

Rapier Combat: An Introduction

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Introduction

Rapier Combat is a personal affair, each of the participants have their own view of what works in combat and what doesn't. This is not a paper about what the author thinks are the most effective attacks, nor is it about the training methods, which are used to train combatants.

Instead, it is a basic introduction to the rapier as a weapon, to the period in which it was used, and the schools and masters who promoted it and used it. This will in no way give a complete history of the rapier and describe all of the techniques that are possible with the weapon.

As a basic introduction it introduces the weapon: examining what it is able to do, and not able to do, where it came from and how it was replaced. Next, is a basic overview of the period in which the rapier was used most predominantly, demonstrating the technological innovations and social aspects of the development of the rapier and its style of combat. Finally there is a brief discussion of the schools and masters which are associated with the rapier and how they were similar and how they differed.

One of the most important aspects of this paper is that there is no documentation attached, and no references supplied at the end. It was written from the basic knowledge that has been collected over the years of participating in rapier combat. This compacts the broad amount of manuals that have been read, experiences that have been had, and study that the author has done on the subject to a relatively short paper about the basic aspects of rapier combat.

If the reader is interested in finding out more about the subject, he or she should feel free to approach the author for more information.

The Weapon

The rapier is a long, slender-bladed sword with a sharp edge and tip. It is a civilian weapon, often worn as much as a badge of rank or costume jewellery, and as a weapon of self-defence. This weapon is one step in an evolutionary series from the medieval war-sword to the foil and epee used in Olympic-style fencing. It was most commonly used in the period from the late sixteenth to the late seventeenth century, though there is evidence of its use up to and including the nineteenth century. One of the most important points about the rapier is that it was primarily a civilian weapon and not one often used in wars. The rapier also happens to mark the period of change from the knight to the gentleman, from the concept of chivalry to that of honour. As a weapon in the period, the rapier was also seen as a badge of rank, worn and used by the gentlemanly in duels to settle matters of honour.

Being slender in blade, the rapier's edge was not designed to cut. The point was the most effective offensive part of the weapon. The only way that the rapier could be used to cut would be to draw the edge along its target like a

razor, or make scratching blows with the tip in what the Italians referred to as *stramazone*. The full-bodied cuts and slashes, which are seen in movies, are things of fiction. The slender make of the blade prohibits cuts and slashes, these were more the realm of the rapiers' predecessors, the cut-and-thrust and the medieval war sword, both of which had much broader blades and were designed more for cutting than thrusting.

The thrust of the rapier was extremely lethal, the penetration of a mere couple of inches of blade would render an opponent incapacitated or dead. On the fleshy parts of the body, the *stramazone* would have been frighteningly effective. With an edge sharpened to a high degree, the drawing of a rapier across a target would have had a similar effect to that of a razor, especially effective against bare skin or fleshy parts of the body.

The evolution of the rapier is one of functionality. Toward the end of the medieval period and the start of the Renaissance, the introduction of gunpowder to the battlefield changed the way that wars would be fought forever. Armour was discarded as firearms would punch through it at long range, thus with the decline of armour the necessity to have weapons designed to smash their way through it were also in decline. Weapons designed to pierce through holes in armour or were not designed for use against armour were developed. The cut-and-thrust was the stepping stone from the cutting sword of the medieval period to the thrusting sword of the Renaissance. The cut-and-thrust still had a broad blade that enabled it to cut, but also possessed a sharper tip, which allowed it to thrust as well. The hilt of the weapon became more complex as bars and rings were added to protect the less armoured hand of the wielder. The rapier and the cut-and-thrust existed contemporaneously, the Italians and the Spanish promoting the rapier and the English promoting the rapier and cut-and-thrust. The cut-and-thrust eventually gave way to the rapier as technique with the rapier developed, mainly due to the superiority of the point over the edge.

The Period

The rapier is a weapon that was developed in the period of history called the Renaissance. It is important for an understanding of the weapon that it be correctly placed in history. The Renaissance was a period of the re-birth of science and the arts exemplified by such things as the works of Da Vinci and Dürer.

The re-birth of science and the arts had a great influence on the social aspects of life as well, noble birth was becoming less important and the great merchant families were starting to grow in importance. Centres of learning, such as Florence, flourished and the things produced there were seen as good, which lead to the spread of knowledge over the European continent.

Technology developed as a part of the Renaissance as well things like the printing press, and more importantly to this document, gunpowder and guns. The introduction of gunpowder to the battlefield made armour essentially obsolete. As such, weapons, which were designed to smash through armour also, became unnecessary. Weapons became lighter and required more accuracy in their use. For the battlefield, the cut-and-thrust and its kind were developed. These

weapons were also worn with civilian dress. As science developed, so did the science of defence, the Italian and Spanish masters developed a style more based upon the point than the edge, and a weapon to go with their new style, the rapier.

When talking about rapier combat and where it is placed in history, it is important to specify which school is being spoken about. The Italian school of rapier combat started in the late sixteenth century and lasted until the late seventeenth century when the colichemarde and the small sword were developed in France. The Spanish school on the other hand lasted late into the nineteenth century unbroken in tradition and style. The Italian is better known because it dominated the European continent and was adapted to suit the use of the small sword. Essentially the rapier was developed to fill the civilian market, for the gentlemen to use to be able to defend themselves in a duel or on the civilian street. It is important to understand how and why it evolved from its predecessors so that it can be fully understood as to why it existed.

Schools and Masters

There were two distinct styles of fence, known as schools, in the art of rapier combat in the Renaissance, the Italian and the Spanish. The Italian school was not a unified and codified set of principles, rather many schools all with similar teachings, based on the same set of ideas. The Spanish on the other hand was more unified in its principles, there were many masters but most taught the same sorts of things.

The main distinctions between the Italian school and the Spanish schools are in their basic premises. The Italian school focused more upon attack and counter-attack, with the notion of defence being secondary. It was thought that the best defence was a good counter-attack. In the Spanish schools on the other hand defence was thought of, and the notion of the parry in defence was used more extensively. The parry was used to set up for the counter-attack, thus once the person had defended they were in a better position to attack.

Especially due to the influence of Ridolfo Capo Ferro, the Italian school was more based upon linear attacks. The two combatants would engage head-on and leave the direction work to the positions and angles in which they used their weapons. The Spanish on the other hand was played in a round, the combatants would circle each other trying to open gaps in the other's defence by using angles and geometry. The Spanish school has more of a basis in science and mathematics than that of the Italian. This is not to say, of course, that the Italian school was not based upon firm grounding principles, if it was not then how could it be that this school would influence so much of what we see in modern fencing.

It is easy to see the two schools as distinctively separate, but in effect they were not. The two schools did interact across the European continent, competing against on another, and combining to form hybrid styles such as that of Vincentio Saviolo, Achille Marozzo and Girard Thibault who used ideas from both the Italian and Spanish schools.

Aside from the individual schools and the combinations of the Italian and

Spanish there was at least one theorist who thought that the use of the rapier as devised by both the Italian and Spanish was ludicrous, and it is important to include this individual as a reaction to the "invasion" of these foreign concepts. The individual whom is spoken about is George Silver, an Englishman who thought that the rapier was a flawed weapon and that a shorter cutting sword would be better in use and much safer than the rapier. Silver is an interesting case, and while his ideas are somewhat strange, and in some cases are ridiculous, he is an important character and is useful for an exterior point of view, a kind of Devil's Advocate of Renaissance fencing and the rapier.

Conclusion

There is a great deal of information available about the subject of rapier combat and its associated topics, it is really a matter of knowing where to look. As has been stated this paper only really is the tip of the iceberg. The paper presented has been a basic introduction to the concept of rapier combat, where it fits into history, some of the major proponents, and schools of thought.

One of the most important things about the rapier is that it was a product of its social, political, and technological surroundings and should be viewed within these boundaries. The rapier was a civilian sword designed for duels, it was used on the battlefield but this was not its primary purpose. It can not be compared to the war sword, and nor can it be compared to the foil or small sword, one is the wrong sort of scenario and the others are much too late in the historical period. The rapier can only be compared with weapons of a similar period and use.

It is the advice of the author that the reader should, if they are interested, do more research and see what he or she may find on the rapier and its particular form of combat. It is hoped that for some this will introduce some to a weapon and area of study that will keep them interested for a long time to come.