

Introduction to Cut & Thrust Rapier

Introduction

This article is intended to give the reader a brief introduction to Cut & Thrust Rapier (C&T), which is now an official part of Rapier Combat in the Kingdom of Ealdormere. Included are a definition of C&T rapier; some historical background for C&T; a discussion of some of the techniques involved, particularly those from Italy in the early to mid 16th century; and a description of the additional armour requirements and authorization process. There is also a fairly extensive list of references for those who wish to explore further.

Definition

A recent addition to SCA rapier play, C&T allows fencers to explore 16th century techniques in a more realistic manner. The current standard for fencing in Ealdormere is Heavy Rapier, which permits a number of different attacks. These include: thrusting with the point of the blade; draw cuts where the edge of the blade is laid on the opponent and pulled across the torso or limb; push cuts which are similar to draw cuts only the blade moves forward rather than being pulled; and tip cuts which are delivered with the point of the blade moving across the opponent. C&T's chief addition to this repertoire of attacks is the use of controlled percussive cuts. A percussive cut is an attack where the edge of the blade strikes the opponent rather than being drawn or pushed.

History

Almost all swords can be used to both cut and thrust, but the degree to which one was used over the other has varied historically. Throughout the Middle Ages the emphasis seems to have been on the cut but over time the use of the thrust appears to have increased, probably as a means to defeat the greater protection afforded by the proliferation of plate armour. Swords of war became more tapered to a sharper point.

What we call Cut & Thrust Rapier in the SCA is often viewed as a bridge from medieval fighting styles to Renaissance fighting techniques. Later Renaissance techniques, such as those found in Giacomo Di Grassi's *Ragione di adoprare sicuramente l'arme* increasingly emphasized the use of thrusting attacks but never completely abandoned the cut.

The city of Bologna in Northern Italy, among others, was a chief focus for the development and practise of this type of sword fighting. Modern literature labels the fencing techniques from this area as the Bolognese School, which developed over the 15th century and entered the 16th century under masters like Filippo di Bartolomeo Dardi, for which reason this school is also known as the Dardi Tradition. One of the best known Masters of this tradition is Achille Marozzo who wrote an early Italian fencing manual, the *Opera Nova* in 1536. Other masters whose works are either part of or very closely related to this tradition include: Antonio Manciolino, who also wrote a treatise called the

Opera Nova c. 1531; Angelo Viggiani, whose posthumously published manual is known as *Lo schermo* c. 1575; and Giovanni Dall'Agocchie, who published the book *Dell'arte di scrimia* c. 1572. Most of the techniques hereafter described will be from the Dardi tradition.

Technique

The addition of percussive cuts to SCA rapier combat allows fencers to better explore the fighting techniques of the early Renaissance and to some extent those of the Middle Ages. Rapier in the SCA, up until the introduction of C&T, has been very thrust-oriented emphasizing techniques from the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Those used to the thrust-oriented style and trying C&T for the first time are often surprised by the multiplied potential attacks they may face and the rise in situational awareness needed to counter them. Cutting attacks may reach a fencer from a number of angles as opposed to the rather direct, predictable nature of the thrust.

Most of the material in this section is derived from material found on William E. Wilson's web site Marozzo.org (<http://www.marozzo.org/>), as well as Giovanni Rapisardi's article "The Teaching's of Marozzo" (<http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/%7Eewew/other/gr/>), and Tom Leoni's "Bolognese Swordsmanship" (<http://www.salvatorfabris.com/Home.shtml>). This section will break down the basic "toolbox" used by fencers of the Dardi tradition, but further exploration is encouraged as not everything can be covered in a short article.

Footwork

Footwork is vitally important to fencing. It is the key that permits a fencer to maintain their "measure"; that is, the most advantageous distance from their opponent. C&T footwork is essentially the same as that of Heavy Rapier, but it is summarized here using the Italian terminology of period fencing manuals.

The standard starting position is placing the same leg forward as the hand that holds the sword with the other leg back, heels slightly out of alignment and the back foot at a 60^o-90^o angle to the front foot. The knees should be bent slightly and there should be a distance of about ½ metre between the two heels. The fencer's weight should be centred over their legs for good balance. Some of the guardia (positions) discussed later in this paper require the opposite foot to be forward but the stance is essentially the same.

A simple step forward is known as the pace or *passo* with the lead foot moving first followed by the back foot. Another way of moving forward that covers more ground is the *radoppio* or double pace, in which the rear foot moves first almost touching the heel of the front foot which is then extended forward to complete the pace. A third kind of pace is the *passata* in which the rear foot is brought past the front foot and the foot now behind is pivoted, so the fencer ends in the same stance as before but with the opposite leg now leading. A stance with the sword arm/leg forward tends to be slightly more offensive and with the sword arm/leg back slightly more defensive.

The *Inquartata* is a circular pace with the back foot moving in a semicircular motion to the right if the right foot is forward with the front foot pivoting. The *inquartata* is usually used to avoid an attack by taking the fencer out of line with their opponent – a method of body voiding. It is also known as a compass pace. The *Intagliata* is another voiding method, involving a forward step like a *passo* but at an angle to the opponent, usually to the left if the right foot is leading. Another name for the *intagliata* is the slope pace. A third option for moving out of line with an opponent is the *Mezzo passo*, which is a side step to the left or right. Finally there is the *Gran passo*, which is a long step forward while performing an attack, similar to but not as extreme as a modern lunge.

Hand Positions

The Dardi tradition includes four basic (right) hand positions. *Prima* is the first position in which the hand holding the sword is rotated so the palm faces to the right. *Secunda*, the second position, has the hand horizontal, palm down. *Terza* or the third position has the hand rotated with the palm facing to the left. The fourth position is *Quarta* with the palm facing up. Naturally, these are reversed when the blade is held in the left hand.

The Guardia

In the Dardi tradition *guardia*, or positions, serve several different functions rather than the purely defensive meaning implied by the name. While some *guardia* are used to close off lines of attack, others appear to be invitations to the opponent to attack apparently unguarded areas of the body. The descriptions for the *guardia* described in Marozzo's *Opera Nova* seem to be a kind of teaching shorthand, describing the beginning and end positions of a particular movement. These *guardia* frequently include a parrying item in the off hand, most commonly a small round buckler (*Brocciero*). Daggers (*Pugnale*), cloaks (*Cappa*), square bucklers (*Targa*) and larger round shields (*Rotella*) are sometimes seen as well. If a parrying item is not used, the off hand is usually held behind the back.

There are two main sets of *guardia* in Marozzo: the *Coda Longa* or “Long Tail” *guardia* and the *Porta di Ferro* or “Iron Door” *guardia*, plus several distinct others that do not belong to these two categories.

Coda Longa

The *guardia* in the *Coda Longa* series apparently act as invitations, placing the sword in such a way as to render the body apparently vulnerable. Like the other Marozzo *guardia* they also act as beginning and end points for actions.

In *Coda Longa e Stretta*, the right leg is leading and the right hand is in *secunda*, just to the outside of the right knee with the tip of the sword pointing inward and slightly elevated, aimed at the opponent's head or chest. *Coda Longa e Alta* is virtually the same as *e Stretta* but the left leg is forward.

With *Coda Longa e Larga* the right leg is forward and the right hand is withdrawn to a position slightly behind the knee with the sword angled downwards, almost pointing at the ground.

Coda Longa e Distesa has the left leg forward with the sword trailing behind the body pointing at the ground. This has the effect of masking the sword and making it difficult to tell where an attack will come from.

If an off hand parry item or dagger is being used it is usually held straight out toward the opponent guarding the left side of the body. With a parrying device like a buckler, the closer it is to the opponent the more it masks the defender's body.

Porta di Ferro

The porta di ferro series of guardia are probably the closest to what those who study later schools of fence would call guards or wards, giving a strong defence but still allowing for offensive moves.

In *Porta di Ferro e Stretta* the right leg is forward with the sword held so that the pommel is close to the fencer's knee, with the hand in terza. The point of the sword should be aimed at the opponent's face or torso. The *Cinghiale* or "Wild Boar" variant of this guardia has the left leg forward.

For *Porta di Ferro e alta* the position of the legs is the same but the sword arm is held higher up with the hand still in third. This aligns the point more directly towards the opponent and decreases the amount of angulation.

In *Porta di Ferro e larga* the hand is now on the left side of the torso in the quarta position. From this guardia thrusts can be made to the left side of the opponent's torso. Some interpretations of this guardia have the sword pointing at the ground.

For such guardia, a parry item is held straight out in front of the body, while a buckler is sometimes brought back to partly cover the face.

Other Guardia

In *Guardia Alta* the left or right leg can be forward with the sword arm straight up and the sword pointing at the ceiling or slightly back. The hand is held in secunda or terza. This is something of an invitation but if the opponent enters into range they could receive some very strong downward cuts.

The *Guardia di Testa* or head guard can be done with the right or left leg forward. The sword hand is held just above the shoulder and slightly to the right in secunda and the sword angled slightly upwards. This is a good guard against cuts to the head.

With *Becca Cesa* and *Becca Posa* the sword is held above the head, angled downward covering the face and upper torso with the hand in prima. In cesa the right leg is forward and in posa the left leg leads. Dall'Agocchie refers to the Becca guardia as Alicornio or “the unicorn”, since the downward angle of the blade resembles the horn of said mythical beast.

In *Guardia di Faccia* or face guard, either leg can be forward and the sword arm is extended straight out in front of the torso with the hand in quarta (palm up). Guardia di Faccia is a good way of keeping an opponent at bay as they would either have to attack under the sword to avoid being struck or beat the sword aside. Similar to guardia di faccia is the entering guard or *Guardia d'intrare*, but with the hand in secunda (palm down).

Guardia di sopra il braccio or the over arm guard has the right foot forward with the sword held so that it passes over the left shoulder and is pointing behind the fencer with the hand in secunda. Similarly, **Guardia di sotto il braccio** or under arm guard, also has the sword pointing behind the fencer but it passes under the left arm pit. Sotto il braccio and sopra il braccio are good places to start a cut from and are often the terminating positions at the end of a cut.

Finally there is **Guardia di fianco** or flank guard where the sword arm is across the body to the left with the palm facing outwards and the point of the sword is towards the ground. This guardia, which is only mentioned once in Marozzo in the context of the single handed sword, is used to protect the left flank from low cuts to the leg.

The Attacks

All of the techniques mentioned above can be used in SCA heavy rapier, some being more effective than others. With the addition of percussive cuts the true utility of some of these techniques, especially the guardia, becomes readily apparent. In the Dardi tradition “strikes are nothing but forceful transitions between guards”. (Leoni, 2006: 9) Marozzo states, “And I tell you again that you must never attack without defending, nor defend without attacking”. (Marozzo, 1536)

As mentioned above, guardia are used as shorthand to describe the beginning and end positions of a particular manoeuvre, usually an attack. A typical description of an attack in the Dardi tradition would have the starting Guardia, the Strike (thrust or cut), and end Guardia.

Attacks fall into two categories, thrusts and cuts, with thrusts being delivered with the point of the blade and cuts with the edge. Cuts can be delivered with the true edge of the sword (the edge that normally faces the enemy), or the false edge of the sword.

Cutting Attacks

Cuts fall into two categories, *Mandritto* or simply “dritto”, which are cuts beginning at the fencer’s right side delivered to the opponent’s left, and *Roverso*, which are cuts to the

opponent's right side. The basic cuts are: the *Fendente*, an almost vertical downwards cut; the *Squalembro* which is a cut from the left shoulder to the right hip; the *Tondo*, a horizontal cut across the torso from the opponent's left to right in an arcing motion; the **Ridoppio**, a cut from the left hip to the right shoulder; and the *Montante*, an almost vertical cut upwards. Fendente, squalembro, tondo and ridoppio are usually delivered with the true edge of the blade. Tondo, and ridoppio can be delivered with the false edge of the blade, making them *falso tondo*, *falso dritto* (left hip to right shoulder) and *falso manco* (right hip to left shoulder). The montante is almost always delivered with the false edge of the blade.

Most of the Italian masters recommend that cuts be thrown with the wrist or at most the arm. Cuts thrown with the wrist are by far the fastest but are also the weakest, followed by those using the arm, with cuts using the arm and shoulder being the slowest but having the greatest force. With SCA calibration standards cuts thrown with the wrist are probably the safest as well.

Thrusting Attacks

There are three types of thrusts found in Marozzo. There is the *Punta* which is a straight thrust with the palm of the hand in secunda. *Punta roversa* is similar but the thrust comes from the attacker's left to the opponent's right with the hand held in quarta. A thrust in *Imbroccata* is an overhand thrust with the hand in secunda where the sword passes over the plane of the opponent's blade with the point directed at the chest. A thrust in *Stoccata* is an underhand thrust with the hand usually in quarta under the plane of the opponent's blade directed at the belly.

To fully explore the different combinations of attacks and defences that can be performed by combining thrusts, cuts and the various guardia would require a much longer discussion. The best way to undertake this is to read the various manuals and analyses of the Dardi tradition now available online, and give them a try at practice.

The Defence

As discussed, some guardia are naturally defensive, closing off lines of attack through the placement of sword, body and parrying device.

A more active defence against a thrust or cut is the parry. Parries in the Dardi tradition seem to consist of counter cuts against an attack using either the false or true edge of the blade. Just as for attacks, such defensive motions occur in transitions between guardia. The two main parries are the *falso dritto* and the *falso manco*. The falso dritta is an upward cut diagonally right to left with the false edge of the sword. A falso manco is an upward cut diagonally left to right using the false edge of the blade.

Rapid footwork and changes of stance creating body voiding are greatly used in the Dardi tradition to avoid an attack. Defensive moves are often used to position the fencer for a counter attack or *Riposte*.

Again, due to the constraints of this article, a more complete discussion of defences in the Dardi tradition cannot be completed here but there are numerous sources available for further study several of which are listed at the end of this article.

Cut & Thrust in the SCA

C&T is a fairly recent addition to SCA rapier, beginning as an experimental form under the name of Sidesword, with only those experienced with period manuals and techniques permitted to participate. After the end of the experimental period in early 2006, several Kingdoms, including Ealdormere, approved the use of C&T. C&T can now be employed at any event or practice in the Kingdom.

In order to participate in C&T a fencer must meet several requirements.

First, there are some extra pieces of protective equipment that must be worn when participating in C&T. The back of the head must be covered by rigid protection as defined by the Ealdormere Rules for Rapier Combat (<http://www.ealdormere.ca/Books/Rapier%20Handbook0v4-highlight.pdf>). Elbows must be covered by an elbow pad or the equivalent. Additional pieces of protective equipment can be worn as well, but they cannot interfere with a fencer's ability to feel a blow. Solid elbow protection, knee protection and wrist protection are some items a fencer might consider when doing C&T.

C&T is considered an advanced authorization, similar to an authorization for a secondary weapons form, but the authorization must be attended by at least one C&T Marshal. Any Marshal can oversee a bout in which C&T is being used and C&T can be used in any tourneys except those involving melee combat. Both opponents must be authorized in C&T and armoured to the appropriate standard.

Cuts in C&T must meet the calibration standards set out in the Rules for Rapier Combat in Ealdormere which state:

“C. In rapier combat, blows will be counted as though they were struck with a real blade, extremely sharp on point and edge. Any blow that would have penetrated the skin shall be counted a good blow. Any blow that strikes a mask, helm or gorget shall be counted as though it struck flesh. (Gormanshaw et al, 2006:7)”

In C&T the intention of the blow is almost as important in judging a good blow as the force of the blow itself. A cut that travels a short arc but seems to land with sufficient force may not have been a good blow. Even though it is the opponent who judges whether a blow is good or not, the person striking the blow can always tell their opponent not to accept the blow if they think it was not good.

C&T cuts are not the full power cuts found in SCA armoured combat. Cuts should always be controlled. They should not land with excessive force but be sufficient to meet the requirement mentioned previously. To do so, a cut requires more force than a thrust, as part of the energy of the blow is distributed along the length of the blade, rather than focused at the point as in a thrust. Again, control is required. Unlike in Heavy Rapier, where a blow to the leg incapacitates the leg, in C&T any valid blow to the leg, thrust or cut, ends the bout.

Due the heavy blade on blade contact inherent in C&T only certain types of sword and dagger blades may be used. The list of approved heavy rapier blades can be found here: <http://www.sca.org/officers/marshal/combat/rapier/bladetypes.pdf>. Schlager type blades cannot be used in C&T. Approved blades continue to multiply, and many experiments are underway.

Conclusion

C&T was initiated to permit fencers to explore some late 15th and early 16th century techniques that are difficult to recreate using the thrust-oriented nature of heavy rapier. C&T provides the fencer with an excellent set of challenges and the opportunity to learn techniques to which they have not been exposed before or that they have only been able to perform in a limited way.

And we are not limited to just the Dardi tradition. While online scholarship on Dardi continues to grow, C&T fencers can explore the sword and buckler fighting in one of the earliest known fencing manuals, MS I.33; or those of England's vocal advocate of sword and buckler fighting, George Silver, or even the longsword fighting found in the German manuals of the 15th century. With the addition of percussive cuts these all become possible to recreate. Feel free to contact your local rapier marshal and see if people are working with C&T in your area or contact the Deputy KRM for Cut & Thrust Rapier (me) at evedave1@AT.rogers.com if you have any questions about C&T. The bibliography that follows provides a number of links to online material useful to those interested in C&T.

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