1460s. Other important fighting texts surviving from the 15th century include works such as the *Codex Wallerstein*, the anonymous *"Gladiatorie"* and *"Goliath"* manuscripts, as well as the *Solothurner Fechtbuch*. There is also an anonymous 15th century work on the use of the medieval pole-axe, *Le Jeu de la Hache*. The King of Portugal, Dom Duarte, produced several training texts in the 1420s. While two obscure 15th century works on swordplay from England also survive (the *MS 3542* and *MS 39564* documents). Fabian von Auerswald also pro-

duced a detailed wrestling manuscript about 1462, of which a well-illustrated later edition still exists.

Fillipo Vadi in the 1480s produced another major Italian work on fighting from the period, which was highly influenced by Fiore's. The Hispano-Italian knight Pietro Monte produced several titles on fighting and combat skills during the 1480s and '90s, including the first published wrestling book. Hans Czynner produced an illustrated color work of armored combat on the techniques of "half-swording" and dagger fighting in armor. Hanns Wurm's colorfully inked manual, *Das Ringersbuch*, of c. 1500 features a range of illustrated wrestling moves and is characteristic of unarmed texts of the period. Around 1512 the artist Albrecht Dürer produced a beautifully and realistically drawn work illustrating sword and wrestling techniques. Several versions of Jörg Wilhalm's work survive including a large hand-written color 1523 edition featuring an array of unarmored and ar-





mored long sword techniques. About 1540 Paulus Hector Mair compiled an immense and a well-illustrated tome on weapon arts including swords, staffs, daggers, and other weapons.

Di Antonio Manciolino's work of 1531 is the first known printed Italian fencing manual. One of the more significant masters of the 1500s was the Bolognese teacher Achille Marozzo. His *Opera Nova* of 1536 is considered the first text to emphasize the use of the thrust as well as the cut in using a slender tapering single-hand blade. His work however still covered the traditional military weapons of the age.

In 1548 the Spanish knight Juan Quixada de Reayo produced a little known text on mounted combat that reflects traditional 15th century methods. In 1550 the Florentine master and contemporary of Marozzo, Francesco Altoni, wrote his own fencing text that disputed some ideas of Marozzo. Often attributed to the 1570s, Angelo Viggiani's significant work of 1551, *Lo Schermo*, also focused on the use of a long, slender, tapering single-hand sword. Camillo Agrippa's treatise on the science of arms from 1553 was one of the first to focus on use of the thrust over the cut in civilian swordplay. Considered another one of the more significant Italian fencing works of the 1500s, Agrippa's treatise also represents the transition from military to civilian swordplay and the use of even more narrow swords.

The Dutch artist Martinus Heemskreck in 1552 illustrated a text, *Fechten & Ringen*, with several woodcuts of short sword, two-handed sword, and wrestling. The German master Joachim Meyer in 1570 produced a large and extremely well illustrated training manual that represents one of the high points of 16th century works. The work covered a host of assorted swords and weapons and combined some Italian and German elements. Meyer included material on classroom play as well as earnest self-defence. Jacob Sutor later produced a fighting manual in 1612 that was mostly an updated version of Meyer's earlier work.

In 1570, Giacomo Di Grassi produced, *His True Arte of Defense*, a major work on fencing from the period that reveals elements of the changing nature of civil-



ian self-defense concerns and the development of slender duelling swords. An English version was first translated in 1594. The Italian Girolamo Cavalcabo's work of c.1580, concerned primarily with sword and dagger, was translated into German and French several times over the coming decades. In 1595 Vincentio Saviolo produced, *His Practice in Two Books*, one of the more influential (and today popular) of late Renaissance manuals. Saviolo's method reflects the changing form of civilian blade in use. An English version of the text was influential at the time.

"So from this art comes all sorts of good, with arms cities are subdued and all the crowds restrained; and in itself has such dignity, that often it brings joy to the heart, and always drives out cowardice ...If you will be renowned in the art, you'll never be poor, in any place. This virtue is so glorious that, if even once poverty would show you his cards, then wealth will embrace you thanks to your art."

*Maestro Filippo Vadi, Liber de Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi, c.1482*

Giovanni Antonio Lovino in 1580 produced a large and elaborate fencing treatise on rapier as well as other swords and weapons. Until recently, only limited portions of Lovino's work were previously known. Other important Italian fencing works of the late Renaissance include those by the masters Giovanni

Dell'Agochie in 1572, Camillo Palladini from c. 1580, Alfonso Fallopi in 1584, Nicoletto Giganti in 1606, Salvator Fabris also in 1606, and later Francesco Alfieri in 1640. Nearly all these works reflect the transition from military swords to the civilian duelling rapiers. In 1610, the Ridolfo Capo Ferro's, *Gran Simulacro*, was first published. Considered the great Italian master of the rapier and father of modern fencing, his work codified much of civilian foyning fence for the duel. These Italian fencing texts offer some of the best of illustrated examples of rapier fencing.

The master Jeronimo De Carranza wrote his influential tome on Spanish fencing, *De La Philosophia de las Armas*, in 1569. It was to become one of two major Spanish fencing manuals that formed the heart of the Spanish school for later centuries. The other great Spanish master of the age was Don Luis P. de Narvaez, whose 1599, *Libro de las Grandezas de la Espada* ("*Book of the Grandeur of the Sword*") presented rapier material somewhat different than his master Carranza's. Narvaez's book is the other of only two major Spanish fencing manuals from the time. Several Spanish masters during the 1600s produced fencing books rewriting the teachings of Carranza or Narvaez and favouring one or the other. In 1640, Mendes de Carmona, a fencing master from Seville, produced his, *Libro de la destreza berdadera de las armas*, an unpublished manuscript recently discovered.

The young Italian soldier and swordsman, Frederico Ghisliero, in 1587 produced an unpublished work, the *Regole*, revealing connections to Spanish styles. About 1600 Don Pedro de Heredia produced his, *Traité des Armes*, an illustrated color manuscript on rapier that included grappling techniques. Heredia was a master-of-arms, cavalry captain and member of the war council of the king of Spain. His work represents a pragmatic Spanish style not wrapped in the geometrical ideas of Carranza and Narvaez. Heredia's manual is evidence the Spanish school was neither uniform nor monolithic. *Mendes de Carmona's, Libro de la destreza berdadera de las armas*, an unpublished manuscript of 1640 has also recently been rediscovered. Carmona was a fencing master in



Seville, who previously wrote a work on Carranza's method. His previously unknown work is a substantial manuscript covering the principles and fundamentals of fencing and tactics to use in specific situations. The most elaborate and lavishly illustrated Renaissance fencing text was that of Girard Thibault d'Anvers', *Academie De L'Espee* (c. 1630), written in French by a Flemish master teaching a version of the Spanish rapier. The only truly French fencing texts known from the Renaissance are that of Henry de Saint Didier in 1573, *Traciete' contenan les ecrets du premier livre de l'espee seule*, and Francois Dancie, wrote his, *L'espee de Combat*, in Tulle, in 1623. The next known is Charles Besnard's later, *Le Maitre d'arme Liberal*, of 1653.

The master George Silver published his

*Paradoxes of Defense* defending traditional English swordplay in 1599. He wrote his, *Brief Instructions Upon my Paradoxes of Defence*, a year later. His work is the primary source for information on English methods of martial arts from the Renaissance and is a favorite study source for modern students of historical fencing. Silver, a critic of the rapier, pragmatically described the use of short sword or back-sword, buckler, staff, and dagger. In 1614, George Hale wrote, *The Private Schoole of Defence*, commenting on English fighting schools of the day as well as recommendations on the rapier method. In 1617 Joseph Swetnam wrote a rapier and back sword treatise entitled, *The Schoole of the Noble and Worthy Science of Defence*, and in 1639 one "G.A." published a book on swordsmanship, *Pallas Armata - The Gentleman's Armory*. It has been suggested that the author was one, Gideon Ashwell. By 1650 the Marquise of Newcastle wrote his own short treatise, *The Truthe off the Sorde*, a little-known work based on the Spanish School.

This description of Renaissance martial arts literature is far from complete. Many other fighting manuals were certainly produced in the 16th and 17th centuries by a host of other masters and writers. In 1620 for example, Hans Wilhelm Schöffer fashioned an enormous work, *Fechtkunst*, that contained 672 crude rapier illustrations, each one fully described and annotated. Other German fencing teachers in the early 1600s were rewriting Italian texts.

The Dutchman, Johannes Georgius Pascha, in 1657 offered a rapier text that included substantial material on the pike and unarmed combat. Fencing works

besides those focused on swords or wrestling were also written during the Renaissance. For example, Andres Legnitzer wrote on the spear in the early 1400s, while Ott Jud did the same on wrestling and Hans Lecküchner also made a treatise on the *Langen Messer* ("large-knife"). In 1603, the Italian, Lelio de Tedeschi, produced a manual on the art of disarming while in 1616 the Spaniard Atanasio de Ayala wrote a short text dealing with staff weapons and Bonaventura Pistofilo's *Il Torneo*, Bologna 1627, was on the use of the polaxe. Antonio Quintino's 1613, *Jewels of Wisdom*, included 16 pages of grappling and wrestling in swordplay as well as material on animal fighting. Before 1620 Giovan' Battista Gaiani had also written two books on swordsmanship for horseback.

The teachings of these masters do not appear to reflect a set "style" or a "Way" so much as a systematic tradition of using proven and efficient techniques within a sophisticated understanding of general fighting principles. Much of what we know of these many guidebooks and fighting treatises is changing and expanding. Although just beginning, serious modern study and interpretation of Renaissance martial arts literature is now well underway. In addition to those described here, many other martial arts manuals were known to have been produced, but existing copies have yet to be found. Previously unexamined collections that have recently become available and should soon open up will inevitably bring to light even more source manuals. It is an exciting time for research as the hunt for further Renaissance martial arts literature continues.





# How to tell if your Fencing is a Martial Art or a Combat Sport

**Just as within the traditional Asian martial arts, the emerging Western martial arts community today is often debating the meaning of "Martial Art" as opposed to "martial sport". The issue is clearest with regard to Medieval and Renaissance combative systems -without question the main focus of historical European martial arts. On the one hand, as these weapons and skills were originally intended for battlefield, judicial combats, and earnest self-defence, they are clearly fighting arts. Yet, in their study and practice today these concerns are far from their purpose. The distinction then between art and sport can be a blurry one; especially since historically, ritualistic combat sports and non-lethal mock-combat competitions were long a part of European martial culture. The general difference between the two today however can be distinguished by examining them with regard to a few specific concerns.**

*- by John Clements -*

Fencing...was the Art of the Sword, or as Medieval and Renaissance schools more appropriately considered it, the art of using weapons, particularly swords. But, over time the sword lost its value as a weapon of war and as older hand-weapons and arms faded before the challenge of ballistics, fencing was narrowed. With only a few exceptions among the military, mainly cavalry, swords became almost the sole proclivity of the aristocracy and fencing became synonymous with preparation for the gentlemanly duel of single sword alone. The older elements of battlefield combat and sudden street-fighting faded from concern, replaced exclusively by that of private affair of honor. Eventually, fencing became sport and pastime, a refined, athletic game of set rules and etiquette. Finally, over time myths arose that fencing had somehow reached its zenith only after it stopped using real weapons in real fighting.

In contrast, the study of historical methods of European fencing is now becoming increasingly popular. A variety of earlier combative systems are being reconstructed and interpreted along historical lines from historical sources. The question therefore arises as to whether these practices represent the earnest skills of a martial art, or constitute those of a stylized combat sport? For that matter,

how do you objectively determine if what you are studying, or what you are being taught, is a legitimate historical fighting skill, or merely re-packaged modern or classical fencing or even theatrical fighting? Is your craft display oriented or results oriented? Is it about effectively ending fights quickly or artificially prolonging them for entertainment value? How can these issues be evaluated? The answer depends upon the approach, the attitude, and the intention of your study and the tools it employs in its method.

Here then are some ways to consider if your own form of fencing practice is a martial art or a combat sport:

## **1. Is it practiced as a method of self-defense?**

What this means is, is your system of fighting focused on scoring and winning competitions or on staying alive? Does it understand the distinction? Does it teach you to do whatever works or what the rules of a game allow? Are you rehearsing moves as lethal killing actions applicable in real fighting, or as only those movements allowed under pretend tournaments? Do you ever stop to recognize and comprehend the difference? Do you train in your fencing art as "preparation" for combat -even though

you know it will never occur -or just play it as a game?

## **2. Is it a tool of learning or an end in itself?**

Does your fencing concern itself with how to win a bout by scoring, or with the effects of what the weapon would actually do? Do you conduct mock fighting to get good at mock fighting, or do you conduct mock fighting to get good at the core elements of the craft itself? Does your fencing even consist of anything other than a mock fighting game?

## **3. Does it rely for its basis on historically accurate replica weapons?**

What this means is, are your swords reproductions of real historical tools with the equivalent dimensions of weight, length, and balance of actual blades? Or are they modern simulators with features that authentic pieces do not have (e.g., extreme flexibility, light-weight, rubber points, padding, special handles, modern materials, etc.). Real weapons handle one way and special training weapons another. The more realistic your weapon, the more realistic your technique and your understanding of fundamental principles and concepts. Each digression from this causes a degree of misinterpretation of the methods developed with and for real weapons in real combat. Do

you ever work with real weapons or just simulators? Unless you also train strenuously with real weapons how else can you be cognizant of the differences imposed by using approximations?

#### **4. Does it include the widest range of techniques possible?**

Are you able to practice and execute actions and moves that would have been reasonably used in historical combat in a manner by which people really fought, or are you limited and restricted to a belief as to what is sporting, chivalric, or gentlemanly fair? Does your concern for safety in mock fighting mean that more lethal and dangerous techniques are never explored or learned at any time under any conditions of training? Are you learning to prevent disarms, seizures and takedowns performed against you, or even to safely fall and roll?

#### **5. Does it let you use both arms naturally?**

Are you able to utilize your second hand in defense, for parrying, grasping, trapping, and disarming? Does your fencing prepare you for countering an opponent trained to use both his hands in grabbing or seizing your arm, clothing, hilt, or weapon? Or following styles of court fencing and later smallsword duelling, are you forced by convention and tradition to pretend you and your opponent only have one arm?

#### **6. Does it make multiple opponents a consideration?**

Personal combat was not only about one-on-one duels. The dynamic of one fighting against many is very different than one against another solo. Does your fencing ever incorporate practice at facing more than one antagonist or combating groups of attackers from any direction? Or is it instead always just about dueling a single opponent with a single weapon?

#### **7. Does it only take place in standardized clothing?**

Historically, combat could occur at any time at any place, not just when two parties formally agreed to it. Are the effects of wearing historical garments such as leathers, thick wool, baggy pants and shirts, heavy boots, or mail armor

taken into consideration? Or is all your fencing conducted in the same uniform with participants imagined to only be identically clad duelists exclusively in shirtsleeves or bare chests?

#### **8. Does practice occur on diverse terrain?**

Historically, combat could occur under any conditions and on any type of flooring or ground. Do you always fence on the same general type of surface, or do you make an effort to experience the effects of moving on broken earth, gravel, mud, sand, high grass, knee-deep water, rocky footing, etc.?

#### **9. Does it consider secondary or companion weapons?**

Historically, fencing was about the use of all hand weapons, not just swords, and not just the single sword among certain gentleman or the aristocracy (at least, not until the late 17th century). Swordsmanship at one time would not be considered complete without skill in effectively facing shields, pole-arms, and daggers. Is your fencing solely that of the single sword, or does it take into account the possibility of successfully encountering diverse and dissimilar weapons with your sword?

#### **10. Are close-in actions ever taken into account?**

What happens when each fighter comes against the other body to body (corps-à-corps)? Is all fencing stopped, or is some minimal amount of bumping and jostling permitted? What about what really could happen in a fight, where grabbing and pulling of clothes occurred as well as tripping, face knocking, arm locking, wrist twisting, hair-pulling, eye-gouging, biting, hilt-striking, etc.? Is this all ignored or are fencers at least instructed in how to safely engage in or prevent their being grabbed, pushed, tripped, or caught in a head-lock? Are all these things merely assumed to be universally negated by the application of "proper" fencing skill with the single sword, or is the unpleasant reality considered?

#### **11. Is grappling and wrestling ever taken into account?**

Historical accounts of both grappling

and wrestling in Renaissance-era sword combats and duels abound. These skills were common among fencers of all classes into the 17th century and beyond. But such skills were dropped from later forms of private combat within the code duello. In your fencing, if two combatants do close upon one another does all action then cease? Or if a seizure or disarm should be employed, does action again cease or are the fencers able to explore the counter-techniques of grappling and wrestling as a defense against an armed adversary? What happens if you are disarmed or drop your blade? Would you know how to continue with any chance of success?

#### **12. Are dissimilar tools utilized?**

Except in arranged duels of honor, seldom were weapons carefully compared before fighting to ensure uniformity of length, weight, sharpness, balance, or other quality. Does all your fencing occur between two equally-paired weapons, or do you appreciate the experience of facing a shorter or longer blade, a lighter or heavier blade, a wider or thinner blade? What about weapons of different hilt styles, such as those that can aid in parrying and trapping?

#### **13. Is there any recognition of the difference between the effects of attacks upon different parts of human anatomy?**

Wounds to the limbs do not produce the same results as those to the head or body, and those to the face are not the same as those to the torso. Does your simulation recognize the effects of wounds to different portions of the body? Does your fencing take this into account and teach appropriate tactics or does it treat all hits as causing the same degree of "incapacitation"? Does it even allow for targeting of the whole body in the first place, or does it impose artificial restrictions upon the freedom to strike at any vulnerable part of an opponent's anatomy? Further, does your fencing always cease action after a single hit, or are the combatants ever allowed to continue on to make successive hits within an exchange of actions?

#### **14. Does it encourage or rely on the exercise of test-cutting?**



It is easy to make claims about what different sword forms could or would do without ever actually trying it out. It is also easy to misinterpret the different degrees of "cut" that can be made with different techniques of assorted blade types on a person. Whether foyning-fence or cut-and-thrust fence, can you really make assumptions without personal experience in using sharp blades on test targets? Does your fencing incorporate the practice of hitting with a true edge using the correct physical mechanics to actually cause maximum results? Are different swords and different target materials utilized for cutting practice? Or is cutting with a real sword considered something "obvious" and "easy" that requires no real effort?

### **15. Does it teach you to draw your weapon?**

Fighting with swords was not always about facing-off with an opponent until a third party verbally started things with an official instruction. Being able to unsheathe your weapon in a quick and efficient manner (as well as possibly stifling the opponent's) was at one time a skill to learn. Does your fencing take into account the drawing of a weapon or of even wearing a belt and hanger, or does it all occur only after blades are drawn and combatants face off at a set distance? Combat did not all occur as formal duels but more often as sudden ambushes and violent assaults. Do you ever even practice attacking from different distances and even from a running attack or is it always started from the same standardized range?

### **16. Is mock-combat approached as if it were real?**

In reality we only have one life to risk and there are no "points" to "score" in earnest fights for survival. To serve its true purpose of preparation for real encounters, mock-combat must be conducted with an attitude that appreciates the inherent danger and consequences of fighting. Do you approach it with the understanding that the penalty for failing to defend is your death, or just the loss of a match? Is there a realistic degree of hesitation or apprehension in fighting because you are aware of the lethality of techniques as well as the



need for actions to be performed safely in order to prevent accidental injury to your partner? Or in contrast, is your fencing so safe and so focused on scoring that you are free to attempt any attack on an "opponent" regardless of how exposed or vulnerable it would leave you in real combat with sharp weapons?

These questions above show there can be far more to fencing than the duel of single sword against single sword. Modern fencing, like many other combat sports today, is approached as a "non-lethal combative." Quite obviously, there are techniques a fighter, as opposed to a sportsman, wants in his arsenal that the other does not, and vice-versa. The former seeks skill for theoretical real life and death encounters, the latter, for winning within the agreed rules of a game. Between a martial art and a combat sport, even when each is pursued as a "non-lethal combative", there are differences in the tools and their application, in the conditions, the environment, training exercises, practice drills, equipment, clothing, and range of activities and actions, as well as general intent. Each may be about self-expression and form as well as function. But a martial sport is concerned with a sense of sportsmanship and the thrill of fair competition. It is about winning or losing a fun game. A martial art in contrast, can be said to be about theoretical life or death survival in a violent encounter or contest. We might further consider that whenever historical fighting methods -that were devised for real weapons to actually kill and maim -are applied for purposes of sporting play, there is a significant and profound change that must occur as a result. The ancient goal of training to learn to defeat real opponents with martial efficiency and deadliness is replaced with the idea of scoring points by following agreed upon rule restrictions. This surely leads to a misunderstanding and misapplication of

the-overall method for properly handling a weapon lethally, in favor of what works in the sport. When practitioners have to study the instructions of the old masters in light of what they are "allowed" to do "under the rules", it changes the entire outlook of how and why they practice their swordplay in the first place. When you practice with a true martial spirit, handling weapons and moving as if to kill or be killed, it changes your outlook and your understanding. It is profoundly different than practicing to win a game -even when such games are hard-fought emotionally charged athletic contests. The significance of this difference within the modern reconstruction of historical European martial arts cannot be understated.

These same criteria above can also be applied to determining whether or not your fencing is a martial art or a performance art, in other words, whether it is either display oriented or combat oriented. Does it have as its goal the execution of a ballet-like series of choreographic movement patterns or the development of spontaneous execution of techniques with adversarial-counter timing? Is it applicable only to the conditions of solo presentation routines, or can it be applied effectively against an opponent in free-play?

These questions address concerns relevant to historical fencing study. Considering these questions helps to approach the subject of historical fencing from the context of a true martial art, an earnest combat skill -its original purpose. In conclusion, it is clear there is much to consider that is simply outside the purview of traditional (i.e., classical or modern) fencing study and this reflects the perspective the ARMA takes toward the subject in its own practice. One of the best questions to consider in your fencing then, is: If you had to fight a real duel in say, three months, would you train differently than you do now? If so, why not train that way already?

# Consideration of Grappling & Wrestling in Renaissance Fencing

- by John Clements -

The skills of grappling and the art of wrestling have a long legacy in Europe. In the early 1500s, many soldiers, scholars, priests, and nobles wrote that wrestling was important in preparing aristocratic youth for military service. The detailed depictions of unarmed techniques in many Medieval fencing manuals (such as those by Fiore Dei Liberi and Hans Talhoffer) are well known and accounts of wrestling and grappling abound in descriptions of 15th century tournaments



and judicial contests. A 1442 tournament fight in Paris "with weapons as we are accustomed to carrying in battle" included in its fourth article the stipulation "that each of us may help each other with wrestling, using legs, feet, arms or hands." English knightly tournaments as late as 1507 allowed combatants "To Wrestle all maner of wayes" or to fight "with Gripe, or otherwise". The Hispano-Italian master Pietro Monte in the 1480s even recognized wrestling as the "foundation of all fighting", armed or unarmed. Albrecht Durer's *Fechtbuch* of 1512 contains more material on wrestling than on swordplay, yet the relationship between them is noticeable. The oldest known fencing text, the late 13th century treatise *MS I.33*, even states, "For when one will not cede to the other, but they press one against the other and rush close, there is almost no use for arms, especially long ones, but grappling be-

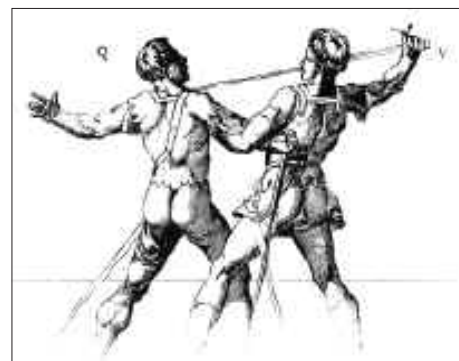
gins, where each seeks to throw down the other or cast him on the ground, and to harm and overcome him with many other means." But just how all this heritage relates to the foyning fence of the Renaissance is less well understood. This has been an area traditionally overlooked by enthusiasts and it is understandable that many enthusiasts have come to the wrong conclusions.

Nonetheless, all historical armed combat (Medieval and Renaissance, cutting or thrusting) involved some degree of grappling and wrestling techniques. But, as few Renaissance fencing manuals include detailed sections on grappling and wrestling or even discuss seizures and disarms, the popular view has been that they were not used or were viewed with disdain. Besides, aren't unarmed and pugilistic attacks merely unskilled "thuggery" practiced only by the lower classes? After all, surely one should not need to wrestle if one knows the sword "to perfection" (...and yet how many are "perfect" with their sword, we might ask?).

This common view makes perfect sense, after all, as a slender cut-and-thrust sword or rapier is a weapon whose characteristics are perfectly suited to keeping an opponent off and killing him at range. Intentionally closing-in to resort to hands-on brute strength would seem antithetical to the very nature and advantage of the weapon. In actuality, the matter is that such actions were not primitive, but advanced techniques that required considerable practice and skill to execute -and knowing them could make a fighter a more well-rounded and dangerous opponent in combat. Yet, fencing historians have typically seen these advanced techniques as being crudities and mere "tricks". Part of this prejudice perhaps stems from the surviving 18th & 19th century view of sword

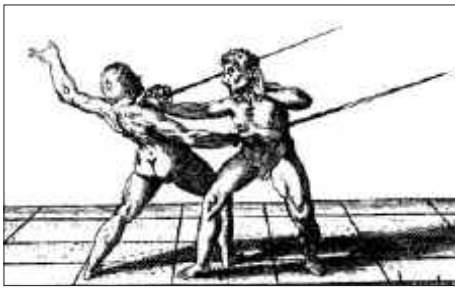
play as being essentially that of personal "duel of honor" or gentlemanly private quarrel. The traditional focus there has been on fencing as "blade on blade" action rather than on "fighting" with swords in battle or sudden urban assault. This was not the case in the 1500s and 1600s. Armed fighting ranged from all manner of encounters with all manner of bladed weapons.

Yet, because approval of grappling and wrestling in the period was inconsistent



and often curtailed during fencing practice, understanding its true value can be confusing now for students unfamiliar with either the actual evidence or the actual techniques. In the early 1500s the Italian soldier-priest Celio Calacagnini listed wrestling as an exercise required for preparing upper-class youths for military service. In 1528, the courtier Baldassare Castiglione wrote, "it is of the highest importance to know how to wrestle, since this often accompanies combat on foot." In 1531 the English scholar and diplomat Sir Thomas Elyot wrote, "There be divers maners of wrastlinges" and "undoubtedly it shall be founde profitable in warres, in case that a capitayne shall be constrained to cope with his aduersary hande to hande, hauyng his weapon broken or loste. Also it hath ben sene that the waiker persone, by the sleight of wrastlyng, hath ouerthrown the strengier, almost or he could





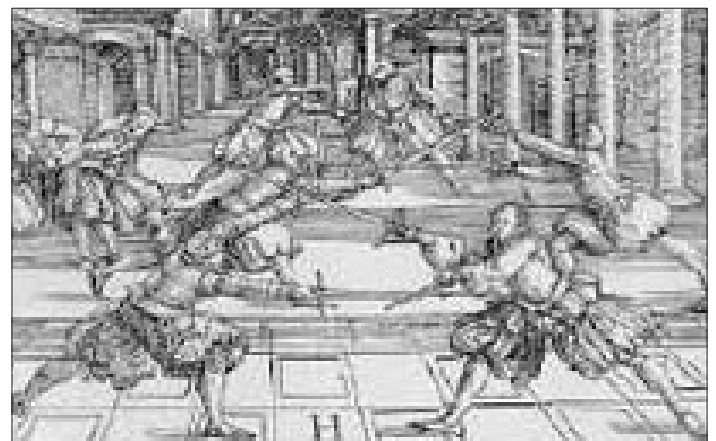
fasten on the other any violent stroke." In 1575, Michel de Montaigne, the French Renaissance thinker, essayist, and courtier, wrote "our very exercises and recreations, running, wrestling ...and fencing". In the notorious 1547 duel between the nobles Jarnac and Chastaignerai, Jarnac was so concerned at Chastaignerai's well known skill as a wrestler (not to mention fencing) that to avoid the chance of a close struggle, he insisted both parties each wear two daggers. Alfred Hutton's account from Vulson de la Colombière in 1549 of a judicial combat between one D'aguerre and Fendilles states, "D'aguerre let fall his sword, and being an expert wrestler (for be it understood that no one in those days was considered a complete man-at-arms unless he was proficient in the wrestling art), threw his enemy, held him down, and, having disarmed him of his morion, dealt him many severe blows on the head and face with it...".

A Ritterakademie or "Knight's School" was reportedly set up in 1589 at Tübingen in Germany to instruct aristocratic youths in skills which included wrestling, fencing, riding, dancing, tennis, and fire-arms. Joachim Meyer offered significant elements of grappling and wrestling with swords in his *Fechtbuch* of 1570. In the 1580s the French general Francois de la Noue advocated wrestling in the curriculum of military academies and the chronicler of duels, Brantome, also

tells us that wrestling was highly regarded at the French court. The Bolognese master, Lelio de Tedeschi, even produced a manual on the art of disarming in 1603. In 1625, Englishman Richard Peeke fought in a rapier duel at Cadiz, defeating the Spaniard Tiago by sweeping his legs out from under him after trapping his blade with his hilt. In 1617 Joseph Swetnam commented on the value of skill in wrestling for staff fighting. But as Dr. Anglo has pointed out, in 1622, Englishman Henry Peacham questioned whether "throwing and wrestling" were more befitting common soldiers rather than nobility, while his contemporary Lord Herbert of Cherbury who studied martial arts in France, found them "qualities of great use". At the turn of the 17th century in France, the celebrated rapier duelists Lagarde and Bazanez came into conflict (the celebrated "duel of the hat") and ended up on the ground violently stabbing and fighting each other. There is evidence close-in techniques were excluded from the German Fechtschulen events of the 1500s where, in order to perform safe displays, rules were in place to prevent such techniques. Similarly, the 1573 Sloane manuscript of the *London Masters of Defence* states that in Prize Playing events "who soever dothe play agaynst ye prizer, and doth strike his blowe and close withall so that the prizer cannot strike his blowe after agayne, shall Wynn no game for anny Veneye". The implication in such cases is that while closing and seizing is effective and understood, it is inappropriate for the public display intended to show a student's skill at defending and delivering blows. In 1579, Heinrich Von Gunterrodt noted that "Fencing is a worthy, manly, and most noble Gymnastic art, established by principles of nature...which serves

both gladiator and soldier, indeed everyone, in ...battles, and single-combats, with every hand-to-hand weapon, and also wrestling, for strongly defending, and achieving victory." Von Gunterrodt (the late 13th century treatise *MS I.33*) also observed: in fencing, "when one will not cede to the other, but they press one against the other and rush close, there is almost no use for arms, especially long ones, but grappling begins, where each seeks to throw down the other or cast him on the ground, and to harm and overcome him with many other means." George Silver's views of 1599 advocating "gryps and seizures" in swordplay are well known. Interestingly though, Silver lamented how such things were no longer being taught by teachers of defence, saying "...there are now in these dayes no gripes, closes, wrestlings, striking with the hilts, daggers, or bucklers, used in Fence-schools". However, Silver also describes situations which are quite familiar and reasonable to those who today practice rapier fencing with more inclusive guidelines for intentional close-contact. Silver, in his *Paradoxes of Defence*, section 31, actually complains that the rapier's excessive length allows for close-in fighting without much fear because there is little threat to prevent it once the point is displaced. He writes: "Of the single rapier fight between valiant men, having both skill, he that is the best wrestler, or if neither of them can wrestle, the strongest man most commonly kills the other, or leaves him at his mercy". He then describes what happens typically when the fighters both rush together, explaining:

"When two valiant men of skill at single rapier do fight, one or both of them most commonly standing upon their strength or skill in wrestling, will presently seek



to run into the close...But happening both of one mind, they rather do bring themselves together. That being done, no skill with rapiers avail, they presently grapple fast their hilts, their wrists, arms, bodies or necks, as in ...wrestling, or striving together, they may best find for their advantages. Whereby it most commonly falls out, that he that is the best wrestler, or strongest man (if neither of them can wrestle) overcomes, wrestling by strength, or fine skill in wrestling, the rapier from his adversary, or casting him from him, wither to the ground, or to such distance, that he may by reason thereof, use the edge or point of his rapier, to strike or thrust him, leaving him dead or alive at his mercy."

In his section 34, Of the long single rapier, or rapier and poniard fight between two unskillful men being valiant, Silver also observes:

"When two unskillful men (being valiant) shall fight with long single rapiers, there is less danger in that kind of fight, by reason of their distance in convenient length, weight, and unwieldiness, than is with short rapiers, whereby it comes to pass, that what hurt shall happen to be done, if any with the edge or point of their rapiers is done in a moment, and presently will grapple and wrestle together, wherein most commonly the strongest or best wrestler overcomes, and the like fight falls out between them, at the long rapier and poniard, but much more deadly, because instead of close and wrestling, they fall most commonly to stabbing with their poniards."

Of course, some might argue Silver was not a "rapier master" and so did not understand "proper" fencing. Regardless, he was obviously an experienced, highly skilled martial artist and expert swordsman who had seen valid methods of rapier fighting in actual use. Then there is the case of "Austin Bagger, a very tall gentleman of his hands, not standing much upon his skill" who Silver describes as having with his sword and buckler fought the "Italian teacher of offense", Signior Rocco with his two-handed-sword. Silver relates how Bagger "presently closed with him, and struck up his heels, and cut him over the breech, and trod upon him, and most grievously hurt him under his feet." Which means he charged forward, swept

his legs out from under him, slashed his rear, and then stomped on him a few times while he was down.

Hutton tells us how in the year 1626, the Marquis de Beuvron and Francois e Montmorency, Comte de Boutteville, the notorious rabid duelist and bully, fought a duel together in which both attacked "each other so furiously that they soon come to such close quarters that their long rapiers are useless. They throw them aside, and, grappling with one another, attempt to bring their daggers into play." In 1671 an affray took place in Montreal, Canada, between Lieutenant de Carion and Ensign de Lormeau. While walking home with his wife, de Lormeau was confronted by de Carion backed by two friends. Provoked into fighting by de Carion, both men drew swords and exchanged blows. De Lormeau was wound-



ed three times, including wounds to the head and arm. Both wrestled briefly before de Carion struck de Lormeau repeatedly on the head with his pommel. They were then separated by some five passing onlookers and both combatants survived.

Closing in to strike, to grab, trip, throw, or push the opponent down is seen in countless Renaissance fencing manuals from the cut-and-thrust style swords of Marozzo in 1536 to the slender rapier of Giovanni Lovino in 1580 and that of L'Lange in 1664. Jacob Wallhausen's 1616 depictions of military combat (armored and unarmored) show much the same. Dr. Sydney Anglo calls this desperate armed or unarmed combat "all-in fighting" as opposed to formal duels with rules, and describes it as: "one other area of personal combat which was taught by masters throughout Europe, and was practiced at every level of the social hierarchy whether the antagonists were

clad in defensive armor or not". He adds that, "Even in Spain, where it might be thought that mathematical and philosophical speculation had eliminated such sordid realities, wrestling tricks were still taught by the masters -as well illustrated in early seventeenth-century manuscripts treatises by Pedro de Heredia, cavalry captain and member of the war council of the King of Spain". Heredia's illustrations of rapier include several effective close-in actions that hark back to similar techniques of Marozzo and even Fiore Dei Liberi in 1410.

The chronicler of duels, Brantome, tells us of a judicial duel in the mid-1500s wherein the Baron de Guerres fought one Fendilles. Having received a terrible thrust in the thigh, the Baron availed himself of his wrestling skills and "closed with his antagonist and bore him to the ground; and there the two lay and struggled". He also relates a sword & dagger duel between the Spanish Captain Alonso de Sotomayor and the knight Bayard. After some fighting Sotomayor missed a thrust which Bayard answered by deeply piercing his throat that he could not withdraw his weapon. Sotomayor was still able to grapple with Bayard so that both fell where Bayard then managed to stab Sotomayor in the face with his dagger.

Some would still give us the impression today that personal combat in the Renaissance consisted only of cavaliers and courtiers formally dueling each other and apparently no gentleman or courtier in the period ever fought under any other condition or for any other reason other than affairs of honor. Of course, it must be thoroughly understood that it was the Renaissance aristocracy who were primarily recording accounts of duels and frays and who naturally wrote almost exclusively about combats among their own social class. Naturally, proper duels (illegal or not) were far more interesting to them than everyday fights (by gentry or commoner) which garnered neither reputation nor honor. But the actual evidence from the period suggests a very different character than a conception of simple "honorable" swordplay.

In the 1470s Paris de Puteo had noted that in a formal duel if a sword was broken he might properly fight by twisting





his opponent's arm, biting him, etc. But by 1553, the Venetian Antonio Possemino stated that to purposely discard a serviceable weapon in favor of fist fighting or to engage in wrestling, kicking, etc. was dishonorable because the contest should be a test of strength not of the body. Such actions were deemed appropriate for dueling gentry if conducted within the course of an armed struggle -that is, they were allowable while still armed. From the early 1500s there is the account of a formal duel sanctioned by the Grand Duke Alphonso in Ferrara, Italy where the challenged party (in an obvious attempt to prevent such actions) attempted to wear armor with sharp projections at places where an adversary would typically try to take hold. Objecting, the Duke summoned forth a smith to file down the offending sharp points on grounds that such was not the proper manner of armor worn by knights in war.

One late 1500s duel between a Signor Amadeo and one Crequi was fought on an island in the Rhone. Crequi brought Amadeo to the ground and without more ado killed him there (Amadeo's relatives later complained of the undignified re-

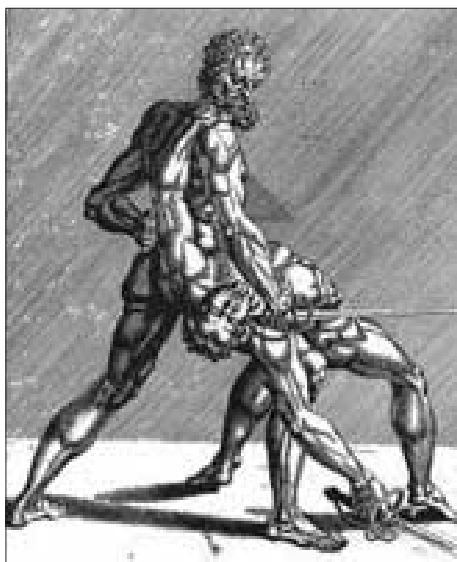
cumbent manner in which their fellow perished). Giraldi Cinzio described a duel of c. 1564 in which an old fencing master named Pirro at Benevento fought with Sergesto, a young former student. Pirro struck him on the back of the knee with the flat of his blade, pushed him to the ground, disarmed him and, seizing his throat, made him surrender.

The master Salvatore Fabris in 1606 depicted a range of close-in and second-hand actions even showing a closing to take down the opponent by grabbing him around the waist. Yet Fabris only included material on grips and seizing reluctantly, because his text was focused on defense with the sword in a way so effective that gentlemen would "never need to come to grips or the seizing of swords". As with other masters, his method was essentially aimed at encounters of honor within the code duello. Apparently though, whatever his opinion of them as appropriate for his readers, he did understand and teach these other skills in some way to prepare his students for them. Fabris' close-in moves were influential enough for several later rapier masters, including Heussler in 1615, L'Range in 1664, and Porath as late as 1693, to all copy them (Siegmond Weischner in his small-sword treatise, *Die Ritterliche Geschicklichkeit im Fechten*, of 1765 also shows a variety of closing actions and grapples similar to Fabris).

Given the range of techniques and actions in the historical accounts, a pattern is discernable. In a 1613 rapier duel between Sir John Heidon, the Earl of Dorset, and Lord Bruce, Heidon not only put his opponent on the ground, but jumped on him afterward. Heidon wrote: "And there we wrestled for the two greatest and dearest prizes we could ever expect trial for -life and honor.

Myself being wounded...I struck...passed through his body, and drawing back my sword, repassed through again...I easily became master of him, laying him on his back, when, being upon him ...I could not find in my heart to offer him any more violence, only keeping him down". In a single combat during the English Civil Wars, Scotsman Sir Ewen Lochiel, chief of the clan Cameron fought a valiant English officer after several moments and exchange of blows, Lochiel finally disarmed his antagonist and they wrestled until they fell to the ground grappling. The Englishman gained the advantage but Lochiel managed to get his hands free, grabbed his foes collar and: "fastening his teeth upon his throat, brought away a mouthful of flesh, which, he said, was 'the sweetest bit he ever had in his life.'

In his 1657 work on rapiers, weapons, and unarmed combat the German master of arms, Johan Georg Pascha, reveals an extraordinary range of unarmed techniques (which some have said resemble styles of Chinese Ming Chung kung fu). It would not be difficult to believe that Pascha, who was also a rapier master,



would have utilized these in his fencing method. We must consider that since he did not show them does not necessarily serve as evidence he excluded them. A fighter always uses what he knows. As Dr. Anglo relates, "For many centuries, the fighting taught by professional masters was relevant either on the battlefield, in the formal duel or in a brawl. The space given to the difficult skills required in each case varied from author to author, place to place, and (certainly) from time to time." Dr. Anglo points out that in the late 1600s, the philosopher John Locke wrote that an unskilled fencer with skill in wrestling has the "odds against a moderate fencer". Locke believed for a man to prepare his son for duels, "I had much rather mine should be a good wrestler than an ordinary fencer; which the most any gentleman can attain to in it, unless he will be constantly in the fencing school, and every day exercising." Scots master, Sir William Hope in his 1707, *"New Method"* fencing book also speaks highly of grips and tripping (although not as something to be casually practiced in class). In 1720, Sir Thomas Parkyns in his *Cornish-Hugg Wrestler* explained, "I illustrate how useful Wrestling is to a Gentleman in Fencing, in the following Example of Parrying, and leave it to the ingenious, to make a farther Application as oft as an Opportunity shall offer itself." Even into the 1700s there are notable accounts of grappling, wrestling and all-out fighting occurring during upper-class duels between skilled fencers. In a 1750

Courtesy of the ARMA



making a blow at it; or, if you think yourself as powerful as your adversary, oppose force to force, then the weaker must go to the ground, if some knowledge of wrestling does not prevent it." During a duel in 1772, Richard Sheridan and Captain Mathews, after missing with pistols, they closed with small-swords, which were each broken on the first lunge. "They then fought with the broken parts until each received many wounds, Sheridan some very dangerous ones. They at last fell to the ground and fought until separated by their seconds, Mr. Sheridan being borne from the field with a portion of his antagonist's weapon sticking through an ear, his breast-bone touched, his whole body covered with

punch" martial artists). It is perfectly reasonable that two gentlemen would prefer to have an "honorable" quarrel settled by "sword skill", rather than risk "scuffling in the dirt"- and getting bashed in the face (of which there are several accounts). But just as with schools of modern martial arts or knife-fighting or hand-gun training now, there were theories of fighting back then that were more ideal than reality. There were also styles that felt no cause to address certain possibilities that would be more or less unlikely to be employed by the parties in a formal aristocratic duel.

Yet, because a Renaissance master of arms produced one text on one aspect of fighting (i.e., rapier dueling) for one particular audience, does it necessarily mean that we can assume he was not at all adept at other styles of sword or rapier fighting? When reconstructing aspects of Renaissance fencing today, it is narrow and self-defeating to attempt to canonize the minority of masters who either disapproved of or failed to address close fighting from those who did. As Dr. Anglo has concluded, "Whatever the theoretical status of wrestling among the learned and knightly classes, it is obvious from surviving treatises that, up to the early seventeenth century and even beyond, many master of arms recognized the advantage bestowed upon their pupils by the physical exercise of wrestling - in order to develop agility, strength, and dexterity - and by practicing unarmed combat to



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small-sword duel between two German noblemen, Swiegel and Freychappel, the combat lasted nearly an hour during which both were wounded many times. Eventually, Freychappel in trying to rush his opponent, tripped and fell and was instantly run through and killed by Swiegel. In his 1771 fencer's guide for broadsword, A. Lonnergan at one point instructs, "When I begin to advance the left hand to disarm you, spring back,

wounds and blood, and his face nearly beaten to a jelly with the hilt of Matthews' sword." That some Renaissance masters and courtiers did frown on these close fighting actions is true. The view that a lengthy agile sword should alone be sufficient for defense is a reasonable one (and is highly reminiscent today of the recent grappling/ground-fighting deficiency so effectively argued against by the more traditional "stand-up kick/



use against the assaults of an armed assailant or in any other mortal affray". The abandonment by later generations (living under very different conditions) of techniques which were a long-established part of the repertoire of many masters does not negate either their significance or their martial effectiveness (all Hollywood musketeer slapstick aside). Just because later 18th and 19th century duelists decided certain moves were "dastardly" and "unsuited" to their notions (artificial or not) of "fair" gentlemanly contests, does not mean all men fighting for their very lives in the violent 1500s and 1600s felt the same. As Dr. Anglo has keenly summarized, "There were many different types of sword, and they were not all handled in the same way. There were many different masters, and - however much they traveled about to gain experience, copied each other, or developed similar solutions to similar questions - they each had their own ideas about how to do things...the history of fencing is a good deal less straightforward than was at one time supposed".

There is little question that a swordsman in the 1500s & 1600s had to be fully skilled, not just for facing gentlemen il duello, but for a fight a' la machia or duel a' la mazza (essentially a private less formal quarrel out in the woods by either noble or commoner). He also had to be ready to defend himself against any unexpected onslaught, sudden ambush, or assault by strangers. He had to draw his weapon, size up the situation, face multiple attackers and survive or safely flee. In other words, he had to be able to fight those who weren't "playing by the rules". There are numerous accounts of gentlemen in hot temper vengefully surprising their rivals. Affairs of honor wherein the adversary stood firm politely announcing, "On guard, sir!" was the exception not the rule.



Seizures, disarms, close-in grabs, and left-hand parries have always been tricky, always been risky, and always required practice in all types of fencing. Perhaps there have always been fencers too conservative to approve of them or to risk coming corps-a-corps ("body to body") at all. But this doesn't mean that in the right circumstances they did not work and cannot work again. These were (and are) advanced techniques and even for advanced students may not always work perfectly (but then, what techniques do?). If the circumstances are correct, and they fail, it is the fighter not the technique which is at fault. Interestingly, some schools and masters were still teaching grips and seizures up to the 19th century. Against a lighter, shorter blade, these actions are indeed harder to effect, but that only meant a swordsman would have to be careful in the attempt - which was true with earlier weapons, as well. Referring to French military duels with "skewers" (epees) of the 1880s, one author related "If it were not for the prospect of that pointed rapier before them these soldiers might sometimes kick and maul each other to death."

For some sword enthusiasts today, historical fencing means martial arts, or techniques approached purely for self-defence, i.e., killing skills. For others, fencing itself seems to mean only the art of the single sword and only when conducted in a traditional pedagogy of mock dueling (a combat selon les règles or a combat "according to the rules"). Yet, historians of dueling have pointed out that in the 1500s and 1600s, little distinction was frequently made between brawls, sudden affrays, rencounters, private assaults, and "duels" (either formal or a' la mazza). This distinction even appears to have been the exception rather than the rule. Some more traditional fencers may see as "brutal" any earlier style that employs close-in actions, hand and foot blows, seizures, grappling, and take-downs. This is understandable, as these much ignored and long overlooked techniques are difficult to learn, dangerous to casually practice, and highly awkward to safely use in free-play or bouting. They may be considered "artless", "vulgar", or "base" to attempt to use them "in place of proper fence". This is a real shame. For these techniques have historical and



martial validity and they can be as fluid and graceful as any weapon and should they serve to win a life-and death fight, to the winner they are neither improper nor crude. In *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, Dr. Anglo, astutely comments on the styles of fighting in the Renaissance stating: "The techniques involved - dealing with unequal odds, left hand parrying, wrestling throws, ruthless battering about the head, stabblings, wards, and a total commitment to death and destruction - are all much the same as those described and illustrated by masters of arms from the late fourteenth century onwards. And, however much such behavior may later have been frowned upon by academic fencers, similar practices were still being taught long after they are conventionally supposed to have vanished from the sophisticated swordsman's repertory".

The view that rapiers were too quick to allow successful closing or grappling is simply untrue. But, it's understandable that as these moves weren't used, they weren't taught any longer, and not being taught they fell out of use. One fights the way one trains after all. Wisely, one would not attempt these actions against an opponent unless one had practiced them considerably in the first place, otherwise they would certainly be foolish to attempt except in desperation (which did occur). Surely it is unreasonable to believe that these things could never have happened because an opponent would be hit before closing to range is not borne out by the available evidence. Nor is it supported by modern contests between "grappling"



versus "non-grappling fencers". Given the variety and length of rapier blades and Renaissance swords that existed, and the greater and greater information now coming to light on the various methods for using them, it would indeed be a difficult proposition to justify. Thus, today's historical fencing practitioners should endeavor to experience the opportunity to go up against someone skilled in them and use caution in declaring across the board they do not work or would not be effective.

Were grappling and wrestling techniques always used in rapier fencing then? No, of course not. But has their historical and martial importance to rapier fencing been overlooked and under appreciated? Yes, from the evidence presented it obviously seems so. If a fighter could kill or defeat his adversary by skill with his blade alone, he surely would. That is what wielding the armament is all about after all. But, if opportunity presented itself and circumstances demanded it, he would utilize every action in his repertoire. Knowledge of grappling and wrestling would make it all the harder for such moves to be successfully used against him. We might ponder if there is a gap or hole in a student's rapier skills if they are completely ignorant of these techniques, but who knows? All we can do today is examine the accounts of duels and compare them with the theoretical instructions in the manuals and our own limited modern experiments. It can be hard to judge the value these moves contain

if modern rapier fencing enthusiasts today do not themselves regularly practice them, may not even be aware of them, and neither have used them successfully nor had them employed effectively against themselves.

Perhaps then, when it comes to fighting with historical hand-weapons, the very view that there is such a thing as "close-quarter" combat is itself artificial? Since virtually all "all-out" Medieval and Renaissance combat involved, or at least anticipated and assumed, close-in techniques of grappling and wrestling, there was no real necessity to distinguish close-quarter from "non close-quarter". There was only the need to identify classes of techniques that worked at one range or another, and were employed either directly by weapon or by empty hand and body. It would seem it was not until close-in actions were later disavowed or discarded that a distinction apparently developed. It may very well be that it was only the structured rules which limited the application of grappling and wrestling, first within certain tournaments and judicial duels and then the gentlemanly Code Duello, that armed combat (and fencing in general) came to be characterized as something "other" than close-combat (i.e., fighting at a range other than the weapon's "reach").

ARMA's perspective is that of training and instructing. Hence, our purpose is not academic theorizing but to interpret and practice this subject as a martial art and to train in these skills -as close as we can approximate to how they were historically intended to really be used (in a traditional approach). Since its beginnings, ARMA has emphasized seizures, disarms, grappling, and close en-

tering actions as crucial, vital, and integral elements in all historical armed combat, including rapier. These actions were real, they were historical, and they worked. They were used by all manners of fighters from all classes of society (indeed, they continued to later be described as highly useful by several 18th century small-sword masters). In our modern study now we must not suppress them, ignore them, or make excuses for our ignorance of them because they do not somehow fit a preconceived notion of how "proper" fencing (whether Medieval or Renaissance) should have been conducted. Instead, we must expose them, explore them, and try to master them.

There is certainly far, far more that can be said about this subject, and grappling and wrestling in Renaissance fencing alone could easily be separated into two or more distinct areas of research. The skills of entering in close to grab an opponent's arm, hand or blade, disarm them or trap them were used and are something that today's student of historical fencing should explore in detail. The techniques of closing to take down or trip up an opponent can make all the difference in a real sword fight and today are elements worthy of long-term investigation by Renaissance fencing students. It has often been said that we should not become prisoners to our style. Good ideas come from everywhere. There are brilliant ideas in fighting and there are foolish ones. The job of any earnest instructor is to honestly point them out. To quote the Master Vadi from c. 1480, "You can also use in this Art strokes and close techniques that you find simpler; leave the more complex, take those favoring your side and often you will have honour in the Art."



Courtesy of the ARMA

*Editor's Note: The reader should note that this article contains some quotations taken from archaic English. Its spelling is quite different from our modern counterpart.*



# ARMA

## The Association for Renaissance Martial Arts

**The ARMA was the first comprehensive attempt at an organization established specifically to advance scholarship into, and practice of, Medieval and Renaissance fighting arts, and offer a modern historically based curriculum. ARMA's intention is not the "play and display" way. We place concern exclusively on acquiring technical knowledge and physical skills, rather than theoretical or academic understanding focused only on form –as these were not what the craft historically was all about.**

ARMA - the Association for Renaissance Martial Arts, is an educational non-profit organization dedicated to the study and practice of historical fencing and the exploration and promotion of our Western martial heritage.

The ARMA focuses on the interpretation and legitimate reconstruction of Medieval and Renaissance combat systems as a modern discipline. The ARMA endeavors to approximate historical fighting skills through a curriculum of reconstructed techniques, principles, and methods for using a variety of swords, spears, shields, staff weapons, daggers, and unarmed grappling and wrestling skills as taught in period books and manuscripts.

The ARMA's efforts are directed toward resurrecting and recreating a legitimate craft of European fighting skills in a manner that is historically valid and martially sound. We rely for our source material upon the dozens of rare surviving manuals of Medieval and Renaissance Masters of Defence.

The ARMA was established to promote the study of European fighting arts and arms & armor of the 15th – 17th centuries. We are first and foremost a martial arts association. The earnest approach we advocate differs substantially from much of the fluff and fantasy-oriented escapism that in the past has occupied this subject. The ARMA does not conduct costumed role-playing nor hold tournaments and sporting competitions.

We also do not perform choreographed fighting stunts. Accurate investigation and interpretation of historical European fighting skills is our primary objective. Our emphasis is also on Spathology – the study of swords.



Courtesy of the ARMA.

The ARMA is a leading voice in the resurrection and revival of lost European fighting arts. Founded in 1992, and online since 1996, (under the original name "HACA") we have been at the forefront of the Medieval and Renaissance fencing studies revival. The ARMA website is the leading online resource for the subject. The ARMA's influence and popularity has been an inspiration to many. In a sea of misinformation, misconception, and sheer fiction, ours is one of few islands of reliable experience and information. We continually revise and amend our training aids and study materials.



Courtesy of the ARMA.

Purpose:

Study European arms and armor from the point of view of their historical function and use.

Study historical source literature as instructional fighting guides.

Examine historical European martial culture within a broader historiographic context.

Study, Interpret, Practice, Promote, and Teach the martial arts of Renaissance Europe.

Objectives:

The ARMA offers classes, workshops, and seminars through our continually revised system of established drills and exercises (Armatura). Our curriculum also includes a Certification & Ranking structure for students and instructors.

The ARMA provides a Training Program allowing students to learn and practice within a common structure that is historically valid and martially sound. The ARMA seeks to advance the quality of skills demonstrated with Medieval and Renaissance weaponry.

The ARMA offers Associate Members a variety of benefits, advantages, and opportunities in pursuit of their studies. The ARMA attempts to improve the relationship between practitioners and academics in order to stimulate the exchange of knowledge and encourage understanding of historical European combat skills.

The ARMA makes it a primary aim to raise the level of scholarship within the historical fencing community with its



Courtesy of the ARMA.

emerging interest in source texts.

A large part of the ARMA's energy is directed at interpretation and integration of translated source material into a practical hands-on curriculum. Interpretation and reconstruction of Medieval and Renaissance fighting arts are still only in their infancy. Bringing to public study the numerous manuals of the Masters of Defence is an important part of our efforts. The ARMA encourages and supports efforts at translating these invaluable texts.

The wealth of fighting manuals currently being studied by many in the historical fencing community is only the tip of a very large iceberg. We have only just begun to scratch the surface in examining the profusion of material now coming to light. Avoiding misinterpretation and error in our study is a continual challenge. While the Internet is frequently awash with inaccurate information on our subject, the growing community of serious enthusiasts and amateur researchers of Medieval and Renaissance fighting arts has long been in need of reputable sources of guidance. In the effort to bring a higher degree of integrity, dignity, and authority to these



Courtesy of the ARMA.

efforts, the ARMA has gathered a list of knowledgeable specialists in several major fields on which we can call on as reference sources. As ARMA Expert Consultants we have historians, anthropologists, linguists, forensic pathologists, curators, armorers, swordsmiths, metallurgists, researchers, scholars, fencers, martial artists, and reenactors. Our panel includes such noted individuals as Dr. Sydney Anglo, David Edge of the Wallace Collection, John Waller of the Royal Armouries, and a variety of historians, professors, scientists, bladesmiths, and craftsmen.

We are passionate about our subject and it is our sincere wish to see historical European martial arts acquire the respect and attention they deserve. Our intent is directed toward raising the credibility, legitimacy, and standards of practice within this field while redeveloping genuine martial skills and teaching ability. To this end, we have established a long-term research effort as well as a proven Training Program.

The ARMA's efforts consists of one main and one supporting program:

**ARMA -The main branch consists of our research efforts and Training Program - A Western martial arts study system for Student Ranking or Instructor Certification. Using the ARMA Study Approach and Training Methodology, it offers students the chance to exchange ideas as well as benefit from the expertise offered by ARMA instructors and senior students. We have a developed curriculum of classes and workshops.**

**ARMA-Youth - A kids program emphasizing history, physical fitness, and the ethics of personal responsibility and service derived from the best Chivalric Values of Western Civilization. ARMA-Youth offers a healthy approach to learning about Medieval and Renaissance culture and our Western martial heritage for teens and kids under age 16.**

Further ARMA activities include:

Develop a continually refined and increasingly accurate interpretation of the historical teachings from the source literature. Maintain a practical understanding of how these principles and concepts were

applied by fighting men in actual combat. Follow a broad, pragmatic interpretation of the historical sources that is focused on earnest physical application of their teachings.

Refine a curriculum of martial training and practice through transcriptions, translations, interpretations, and physical application of the source literature.

Encouraging the development of historical fencing equipment and commercial training gear while supporting and promoting the production of historically accurate replica swords and weaponry.

Promoting interest in and advancement of Medieval and Renaissance fencing.

Raising the quality of discourse on the subject while promoting its investigation.

Protecting the rights of enthusiasts to purchase and own accurate replicas of swords and historical weaponry through legal and legislative action.

Offering to the public reliable educational resources and expert guidance on the fighting arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance as well as a consulting service for schools and the media.

Developing and supporting affiliated Study Groups following the ARMA system and our work to be strong, quick, and fluid in our techniques.

Networking with the worldwide community of historical-fencers and promoting open dialogue and exchange.

*The ARMA receives dozens of new membership requests every month and selects only a few. Generally we look for those who are not already deeply involved in study of Asian martial arts. Additionally, from outside the USA we now only accept new Study Groups of 4 or more individual applicants.*



Courtesy of the ARMA.

**For more information about ARMA go to ARMA's website:**  
[www.thearma.org](http://www.thearma.org)



# The Grand Assault: Notes on Its History

**In the late 19th Century, a Saturday's entertainment might involve men swinging broadswords at one another, cudgeling one another at quarterstaff, or having an elegant bout with foils and dueling weapons.**

*- by Russel Hogg -*

Most people view warfare and its grim accoutrements with horror and distaste, and excessive bloodlust and aggressiveness are generally viewed as negatives in most cultures. Simultaneously, many cultural traditions throughout history have exhibited a seemingly paradoxical fascination for the fighting arts and have honored those who have attained proficiency in the skills of combat. Literary sources such as *The Iliad*, *Beowulf*, and *The Song of Roland* clearly reflect the reverence that the authors' societies held for bravery in their warrior class - not to mention more modern pieces such as *The Lord of the Rings* or *Rob Roy*. Given the mass appreciation for well-honed reflexes and combative prowess as well as the notion that fighting is indeed fun - especially when there are no lives at stake - martial demonstrations and contests are a common theme. From bronze-age Crete we have frescoes depicting boxing and wrestling; later on we have evidence of war dancers and Olympic wrestlers in Classical Greece. From Rome, of course, we have the gladiatorial combats, from medieval Europe we see Knights in tournaments and jousts. In nineteenth century Europe, we see the grand assault of arms: large, sometimes exorbitant contests and demonstrations of swordplay as it was practiced in France and Italy, in which fencing masters and amateurs played out their skill before some of the most esteemed personages of the time.

## Origins

Like the gladiatorial combats and jousts that preceded them, the Grand Assaults were a symptom of particular socio-historical forces; as such, it is difficult to

duplicate them today. During the time of the grand assaults, fencing stood as a highly popular pastime of Europe's elite classes. In Italy and France, the privilege of carrying a sword had belonged largely to the nobility. The seventeenth-century fencing master François Dancie even notes, with some distaste, that the only way one can distinguish between a gentleman and the newer class of wealthy merchant is through the wearing of a sword.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the nobles learned the proper usage of these weapons from skilled fencing masters who were, in turn given high social status so that gentlemen would not have to demean themselves by learning their art from a working proletariat. Beginning with the reign of Louis XIV, fencing masters could even earn a title of nobility themselves. In the first part of the 1800s the fashion of daily sword-wear died off (possibly as a side effect of the French Revolution), but with the continuing threat of the duel and the increasing popularity of fencing as an art form, it maintained its popularity among the upper classes.

Even prior to Louis XIV's mandate, there is clear evidence that competitions in swordsmanship were popular in many parts of Europe. In Tudor England, for example, candidates for the title of "Maister of Defence" had to go through a sort of final examination known as the prize fight, in which they would pit their skill against other swordsmen in a public forum - often an inn. After the Company of Maisters dissolved in the mid-1700s, professional combatants such as the famous James Figg continued to stage fights for a paying audience in a manner somewhat similar to that of professional boxing matches today. Whereas

these pursuits typically attracted a more proletarian interest in England, swordsmanship contests on the continent maintained a more aristocratic bent. In one such example in 1611, the Flemish-born and Spanish-trained fencing master known as Girard Thibault is known to have participated in and won a fencing contest in Rotterdam. The Dutch masters were so impressed by his fencing style (which they had never witnessed before) that they invited him to teach in the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup>

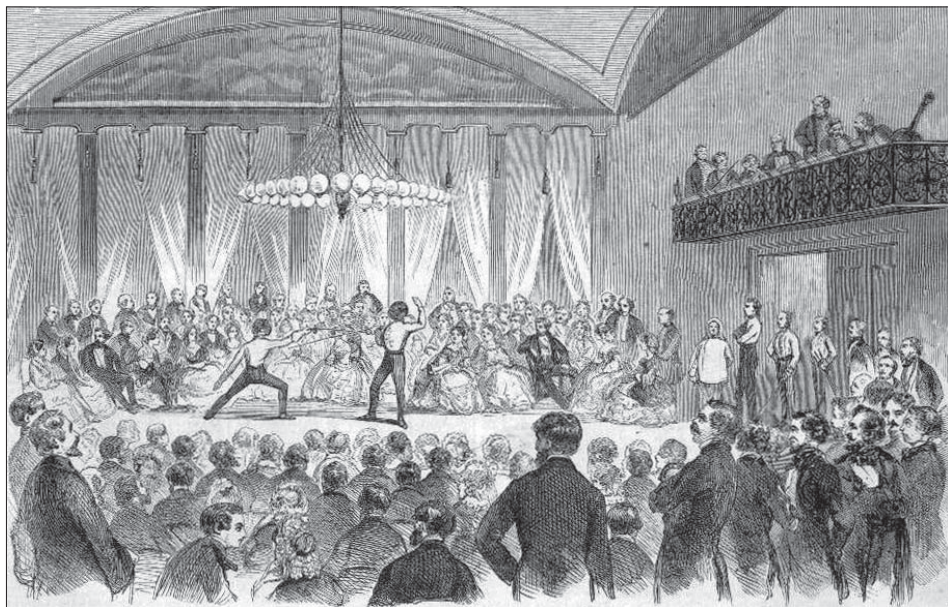
Domenico and Henry Angelo, a father and son who popularized French methods of fence in London during the late eighteenth century, were also involved in fencing exhibitions. Domenico, having come to London in pursuit of an amour named "Peg" Worthington, was prodded by his aristocratic friends to open a fencing school after he trounced one Dr. Keys - "reputed the most expert fencer in Ireland" - in a public trial of skill in 1760. At the match were present "many ladies of rank and fashion, as well as noblemen and gentlemen" - a typical aristocratic crowd for a fencing event, although perhaps more than Angelo had expected.<sup>3</sup>

Fencing contests in the Angelos' time appear to have consisted largely of public challenges and demonstrations, though tournament-style competition was not uncommon. In his *Reminiscences* (which are generally more concerned with social recollections than fencing), Henry Angelo recalls several instances of public challenges, most notably that between two fencers named LeBrun and Lapière at his fencing school on Haymarket Street. We are told little beyond the fact that LeBrun won twelve touches to one.<sup>4</sup>

The Angelos also sponsored numerous public exhibitions, the most famous of which featured the Chevalier de Saint George and the Chevalier d'Eon - both close friends of the Angelo family and two of the most highly lauded fencers of the time. In 1787 the Prince of Wales himself witnessed one of these demonstrations, which was immortalized in an etching by the artist Thomas Rowlandson. Henry also mentions an Irish organization called the Knights of Tara, which held an annual meeting of amateurs, with a "diamond-cut sword" as the grand prize. True to the later Grand Assault style, "this exhibition was always honored with the presence of the lord-lieutenant and ladies, and concluded with a ball in the evening."<sup>5</sup>

In France, evidence for fencing competitions in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century is somewhat scarcer. Given the aristocratic history and ties of fencing, the French Revolution did a great deal to upset public exhibitions and competitions in Paris; the revolutionaries, for example disbanded the company of *Maîtres en fait d'armes de Paris* (True Masters of Arms of Paris) and revoked the privileges of the *Académie d'Armes*; the latter organization did not re-form until 1886, and the former was never revived.<sup>6</sup> Yet despite its lower profile during this transition, fencing remained a popular and important pastime - so much so that Napoleon mandated that all military recruits be taught the usage of the foil.<sup>7</sup> Under such famous masters as Jean-Louis Michel and Augustin Grisier, fencing's popularity increased as it spread to non-aristocratic people who had never been exposed to it before.

As in England, fencing demonstrations seem to have consisted of organized contests and public challenges. We do have a text on the preparation of rules for a *concours d'escrime* (fencing contest) that was held in 1790 in Marseille,<sup>8</sup> and there are numerous anecdotes of exhibitions that involved famous masters such as the above-mentioned Jean-Louis, St. George, and Eon. Another such figure is that of Louis-Justin Lafaugère - a military master who took part in many foil demonstrations, including one in 1816 against the Comte de Bondy, who had issued a public challenge. The bout took



1859 foil bout at Grand Assault in Boston (from Harper's Weekly)

place "in the ballroom of an elegant house on the Quai d'Orsay," with numerous eager spectators to witness Lafaugère's victory.<sup>9</sup> This elaborate type of setting is typical of early fencing contests, and was eventually epitomized in the grand assaults.

### Grand Assaults and "The Golden Age of Fencing"

The grand assault proper developed in the late 1860s and early 1870s in tune with the economic and historical forces that gave birth to France's gilded age, *La Belle Époque*. According to Robert Milton, the sports column writer for the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, this was "a time when everything is made grand - Grand Review or Grand Minister. It is thus that we announce the Grand Assault."<sup>10</sup> If Milton's tone is any indicator, this 1882 event may have been the first usage of the term in such a manner, but we do know regardless that fencing contests and exhibitions had begun to expand considerably in their scope by the late 1860's, when the famous master Louis Merignac exhibited his skill against three fencers named Heidenbrunze, de Tours, and Gaspard in the Paris Exposition.<sup>11</sup>

With increased prosperity came an increased interest in fencing. The attendance at fencing exhibitions rose dramatically, with hundreds and occasionally thousands of spectators standing by to watch the feats of martial prowess. The assaults became important social events, frequented by the brightest stars of both

French and International society. The American publication Harper's Weekly reports one such event, which had 700 attendees - admirals, generals, journalists, artists, authors, noblemen, the entire cabinet, and even the President of France himself.<sup>12</sup> *Le Figaro* lists a number of Grand Assaults with such eminent observers as General Ney, the Duke d'Elchingen, and the Viscount de Langle, not to mention the dames elegantes and other enthusiasts.<sup>13</sup>

The above-mentioned Harper's article also notes that this particular series of exhibitions took place in a concert room of the President's residence at the Elysees. This is certainly no rarity, as the grand assaults are defined by their glamorous venues in addition to their illustrious crowds and participants. The fencing critic Adolphe Tavernier mentions several assaults taking place at the *Cirque D'Hiver* and the Grand Hotel, as well as at the house of the prince A. de Chimay.<sup>14</sup> The former two places hosted a number of assaults throughout the 1880s and 1890s alongside *Le Grand Cirque*, which hosted the 1882 event that Milton discussed above. Not only did these venues provide the elegance suited to such an event, but they also had the capacity to hold the large audiences that these events often drew. Assaults could last for an evening - usually ending at midnight on these occasions - or for as long as three days. If laden with social accoutrements beyond fencing and conversation, a grand assault d'escrime could become a gala d'escrime, accompanied



by dances and even, in some cases, by "admirably served buffets."<sup>15</sup> Fencing exhibitions, therefore, were not only important for the fencers themselves, but were also a major component of Parisian social life; missing an important assault or gala d'escrime would mean that a person had missed out on social opportunities. Given the vast interest in fencing, it is not surprising that modern fencing historians generally regard this time period as the "golden age" of the art. Newspaper articles not only advertised events and reported on scores, they offered detailed descriptions of individual matches for those who had missed the events, as well as offering criticism of the fencers themselves. Tavernier's 1885 book, *Amateurs et Salles d'Armes de Paris* served as a Who's Who of Parisian circles, offering biographies and descriptions of the dashing figures and their schools so that the public could keep track. It was, in essence, the nineteenth-century French equivalent of baseball cards or Sports Illustrated magazine.

These events were radically different from today's fencing competitions. More often than not, they were organized more as exhibitions or prize fights than competitions per se. Poster and newspaper advertisements before the assaults gave a pre-determined list of the encounters; for the most part each participant would fence only once, although exceptions did occur in the larger events. Thus the objective of each fencer was generally not only to win the event, but also to make a good showing in his (or occasionally her) encounter. Maître Gerard Six notes that these events were often as much for show as for victory, as a well-fenced and elegant bout at a grand assault acted as a personal advertisement for those masters participating.<sup>16</sup> It is also worth noting that decorum and manners were considered of the utmost importance in these galas d'escrime. Le Figaro reports of a sabre bout between one Casella and Lantieri: "(they were) excessively courteous... where each hit was announced without hesitation by the two champions."<sup>17</sup>

Unlike modern competitions, the weapons practiced at the individual assaults varied a good deal depending on participants, tastes, objectives, etc. Foil, of course acted as a mainstay and could be



Poster for grand assault, 1900

seen in almost every event. Sabre, too, was commonly demonstrated, and oftentimes capped off the events.<sup>18</sup> The 1882 Grand Assault, which lasted three days, stands as an unusual case in that it seems to have consisted only of bouts at the newly developed épée de combat (dueling sword) and sabre; if any foil bouts did take place, the paper neglected to mention it.<sup>19</sup> Épée events became more common as time went on and the weapon became more popular; in 1897, Le Figaro sponsored an international épée contest, which was won by Maître Anthime Spinnewyn (as he makes sure to mention in his treatise on the weapon).<sup>20</sup> In contrast to modern events, which are limited to foil, épée, and sabre, the Grand Assaults also took advantage of the knowledge of other types of fence to create more dramatic demonstrations. Backsword and broadsword (heavier cutting weapons) contests featured regularly, as did bouts at singlestick - a practice weapon for the backsword, and favorite of Theodore Roosevelt. The New York Times reports a grand assault at the Cirque D'Été in 1895, in which "shield, sword, rapier, two-handed sword, cutlass, and bayonet" were all used "[to exhibit] the various ways in which two men have cut each other's throats at different epochs in history," and in which the famous renaissance duel between Jarnac and La Chastaignerie was recreated.<sup>21</sup> The English fencers Egerton Castle and Alfred Hutton gave exhibitions of longsword, rapier and dagger, and sides-

word (amongst others) at the grand assaults in which they participated in the 1890s; other British exhibitions included such events as mounted combat with sword and lance and assaults at quarterstaff.<sup>22</sup> Women did not usually participate in the grand assaults, although they were able to occasionally show off their considerable skill at the foils in these events. The French author Guy de Maupassant gives a fictional account of a grand assault in which the spectators are so moved by the beauty of a bout between two young women that they pay no attention to the sabre bout that follows it.<sup>23</sup>

## The New Seed: Grand Assaults Across The Pond

La Belle Epoque in France coincided with the end of Reconstruction and the birth of The Gilded Age in the United States. This was a period of prosperity for the Americans just as it was for the French, and well-to-do Americans began to fall in love all over again with things European. Americans had largely tended to ignore fencing with the exception of the Louisiana Creoles, who were well-known for their love of dueling and who also were known to host their own Grand Assaults; in 1840, for example a competition was held in New Orleans in which the masters of the day actively excluded the famous duelist and teacher Jose "Pepe" Llulla, purportedly out of jealousy at his success. As fencing began to decline in New Orleans some thirty years later, fencing became a fad almost overnight in the country's other major metropolitan areas.<sup>24</sup> Prior to the mid-1870s it is an immense challenge to find any mention of the discipline in American newspapers; after 1880, the papers almost abound with fencing news. As Ken Mondschein has pointed out in his article "*The Other Wild West*", the papers which did focus on fencing tended to be those which catered to a more monetarily-endowed crowd, with Harper's Weekly and the New York Tribune leading the way.<sup>25</sup>

By the mid-1890s New York had two successful clubs and Boston had one; the era of New World Grand Assaults had begun. The earliest of these events took place in 1876, when the French immigrant Master Regis Senac fenced against

Courtesy of Russel Hoge

Colonel T. H. Monstery "for the championship of the United States and Spanish America" at Tammany Hall. Although the title itself was of questionable value (given the dearth of fencing in the western hemisphere at the time), the event did have most of the qualifications of a true grand assault: a large crowd, a predetermined match-up, and an illustrious location. After having lost the foil event and having won the sabre event, Monstery defaulted, and Senac was declared winner on the understanding that Monstery would challenge Senac again.<sup>26</sup> Apparently the second contest never materialized, but Senac fenced for the "Championship of the Americas" at least three more times, finally losing to a Frenchman named Louis Treuchet after having defeated Errico Casella and Albert Vaughn. All of these contests were fenced at Tammany Hall with the exception of Senac vs. Casella, which was fenced at Cosmopolitan Hall.<sup>27</sup> Senac hosted and participated in a number of other demonstrations throughout the 1880s and 1890s, at one point even fencing against three opponents at once.<sup>28</sup>

In 1895, Boston enjoyed a true gala d'escrime at Papant's Hall, where the Boston Fencing Club invited the best fencers to an event so filled with spectators that the only open space was the fencing strip itself. This particular assault featured broadsword and singlestick, much to the delight of the spectators who had never witnessed such an event before. The commentator for Harper's Weekly notes that "The example of Boston may be profitably imitated by the rest of the country. There is no healthier sport than fencing."<sup>29</sup>

In 1893 and 1894 there passed a whirlwind of fencing assaults such as New York had never encountered before. In November, December, and January, the three great Italian masters Eugenio Pini, Agesilao Greco, and Carlo Pessina made a stopover to demonstrate their tremendous skills to the people of the New World. The stay began with a gala d'escrime at The Fencer's Club (which is still in existence in New York), where the visiting French military master L. Vauthier faced off against M. Jacoby, the former instructor at The Fencer's Club; in addition to foil, there were demonstrations of broadsword, dueling sword

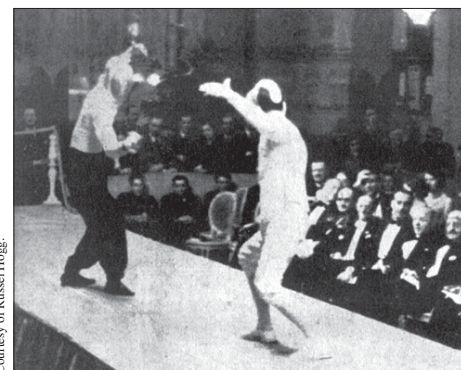
sword, and even "Japanese singlesticks" (i.e., kendo practiced with shinai) by Shilo Sacaze of Nagasaki. Amongst the attendees that night was none other than Mark Twain.<sup>30</sup> Although they were present, the three Italians did not fence in this event; they did participate in a grand assault three weeks later at the Lyceum Opera House, where a horde of Italian immigrants was so enthusiastic that - in the words of the reporter - they reminded one of "a mob of raving lunatics" or a "theatre riot." In a venue so packed that there wasn't even standing room available, the Italians faced off against such worthies as M. Gouspy and Louis Senac (the son of Regis). The crowd grew so boisterous at one point that Pini, "his countrymen's idol," had to admonish them during the bout with the statement that "true Italians should always be courteous to a worthy adversary."<sup>31</sup> Greco managed to defeat the young Senac handily, despite having been wounded on the head in a mounted broadsword tournament at Madison Square Garden only days before!

### **Olympics, World War, and the Decline of Grand Assaults**

Two bells struck the death-knell of the grand assaults. The first of these was the first Olympic Games in 1896, in which fencing was one of the four initial events. With the Olympics, international competition grew increasingly important, and fencing contests became more and more organized toward the goal of victory over the entire field of competitors, rather than a demonstration of skill. The tournament-style format, in which fencers are eliminated one-by-one until there is only one left standing (so to speak) became the norm in the new Federation Internationale d'Escrime (F.I.E.), as evidenced in issues of the French fencing magazine *Escrime et le tir* in the 1920's. With only foil, épée, and sabre left as "official" fencing weapons, such disciplines as broadsword and singlestick fell into increasing disuse. Given the severe politico-economic disruption of the two world wars - not to mention the myriad of fencers who met their deaths as a result of these wars - people had fewer resources to devote to the extravagant galas d'escrime. Fencing competitions, in effect, became singular in focus as all of the glamour of the galas

was eliminated. The widespread adoption of electrical scoring in the middle of the twentieth century also began to alter the rules and the fencing itself, so that it became more difficult for non-initiates to understand and appreciate the phrases of a fencing bout. Thus fencing lost what few spectators it had retained by the end of the century.

The last of the grand assaults - not in name, but in spirit - was among the most famous fencing matches in the history of the discipline: that between the French champion Lucien Gaudin and his Italian counterpart Aldo Nadi in 1922. A result of a public challenge rather than a tournament or competition, the event took place before a sold-out crowd of thousands. Gaudin stood as the official victor at the end, though of course proponents of French and Italian styles argue to this day about who "should have won." The importance of this match was deemed so great that the French government awarded Gaudin the Legion of Honor for his victory. Nadi himself continued to draw tremendous audiences at demonstrations, fencing before a capacity crowd at New York's Plaza Hotel in 1935. Such events became increasingly rare, and although Nadi was one of the first of the new generation of "sport fencers," one could also argue that he was one of the last carriers of the flashiness and romanticism of the grand assaults - thus he could draw the huge crowds that he did. When Nadi died, much of that magnetism died with him. The appeal of combat exhibitions and demonstrations of skill did not die out with the grand assaults. It lingers on in the fans of televised sporting events such as football, boxing, wrestling, sumo, or rugby, all of which have a mass appeal similar to that which the assaults enjoyed a little more than a century ago.



Nadi (left) vs. Gaudin from "*Escrime et le Tir*"



Yet although fencing is seldom viewed as a "spectator sport" today, it may be premature to ascribe the grand assaults as a curiosity of a dim past. The Association for Historical Fencing (AHF), founded in order to preserve and encourage fencing as it was practiced in the nineteenth century and before, is fighting to raise public awareness of the discipline and has begun an initiative to revive the grand assault tradition. In July 2003, the AHF held its first annual Grand Assault of Arms at the City Center in New York. This tremendously successful event drew fencers from across the country to compete in foil, épée, sabre, and singlestick. As with the grand assaults of old, it advertised and drew public attendance. In addition to the competitions, the event offered demonstrations of older weapons such as French small sword and Italian rapier - the dueling weapons that were the ancestors of the fencing implements we know today. Each year, it is hoped that the scope of this event will increase until it has all the glamour of the galas of old. With growing interest in fencing and a rapidly expanding movement of fencers interested in preserving and resurrecting older styles, weapons, and techniques, the grand assault of a thousand spectators may linger only one or two bends up the road.

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**Russell Hogg** began fencing in the Olympic style in 1993, training with a number of instructors and masters before moving to New York in 2000. After a brief hiatus from fencing, he switched from sport to the traditional, combat-oriented style taught at the Martinez Academy of Arms. A Ph.D. candidate in anthropology, his primary interest lies in the classical dueling weapons of the 19th century (primarily the French épée de combat and the Italian dueling sabre), and in the evolution of the French school of fence from the sixteenth century to the early twentieth.

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# Daggers of the Mind: Towards a Historiography of Fencing

A look at the scholarly myths about Western martial arts.

- by Ken Mondschein -

If historians from Karl Marx to Michel Foucault have dealt with conflict between dominant and subordinate groups as a primary theme in their work, it is arguably because of their European background. The notion of social class, it has oft been noted, is more in the fore of the French or British mind than it is in the American. After all, one often-admired quality of American society is its supposed "egalitarianism." The United States has had a civil war, but never a revolt of the plebes.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, to the American-born historian, conflict and competition between social equals would seem to be a more authentically pressing issue than conflict between social classes. Classical fencing—that is, a systematized method of civilian combat with the sword, for sport and for self-defense—is a virtual repository of attitudes, norms, and codes for dealings between social equals. It is, after all, rooted in the reality of the duel, the antagonistic and ritualistic combat between two adversaries, intended to settle a question of honor; that is to say, of social status amongst one's peers.<sup>2</sup> Through the bourgeois appropriation of aristocratic, chivalric ideals, such as the bearing of arms, the code duello participates in what the medievalist Johann Huizinga called the "identification of an aesthetic concept with an ethical ideal."<sup>3</sup>

However, though the oldest existing martial tradition in the Western world, the Italian school of fence, reckons itself to be almost five hundred years old,<sup>4</sup> academic consideration of the subject may almost be said to still be in the Dark Ages. Some of the most well-known and frequently cited works on the history of fencing are more than a century old, and

are inundated with attitudes and assumptions that, while typical of their age, are badly in need of reappraisal. Yet, these selfsame attitudes are, in turn, very revealing of the mindset and mentalities prevalent amongst the educated elites in the mid- to late- nineteenth century, and which to an extent, are still current in our own society.

A study of these works would, arguably, be even more revealing of the "spirit of the age" than reading the works of writers such as Nietzsche, since it would tell us what was going on not in the mind of the philosopher, but in the mind of the (admittedly well-dressed) man on the street. Since fencing is, perforce, a pastime of the elite, the segment of society most likely to have been schooled in depth in the various mental habits and viewpoints of their culture, it will reflect a "pop culture" version of this culture's biases. This group's perceptions of, and thoughts about, their leisure activity will, logically, reflect their ways of thinking, not only about practical matters, but about their aesthetic tastes, their hopes, dreams, and ideals. An analysis of works on fencing and dueling will, likewise, provide us with the views of this upper crust towards conflict, fair play, and the place of the aggressive instinct in society. In these aspects, it may be broader and even more valuable than a detailed, in-depth analysis of one influential historical writer, such as Ranke or Gibbon. Finally, the study is also of interest to historians of science, since classical fencing was, and is, reckoned to be not just a physical activity, contingent upon reflexes and brawn, but a science—an aesthetic science, subject to eternal and universal rules, as if the same Platonic

truths embrace geometry, fencing, and art. The better we understand the clockwork of the universe, the better we can make it work for us. The attitudes towards fencing will, therefore, also reflect attitudes towards science and scientific progress.

The three primary English-language historians of fencing in the nineteenth century were Edgerton Castle, Captain Alfred Hutton, and the famous adventurer and explorer Sir Richard Burton, whose major contributions, respectively, are *Schools and Masters of Fence*, *Old Sword Play*, and *The Book of the Sword* (all published in 1892). Castle deals with the history of the art itself, Hutton with the practical points of Renaissance swordsmanship, reconstructing technique from an antiquarian point of view, and Burton with the archaeology and development of the sword itself.

The most significant of these writers is Castle, who is still widely quoted as a historical authority in works on fencing. Burton, though a colorful character, is not as useful, since *The Book of the Sword* mainly deals with the evolution of the weapon itself, and thus is not of as much interest to the historian who wishes to deal with social conceptions of its use. Finally, though the bulk of Hutton's work deals with the actual technical aspects of the use of "old" weapons, the introductory portions are very revealing.

The primary assumption underlying the writings of these men is that human history since the Renaissance has, under the aegis of reason, been a continuing march towards greater and greater "perfection." Like the Swiss historian Jacob Bruckhardt's view of the Renaissance, Hutton, Castle, and Burton display a





strong moral and historical positivism. To them, the invention of fencing, begun in the glorious days of the Italian Renaissance, paralleled the progress of the scientific revolution and the evolution of the "modern" age towards greater moral, intellectual, and physical enlightenment and refinement, to a point, in fact, where dueling had vanished, and the study of the sword was wholly an academic, leisure-time activity. (At the time of writing, no Englishman had engaged in a sword duel for years.)<sup>5</sup> As Castle says in his introduction to *Schools and Masters*: "The author does not profess... to analyze closely the contents of all the books written on the imperfect play of our ancestors, nor to trace every link in the chain of (fencing's) development, from the "pancratium" of the fifteenth century, in which leaping and wrestling were of more avail than aught else, to the courteous and academic 'assault' of modern days, where elegance and precision of movement are more highly considered -or ought to be- than mere superiority in the number of hits."<sup>6</sup> As part and parcel of this bias, we see a strong tendency that, the later and further north one looks, the more "perfect" the development of the art is accounted to have been. Hutton, trying to say in a few paragraphs what Castle said in a book, is even more revealing. For instance, in his introduction to *Old Sword-Play*, he makes blanket statements such as: "...in Western Europe the long, handsome rapier had by degrees given place to the short walking sword, which, however, did not assume a settled form until the century following (the eighteenth); but the Italians, who were the original teachers of our art, adhered to the earlier form. This change of pattern in the sword necessitated a change in the method of using it, and hence arose the two great and only "schools" of fence, the Italian and the French.

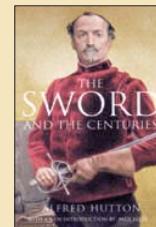
"From this point on we deal with the French system alone, and we find that as the short, light swords improved in their form, the art of wielding them advanced in precision and grace, which latter quality may be said to have attained its perfection about the middle of the eighteenth century."<sup>7</sup>

Hutton summarily drops his discussion of the Italian school as soon as it cedes

to the French-the students have surpassed the masters. Likewise, he apparently does not feel the Italian school to have been "perfect" in and of itself, but rather only an antecedent to the French school, in which the art reached its ultimate culmination. In this, we might detect an obvious nationalistic and even racist bias-fencing could never be "perfected" by those swarthy Italians. Similarly, Hutton ignores, and Castle dismisses, the Spanish school. While their southern cousins might have been inspired artists with brush, pen, and sword, it was up to the Northern European countries to give the Renaissance its true intellectual direction.

To Burckhardt, as well, the Italian despots were almost animalistic-to be admired for their fierceness and political effectiveness, to be sure, but still ruled more by a fiery heart than a cool mind. Ignoring the history of the communes, so important to the development of civic humanism and such movements as the Savonarolan millennial community in Florence, emphasis was placed on the "tyrants," the great political powers and artistic patrons. Their epitome was Cesare Borgia, who was the despotic son of a Spanish pope of few scruples, and who was the admired hero of Machiavelli, whose very name was a byword for political cynicism and moral indifference. The Italians had genius, to be sure, as is seen in the art of Michaelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci, but the history textbooks then switched their focus (as they still do today) from the Italian wars to the theology of Luther and Calvin, or to the consolidation of the French state in the seventeenth century. The Italians were ruled by "tyrants," the French by "autocrats."

Fencing, likewise, was held to have been perfected by the "refined" French, who in this period pioneered the "small sword," or "walking sword," as Hutton calls it, that combined the functions of masculine jewelry and self-defense.<sup>8</sup> Even today, few costume dramas set in the seventeenth or eighteenth century seem complete without an affair d'honor settled at sword's point.<sup>9</sup> Italian technique, meanwhile, remained "coarse" and "primitive," using a heavier weapon that was little more than a scaled-down rapier. Physical labor and brute strength,



The Sword and The Centuries  
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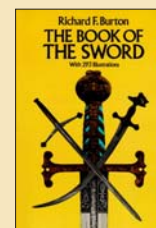
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FOREWORD / LIST OF AUTHORITIES / I. PREAMBLE: ON THE ORIGIN OF WEAPONS / II. "MAN'S FIRST WEAPONS- THE STONE AND THE STICK. THE EARLIEST AGES OF WEAPONS. THE AGES OF WOOD, OF BONE, AND OF HORN" / III. "THE WEAPONS OF THE AGE OF WOOD : THE BOOMERANG AND THE SWORD OF WOOD; OF STONE, AND OF WOOD AND STONE COMBINED" / IV. THE PROTO-CHALCITIC OR COPPER AGE OF WEAPONS  
V. "THE SECOND CHALCITIC AGE OF ALLOYS-BRONZE, BRASS, ETC : THE AXE AND THE SWORD" / VI. THE PROTO-SIDERIC OR EARLY IRON AGE OF WEAPONS / VII. THE SWORD : WHAT IS IT? / VIII. THE SWORD IN ANCIENT EGYPT AND IN MODERN AFRICA / IX. "THE SWORD IN KHITA-LAND, PALESTINE AND CANAAN; PHENICIA AND CARTHAGE; JEWRY, CYPRUS, TROY, AND ETRURIA" / X. "THE SWORD IN BABYLONIA, ASSYRIA AND PERSIA, AND ANCIENT INDIA" / XI. THE SWORD IN ANCIENT GREECE : HOMER ; HESIOD AND HERODOTUS: MYCENÆ  
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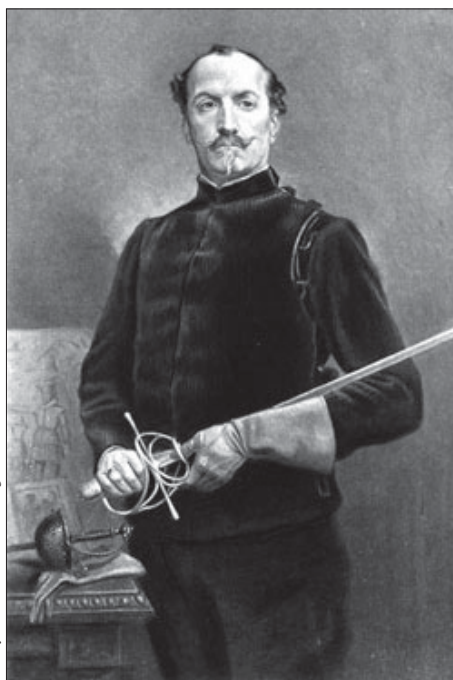
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in the most courtly fashion, were considered uncouth. The featherweight small sword provided a personal weapon as light, elegant, and refined as the spirit itself. Even if the profession of the gentleman was to carry a sword, the fashionable courtier of the Age of Enlightenment was determined that his "work" would involve as little actual sweat as possible. This perception is borne out by a well-known anecdote of the famous fencing master Domenico Angelo defeating a certain Dr. Keys in a celebrated early-eighteenth century contest. Keys, an Irishman of considerable size and strength, challenged the French-schooled Angelo to a fencing match in a London tavern, which often served as venues for such entertainments. According to Angelo's son, the challenger cut a "a tall, athletic figure... his shirt sleeves tucked up, exposing a pair of brawny arms, sufficient to cope in the ring with Broughton or Slack (two famous pugilists of the day)." Angelo, however, easily put by all of Keyes' powerful attacks with small, skillful, and effortless motions, and then went on to score a number of unanswered hits on his exhausted adversary.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, what this meant to contemporaries can be easily interpolated: the intellect and science of the Enlightenment, or at least of the self-made gentleman and courtier of that era, had triumphed over brute force, as personified by the uncouth Irish. Angelo went on to become an enormously influential and successful teacher of fencing and other manly graces to the gentlemen of England, and is a significant reason why Hutton and Castle would eventually come out as such aficionados of the French method.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, improvement in technique, with all its moral implications, is the logical result of technological development. In fact, it is the logical result of it. As Hutton says, "(The) change of pattern in the sword necessitated a change in the method of using it." Moral, artistic, and ethical development go hand-in-hand with mechanical progress; the industrial revolution, according to this mindset, could only produce beneficial results. Technical improvement leads to overall improvement, just as oil painting is superior to panel painting.

However, despite Hutton and Castle's impressions, it is not the case that the



*Drawing of Captain Alfred Hutton*

Italians were, in practice, inferior in any wise to the French in the practical application of the art of the sword. We find in contemporary accounts of contests between fencing masters that the southerners at least held their own. Whereas it is true that, the style of the "home team" was preferred as the most beautiful, elegant, and effective, we see in such events as the French tour of the Italian Scuola Magistrale in 1889, the visitors gave as good as they got.<sup>12</sup> Fencing was a common and widely followed sport in the late nineteenth century in such places as Paris, at least amongst the upper classes. Newspapers even employed fencing critics who, in many ways, filled the roles that both sports writers and theater critics do in modern mass media—for fencing was, as we have said, an aesthetic as well as an athletic exercise. As one such critic, the French fencing master Rupiere, remarked with obvious nationalistic bias: "The Roman masters have not yet abandoned theatrical postures, useless movements and contortions, and the continuous beating of the adversary's blade, which they search for in a monotonous fashion... but the attack executed from immobility (i.e. in the French manner) is always superior to the attack performed with an advance (a typically Italian maneuver)..."<sup>13</sup> However, another French master, Victor Maurel, disagreed with the "sour grapes" approach and wrote this on the difficulty the French fencers had with the Italians:

"Above all, the purpose of fencing to the Italian fencers is combat; their aim is to hit and not be hit. We, instead, admire, above all, aesthetic bouts. Here is the habitual expression, and we hear this heresy daily: 'One beautiful hit equals ten bad ones.' With this attitude, one can obtain only a conventional art that is no longer combat (i.e. no longer has practical martial applications), and that places one in a position of inferiority when faced with men who fence seriously."<sup>14</sup>

The boldfaced words are significant. What can we read into this preference for "aesthetic bouts," that rhymes so well with Castle's earlier comment on "the courteous and academic 'assault' of modern days"? Clearly, to this mindset, the artistic and the scientific are one—"truth is beauty, and beauty is truth," as Keats said. But why, as far as fencing goes, was beauty more important than effectiveness?

Peter Gay, in *The Cultivation of Hatred*, the third volume of his great psychological study of the nineteenth century European bourgeois psyche, does not specifically handle fencing, though he does discuss the German student ritual of the mensur.<sup>15</sup> Still, Gay may give us a methodological pointer that can help us arrive at an answer. We would suggest that, by the formalization of violence, it is, in a way, controlled. The world is thus ordered, and the raw id, while acknowledged and given vent to, is removed one step from reality and thereby both diffused and taken out of sight. The violent instinct, in other words, is both socialized and hidden, acknowledged and denied. Gay says the mensur "is a superb instance of the clash between the two meanings of cultivation, an exercise in aggression checked by accepted rules," but this may be said, to an extent, of similar ritual, or indeed, of any sport.<sup>16</sup> Further, in agonistic fencing, at least, the reality of conflict and death is given a veneer of sociability. In civilized society, which is to say progressed society, one is not in daily peril of one's life. Saber-toothed tigers do not haunt Piccadilly Circus, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting pedestrians, and Genghis Khan almost never leads his Mongol hordes down Bond Street, stopping to loot Sotheby's on the way to Buckingham Palace. Like





Sir Walter Pollock and Egerton Castle demonstrating in London, 1889.

Courtesy of Britain's National Fencing Museum.

wise, we do not die in polite society; we "pass on," and we are not fired, but rather "let go."

By sweeping these grim realities under the rug, the euphemistic hiding away and disguising of war, death, sickness, and other unpleasantness, is thus maintained. The reality of death at a sword's point was likewise masked by the extreme academic formalization of the training. One does not really penetrate another man with one's steel, one achieves a "touche" with the "fleuret." (The Freudian overtones of this need not be remarked upon.) The fact of violence is thus incorporated into the socially constructed, self-referential web of ideas that constitute "culture."

Even when the bourgeois gentleman was willing to lay down his life, such as in a duel or in the opening days of World War I, it was for an abstract idea such as honor or love of country—an aesthetic ideal taking on the substance of an ethical concept in his mind and in the minds of the onlookers. The duelist makes himself the subject of the onlookers, wishing to win acclaim, objectifying himself and his opponent. In their agon is played out both their own drama, upholding their status in the eyes of their peers, and exorcising the collective insecurity of their entire class, perched midway between chevalier and shopkeeper. Nor should it be forgotten that this ideal was one that began with the feudal knight, who collected rents and

rode off to defend Christendom, or at least his own bit of it, and was passed to the new nouveau riche, who, even if they were the "nobility of the robe," still armed themselves. Thence, third-hand, was it traded down to the gentlemen of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If the duelist of the sixteenth century went out into the field to prove himself worthy of the esteem of his peers; the duelist of the nineteenth, with his internalized sense of honor, may perhaps be said to have followed his footsteps of his predecessor to prove to his peers that he was worthy of his own self-respect.

The French duel of the nineteenth century, as Kevin McAleer points out in his excellent book on *Duelling*, was a comparatively bloodless affair, usually conducted with epees, or else wildly inaccurate smoothbore pistols. Though there was much elan, pomp, and circumstance, there were relatively few fatalities, since it was usually stopped before a lethal wound was inflicted. Neither side truly wished to be killed or to try one's courage, or at least make a good show of it, was enough.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it was more of a social happening, and the supposedly illegal affair would be well-covered by the press, with reporters remarking on the style and panache with which the duelists had conducted themselves. So, even what was in theory deadly combat was, in fact, extremely conventional in all its aspects.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, we should not be surprised if The Devil's

Dictionary defines a duel as "a ceremony necessary before the reconciliation of two enemies. A long time ago, someone died in a duel."

On the other hand, the favored dueling weapon of the Germans (as McAleer records) was a much more lethal rifled version of the pistol at murderous ranges, or, on other occasions, the dangerous and disfiguring saber. McAleer further suggests that this, along with the brutal *mensur*, may have something to say about the essential character of German society, as opposed to the character of French society.<sup>19</sup> A large segment of the German population, apparently, was more willing to risk death, pain, or other unpleasantness for peer approval, and was more conformist and obedient to authority, not just because it was authority per se, but because it was socially expected to be obedient.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, the German duel was much deadlier than its French counterpart.

It should be noted, though, that both sides, come 1914, died in the trenches with equal aplomb. The aesthetic appeal of a beautiful death was revealed to be no more than a mask, the rouge-brightened cheek of an aged courtesan who was yet acknowledged the most beautiful woman to ever live. It has been suggested, both by McAleer and others, that the carnage of the World Wars, more than the anti-duelling societies, was what helped to put a brake on the frivolous shedding of blood.

Thus far, we have seen several obvious nineteenth century ideas—progressive moral positivism, nationalism and racialism, and the conflation of aesthetic ideas, ethics, and scientific truth—crop up in our discussion.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, displaying another sort of "pop Darwinism," both Hutton and Castle, in *Old Sword-Play and Schools and Masters*, completely discount any offshoots of, or strange Pleistocene antecedents to, what was seen as the final development of the evolution of the art. An excellent example of this is the Spanish school of fence, which in itself was a remarkable cultural artifact and which most probably was the antecedent to the Italian school, yet is mysteriously glossed over in Hutton's work, and denigrated in Castle's:

"It is a remarkable fact that in Spain, the reputed birthplace of systematic sword-



Edgerton Castle

Courtesy of Britain's National Fencing Museum.

manship, so little progress should have been made towards what may be called the more practical use of the sword. Whilst the Italians, and, after their example, the French, Germans, and English, gradually discovered that simplification led to perfection, the Spanish masters, on the contrary, seemed to aim at making fencing a more and more mysterious science, requiring for its use a knowledge of geometry and natural philosophy, and whose principles were only explainable on metaphysical grounds."<sup>22</sup>

Castle likewise completely discounts the possibility of there having been a valid school of arms at any time before the Renaissance:

"The rough untutored fighting of the Middle Ages represented faithfully the reign of brute force in social life as well as in politics. The stoutest arm and the weightiest sword won the day, even as did the sturdiest baron or the most warlike king. Those were the days of crushing blows with mace or glaive, when a knight's superiority in action depended upon his power of wearing heavier armor and dealing heavier blows than his neighbour, when strength was lauded more than skill, and minstrels sang of enchanted blades that nought could break."<sup>23</sup>

Later, he makes such ridiculous statements as, "...the habit of wearing defen-

sive armour in battle, and, indeed, on most occasions out of doors, caused the sword to be regarded in the light of a weapon of offense only, sufficient reliance being placed on headpiece and carapace for protection," and: "The chivalrous science never had anything but a retarding effect on the science of fence."<sup>24</sup>

Whereas this is to some extent true, to the degree that there was no specifically civilian form of armed self-defense for settling affairs of honor, this is not to say that there was no evidence of a system of systematic swordplay. Because of his selective blindness and prejudice (for, no doubt, there were a great many Zulus and Hindus who would have disagreed with his position on "the reign of brute force" in British politics), Castle apparently did not even bother to look close to home for evidence. The Royal Armouries are in possession of the first known *fechtbuch* ("fighting manual"), written in Germany in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, and catalogued as Cotton *MS I-33*. Whereas the sword-and-buckler play shown therein is quite different from both Castle's "modern" fencing and from what we are used to seeing as "medieval sword fighting" in the movies, the work is obviously Scholastic in flavor in that it seeks to systematize and explain a methodological system of all-purpose armed self-defense.

Later, Castle even handles, in a semi-favorable light, the German *Marxbruder*, one of several German guilds (*federfecthten*) that taught *der riddersche kunst*, a systematic style of fighting with the long sword, and which incorporated such weapons as the rapier and smallsword as they came into fashion. This school may even be traced back to the mid-fourteenth century, placing it firmly as a "Medieval" school that taught "Medieval" weapons.<sup>25</sup> The cultured art of fencing, to this mindset, was necessarily a rational, humanistic invention, one that involved a degree of thought and sophistication impossible to what was seen as the superstitious, backwards Medieval mind. Therefore, it was something that would naturally come into being with the Renaissance in Italy and the rediscovery of classical learning. Castle generally regards the early Spanish school as an offshoot of the

Medieval school, despite the fact that a perusal of surviving manuals will show that its intent was likewise to resolve civilian affairs of honor. Castle seems to contradict himself, on not one, but on several accounts, in his attempt to fit established historical facts into his scheme. He states that "beyond that fact that there were regular and well-known schools of arms in Spain during the fifteenth century, and the fact that Spanish bands-the best trained in the use of arms of all European troops at that period-overran Italy and the Low Countries during the sixteenth century, there are no reasons, notwithstanding the current opinion to that effect, to ascribe to Spain the birthplace of the art."<sup>26</sup> Yet, he also says that Achille Marozzo (a Bolognese master of the early 16th century) "is generally looked upon as the first writer of note on the art of fencing. It would perhaps be wiser to consider him as the greatest teacher of the old school, the rough and undisciplined swordsmanship of which depended as much on violence and sudden inspiration as on carefully cultivated skill,"<sup>27</sup> but does not say how Marozzo was any different from the Spanish. The wide cultural contact between Spain and Italy, such as the occupation of the Kingdom of Naples or the election of a Valencian, Rodrigo Borgia, to the office of Pope, and the ascendance of duels "in shirtsleeves" during this period, which we have negative evidence of in the form of the practice's denigration by the Milanese master-at-arms Pietro Monte,<sup>28</sup> does not figure into his history. In this moral positivism, we may see reflected a supreme confidence in one's own world, and at least lip service towards the fruits of "progress." Yet, there is also doubt. Ironically enough, there is a certain amount of reactionary interest, even of antiquarianism, inherent in the study of fencing, associated as it is with the privileges of the aristocracy. Even the emphasis on aesthetics above all is a strange and contradictory feature. Indeed, the entire purpose of Castle's friend Alfred Hutton's work on *Old Sword Play* is the study of historical weapons. We may then, if it is not too general a statement, include this nineteenth century interest in swordplay, old and modern, as an element of the "romantic" movement.



Yet, what is this chimera called "romanticism?" Like the Questing Beast from *Le Morte D'Arthur*, many have sought to capture its quintessence, but it has eluded them all. There are so many varieties, from the retro-Medievalism of Scott and the Pre-Raphaelites to the utopian idealism of the Chartists and the Socialists, to Lord Byron's aristocratic rejection of the world and his foppish dissipation, that no definition can possibly encapsulate them all. In fact, romanticism can only be defined by what it is not, or, in other words, what it is in opposition to: modernity.

The romantic is disaffected with the modern age, with its soot-darkened skies and its replacement of vast tracts of countryside with housing developments, with its weapons of mass destruction and its poverty-stricken slums. Machines are efficient, but they are unbeautiful, replacing personal handiwork with mass-produced product and reducing the individual to no more than a variable in an equation of profit. The modern city, moreover, is an alienated place, where displaced strangers, brought in from intimately small villages, are housed in impersonal, identical apartment buildings. Instead, the romantic longs for a utopia, either in the past or in the future, or hidden away in some undeveloped corner of the world, where their own vision of happiness is realized. Modernity is ugly and unaesthetic; the romantic vision is beautiful and aesthetic, a chiliastic hope for the ideal world. And, as the contemporary or near-contemporary writings of Sir Walter Scott and the paintings of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood amply demonstrate, the image of the long-ago and far-away romanticized Middle Ages were seen as a more aesthetic, if brutal, time, when idealists, not accountants, held sway over public life. In France, this is reflected in the writings of Alexandre Dumas, where D'Artagnan and the Three Musketeers carve out their destiny in Riechlieu's France with a rapier's point. The image of the sword in such as John Waterhouse's *The Accolade* is one of the tool and symbol of the just idealist, the fantastical knight-errant of Mallory who fought for love and honor, good and right, God and country, not for profit and money.

Learning to use the sword in the age of



Sir Richard Burton

Courtesy of Britain's National Fencing Museum.

the six-shooter and Gatling gun is most certainly a rejection of unbeautiful modernity. Certainly, both Castle and Hutton seemingly identify with the weaponed gentleman of a bygone age. The duel, the idea of a man defending himself and his honor, was an anachronism in an age of shopkeepers, where a person's worth was increasingly considered only as what could be quantified into figures of production and consumption, and where the law court had replaced the dueling field. However, these nineteenth century romantics are not alone. Indeed, they were dreaming a dream that we have never quite woken up from. Certainly, we can detect such biases in the work of historians, such as E.P. Thompson, who study the pre- or early- modern era. Since Thompson's work deals with the English working class, rather than the aristocracy, he looks at his era as an age of moral economy, of a time when a person was considered as part of a community, not as an individually quantitized wage-earner, and where economic transactions had a social, not just a fiscal, aspect. As an avowed Marxist, it would seem that he would clearly prefer this social milieu to that of the capitalist world.

Though there have been few recent works on the history of fencing per se, there have been several which deal with dueling, thus giving us some sort insight into what contemporary historians think about these matters.<sup>29</sup> McAleer's somewhat iconoclastic, but thoroughly enjoyable, *Duelling* has already been mentioned. Another recent work is Billacois' *The Duel: Its Rise and Fall in Early Modern France*.

This last work, however, has some serious flaws. Billacois proceeds from a historical perspective admittedly influenced by the French Cartesian school. Though he admits the problems with attempting to reconstruct an extralegal practice through strict adherence to documentation,<sup>30</sup> he also makes use of a number of works, such as treatises on honor and dueling, in order to gain some perspective on the matter. Yet, nowhere amongst these is a fencing manual, in which fencing masters, the recognized arbiters of the extralegal duel, invariably also included essays treating with the implications of the code of honor. To attempt a history of the social implications of dueling without using such sources is like attempting a book on human anatomy without ever dissecting a cadaver, or attempting a book on the Roman law code without ever learning to read Latin. Because of this, he can not see the forest for the trees.

Furthermore, Billacois is unforgivably Francocentric, utterly dismissive of the significance of the duel in Spain or Italy. Whereas the English historians Hutton and Castle see the French as cool-headed and elegant, at least when compared to the Italians, Billacois subscribes to the myth of the Gallic fighting-cock. Had he, however, even made a cursory survey of schools and masters of fence, he probably would have realized that the duel was not merely an foreign phenomenon imported into France, where, like jazz, it achieved its "true realization" as a socio-artistic form. Rather, Billacois makes bald, unsupported statements such as, "the duel never had a properly native existence in the Iberian peninsula,"<sup>31</sup> while seemingly insensate of all evidence to the contrary.

Nor does he examine the plethora of Italian fencing manuals, despite the fact that they were written in a fragmented and chaotic political and social climate that we would think more likely to produce duels than would 17th century France. In fact, it was the Italians, not the French, who exported fencing masters to England and the Low Countries.<sup>32</sup> The French duel would seem to have been most in vogue at a time when the new "nobility of the robe," bourgeois rising in social status, were in conflict with one another and with the old "nobility of the

sword," attempting to conform to the old military ideas of aristocracy and thus prove their worthiness. Billacois does not seem to handle this idea, either pro or con, in his book, instead merely pointing out that incidence of dueling diminishes in times of war, and that, in peace, Huguenots and Catholics were likely to find each other at the ends of each other's swords.

Finally, Billacois suggests, in the conclusion to *The Duel*, that dueling was a self-destructive method of resistance to the king's newly centralized power comparable with modern-day airline hijacking. Billacois' assertion is itself an excellent example of transferring the thought and concerns of one's one own times onto a bygone age. Though, certainly, there is a political aspect that can be read into the duel, it was never meant as such. Dueling was, by definition, ostensibly a private affair, played out in front of one's peers, and not a public political act. That "sticking it to The Man" was at the fore of the minds of seventeenth century duelists seems unlikely in the extreme; more likely, they sought simply to stick it to the one particular man who they felt had insulted them, with or without the permission of centralized authority. It would seem that researchers into early modern aristocratic culture would benefit greatly from a well-written secondary source on the matter. So, if Hutton, Castle, et al. are scions of the "modern" school of thought, what would a "post-modern" history of fencing be like fencing? We know what a Ranke or a Gibbon would say on the matter, and even what the modern Cartesian school would say, but what would a Foucault or a Diderot say? We must now cease criticizing, and attempt to answer the questions that we have raised.

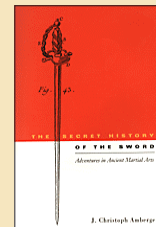
First of all, it should be instantly recognized that fashions in weapons, be they part of one's costume or solely intended for use on the "field of honor," are, like the duel itself, social constructions. By its very definition, a duel is a combat by convention. The weapons used, be they rapiers, small swords, epees, sabers, pistols, or sledgehammers waist-deep in a Louisiana bayou, are an agreed-upon convention. The way of fighting, at an appointed place and time, with an air of nonchalance, is conventional.<sup>33</sup> The code

of honor is likewise a convention, being no more or less than what it is agreed to be by society. It is not based not on one's own feelings of self-worth and inner life, the bourgeois, nineteenth-century development of which Peter Gay has excellently chronicled in *The Naked Heart*, but on the acclimation of one's peers.<sup>34</sup>

It is a relic from a time when one's outer self was one's inner self. From the first insult to the final blow, and the resolution afterwards, all is dictated not by the duelists themselves, but by the code. The technical aspects of the "science of fence," as well, might be seen as conventions. For instance, the hand positions for parries, numbered in the French school from one to eight, are pedagogical constructions, used to describe more accurately various actions that might be taken during a match. When Hutton transcribes exercises for the broadsword or two-handed sword, he also translates the actions into the commonly understood language. Thus, Marozzo's colorfully named "Porta di ferro alta" is "quarte," the "Cinghiara porta di ferro" is "tierce."<sup>35</sup>

While this would seem to indicate a continuity of tradition, in that the same physical motions are merely described by different names, we must ask if there is some overlooked cultural parallax here. Can a nineteenth-century Englishman fence like a sixteenth-century Italian, or would the conventions and training of his own school and his own time period—such as the supposed superiority of the parry-riposte action, as opposed to the counter-action in single time-limit him?<sup>36</sup>

So, even the most necessary elements of the pedagogical system might be seen as no more than what they are agreed to be. Against this heresy, however, the "moral positivist" might reply that certain laws of physics (such as rate times time equals distance) will always apply to both swords and freight trains. Likewise, certain biomechanical principles will likewise always be true, even if much of the rest is an edifice built upon this bedrock. There can be no argument against the fact that there are certain principles and practices that, barring accidents of chance, will carry one through most any encounter. The "science" of fencing might be seen as a combination of both practical observation and cultural arti-



The Secret History  
of The Sword  
by J. Christoph Amberger

228x152 mm, 192 pp,  
33 photos

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## THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE SWORD

The Japanese don't hold a monopoly on fascinating sword history and evolving combat methods. Europe has equally venerable sword traditions, ably revealed and chronicled in J. Christoph Amberger's *The Secret History of the Sword: Adventures in Ancient Martial Arts*. Evidently, your average Western sports fencer has as little idea of the "true" history of the art as does your average Japanese sports kendoka. Misinformation and myths abound (sound familiar?). In *The Secret History of the Sword* Amberger does a remarkable job of laying many of these to rest, correcting prevailing misconceptions with numerous primary accounts of sword combat throughout European history from medieval trial by combat to modern German student dueling fraternities.

Amberger uncovers many of the realities of both battle and personal combat with blades - and he knows whereof he speaks: as a member of a German student dueling fraternity he participated in seven *Mensuren*, armed with a live blade. His story and the others he presents are loaded with useful information; although the book is obviously directed at the Western sword aficionado, there is a great deal of value here for we students of the Japanese sword as well.

The chapter "Men of Iron" covers a topic relevant to all involved in the pursuit and study of combat systems, ancient or modern, Eastern or Western - the fact of fear and its effects on even the most well-trained combatants. In other chapters he discusses the difficulty of reconstructing ancient sword systems; unlike many of the Japanese *koryu*, there is no direct transmission to draw on. But there are detailed manuals and accounts, and these together with research into the weapons morphology, the culture, and the socio-political climate of the era in which a system existed allow one to make some educated guesses on how the weapons might have been used in various circumstances.

The entire volume is simply fascinating reading; my sole complaint is that for someone not up on the details of Western fencing terminology, it can get a little confusing at first. I found that Part Two cleared up a lot of those details for me, so you might want to consider reading it first, then going back to the beginning. All in all, I recommend this book highly to anyone with an interest in swords!

Diane Skoss  
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fact. It is the application of human reason, and human culture, to coarse and brutal reality. As such, it might be described with equal accuracy as both an "art" and as a "science." The overlooked Spanish school of fence bears some discussion here. Besides that fact that, as the first purely civilian system of combat intended for use in settling private affairs of honor, it was of great influence on the development of later schools of fence in other countries, it provides us with an excellent field, as it were, in which to set one historical construction up against another for a trial by combat. Sadly maligned both by Castle and by later historians, and contrary to what Billacois writes, the first Spanish fencing manuals, treating with civilian combat, if not *la verdadera destreza* itself, date from 1474.<sup>37</sup> Thus, they precede by half a century the *Opera Nova of Marozzo* (published in 1536), which is widely regarded as the beginnings of the Italian school.<sup>38</sup> By applying a different historical philosophy to the problem, we may arrive at some valuable insights into early modern Spanish culture, just as we used Hutton and Castle to explore the nineteenth century.

In practice, the Spanish method, as it took its final form in the seventeenth century, appears far different from what we are accustomed to regard as fencing. It is a conventional, formalized, even ritualized, combat, appearing more like a dance than a sword fight. The two combatants face each other, walking the perimeter of an imaginary circle inscribed on the floor. Their posture is upright, their knees locked, as in the manner of a Spanish court dance, and their swords are held out at arm's length. The fencers and their weapons circle about one another, seeking an advantageous angle. When an attack is made, it is by stepping off along an angle, in effect, inscribing a chord in the circle. If done correctly, this will carry one's own blade home, while avoiding the point of the adversary—fencing by numbers, if you will. The overall appearance is one of elegant menace.

However, to understand the Spanish school of fencing, it is first necessary to understand the culture that it proceeds from. We must begin, strangely enough, with Scholastic philosophy and the problem



Alfred Hutton 1910

Courtesy of Britain's National Fencing Museum.

of universals, an ancient dilemma that was revived in the Middle Ages and, strangely enough, is repeated in the twentieth century (see Figures A-C). At its heart, the controversy is one of certainty: Is there absolute truth, or is there not?

The problem of universals proceeds from a classical philosophical argument over the Platonic Ideas first proposed by the philosopher Porphyry. The "realist" position, held by orthodox thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas, affirms the existence of these Ideas, which St. Augustine located in the mind of God. There is an essential "quiddity," or essence, of, for example, "man," that is common to all men. Likewise, there is an essential characteristic common to all combs, another common to all horses, and others common to immaterial concepts, such as "love" or "justice."

Meanwhile, the "nominalist," position, as might be guessed, holds that these "universals" exist only as mental constructions. One Medieval objection to the Realist position, for instance, is how a singular essence can be divided amongst many objects and still remain singular.<sup>39</sup> This debate is not of interest just to philosophers and zoologists. For the Catholic believer, for instance, it calls into question the theology of the Holy Trinity, where three persons partake in the same essence.

Likewise, it places us in a moral conundrum: is there, then, such a thing as good or justice, which are located in and identified with God? Can anything be known

for certain? Without sure knowledge, how can we apply our intellect to act in a wise, rational, and moral manner? "Is this a dagger I see before me, or is it but a dagger of the mind?" We can see that, in many ways, the nominalist position is echoed, at least on a basic level, by the New Linguistics: Concepts only have existence in the mind, since they are social constructions. The old problem of universals has applications in such things as statistics and feminist theory: How are all women alike? Does what applies to one woman apply to all, or vice versa, or both, or neither?<sup>40</sup>

One ancient proof of the Realist position, which also has hermetic, Pythagorean, and kabbalistic overtones, is through mathematics and geometry. For instance, the square of the hypotenuse of a triangle will always be equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in Renaissance manuals, the Platonic forms were envisioned as geometrical forms, just as were the "crystal spheres" that were the homes of the planets.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the position of geometry in the Medieval academic curriculum: To demonstrate mathematical truths.<sup>43</sup>

Castle summarizes the work of the famous Spanish master Don Jeronimo de Carranza thusly: "[his] is the first of the long series of ponderous Spanish treatises on the 'raison demonstrative,' in which the ruling principle, after the Aristotelian method, is the 'conocimiento de la cosa por su causa,' and the purpose, to demonstrate that a perfect theoretical knowledge must infallibly lead to victory, notwithstanding grievous physical disadvantage."<sup>44</sup> Whereas we may disagree as to how "ponderous" it was, it was certainly Aristotelian. Castle has hit the nail right on the head: the Spanish method was a rational method of fighting, proceeding by established principles in a way that could not help but succeed. The Spanish school of fence was thus "scientific" in the sense that it used geometry as a proof of the efficacy of its system. The entire scheme, while conventional, as suits a ritualistic combat between equals, was also geometrically based. We thus see how it was enmeshed in a complex teratogenic web of Scholastic philosophy, Christian doctrine, aesthetic taste, and scientific knowledge. It embodies the idea of *gracia* in all its connotations.



*A view of a 18th-century fencing salle*

Without understanding all of these, the affair of honor in early modern Spain is impossible to comprehend. The swordsman trained in the Spanish school uses his knowledge of the underlying foundations of the universe to affirm himself in a cool, detached, and scientific manner that, incidentally, is also a type of kinetic art. As Carranza himself said, "la solucion de la dubda es el invencio de la verdad."<sup>45</sup>

It is these Medieval and Renaissance philosophical roots that are the direct antecedent to the "scientific moral positivism" of the nineteenth century that claimed to have a monopoly on truth. Ironically, the historians of the "modern," "perfect" mode of fencing would later overlook these intellectual antecedents, just as they overlooked the school itself. Yet, without what had gone before, what came later would never have been. Rather than being the capstone of history, the "modern" era was, instead, both the heir and the traditor of a long legacy.

While all this may seem to be another example of social construction heaped upon social construction, it must be remembered that these techniques, or, we should say, technologies, work, just as medicine and aircraft and light switches do. Men (and women) were willing to stake their lives on the theories of these fencing masters, just as today, we trust our doctors, airline pilots, and electricians. To the Spanish gentleman of the "early modern" era, or the duelist of fin de siecle

France, this was not a perspective or an idea; it was truth itself laid bare in steel. A proof of its lasting quality is that it did not apparently die out until the nineteenth century, and that, in fact, that the Spanish were long held to be some of the deadliest swordsmen around. Certain things are always going to be eternally true, and there is nothing quite like staking one's life on a mathematical formula to make one appreciate this.

So, what is the point of this cockfight of ideas that has been presented in the guise of a discussion of the context of schools of fence? It is simply that many works of culture besides historian's text, the art historian's painting, or the archaeologist's pot sherd can give us insights into the culture that produced them. It is unfortunate that the study of relations between equals, be they kinetic or otherwise, is mired in a century of outdated ideas. Besides, if the task of the historian is to "interpret the past to the present," then in understanding these artifacts of culture, we better understand ourselves.

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NB: Manuscripts and books out-of-print are available in reproduction from Dr. Patri J. Pugilese, 39 Capen Street, Medford, MA 02155. (781-396-2870), save for I-33.

<sup>1</sup> Though many of the events of the 1960s and 1990s have come close (the L.A. riots and the "levitation" of the Pentagon come to mind. For the latter, see Abbie Hoffman, *Revolution for the Hell of It*.)

<sup>2</sup> We differentiate here between the "classical" fencing of the 19th and early 20th century and the modern sport of fencing, which is a conventional game based on athletic strength and endurance, utilizing an electronic scoring apparatus to determine touches.

<sup>3</sup> Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, p. 58

<sup>4</sup> Gaugler, *The Science of Fencing*, p. xxiv. (Maestro Gaugler is both a professor of classical archaeology and a fencing master of great repute).

<sup>5</sup> Castle, *Schools and Masters*, p. 312.

<sup>6</sup> Castle, *Schools and Masters of Fence*, p. 2. Emphasis has been added to the most telling statements by printing them in boldface.

<sup>7</sup> Alfred Hutton, *Old Sword-Play*, hypertext version prepared by Bryan Maloney at <http://www.people.cornell.edu/pages/bjm10/hutton/hutton.html>.

<sup>8</sup> The small sword is also significant for being the direct ancestor of the modern sport fencing weapons used since the nineteenth century. The foil was the training tool for the small sword; the epee, a dueling weapon that came into use after the sword ceased to be a part of male costume, is employed



in much the same manner. Once the technique for the weapon was established, it did change, but not as much or as radically as it did during the transition from rapier to small sword. (The history of schools of use of the dueling saber is complicated, but it is interesting that, as for foil, the Italian school uses much the same technique as was used for earlier weapons).

<sup>9</sup>Dangerous Liasons comes to mind.

<sup>10</sup>Castle, Schools and Masters, p. 302.

<sup>11</sup>Nick Evangelista, *The Man Who Invented Sport Fencing*. The Amercian Citizen, Summer 1993, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup>William Gaugler, *Epic Encounters between Italian and French Fencing Masters, 1881-1911*, The Sword, July 1988, p. 13. (The Sword is the publication of Britain's amateur fencing association.)

<sup>13</sup>Gaugler, *Epic Encounters*, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup>Gaugler, *Epic Encounters*, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup>For those unfamiliar with the mensur, it bears some discussion here. Tracing its lineage back to the student duels of the Middle Ages and continuing on to this day, the mensur, or "measure," is more a ritual or rite of passage than a sport. The adversaries, who are invariably drawn from two different studentkorps (duelling fraternities), are made to stand a sword's length away. The shorter is given a platform to stand on, so that they are of equal height. They are dressed in thick leathers, with their necks well protected, their heads covered by a leather cap, and their eyes shielded behind mesh goggles. However, their cheeks, chins, and faces are completely bare to the attacks of their opponent's razor-sharp schlaeger, which come in a lightning flurry as soon as the signal is given. The scars (schmiss) gained by this are permanent, but are a mark of pride amongst mensur aficionados. Indeed, a hundred years ago, such scars were quite fashionable, and a well-marked veteran would be considered quite a catch by the young ladies, for membership in a studentkorps indicated wealth, education, breeding, membership in the ultimate "old boy's club," and a very bright future indeed. Moving, flinching, crying out in pain, or disobeying the rules, the referee, the doctors, or any of their orders in the slightest are absolutely verboten. Obedience and the maintenance of a stiff upper lip (provided that it is still attached to one's face) is all in the mensur. One can easily understand why this was thought to be an excellent manly exercise in Bismark's Germany. In fact, Bismark himself had engaged in not a few student duels, in the days before they took this final form of immobile stoicism. ("In my day, we didn't parry with our faces!" he is recorded as saying. Still, when the command came from high up to storm that trench, the trench was stormed.) Violence is still controlled, by the control is "Apollonian"-placed under the domination of the will -rather than "Dionysiac" -transformed into an artistic form.

<sup>16</sup>Gay, *The Cultivation of Hatred*, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup>See McAleer, *Duelling*, Chapter VI.

The great Italian champion Aldo Nadi, in his recollection of his own duel in his book *On Fencing*, is both introspective, as only the modern mentality can be, and worried about the possible legal consequences of his encounter.

<sup>18</sup>McAleer, *Duelling*, p. 190.

<sup>19</sup>The issue that enters into this, of course, is that of whether there is an "essential character" to the German national psyche. This has been of no small importance to historians of the Holocaust.

<sup>20</sup>The case of the German execution units in World War II, as recounted in Browning's *Ordinary Men*, comes readily to mind. Browning suggests that these groups, composed mainly of poorly-trained reservists, were willing to commit war crimes not so much out of obedience, but because it was expected of them.

<sup>21</sup>Another example of moral positivism, ethics, and scientific truth is embodied in the racialism of the imperial era. "Taking up the white man's burden," as Kipling wrote, involved acting in a paternalistic fashion to the "less developed" races that, incidentally, happened to be wholly favorable to one's own economic interests.

<sup>22</sup>Castle, *Schools and Masters*, p. 95.

<sup>23</sup>Castle, *Schools and Masters*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup>Castle, *Schools and Masters*, p. 19.

<sup>25</sup>S. Matthew Galas, *Kindred Spirits*. The Journal of Asian Martial Arts Volume 6, Number 3, 1997.

<sup>26</sup>Castle, *Schools and Masters*, p. 46.

<sup>27</sup>Castle, *Schools and Masters*, p. 48.

<sup>28</sup>Monte is mentioned in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* as a master of feats of arms. Anglo, Sidney. "The Man Who Taught Leonardo Darts: Pietro Monte and His 'Lost' Fencing Book." The Anti-quaries Journal.

<sup>29</sup>No doubt corresponding to the unfortunate decline of the "art" of fencing in favor of the "sport" of fencing. Recall what Foucault said about competition.

Authors such as Matthew Galas and William Gaugler seem to write for an audience of fencers who are more interested in the technical aspects than in the sociological implications thereof. Though their works, particularly Dr. Gaugler's recent *History of Fencing*, are of excellent quality, their historical observations tend to be episodic and anecdotal-concentrating on the phenomon, rather than the nomenon, as it were. There has been little move towards an overall reappraisal of the philosophy of fencing history in its sociocultural context.

<sup>30</sup>Billacois, *The Duel* p. 72. Also see p. 60 and p. 72.

<sup>31</sup>Billacois, *The Duel*, p. 36.

<sup>32</sup>c.f. George Silver's *Paradoxes of Defense* (1597), in which the proponent of good, old-fashioned English broadsword-play rails against the "false fight" of the Italian rapier.

<sup>33</sup>Errol Flynn returning his adversary's fallen weapon, for instance, is tactically ludicrous, but expected by the audience-Captain Blood or Robin Hood is a "good guy," and expected to abide by rules of "fair play."

<sup>34</sup>A recent movie, *Rob Roy*, has said that "honor is the gift that a man gives himself." Nothing could be further from the truth.

<sup>35</sup>These names occur at least as far back as the fifteenth century.

<sup>36</sup>The difference between these two is that the parry-riposte, performed with a lighter, quicker weapon, such as the "walking sword," puts aside the attack,

and then replies, in two actions; the counter-action seeks to deviate the oncoming steel in the process of striking back, in one action.

<sup>37</sup>These manuals, by Jayme Pons and Pedro de la Torre, are now, unfortunately, lost, but reference is made to them in works by later masters, such as Narvaez, Palla Vicini, and Marcelli, who published in 1600, 1670, and 1686, respectively. (From the Martinez Classical Fencing FAQ). (It would be much appreciated if these incubalae could be found!)

<sup>38</sup>Gaugler, *Science of Fencing*, p. xxiv.

<sup>39</sup>Practitioners of sympathetic magic will object that this essence is not, in fact, subdivided. What affects a wax doll of John Silber, for instance, will affect him.

<sup>40</sup>For an example of the legal application of this, see Joan Wallach Scott's essay on "The Sears Case" in *Gender and the Politics of History*, p. 167.

<sup>41</sup>The objection to this, of course, is that the triangle is likewise a social construction. This objection is dealt with by means of what has become known as the "big rock" proof. To wit:

"You say that this triangle is naught but a social construction?"

"Yes, I do."

"Is this big rock here likewise a social construction?"

"I would have to say that it is."

"Then may I throw this nonexistent rock at your head?"

"Er..."

<sup>42</sup>Today, of course, we know that the planets follow elliptical orbits.

<sup>43</sup>For further discussion of this, c.f. Thomas Aquinas' *On Being and Essence* and his *Summa Theologica*, chapter LXXXV.

<sup>44</sup>Castle, *Schools and Masters*, p. 96. Oddly enough, the same might be said for Castle's own school of thought.

<sup>45</sup>Carranza, *De la Filosofia de las Armas*. (1569).

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