



A Short History of European Swordplay

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The history of fencing, having gathered dust for a century, experienced an amazing explosion of research and publishing activity at the end of the 20th century by people we know personally. And it's still expanding.

Can a history story be really truthful? All have points of view; most have agendas. Ours is to support our tradition of friendly competition. For us, fencing (or swordplay) is non-serious combat between two people using stick-like hand weapons applying mental and physical skill to both attack and defend.

Most histories of fencing are based on the evolution of swords into something that could be used for fun. Others follow the serious use of the sword, with references to training soldiers and gladiators with the sword using posts as targets, but this is not fencing. What we're looking for is sword *play*... fun.

In the 12th century something happens when Welsh culture meets Norman aggressiveness. The Arthurian stories of knights, jousting and duels written down and popularized at the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine, c. 1150, are different from anything that went before. These legends tell us of "honorable" one-on-one combats, agreed on by the knights and carried on with no hatred even though they might end in beheading – or the meeting of long-lost brothers.

Two centuries later, the idea of friendly combat among the common people appears in the Robin Hood legends. Robin made defeating him a condition of joining his band. We see friendly sparring and fair play emphasized over winning every time. Little John and the sheriff's cook sit down to ale and meat pies before setting about each other with sharps.

My point: it's not about the weapons, nor even about winning – it's about the people and the fun.

The art as taught

Many histories of fencing emphasize teaching, which introduces the idea of sword use without injury — one of the requirements of sword play. An edict of the 1270s from Edward I of England banned fencing schools in London. The weapons for training were blunt swords, real bucklers, and any number of makeshifts for the halberd and spear. Blunt or flexible safety weapons were called foils.

You've heard that the sword was the knight's privilege; commoners being prohibited from owning them. True for serf and peasants, but by Chaucer's time, sword and buckler were standard articles of outdoor clothing for the yeomanry, a class of commons above peasant but below esquire, from which the longbowmen came.

By the 1400s, we see evidence of fencing in manuscript borders and decorations which often show men or boys playing at sword and buckler. Or... girls. The "Tower of London Fechtbuch" (fight book) now referred to as "Ms. I33" is a 14th-century German manuscript on parchment. The colorful, detailed illustrations show a priest, a monk, and a woman named Walpurgis playing at sword and buckler while the Latin/German text gives the play-by-play. That's the book Dr. Jeffrey Forgeng was translating during his seven years in Ann Arbor while working on the Middle English Dictionary — and playing with members of the Ann Arbor Sword Club.

That it's a German manual – the fencing terms are in German – exemplifies the fact that most of the heavy lifting in the development of the European martial arts happened in Germany. The 14th-century master Johannes Leichtenauer holds the belt as the father of German swordplay. Much follows from his work, including Italians like Fiori. For a vivid motorbike history of the period fencing manuals I can do no better than suggest the video of Dr. Forgeng's 2014 lecture on the subject at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

In the early 1990s the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted an exhibit of early fencing books and equipment, including bucklers with belt-hooks and lightweight, flexible longsword-foils with sturdy guards and grips and a circa-1560 fencing doublet. (I took photos of the entire exhibit.) That exhibit, I believe, opened a lot of eyes and helped trigger the explosion of interest we saw later that decade.

More and more fencing-manuals are getting translated into modern languages with the result that historical fencing is burgeoning worldwide. It is clear from the massive catalogue of these "fechtbuchs" that the German

Longsword was the key to the city of fencing for three centuries. But Johan Meyer's 1570 masterwork also teaches rapier and dagger as well as German specialties like Dusack, a short broad sabre often made in hard leather for practice and play. The first edition of Dr. Forngeng's translation sold out in under two years.

The world of swordplay is wider than the history of sword-schools and dueling. From many sources we know that armored, mounted tournaments continued long after they were clearly obsolete as war training *because they were fun*. On the continent from 1450 to 1600, more (jousting) tourneys were held by commoners than by nobles. We know Henry VIII was so addicted to jousting (with blunts) that he continued in spite of the genuine protests of his council, even when he could no longer mount a horse unaided. (This is where that myth of the knight having to be hoisted into the saddle came from.) Henry also chartered a guild, the Masters of Defence, as early as 1520. His daughter Elizabeth did not renew it, but the masters were active and writing.

While there is no reason to believe fencing was restricted to cities, what *does* require a city-size population is a fencing-school. Cities developed earliest in Italy; thus fencing-schools and masters who wrote there.

The rapier

Modern fencers focus on the rapier because it appears to point towards the lightweight, high-speed weapons of the Olympics. But any historian will tell you that history never points toward anything; the notion of progress in history is an outdated projection of modern ideas onto people who had no such concept. In his rapier section (1570) Meyer says "in Germany we no longer use the thrust."

By 1500, the sword of the young nobleman seen in portraits begins to show a rapier-like hilt. Late 15c German engravings show printers standing at the job case setting type while rapiers hang in scabbards on their belts. Nobles attending fencing schools were usually taught by commoners - where, most scholars agree, bouts and tournaments were held. Like the goldsmith or the armourer, the fencing-master is throughout the 16th through 18th centuries a commoner whose trade touched the rich whether noble or not.

Achille Marozzo (1536) tells us that the use of the rapier was a developing art in his time. By the 16th century it had long been known that the thrust was a more efficient way to kill than the cut. Spears and longbows in the hands of commoners had famously trounced mounted knights in battle. Towards the end of the 15th century, mounted soldiers were favoring a sword more adaptable to the thrust: the estoc.

The grip necessary for an effective thrust is different from that for a chop, but can be achieved even on a broadsword by hooking the forefinger around the quillon. Risky. The estoc's design recognized this by adding finger-protective rings. Still, you couldn't hook your finger around that quillon wearing a mitten gauntlet, so the guard began to grow protective bars and shells to obviate the mitten.

The guard by itself doesn't give you a rapier. The basket-hilted broadsword marked a split on the evolutionary line, leading to the 16th-century Schiavona and the 17th-century so-called Scottish claymore. These weapons are very difficult to thrust with because their hilts tend to force a fist-grip. The rapier hilt allows the blade to follow and extend the line of the arm.

Protection

As far as we can find out, renaissance sport fencing was done without steel armor (such as Bill Hobbs has Mel Gibson wear in Hamlet) although 16th C. padded jackets like the one at the Metropolitan exhibit were in style. Were they essential for protection from the hard-hitting rapier-foils of the time? Our replica of a 1575 "English Sword" (a 33" practice rapier) is about as flexible as a fireplace poker. Was it fashionable to fence in padded clothes, or did fashions get padding to imitate fencing garb - just as slashes had earlier become the rage following the Landsknechts' sword-sliced fashions?

We don't know. While the fencing books certainly speak of the safe way to do things, no mention of a mask happens before 1620. A cheap flexible foil was a thing of the future.

It was easy enough to put a safety tip on the real thing. According to Dr. Forngeng's research, a 1.5" diameter ha-penny with a thick leather disk in front of it would stop the point. An India-rubber plug fitted onto the blade and soft leather tied tightly on would keep it all aligned.

Masks came about 1670, when most fencing masters finally admitted they were human. It cost many of them an eye to learn it. This coincided with the development of slimmer, more flexible fencing blades, which made quicker actions possible, which in turn multiplied accidental hits to the face.

Street wisdom

Traveling on horseback, a 16c nobleman wore light armor and a heavy sword to reduce the risk of being successfully attacked. But once adapted to city life, you saved the horse for special occasions. A sword is still a sign of your power even if merchants have taken to wearing them. But how heavy a sword and how much armor are you going to wear on foot in this period of jacks, brigandines and light mail shirts under the doublet?

It's difficult to imagine a noble daring to walk a 1550s street with only a light thrusting sword, no matter what that swordmaster said. There would be comfort in a piece of steel strong enough to parry a heavy cutting sword. Plus, the size and weight could impress those still unaware of the deadly effect of the point.

But while the broadsword is not that heavy, it's awkward defending against the thrust. The rapier combined the ability to cut and thrust efficiently with the ability to parry, without requiring a heavy gauntlet. But without training, the rapier is worthless.

Fencing manuals up to 1600 continue to respect the cutting sword. Meyer, Marozzo, di Grassi and Saviolo all show the primary cutting attacks and a target for practicing them. Di Grassi says the thrust is usually the more direct path, and gives the greater hurt, but admits plenty of situations where the cut will be more effective.

Writing between 1560 and 1600, all of these rapier-era masters urge you to defend first and worry about killing second. They are, after all, masters of Defence, not of the duel.

Alexandre Dumas' *Three Musketeers* (a 19th century romantic children's book), depicts a playful aspect of rapier fights that probably never existed. The deadly-serious fact about the rapier age is that once swordplay became the medium for settling quarrels, its playfulness was left bleeding in the street for three centuries.

From there to here

Once the western world came to realize the effectiveness of the point thrust, the history of fencing became a progression from heavier to lighter weapons, and from slower to faster moves. But we have no clue to the attitudes of the participants towards each other. History does not speak of Robin-Hood chivalry in the 17th and 18th century fencing-schools. Swords were still too serious a matter until pistols took over dueling.

By 1680 Europeans from the rank of gentleman up might wear a straight small-sword with streetwear. The schools focused on these weapons, discarding the dagger. But the cutting sword had not forsaken the military. By 1750 every European cavalry unit used sabres – a style learned from the Turks. Army regiments had swordmasters and navy ships issued cutlasses. By 1789 swords were still normal streetwear in France but not Britain, and the military settled many duels with sabres. The French Foreign Legion continued that into the 1920s.

There are many sources on manuals and the evolution of fencing. Notable swordfighting encounters from 1550 to 1900 are set forth vividly in Alfred Hutton's *The Sword and the Centuries* (1901). The later encounters in that volume show more interest in the play aspect arising in clubs and schools. In the 19th century, students in German universities organized mensur-schlager duelling societies where some courage could be shown but life was never at stake. (My first fencing master received two scars at Heidelberg in the 1950s.) About 1900 saw the last serious civilian sword duels (they remained legal in Germany to 1918). Swordplay henceforth would no longer be a matter of life and death for ordinary gentlemen and at last we could look once again at sword-play.

By 1900, European foil fencing had become sufficiently standardized so that when the Olympics were revived fencing was one of the first sports to be included. That was the beginning of the sport we know today. The Sears and Roebuck catalog offered foils and masks. After 1900, fencing spread rapidly, especially on university campuses whose teams became the core of twentieth century Olympic teams.

In the late 1940s, electric scoring was developed for foil and epee. Sabre took until the 1990s to establish the system now in use worldwide. France, Italy and later Russia dominated world fencing; America remained far behind in both participation and success until quite recently. The east and west coasts have dominated the sport in this country because it still takes a big city to support a full-time pro fencing master. Detroit and Chicago had masters teaching at universities in the 1970s but no longer.

A 20-year effort by coaches and USFA organizers alike produced unprecedented success for American fencers in the 2016 Olympic games, led by the women sabreurs. So the future looks good for modern fencing.

In Historical European Martial Arts, we are seeing amazing growth in teaching, practice, organizations and equipment manufacturing. Here in Ann Arbor, we are on the ground floor of a bright future worldwide.