

Rapier

A rapier is a relatively slender, sharply pointed sword, used mainly for thrusting attacks, developed in Europe around the 16th century.

Description

Rapier generally refers to a relatively long-bladed sword characterized by a complex hilt which is constructed to provide protection for the hand wielding it. While the blade might be broad enough to cut to some degree, the strength of the rapier is its ability as a thrusting weapon. The blade might be sharpened along its entire length, sharpened only from the center to the tip (as described by Capoferro), or completely without a cutting edge as discussed by Pallavicini. A typical example would have a relatively long and slender blade of 2.5 centimetres or less in width, 1 meter or more in length and ending in a sharply pointed tip.

The term rapier generally refers to a thrusting sword with a blade longer and thinner than that of the so-called side-sword but heavier than the smallsword and Italian dueling sword that would follow in the 18th century and later, but the exact form of the blade and hilt often depends on who is writing and when. It can refer to earlier spada da lato (much like the espada ropera) through the high rapier period of the 17th century through the smallsword and dueling swords, thus context is important in understanding what is meant by the word. (The term side-sword, used among some modern historical martial arts reconstructionists, is a translation from the Italian spada da lato--a term coined long after the fact by Italian museum curators--and does not refer to the slender, long rapier, but only to the early 16th-century Italian sword with a broader and shorter blade that is considered both its ancestor and contemporary.)

Parts of the Sword

Blade

Capo Ferro defines the forte as the blade from the hilt to the middle. From the middle to the top is known as the debile (Chapter 3 verse 37). The Ricasso is that portion of the blade within the rings that extend forward from the crosspiece or quillons.

Hilt

Rapiers often had complex, sweeping hilts designed to protect the hand wielding the sword. Rings extended forward from the crosspiece. Later these rings were covered with metal plates, eventually evolving into the cup hilts of the later rapiers. A knuckle bow extended back from the crosspiece protecting the hilt which was usually wood wrapped with leather or wire. A pommel (often decorated) secured the hilt to the weapon and provided a balance to the long blade.

History

The rapier began to develop around 1500 as the Spanish espada ropera, or "dress sword". The espada ropera was a cut-and-thrust civilian weapon for self-defense and the duel, while earlier weapons were equally at home on the battlefield. Throughout the 16th century, however, a variety of new, single-handed civilian weapons were being developed, including the German Rappier, another cut-and-thrust weapon used for sportive fencing, as described in Joachim Meyer's Fechtbuch of 1570. Nevertheless, the English word "rapier" generally refers to a primarily thrusting weapon, developed by the year 1600 as a result of the geometrical theories of such masters as Camillo Agrippa and Ridolfo Capo Ferro.

The rapier became extremely fashionable throughout Europe with the wealthier classes, but was not without its detractors. Some people, such as George Silver, disapproved of its technical potential and the duelling use to which it was put.

By the year 1700, the rapier had been replaced by the lighter smallsword throughout most of Europe.

The etymology of the word rapier is uncertain. Charles du Fresne, sieur du Cange uses the word Rapparia in 1484 to describe an espée in his Glossarium mediae et infimae Latinitatis. He proposes that the origin of the word may stem from the Greek $\rho\alpha\pi\iota\epsilon\rho$, to cut. However, Walter William Skeat suggests that "rapiér"

may derive from *raspière*, a poker, and that this may be a contemptuous term developed by older cut-and-thrust fencers for the new weapon. The most probable root of this term, however, appear to be from the Spanish *ropera* that comes from *ropa*, or elegant dress, thus a "dress Sword".