

Reverse engineering of 17th century sabre fencing style

This essay represents my actual point of view on making 17th century sabre fighting style alive again. You can find some notes regarding general approach to this issue, together with some explanation why I choose such way and means for my work.

At first, I would like to explain closely why I use exactly these words in the heading. In recent period, the word mostly used in this field, is research. But research is, by definition, coming up with new ideas and approaches. And coming up with new ideas is exactly what we need to avoid, when our goals are historically accurate results. What we exactly need is to come up with “old” ideas, as accurately as possible, to be able to look on the issue by same eyes as our ancestors did. In this case, I would prefer to use word “development”. But still, development means grow from some starting point. When the starting point is not clearly visible, development can be hardly archived. As for the sabre fencing styles, this is exactly the case.

Fighting style, together with plenty of other general approaches in one’s life, is deeply connected with cultural and intellectual background of the society. This determines one’s way of thinking and also his interpretation of the world and its events. Therefore, deep study of cultural background is a mandatory part in one’s progress. Only by this way it is possible to understand the mindset of our ancestors as described. Such approach can be most correctly described as reverse engineering, as we are going through same “from what to how” process.

This approach is very important in the field I choose to work at. For sabre fencing styles of the 17th century we have only limited amount of references, on which we can base our study. When we lack too many information to provide good overall image, we need to use indirect ways to make the image clearer. For this, several approaches can be used. I selected the method which is applied in cybernetics to control unobservable systems. Simply put, it is about how to control something that I am not able to measure. It is used mostly in technical applications, but general ways how to handle such issues can also be applied to other fields.

Defined inputs for particular fencing style are: parameters of weapon, which is used, observation of tempo and measure, as well as cultural background. From these premises, fencing style and philosophy is derived, which we can call fencing system. As output, application of this fencing system by using particular techniques can be observed. Using approach mentioned above, “the system”, and neither inputs nor outputs, is subject of changes.

For example, one of the “system” features for our fencing style, mentioned in various reports, is continuous blade movement, applied in form of countless cuts serving as both offensive and defensive actions. This can be derived from cultural background of the sabre users as cavalymen. Cavalry, in its most principle way of operation, is not able to hold ground standing still. Only cavalry in motion is able to use its advantages, delivering fast and powerful blow to the enemy. Also, when in charge, you need to push forward at any time, taking ground from your enemy and forcing him to break formation.

Using examples such as cavalryman mentality, and applying them in development of fencing system, give us particular techniques to be used as result. For example, this approach results in moving forward in any possible time during both striking and parrying. And in case that any particular technique is found to be either defunct or in any way inferior, we are going to re-think the system itself, not focusing on any technique in particular.

Margin for error is big for sure with such an approach, but I still consider it better than seeing a sabre fencing style with a present time mindset. Also, every big error in interpretation, will be reduced by every cycle of trying and checking. To shorten the period needed for at least moderate results, extensive study of both similar era fencing styles (giving general understanding regarding approach to armed fight for corresponding era) and modern fighting styles (giving understanding of how life threatening situations should be handled) is mandatory.

Also, I do not consider optimal looking on a particular bits of techniques described in primary sources and just making sum of them and creating a basis of a fencing style just on such described techniques. Fencing style, in my opinion, is more than just couple of techniques put into motion.

Coming up with the mindset, which is as accurate as possible to the mindset of our ancestors, gives us opportunity to have general understanding of the fencing style as they had. With such an approach, we will be able to apply this general understanding, deriving techniques from it and finding out whether the results are corresponding with the primary references we have. Such comparison is the final and most important step, and one has to be ready to throw away everything which is not according to expected results, regardless of the time spend or usefulness of the particular technique.

I hope that this proposed essay provided you some insight into the way I choose to get as closest as possible to 17th century sabre fencing style, as it was practiced in that period. I am aware of that we have still long way in front of us, but I find going down this way very interesting.

For Messores
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