

Introduction to Italian Rapier The Work of Rudolfo Capo Ferro

Objective: This class will introduce fencers to the Italian rapier technique of Capo Ferro, including basics of theory, terminology, and the historic context in which his manual was written. Fencers will be shown how to integrate some of the theories of Capo Ferro into their fencing technique in the SCA.

About Capo Ferro's Work:

Rudolfo Capo Ferro's manual, *The Grand Simulacrum of the Art and Use of Fencing*, was first printed in 1610. It was written and presented to the Duke of Urbino, Don Francesco.

Capo Ferro based some of his theory on Agrippa's work; using the four guards Agrippa advocated (as opposed to the eleven guards advocated by Marozzo).

Introductory Theory

Fencing is the art of defending oneself well with the sword. Capo Ferro. Chapter II

There are two parts to fencing: the knowledge of the sword and its management. Capo Ferro. Chapter III

The Sword:

Whereas other masters defined the sword with upwards of four parts, Capo Ferro defines the sword with the two parts we are most familiar with: the *forte*, the lower, stronger part of the blade (going from the base of the sword to the middle), and the *debile*, the uppermost part of the blade. The *forte* is for parrying, and the *debile* for striking.

The edges are defined, as well: the *false edge*, which was the back edge of the blade (used rarely), and the *true edge*, which was the side of the blade on the same side of the knuckles.

He goes on to say that the hilt is used "to cover oneself and principally the head in striking." (Chapter III, Section 39).

Guardie, aka The Guards:

"The *guardia* is a positioning of the arm and the sword...to keep the adversary far away from every offense and to offend him in case he comes near to harm you." (Chapter X, Section 97).

Like Agrippa, Capo Ferro advocates (primarily) the use of four guards. He claims that two have very limited uses, though.

Prima (First): The thumb is down, and the palm is to the outside of the body; the true edge faces upwards. It is *prima* because it is the first position you will be in once drawing the sword from the scabbard and pointing to your opponent. It is very aggressive, is a good defense versus cuts, though it tires the arm and offers no protection to the lower body.

Seconda (Second): The palm is turned down, and the true edge is to the outside. It still protects the upper body.

Terza (Third): Knuckles are down, the true edge is down, and the arm is in a more comfortable position. The hand can be turned either way to make effective parries. Capo Ferro calls this “the only *guardia*” (Chapter X, Section 98). He claims it ideally protects the body, and is in ideal position for striking.

Quarta (Fourth): The palm is up, and the true edge faces inwards. The lunge should be preformed from this position, and attacks from this position are good for attacking both the outside line and the inside line. It reveals too much of the body, though, according to Capo Ferro, and should be used just for attacking and not for protecting your body.

The Management of the Weapon - Misura and Tempo:

“The *misura* is a correct distance from the point of my sword to the body of the adversary from where I can strike him” (Chapter IV, Section 44).

The *misura* is the measure, the distance, from the point of your sword to your opponent’s body. There are three types of *misura* described by Capo Ferro: *misura stretta* (short measure), in which one could hit the opponent by reaching out by only pushing out the body from the legs, *misura larga* (long measure), in which one would have to lunge to hit the opponent. There is also the *strettissima misura*, in which one can strike the opponents sword or dagger arm from *misura larga*.

Hand in hand with the measure is *tempo*. *Tempo* involves both distance and time; it represents the time it takes to perform a movement. One can move in *dui tempi* (two movements), or *primo tempo* (in which there is only one movement of the sword). *Mezzo tempo* is the quick attack, most likely to the hand or arm, and the *contra tempo* is the counter-attack, the attack one throws as the opponent is in an attack-motion.

Capo Ferro goes into a great deal of detail, showing the connection between measure and tempo. This is the fundamental truth we find in swordplay: the interconnection between time, distance and accuracy. He stresses the attack in *mezzo tempo* while in the *misura longa*, for example.

Concepts of Attack – Integrating Measure, Time, and the Placement of the Blade:

Capo Ferro describes ways in which one both thrusts and cuts. He says that cuts should be delivered with the sharp edge of the *debole*. He describes the cuts as “done by scything” (“Of The Cut” Section 16). There are various types of cuts, defined by the direction of the strike. In the same way, there are different types of thrust. The most common, the *stocatta*, is the thrust that originates in *terza*, and targets the opponent’s right shoulder. The *imbrocatta* goes from *prima* to the opponents left shoulder. The *punta riverso* is made from *quarta*, with the palm up, to the outside line of the opponent’s shoulder.

A key concept that Capo Ferro introduces is the *stringere*. The act of *stringere* is done to gain *misura*, or to gain the sword, or to “uncover the adversary from the outside and from the inside” (p. 58). The *stringere* involves making contact with the opponent’s weapon, in order to guide him to a position in which you can attack in your own measure.

Instead of the disengage, Capo Ferro provides the fencer with the *cavare*. It is not a disengage, because the opponent’s sword does not necessarily have to be engaged to perform a *cavare*. Executing a *cavare* involves moving the tip of your weapon, either from above or below the opponent’s tip, and either placing it in line for attack or to gain *stringere*.

Historical Swordsmanship Techniques and their Application to SCA Fencing

Capo Ferro’s theory and technique lends itself well to SCA fencing. As longer, heavier, more historically accurate blades are introduced into the Society, techniques in fighting have to adapt to suit them. Rapier techniques find a closer home in SCA fencing as our weapons move closer and closer to historical rapiers.

Epilogue – Why bother with historical swordsmanship?

According to the opening page of the SCA website, we are an organization that is “dedicated to researching and re-creating the arts and skills” of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. I promote historical swordsmanship for both practical and philosophical reasons.

The practical: As I mentioned before, the trend is for our weapons to develop closer to historical-styled weapons. We commonly see 42-inch weapons on the field. Several Kingdoms have outlawed epees. There is a renaissance (no pun intended) in western martial arts, and there is a great deal of research material on the commercial market about historical swordsmanship. These techniques work with the weapons we use.

The philosophical: If we ignore the historical context of our fighting, then we ignore an enormous opportunity to continue to promote an important aspect of history. The SCA is an educational organization, as well as an opportunity to dress in different clothes and enjoy a touch of fantasy. If we are going to trouble ourselves with intricate garb,

banners, swearing fealty to our lieges, fighting for our consorts, then why not promote the study of historical swordsmanship? Ignoring historical swordsmanship is a shame, when the resources are here to learn, and there is a venue to show what we discover. If we do not show what we learn, then there is little reason to dress in the garb, swear fealty to our lieges, or participate in anything that could resemble the Dream.