

Introduction to Studying Historical Swordsmanship

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My objective is to make studying historical sword-fighting accessible to everyone. Techniques from the period masters can be integrated into SCA rapier with a minimum of mutation. The purpose behind this class is to give you the tools so you can start studying historical technique.

Outside of the practice of sword-fighting, what are the advantages of studying the period masters?

1: Historical technique can be used as a tool for persona development and cultural research. Take the study of Italian and English masters for example. For example, George Silver wrote his manual as a response to the proliferation of Italian masters throughout London, and the popularity of rapier fighting. How does that impact you if your persona is from Elizabethan England?

2: The period masters have something to say about our martial culture. The manuals weren't written in a vacuum; they were written in response to specific needs of fighters of the time. Who were they written for? Were they written for a particular patron, or for the public? Who would have used this fighting style?

3: Studying historical sword-fighting helps preserve obscure arts and sciences that would die out, were it not for our practice. The recent renaissance (no pun intended) in western martial arts has created a need and interest in the publication of sword-fighting manuals. Western martial arts groups, as well as the SCA, are preserving these arts. We pass these techniques onto our students, and to the public via demos, scholas, academies, and other events.

How do we begin?

First, surround yourself with like-minded individuals. Find friends who share your interest. I can't stress the importance of having a supportive group that has your back. Excitement is infectious. It's important to have a circle of students to provide different opinions and outlooks on the text. In my opinion, you should have a minimum of three people, so two may practice the technique, and one can read the manual and offer opinions from the outside.

Second, choose a master you'd be interested in looking into. How to choose a manual or a particular master is beyond the scope of this class. Choosing what kind of manual, though, is based really on what you're interested in getting out of the manual. If you're interested specifically in using a rapier, as opposed to older forms or cutting-based forms, you may be interested more in Fabris or Capo Ferro, for example. If you're interested in a form that emphasizes the mechanical aspects of time and distance, consider a Spanish technique.

Once you decide on a manual, analyze it with your study group. Look into the historical context of the manual. Don't ignore the introduction to the manual; often, it will talk about the background of the master, who he's written for, and a little about the culture he's written in. Read as much of the manual as possible before practicing techniques from the manual. Don't just read the first paragraph, for example, and try the technique described. Most often, techniques in a single section of a manual build on other material described earlier. You'll understand more of what the master is trying to describe when you see techniques described earlier and later.

I should take a moment to say a few words about looking over the plates in the manual. Obviously, the plates are just snapshots, single moments in time. Mimicking the plates is not the same as learning the technique. Think of the plates as a guide to use along with the text. If you try to just recreate the stances and motions shown in the plates, then you're not really learning anything of the technique. Don't be afraid to play with what you see in the manual, though. If you see a plate that shows a final motion (such as a killing blow), don't be afraid to play with the motions that take you from guard position to the final plate.

What should we keep in mind when we practice?

Play. Don't be afraid to play. Don't be afraid to experiment. Have a great sense of humor about what you're doing. While you're trying something new, expect to lose a lot of bouts. You'll be learning new things about your stance, distance, timing, guards, etc. Get used to dealing with a new learning curve.

Like I'd said earlier, I find that working in groups of at least three works best. One person reads the manual, while the other two practice. The one observer serves the role as director. Rotate the roles among each other. Listen to each other, and share your observations.

Here are a few other tips:

Make sure that your study group stays focused. It's easy to drift off while studying a manual. There may be movements or terminology you may not be familiar with; resist the temptation to try to mutate the techniques in the manual to fit your personal style. The further away you take yourself from the intention of the master, the less effective the techniques you're trying to learn become.

That shouldn't keep you from playing with the techniques, though. There's a difference between playing with the form and drifting too far from the goal.

While reading through the manual, try to find the agenda that the master is trying to put forth. Most manuals follow a particular theme, technique, or even political agenda. If you're able to discover the "agenda," then you have a tool to help you get through roadblocks in the manual. For example, if you know that one particular master advocates attacks in single-time, then if you are at a roadblock in a particular part of a manual and it is ambiguous as to how an attack should be delivered, you'll at least know that it is likely that the attack should be delivered in single time. It's one more tool at your disposal to help you understand the manuals a little more deeply.

Consider your sword. Is the technique you're studying going to work with that weapon? Different masters advocate weapons of different styles or lengths. For example, Silver will not work with a long rapier, Capo Ferro will not work with a curved blade. I wouldn't use epees or foils for Italian rapier techniques (the techniques just don't work). Again, determining the correct weapon length for all different masters is beyond the scope of this class. In some cases, the master may assume you know the length or type of weapon to be used (that's where it's helpful to know the historical context in which the manual was written). Others may specify the length by your height, the length of your lunge, etc.

Remember your fundamentals. Things like footwork, distance, accuracy, and timing are universal. Though some things may work differently, the basics of how to fight aren't necessarily going to change. Some masters may want slightly different stances, or recommend you move a particular way, but they won't likely be too different from what you first learned.

Drill. Stretch. Work out. I've found that reproducing some techniques straight from the plates is a little like yoga. There may not be a lot of impact, but its still a workout.

When you practice, practice with intent. The best way to determine if something works is to practice as if you are really fighting. For the longest time, I couldn't see any value in Capo Ferro's first guard. One day, we practiced cutting attacks against someone who is just first drawing his sword out of the scabbard. That was when we found its value. We could never really see how effective it was when doing slow-work., or just trying to reproduce moves from the plates and from other practitioners' pictures.

Practice everywhere. Take what you've learned into tournaments. Yeah, you may loose at first...a lot. But be okay with that. One way to stay encouraged is to look for different objectives when you enter tournaments. Instead of, "victory" as your ultimate objective, why not focus on insuring that your technique is as clean as possible. The more you perfect your style, the closer to victory you'll ultimately become. That may sound obvious, but you're likely to be moving out of a particular comfort zone. Its important to have something to hold onto, to help keep encouraged.