

Circle of Steel

Renaissance Knife Fighting

“In these modern times, many men are wounded for not having weapons or knowledge of their use.”

- Achille Marozzo, 1536

During the Renaissance, roughly 16th-17th Century, there were many changes in the European styles of swordplay, and a new style evolved, based on the earlier Medieval methods. Overall, there was a shift from swordplay based in military combat, to being more and more designed for use by civilians, and used in sparring in an early “training hall” environment, where common people would pay to take lessons. Additionally, the invention of the printing press gave rise to mass-produced training manuals, many of which were translated into other languages and sold abroad. Before this time, these books were the secrets of professional warriors and the real killing techniques and counters were carefully guarded, but this tradition of secrecy changed as teachers during the Renaissance sought a civilian audience with money to spend learning these “formerly classified skills”.

In the Renaissance, with the rise in urban culture, the lighter rapier truly became the people’s weapon, while the military increasingly used firearms and pike formations to wage war, lessening the importance of individual combatants, and of the sword. Some masters, particularly the English, preferred the old ways, however, and one of the famous master George Silver’s big complaints about the “new” rapier was that it was of no use in times of war, and that men should fight with the older, heavier, military cutting swords instead.

This separation between military and civilian swords was even parodied in England in the 1640’s, in a play entitled “Work for Cutlers”. In the play, two actors representing the thrusting Rapier and the cutting Sword argue back and forth over which of them is the better weapon. Each one boasts of his unique abilities, and why the other is inferior. A third actor appears as Dagger, and tries to make peace between the two. Eventually, Dagger gets Sword and Rapier to become friends by declaring that Sword is best for the soldier, and Rapier best for the civilian. Dagger, for his part, says that he works equally well with them Both, and will always be there to back them up in a fight! A happy resolution for all, and a great insight into how the people of the Renaissance viewed these arms.

The first manual to be mechanically reproduced for sale was Achille Marozzo's *Opera Nova* ("The New Work") in 1536, and Western swordsmen have always considered it one of the most important fighting manuals. Marozzo not only published this book, but he also taught many teachers, and became the first great Western master to "bridge the gap between the military, the police, the martial artists, and the informed citizenry". His book covered both the older military weapons, such as the longsword and spear, and the new civilian weapons, such as the lighter cut-and-thrust swords and rapiers, and the small buckler. He also included a long section on unarmed combatives, and in this respect was the last to do so for over 100 years. Not until the mid-1600's would anything close to this be seen in Europe, in terms of the level of unarmed technique depicted. Twenty-two techniques in this section, two of them show knife on knife fighting while the other twenty depict various unarmed versus knife encounters.

Marozzo, then, is the link between the Medieval styles and the new Renaissance ones. What he shows is a condensed version of the types of moves used in the earlier Italian systems, such as that used by Fiore dei Liberi and documented in his 1410 *Flos Duellatorum* ("Flower of Battle"). *Dei Liberi* showed over 100 individual techniques of wrestling, dagger fighting, and unarmed defense, which Marozzo distills down to 22 techniques. One important difference between them, however, is what Marozzo leaves out of his book. While *Fiore* shows multiple counters to all of his moves, Marozzo does not even mention them as a possibility. In this sense, Marozzo's work is very "optimistic" about the techniques working as planned and the "counter for counter" idea is not explored.

This in no way reduces the importance of Marozzo's work, however, and many scholars since have studied and taught his methods, and many fencers declared him the "Father of Modern Swordsmanship" and "The First Scientific Teacher". The great swordsman and historian Alfred Hutton was a fan of Marozzo's unarmed versus dagger methods, and included 14 of the 22 techniques into his 1889 book, *Cold Steel* (not to be confused with John Styer's 1952 work by the same name). Hutton was one of the fathers of modern research into the true ancient Western combat arts, and his books *Cold Steel* and *Old Swordplay* are still excellent starting resources. In 1999, as a tribute to both Hutton and Marozzo, this author wrote a book entitled *Hands Against the Knife*, which describes all 22 of Marozzo's unarmed versus dagger techniques, explains their hidden inter-connections, and gives training methods for their practice in the modern day, as well as having the first complete translation of the text from the Italian. Many

experts, such as Hock Hochheim, Jim Keating, and John Clements have found this book to be insightful in their study of these historical methods.

After Marozzo, the majority of books published during the Renaissance were purely on the civilian aspects of swordplay, though as late as 1594 Giacomo DiGrasi still includes the military two-hand sword, halberd, and spear in his True Art of Defense. With a few such notable exceptions, the majority of the manuals on into the 1600's focused on the rapier, or rapier paired with a dagger, buckler, cloak, or second rapier. Sadly, the techniques of using the knife or dagger as a solo weapon are ignored in the majority of manuals from this era, and techniques for unarmed combat are relegated to a few support techniques, referred to generically as Grips (Grypes). They were meant to be used when you end up too close to the enemy to use the sword effectively, and were no longer taught as part of a larger spectrum of unarmed skills the swordsman should have. The majority of the Grips used in Renaissance swordplay could be described as Hand Snaking or Wrapping disarms. They are generally done with the free hand or with the dagger, but are sometimes also done with the sword, in what many modern practitioners would call a Vine disarm, or Weapon Snake.

When the knife is mentioned as a solo weapon in the Renaissance, the classic Medieval tactic of cutting the opponent's knife hand is frequently described. Like in all great knife traditions of the world, this simple technique was highly valued as a quick fight-ender. Other basics that were commonly taught in the Renaissance styles included using low fakes to open up high attacks (and vice-versa), and fakes to one side before launching the real attack on the other side. Throwing the knife, or even just faking a throw, were also sometimes mentioned. One preferred method of throwing was to use an underhand swing, and to release as the knife comes on line with the enemy, allowing the knife to fly straight into the target point first, with no spin.

By the end of the Renaissance, the styles of swordplay would again change, as smaller, even lighter, thrusting-only swords come into fashion, and the dagger would be dropped from use. These "small-swords" became the mark of a gentleman, and were used for duels of honor. The techniques that were used became more and more refined and abstracted from the realities of the Medieval battlefield, hundreds of years before. They were quick, light, athletic movements that could be delivered in a rapid-fire manner, with each block being answered with a thrust. This gentleman's dueling style was also favored with military officers, and became what we would call "Classical Fencing" today. In turn, Classical Fencing would

change into the athletic sport of Olympic Fencing with the advent of electronic scoring in the 20th Century. Today, more and more people are researching and training in the Medieval and Renaissance forms, however, and seeking a return to the earlier combative roots of the Western tradition.