

The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe
by Sydney Anglo
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Sydney Anglo's long-awaited book *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe* is unquestionably a labor of love, a well-put together work of remarkable erudition. The command that the author, a research professor at the University of Wales, shows of his source material is encyclopedic. While certainly owing debts to previous writers, Dr. Anglo also attempts something quite unique: To examine the actual teaching and practice of arms as an artifact of culture. While Dr. Anglo does not do a perfect job of this, his work does much exciting material to light. More importantly, it gives the study of historical swordsmanship much-needed academic cachet, introducing the art historian to the literature of fencing, and the historian of ideas to the geometrical conceptions of fencing put forth by such diverse personages as Agrippa, Carranza, and Thibault.

Dr. Anglo also introduces us to some new names whose works have been previously neglected. The significance of the impact these masters may have had (in part, due to poor distribution) may have been minimal, but their works are nonetheless fascinating. The Spanish master Pietro Monte, acquaintance of Castiglione and da Vinci, is already known to Anglo's readers through his monograph "The Man Who Taught Leonardo Darts" (*Antiquities Journal* LXIX, 1989). However others, such as the Italian Frederico Ghisliero, published in Parma in 1587 are new. Excerpts, rather than paraphrases, from the works of these men would have been welcome, both for the sake of the nuances of language, and because some of Ghisliero's illustrations and Anglo's treatment of his text provide titillating suggestions as to the origins of the equestrian art of dressage, a connection that, we are sure, the author was not aware of.

Proceeding from a broad discussion of the place of masters of arms and the teaching of arms in Medieval and Renaissance society (a topic also touched on by Wise), Dr. Anglo proceeds to a chapter on the "notation and illustration of movement in combat manuals." His answer to the problems posed therein seems to be much influenced by the methodological approaches of dance history—that each position illustrated in a manual captures a moment in time.

Though Dr. Anglo's view of fencing manuals and their relation to dance manuals is indeed a welcome and astute insight, being as both genres deal with social "graces" of different sorts, it is surprising that a scholar of his erudition did not further discuss art-historical topics as they relate to the subject at hand. What of the Mannerist concept of elegance, the *contrapposto* that is present in both the Michelangelo's Sistine Sybils and the twining combatants of Fabris? What of the Renaissance idea of "real" space and "ideal" space that are exhibited both in Thibault's elaborate engravings and Bellini's Madonnas? What is the relationship between the Medieval "memory palace" and its allegorical mnemonics and the wolves, dragons, and elephants of de'Liberi and Vadi? Such mention might have further enriched this chapter. Happily, though, Dr. Anglo has left this subject virgin ground for future writers.

What Dr. Anglo neglects is that fencing is not merely kinetic art. Such concepts as timing, second intention, and other such subtleties are hard to understand, or to recognize

in texts, without practical experience. Even the “pictographs” of Cotton MS I-33, the earliest known manuscript that can be considered a work on fencing, are not so occult to cognoscenti. This is why a knowledge of tradition is also important, so that the pieces of the puzzle have some framework to fall into. As the author paraphrases Pietro Monte, “lessons will be more readily grasped if there is a master to show how they should be done. A thorough knowledge of intangibles such as these is the main pitfall when attempting to comprehend books on fencing. (Unfortunately, Anglo also seems to be unfamiliar with Dr. William Gaugler’s *History of Fencing*, which is not listed in his bibliography, and which might have been useful in attempting to grasp these intangibles.)

Additionally, though Dr. Anglo is critical of Egerton Castle’s Victorian-era superiority in *Schools and Masters of Fence*, which saw all fence as leading up to the “perfection” of contemporary (i.e. nineteenth-century) foil-play, Dr. Anglo himself occasionally lapses into modern editorial when he discovers a construction he does not understand. This is most notable when, like many writers, he seems to have been bewildered by the Spanish school of rapier fencing. Indeed, even his bibliographical information on Carranza—giving 1582 instead of 1569 as his date of publication for *De la Filosofía de las Armas*—is in error. Even a cursory glance at *la verdadera destreza* will reveal a rationalistic system of fence, intimately tied, as with the rest of the masters considered, to the humanistic pedagogical, intellectual, and aesthetic concerns of its time and place. Dr. Anglo says, “The Spanish masters . . . were anxious to work out a symbolic notation rather than one which relied . . . on a realistic representation of fencers. And the key to this quest was their obsession with the interrelationship between mathematics and sword play.”

Indeed, this is so, but not because swordsmen were expected to fence “by the numbers,” but rather because geometry and mathematics were believed to develop the facilities of judgment and enable to practitioner to address the problem at hand rationally—intangible qualities of no small use in fencing, but which can not be understood without first-hand knowledge. Static figures do nothing to convey this sense. (We have not mentioned, either, the connection between geometry and conceptions of Platonic forms, which would have been implicitly understood by Carranza’s audience.) The Spanish masters differed from their predecessors in that they tried to elucidate a meta-approach to fencing. Whether the system “works” or not is immaterial; what it *means* is. To his credit, though, Dr. Anglo does produce one of the best discourses on Thibault’s *Académie de l’espée* in recent years, and explores the humanistic idea of fencing along the Vitruvian plan quite well. (Ironically enough, Thibault was derided by Narváez as confusing the issue with complexity, and Narváez is in turn criticized on the same grounds by Anglo.)

The next chapters in *Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe* are rather straightforward, dealing with the “Myths and realities of foot combat with swords”; “Vocabulary and taxonomy of sword fighting”; “Staff weapons”; “Bare hands daggers, and knives”; “Arms and armour”; “Mounted combat” (both with the lance and other weapons); and “Duels, brawls, and battles.” In all, a wealth of information and analysis is expertly introduced and dealt with. When Dr. Anglo deals with the intellectual history of the sword, he cannot be disputed. The book’s weakness, and fatal flaw, is when he offers technical analysis, for it is then that errors and errata creep into the discourse.

For instance, in “Myths and realities of foot combat with swords,” we encounter a passage on cut versus thrust, in which the author quotes Castle’s well-known dictum: “the thrust belongs to a more advanced state of the art.” Castle is then used as a straw man to expound upon, the deadly efficacy of Medieval swordsmanship, which included both cut and thrust. While this may be a useful rhetorical technique with which to enlighten the reader, what is surprising is that Dr. Anglo then launches upon a vague flight of fantasy, pitting the rapier against the katana and the longsword, without even mentioning of the technical virtues of each. One can only wonder what scholarly works are informing this flight of fancy. That relevant fact and necessary analysis mix so with such material is one major flaw of this work.

Likewise, in his final chapter on “duels, brawls, and battles,” a brief consideration of hopology might have served Dr. Anglo in good stead. Likening rapier fence to commando-style “all-in fighting,” he states, “Renaissance duels and armed affrays were analogous to war; and, to judge from the homicidal pages of the masters and the bloodstained record of personal combats, prisoners were rarely taken.” This statement would seem to be a concise statement of the *leitmotif* of the book, and it is disappointing, for it is far too simplistic. Regardless of the fact that the true intention of the skilful use of the rapier is to keep the adversary at distance and kill him there—and thus is quite different from the earlier weapons discussed, such as the longsword—this attitude is also contrary to some of the best thinking on the subject. J. Christoph Amberger has pointed out in his *Secret History of the Sword* that there is a definite difference between combat in war and personal combat fought under a set of rules, and between mass combat and the predatory, cold-blooded dispatching of an adversary. If absolute dominion was the only requirement for success in all scenarios, then why the often-repeated admonitions on grace and style in countless manuals of fence? Indeed, why fight a duel at all?

Nor does Dr. Anglo convincingly show that the teaching of “all-in” fighting was all-pervasive throughout the period in question. The inclusion of unarmed techniques in a manual of fence in the sixteenth century does not mean that this material was not being taught alongside the use of the sword a century later, but it does not imply it, either. Just as society changed greatly from the fifteenth century to the seventeenth, and just as customs varied from country to country, so, too, did customs regarding personal combat. Most importantly, we see in this period the evolution of the civilian sidearm. This is especially true in that the rapier was *not* a battlefield weapon, and its use must be examined as a separate subject entirely. Context is all-important, and is definitely lacking in this case.

Because Dr. Anglo deals mainly with written evidence, his arguments and conclusions are almost wholly derived from his examination of fighting manuals and anecdotal accounts. His mastery of this material is irrefutable. It is when he attempts to synthesize this material into a coherent whole that he reveals a critical lack of understanding of purposes and a lack of knowledge of time-honored traditions. In this, Dr. Anglo shows himself to be, in his own way, just as biased is his predecessor Castle. The idea of “martial arts,” in the modern conception, is a recent one, and a poor lens through which to filter the world of five hundred years ago. “Martial arts” may mean “fighting arts” today, but to attempt to apply the term to the entire breadth and scope of activity dealing with mass and personal combat on foot and on horseback, in armor and in

shirtsleeves, in war and in peace, that existed a half-millennium ago is little better than a gimmick.

Still, though flawed, *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe* is a significant work and a welcome addition to the English literature on the subject. Serious students of the history of swordsmanship should invest in a copy, both as a general introduction, as a useful reference source, and so as to be informed participants in the spirited debates that are sure to follow.

—Ken Mondschein

Techniques of Medieval Armour Reproduction: The 14th Century
by Brian R. Price
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Those familiar with some of Paladin Press' other offerings may be surprised at the concise, informative nature and handsome layout of Brian Price's *Techniques of Medieval Reproduction*. Quite frankly, this book may be the finest volume that we have ever seen from the Colorado publisher, and they certainly are to be commended. We can only hope that Paladin continues to publish works of such quality in the future.

This is not, of course, to detract from the praise due to the author. Mr. Price has filled a need in both the historical fencing and reenactment communities, namely, the lack of an authoritative handbook for the construction of reproduction armor. Armor (or armour, as the author would have it), is more than just protection against brute force and injury. It is also a form of costume, an announcement of social standing, and a display of sartorial style. Though there are many basement and garage armories in operation today, relatively few turn out pieces that are as functional and elegant as their medieval antecedents. *Techniques of Medieval Armour Reproduction* may help to rectify the situation somewhat. And, even if one is hopelessly inept in the craft shop, Mr. Price provides the reader with a catalogue of tools, techniques, and designs that are as useful for the enthusiast as for the craftsman.

Beginning with an overview of some of the various groups who are the primary modern consumers of armor (and demonstrating a definite bias towards certain types of reenactment or recreation), Mr. Price then launches into a catalogue of whom he feels are outstanding armorers currently working in the U.S. and abroad. This is a very unique and eye-opening section, being in effect a survey course that introduces the reader to masters of the trade they may have been entirely unaware of. In the following section on techniques, Mr. Price discusses some of the current reputable and useful literature available on arms and armor, and the chapter on training the hand and eye suggests that armoring, done correctly, is on the level of fine art. These features alone raise the quality of the book considerably above the usual run. Finally, there are the projects, beginning and overview of armor in the fourteenth century and encompassing the construction of several types of armor for the entire body, from helmet to greaves (sabotons being covered elsewhere). The book ends with useful glossaries, a list of sources, and a very good bibliography.

Overall, *Techniques of Medieval Armour Reproduction* is richly illustrated and documented with pictures of original and reproduction medieval armor, as well as all phases of a project. When Mr. Price engages in speculation, he does not hesitate to qualify his assertions and present; neither is he afraid to admit when there is a gap in our current knowledge of medieval arms and armor. The book is further enriched by some valuable articles. David Edge of the Wallace Collection writes the introduction, which should be a recommendation in its own right. Dr. Alan Williams contributes an excellent short article on the metallurgy of medieval armor. There is even a piece on gilding excerpted from Benvenuto Cellini's sixteenth-century treatise.

Though, again, definitely displaying a bias for certain forms of reenactment, and flexible enough to accommodate both modern tools and modern necessities in armor reproduction, Mr. Price does exhibit a remarkable concern for authenticity. His work is very much oriented towards armor for use, rather than for display. So, too, does he realize that certain projects may be beyond the abilities of beginning or intermediate armorers, and, as in the case of constructing greaves, gives some shortcuts. Indeed, one of the few objections we might point out are when he does *not* make such exceptions, such as when he instructs the reader to strap leg armor on the inside, despite the fact that this can be uncomfortable for the horse. There is also the occasional debatable statement, such as “Indeed, on horseback, the movement of the visor against the helmet contributes to the range of vision, greatly expanding it as the occularia moves up and down.” Perhaps so, but, in practice, definitely a jarring experience!

These, of course, are mere quibbles. The book is overall excellent, focused, and true to its task. Mr. Price has produced a very fine and useful work indeed, and he deserves all due praise. *Techniques of Medieval Armour Reproduction* should be on the reference shelf all aspiring armorers and armor users. It will doubtless prove the standard textbook for the next decade, and be included in the bibliography of similar works for centuries to come.

—Ken Mondschein