

The Sabre in Francesco Antonio Marcelli's Manual

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the use of the sabre in the Manual ("The Rules of Fencing") published by Francesco Antonio Marcelli. The first part is a historical introduction, while, in the second part, I have translated the sabre part of the book.

The Manual

The manual we are considering was written by Francesco Antonio Marcelli and was printed in Rome in 1686; it was examined and approved, as non offensive to the Catholic Religion, in 1685. The book is dedicated to Cristina Alessandra, Queen of Sweden, who lived in Rome at the time. Marcelli says that he served under Cristina and that he inherited the service from his uncle, the link with the Swedish Queen is, therefore, a direct one (this is not a totally minor point, since Marcelli mentions Sweden in his sabre section and one could wonder what he knew about that country). The manual may, anyway, be not the result of the work of just one person. As we will see, in the sabre section, Marcelli states that all fencing treatises are in Italian, however, in the introduction he reports a list of fencing treatise, which includes Spanish, French and German ones. It is possible that the introduction and other parts of the manuals were not written by the same person, this could mean that the sabre section is actually older and not datable in the 1685 circa. Marcelli says that most of the "documenti" on which the manual is based came from his father; it could mean that most of the "teachings" or most of the "documents" came from his father. This doesn't necessarily imply that the sabre section is his father's work, it is possible that it was his uncle's, we do not know. The manual is an unusually rich one and it deals with the smallsword as well as the rapier and the sabre.

The word "Sciabla"

Marcelli uses the word "sciabla" and it is the first time this happens, as far as I know. Now, the word itself seems to be the Italian version of the Polish word "szabla", because the two are pronounced alike and there was a specific word already for the Turkish curved sword: "scimitarra" (it is reported, for example, in the Florio dictionary, whereas "sciabla" is not). This said, we cannot claim that Marcelli meant specifically the Polish sabre, because in the intro of the sabre section he makes a quick list of the countries in which the sabre was in use, this list includes Turkey where the sabre was the kilij not the szabla and it is not the case that just one type of sabre was used in Poland as well.

We tend to think Marcelli used the word "sciabla" because it had become popular in his time to mean a whole family of weapons fitting his description: "*The sabre is a single edged weapon, long three palms, a bit more or a bit less. It is not straight as the sword is, but it is somewhat curved at the point, where, in a tongue like shape, it ends with two edges.*"

The reader will be wondering, at this point, why a Polish word had gone into European military jargon to mean an entire family of swords. It is also worth reminding to the reader that swords fitting the reported description existed, in continental Europe, in the centuries preceding Marcelli's manual: in Italy they were named "storte", it not at all uncommon to find Austrian curved blade swords from the 17th century in auctions, usually named "Styrian Sabre".

Swedish troops are credited for introducing the use of the sabre in the 30 years war¹, however, Andreas Eggstrom, a Swedish martial artist that studies the Swedish military sabre, tells us that the Swedish Army also had Polish troops in its ranks. The matter is, anyway, another in my opinion: Marcelli cares to mention two important characters of his recent past, in the introduction of the

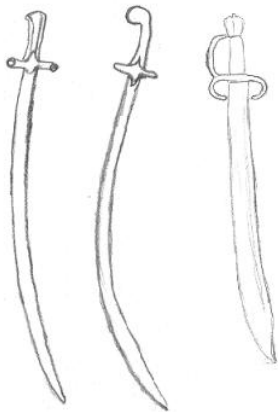
¹ Piero Del Negro, *Guerre ed Eserciti da Machiavelli a Napoleone*, Laterza, pag. 69.

manual: the emperor Leopold I and Jan Sobieski of Poland. They have in common an historical event that is often overlooked nowadays, but that must have been felt as very important around the end of the 17th century: they fought and defeated the Ottomans, preventing their expansion in Europe.

Leopold fought the Turks in the sixties of the 17th century already, with the support of various German princes and even of Luis XIV; during that war, general Raimondo Montecuccioli got a very important victory at S. Gottardo (Szentgotthárd) in Hungary. Montecuccioli would later publish a military treatise, “Aforismi dell’Arte Bellica” or “Della Guerra col Turco in Ungheria 1660 – 1664”, that had to become the theory upon which the military system was to be reformed.

The Emperor Leopold fought the Turks again in the eighties, with Jan Sobieski on his side, this time Vienna itself was under siege and it was the Polish King who lead the imperial troops to victory in that occasion. When Marcelli’s manual was printed, the war was not over yet (it was only with the Karlowitz peace of 1699 that the Sultan agreed on the Habsburg sovereignty over Hungary) therefore there is no doubt that events related to it were considered important.

The Polish society included a greater portion of nobility, compared to the average Western Europe country of the day, this and tradition made for an army that was mainly based on mounted troops, troops that carried the szabla. On the other front, other types of curved swords were in use in quantity, no doubt, so, that the curved sword was the raising star of the day in military circles and a word had to be used to denote it. It is a logical choice to adopt the word used by the allied that have the most sabres, hence “szabla”, or “sciabla” becomes the word that describes the curved sword used in the recent war.



In the above picture, we have drawn a Polish Karabela, a Turkish Kilij and an Italian Storta. It is not possible to draw any sure conclusion about the real origin of the techniques of the sabre section of Marcelli’s manual. What Marcelli presents may be, although we doubt it, a traditional method of his family, taught him by his father. More likely, this section is new and the method described is due to Marcelli’s own study of the weapon, or some teaching he got from some soldier of the war against Turks, teachings he condensed in a simple system, focused on the use of the sabre against the rapier. It seems reasonable to assert that he has played bouts with the sabre and against it and it is not unlikely that he heard accounts of fights, between straight European military swords and sabres.

We cannot claim Marcelli’s method is a derivation of some traditional Polish or Turkish method, all we can say is that, in the manual’s period, there were people who may carry sabres and know how to use them properly, as well as people who got them as war trophies, or just bought them, and carried them with no proper cognition about their use. It is possible that Marcelli channelled someone else’s notions in his own record for a matter of convenience, at the time it was not so important to show a “tradition” or disclose ones sources as being the inventor of something.

About the Rules of Fencing

4th Book

How to use the sabre against the sword and how to defend yourself with the sword against the sabre

I don't know why I've never found anything about sabre play, in either modern or ancient texts; but I know for sure that this is an ancient weapon, which is used in many nations, especially the eastern ones, such as Sweden, Poland, Hungary and Turkey, and many other places different from our for climate, religion and rituals.

I suppose that, since all books about fencing have been written by Italian authors, they (the authors) just wrote about what you can purchase and use in Italy. So they just wrote about the sword (rapier), because it is the only one we have in our tradition and the only one allowed by the princes.

Today, I see that the habit of wearing the sabre has been brought to us, not a few people trust to use it in various occasions, so I opted not to ignore the matter.

So here you get a few instructions about the sabre.

The way to grip the sabre and how many parts it is divided in

The sabre is a single edged weapon, long three palms, a bit more or a bit less. It is not straight as the sword is, but it is somewhat curved at the point, where, in a tongue like shape, it ends with two edges.

The blade is four times, or more, broader than the sword's one, because of this, and of the weight, which is a lot, and the edge, which is acute, the sabre hurts with vigour and falls with strength. This weapon is very dangerous because of its cuts, which are far more lethal than the sword's and, at times, they remove limbs cleanly.

The sabre is not made of three parts like the sword: forte, terzo and debole, it is considered to be made of just one part, which includes the whole blade, because it has all the same strength and quality. So, the sabre is considered to be all forte, because you can hurt and defend with any part of it, be it the point, the middle or the one close to the hilt.² You can sever the enemy with any part of a sabre's edge (I say edge, because the sabre doesn't hurt with the point)³, all parts have equal strength, with no quantity variation, because the blade doesn't vary in quality.⁴

The sabre is to be gripped in a locked key fashion, putting the index in that hollow which is found in its cross⁵, so that, being held fast in the hand, one has a secure grip, able to resist to the violence of the moves, and doesn't lose the hold on it, which could easily happen, if one held it in another way, or tried to play with it in the light fashion we suppose is appropriate to the sword.

Here some arguments are not valid, those I stated about the sword don't hold, we're talking about a totally different weapon, in nature and play, it is, anyway, necessary to practice its play, despite different in rules, in order to find rules appropriate to the instrument (the sabre), with which they are supposed to be used.

² We remind the reader that, here, the sabre is considered in its use against the rapier, more than against another sabre, this explains the division of the blade

³ Marcelli he's saying that the sabre is not used to thrust, this may seem weird to the modern swordsman, yet we refer to the note above. Our guess is that it unlikely that it is expedient to play with the point with the sabre against the rapier.

⁴ This sentence is, I suppose, related to mass distribution in the parts of the blade

⁵ Likely a small leather lace

Guard and parries with the sabre

The guard of the sabre doesn't require that body and belly positioning I taught, when I dealt with the sword's guard. This guard is assumed with the body straight, upright, remaining in a standing position; when you play with the sabre you have to keep a stiff body (not bend over) and the feet well planted on the ground; so that you don't risk to bend over with the cuts, which most of the time miss and could unbalance you in the recovery phase, when they meet no resistance.

The way to defend from the sword's thrusts is obtained by the standard sabre operations and by the way its cuts move, such cuts, delivered quickly, will perform both tasks (defending and offending). However, we must say that, in order to obtain such effects, you must operate the sabre swiftly, so that the cuts are many, quick and close together, the path of the cut should be almost impossible to see. If you play slowly with the sabre, your opponent's thrusts will find the time and place to hit. It happens also in the sabre case that you have to adapt your actions to the chances that your opponent's actions give, and to the measure he sets.

You can, no doubt, step forward and retreat backward with ease, moving the feet with solidness (stability), using natural and short steps, instead of long and furious ones.

It happens that the opponent, being afraid of coming in distance, doesn't risk to give his strikes at the appropriate measure, but he throws some strikes from far away, to keep his opponent at distance. In this case, it is necessary to parry, stepping in the same time, in order to get closer to the enemy and hit him with the cutting riposte.

All the cuts explained in the first part of the book can be used with the sabre, the main ones being the mandritto and the reverso (inside, outside), either fendenti (coming down vertical) or obliqui (angled), because they are the most dangerous, since they hit high, in the head area. Although all sabre cuts are good, with these you have the chance to quickly overcome the opponent.

One must not use the Passate, with the sword against the sabre

The foolishness of the one who thought he could escape to that blade, which cannot be stopped and prevented to hurt in such occasions, would be very well punished. Fate wouldn't spare him, because what happened would have happened for a reason. One would be very silly if he did not see, by himself, the unavoidable danger of doing the passata, against the sabre armed enemy, and he'd have little judgment in not seeing its effect beforehand, since it gives the target, instead of taking it away, to the opponent's cut. I can concede that, when the passata is done at the appropriate speed, one can hit the opponent with his thrust, however, it cannot be that your speed is such that you cannot be hit by the opponent's cut, which is operated with the sabre, that can hurt at such a close range. In this case, the usual argument regarding swords: that thrusts are more dangerous than cuts, so it is no big trouble to get at close range to give a thrust and receive a cut, doesn't apply. This argument is based on the fact that the sword's cut is weak at close range and it cannot be as dangerous as the thrust, however, a sabre's cut is different from a sword's thrust: it can sever the head and take the life in one blow, it is also a fact that, if the cut falls perpendicular, it can sever a limb cleanly.

How to use feints with the sabre

You can feint cuts, with a sabre, although not easily, pretending to hit in a place and hitting in another instead. One way to feint, from which the others can be deduced, can be seen in the following picture.



Having the attacker thrown a mandritto tondo to the hip, the defender attempted to parry it, because he couldn't slip it, opposing the forte of the sword, however, since the attacker did not finish that cut, the defender got hit, in the same time, in the head by a reverso. In order to have the necessary speed, for such feints, one must remember the universal rule regarding cuts: they are to be delivered with the wrist only, without moving the whole arm, or they become wide and slow movements. So, you feint with the mandritto tondo and you hit with the reverso or you can feint with the reverso and hit with the mandritto, which would be the case in the picture if the attacking knight, feinting on the line A, compelling the defender to parry, in the same time recovered the sword along the line C and hit in B. One can deduce the other ways to feint from this one, by way of a long practice, understanding which occasions are more advantageous for him.

How to get to wrestling with the sabre



One of the advantages to consider, in possession of the one who uses the sabre against the one who uses the sword, is that he can get to the grips, but the other can't. Here I confirm what I said previously: the grips can be taken with many actions. In the previous picture, the knight 38 has performed an inside parry, then, lunging in, and using his opponent's effort to deliver his strike, he took the grip in the way shown.

The knight who got hit could not escape this quick action because, being in such a position of great effort for the body, he needed far longer a time, in order to get away than the assailant needed to hit him.

Which actions aren't to be performed with the sabre against the sword

The actions to be performed with the sabre are the ones I previously explained, one has to avoid the infinite set of actions that belong to sword fencing, because they are good with the sword, but dangerous with the sabre.

Single time actions, which are so important with the sword, are very dangerous with the sabre, because, being this a weapon that hurts with the edge only, it is not the case that it can hit the opponent with the edge and set aside his point, in a single time: the first action doesn't have in itself the second, the defence, so you cannot offend in single time.

With the sabre, you don't do the quarte (inquartate), the sottobotte (single time counter involving crouching), the passate and the fianconate, or the others I taught for the sword. We are in a totally different context and we have to perform those actions that cope with the instrument we're using. Perfection in sabre play comes from a long and conscious practice, with which the arm is made stronger and more agile, developing the speed and readiness that are necessary. Such virtues have to be developed to the point that you can close any possible way to the enemy's thrusts, by way of cutting often and quickly.

One also has to pay a lot of attention to measure, so that he doesn't get so close he offers the body to the opponent's point, which have a reach twice that of cuts: not just because of the nature of the cut, which is always shorter than the thrust, not being delivered with the body forward and the arm stretched, but also for the short reach of the sabre, which is shorter than the sword.

So I say one has to be very cautious in hurting in single time, with the sabre, and that it is more advisable to do so in double time, especially appropriate is doing so, when you see that you've set aside the opponent's point, and you can go in measure and hit with a cut, without having to fear to be hit by his point.

From the preceding reflection it follows that, if one acts along the appropriate rules, he acts safely. Footwork must support the cut, giving it more power and strength, but it must always be fit to the natural movement of the strike. You can step forward and backward, to the left or to the right, but always making short steps, with body upright and well centred (between the feet).

One has to walk remaining stable, without haste. It is necessary to consider what action is to be taken, in order to match it with appropriate footwork. One has to be strong and stable on the ground, with the body on a line and well gathered, so that he doesn't become unstable and fall, for the fury of the cuts.

It often happens that the arm gets tired and weak, because of the weight of the sabre, the strength of the cuts and the length of the fight. In this case, being astute, you can catch breath and rest, without letting the opponent notice it because, if the opponent noticed that you're tired, he could press upon you with his thrusts, while your cuts are slow. You can go to a longer measure, and get more distant from the enemy, by being smart and pretending to assume a better position or to be planning something, so that your enemy doesn't pursue you with his thrusts, this will permit you to rest and come back stronger to the fight. It is necessary, though, to pretend that your slower moves and retreat depend upon your intention to cheat the opponent and not upon necessity.

How to fight with the sword against the sabre

The only one rule that the sword armed fighter has to follow, when he deals with a sabre armed opponent, is to slip his point in any way from the opponent's cuts. For this reason, in this case,

toccate and attacchi (actions involving blade contact) or any similar actions, are of no use, because the sabre doesn't stay forward in line, has no weak part, which you can engage with the sword and, most important: its point is never static, because of continuous cutting.

The only one action I hold as valuable, with the sword against the sabre, is the straight thrust in time, delivered in the point in which the opponent's cut begins, not when you see the blade falling, but when you see the point dropping to begin the cut. With this action one defends himself, offends the opponent and keeps him far away, so that he cannot come close and hit with those so dangerous and deadly cuts. I leave to the common sense of prudent the form of his retreat, which has to be fast, he doesn't need my advice about this. The speed must be such that you have to have given the thrust already and come back to guard, before your opponent can find your sword with his cut, knowing the unavoidable danger of doing otherwise: either your arm will not withstand the impact and you will be disarmed, or the sabre armed guy, hitting the sword, will be able to use the time of the riposte.

The one who has the sword must not come to the grips or go in a strength confrontation against the one with the sabre; he must not feint, use sottobotte or passate. So, in the end, to say it all by saying little: only the straight thrust allows you to have the upper hand in this confrontation, permitting to hurt very quickly and save yourself.