

Medieval and Renaissance Knife Fighting History

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Medieval Knife Fighting

“There is no man at arms who can use courtesy or kindness to face his enemy” - Fiore dei Liberi, 1410

During the Middle Ages, roughly the 14th-15th Centuries, the warriors of Europe developed a powerful style of combat that proved equally victorious on the battlefield in times of war, on the street for suppressing riots, and in personal defense. These men fought personal and judicial duels to the death, as well as taking part in organized “melees”, or tournaments. Though the tournaments may have appeared civil, and were fought with wooden or blunted swords and referees, they often ended up with crossbow men becoming involved in the fray, trying to prevent their knight from being beaten, captured, and ransomed back later by another knight! Forget the chivalrous notions you may have had about the lives these men lead – they were killers, or they were dead, plain and simple. As the wars raged across Europe, fighting techniques were tempered in the forge of battle, and the swordsmen of each country perfected the art which they would pass on to the next generation.

These techniques of killing, known to men who had fought and survived many battles and challenges, became part of an oral military tradition, passed on from one warrior to another. Then, starting in the late 1300’s, books that taught fighting techniques were made in small numbers, each one carefully reproduced by hand. Some of these books contained only a few dozen illustrated techniques, but others, such the works by Fiore dei Liberi and Hans Talhoffer, catalog literally hundreds of individual techniques and counters. By the 1400’s these manuscripts were produced in an ever increasing number, with several authors writing multiple books in their lifetime. This continued throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, with books being written in many countries, though the vast majority came from Germany and Italy. The 1400’s saw the height of Medieval close combat, and this was the golden era of the “Fechtbuch” or “fight-book.”

Though during the Renaissance, roughly 16th-17th Century, things would change with the invention of printing and the rise of teachers who accepted civilians as students, during the Middle Ages these books were kept among professional warriors, and the real killing techniques and counters were guarded secrets. In his 1410 book *Flos Duelatorum* (Flower of Battle) the Italian master Fiore dei Liberi states that these techniques should be kept secret “For the experts in swordsmanship who help the men at arms during wars, riots, and duels” and should never become known to the common people “who are created by God without a wit like cows that are born only to carry heavy loads”. Fiore would never show his techniques in public, except as he used them in battle, and he taught all his students behind closed doors, swearing them to secrecy about what they

learned. He wrote his book only as an old man, long after he had need of his skills, and in the service of “the most Illustrious Messer Niccolo Marquess of Ferrara, Modena, Parma, and Reggio”, who would use this book to train all his knights.

On a technical level, one of the first key elements you find in reading the Medieval books is that they contain a large amount of unarmed combat material. A Medieval Knight, or Man-at-Arms, would be expected to know unarmed combat and dagger fighting in addition to the sword and spear skills we associate with them today. In the surviving combat manuals, most contain long sections on unarmed striking and grappling, unarmed defense against the dagger, and dagger fighting. Unarmed techniques against the sword, and dagger against sword are also shown. The manuals show systematic joint locks, breaks, throws, disarms, counters, ground grappling, strikes, clinches, holds and more. The unarmed system is also fully integrated into the sword and spear work, with the majority of the techniques shown involving some degree of “close work”.

You will see identical techniques (particularly throws and arm locks) done with all the different weapon forms, showing the integrated nature of this system. The Medieval knight truly understood how to “make the connection” between the essential techniques in combat, regardless of weapon. Primarily this was a weapon based style, that using standing grappling and a full compliment of basic powerful striking tactics. In this respect, it is much like military combatives today, using eye gouges, chin jabs, knee strikes and low kicks. Ground fighting was used mainly to hold a man down while you drew your own blade and stabbed him, or held him to be “pinned” by a few spear men from your unit.

Only when showing the techniques used in judicial combat or dueling, where no one was going to interfere with the fight, do you see grappling holds as we think of them now, being applied. Just like the ones used when standing, you find chokes, arm and neck breaks, gouging, fish-hooking, and a host of other “gutter fighting” tactics that we love, being applied on the ground. The armor was used to grind into the foe and tire him, and often we see men picking up weapons that have been dropped, or drawing a dagger, while grappling. The duels were grand public spectacles, with elaborate preparations for the combatants involving prayer, ritual bathing, and so on. They would walk onto the field from their pavilions proudly, in front of the assembled crowd, but then once they stepped into the list, there could be no one there but the two of them, the marshal, and God. Many images we have of period ground work show it under these settings, in a traditional octagon ring – just like a Medieval UFC.

In addition to the use of various other weapons, such as the mace or axe, the Medieval warrior had to learn to use the armor he wore as a weapon. Fighting in real armor is quite different than fighting without, and the Germans coined the phrases blousfechten and harnisfechten to describe fighting in regular clothing and fighting in armor, respectively. The plate and chain armor of the time could render many slicing and stabbing blows useless, enabling the wearer to close in and fight with their longsword in a shortened “bayonet” grip referred to as halbschwert, or “half-sword” techniques, designed to deliver maximum power thrusts at the gaps in the opponent’s armor. Additionally, the armor would be used to grind into the opponent while on the ground, and the pointed knees and elbows could deliver horrible pressure to an unarmored foe, in addition to delivering lethal strikes. Even the knight’s shoes came to points designed for kicking. These were

called sabatons by the French, and would be used when on horseback to kick people in the face who got too close to you.

Fighting from horseback was another important skill the knight had to perfect. The long spear, or lance, was used from horseback, along with the mace and sword. Fiore dei Liberi, among others, also shows many ways to apply grappling techniques to unseat another rider when in close, side by side. Fighting from astride an armored war-horse, the knight was as an imposing force on the battlefield, particularly when in large units. At around 2000 pounds each, and traveling at up to 35 miles an hour in a charge, the mounted knight must have inspired true terror in anyone facing them on foot.

This completely Western unarmed combat art is far older than comparable Asian styles such as JuJitsu, Chin-Na, Aikido, or Hapkido. Most styles of martial arts taught today, are less than 100 years old and may or may not have any relation to life and death combat. Many practiced today are taught as health or meditation systems. With the Medieval fight-books, we are discussing traditions and specific techniques that are over 500 years old, and designed to kill. Many will talk of “Samurai Heritage” or the “Shaolin Spirit” by way of making their art sound ancient, but where is the true history for the specifics of what they teach? Is there an actual link is there on a technical level, or is it merely “inspired by” some older art? With the Western historical combat arts we have the verifiable link by way of the Master’s written works by way of knowing that this was used, for real, on the battlefield and the street.

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.