

# Brief notes on fencing, from the military treatise of Giovanni Alberto Cassani (1603)

Translated by Piermarco Terminiello

## Introduction

Giovanni Alberto Cassani published a military treatise in Naples in 1603.<sup>1</sup> In this work he indicates that he was born in the town of Frassinello Monferrato in Piedmont, and that he served in the Spanish army, but little more is known about his life.

Most military treatises of the time contain almost no advice on hand to hand combat. Cassani's is somewhat of an exception. The bulk of the work is dedicated to organising troop formations, relying heavily on mathematical formulae, however on pages 5 to 8 he briefly includes notes on fencing.

These notes are succinct and somewhat vague. Crucially he does not provide definitions for his four principal blows, limiting the technical value of his already concise summary.

Despite these limitations, Cassani's advice on fencing is interesting for a number of reasons. We have few instructions on military swordsmanship in the period. Cassani's method appears firmly stationed within a military context, and seems very different to contemporary treatises on civilian fencing.

Cassani predominantly describes passing footwork, and exclusively employs cuts, quite unlike any comparable Italian work from the first decade of the seventeenth century. It is also of interest that in the few pages he dedicates to fencing, he discusses combat with two swords, like Altoni, Docciolini, and Palladini,<sup>2</sup> recommending a second sword as the first companion arm to be learned before other combinations.

Finally Cassani describes the two main cuts in fencing explicitly as “two arcs, or rather circles”,<sup>3</sup> from which we might infer a family resemblance to the exuberant self-defence methods (as distinct from approaches for duelling or the *salle*) which are occasionally discussed by contemporary fencing masters.<sup>4</sup> In fact, despite the apparent differences between Cassani's military style, and the general approach advocated in civilian treatises, Cassani strongly recommends practice in the *salle*, or at home, presumably under the tutelage of a fencing master.

Thus although brief and frustratingly imprecise, Cassani's few words provide an intriguing insight into historic approaches to swordplay.

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1 Cassani, Giovanni Alberto. *Essercitio militare, il quale dispone l'huomo à vera cognitione del scrimire di spada, e dell'ordinare l'essercito à battaglia etc.* (Naples, 1603).

2 See: Altoni, Francesco di Sandro. *Monomachia: Trattato dell'arte di scherma*. Edited by Battistini, Alessandro, Rubboli, Massimo (sic) and Venni, Iacopo (Rimini, 2007); Docciolini, Marco. *Trattato in materia di scherma* (Florence, 1601); and Wallace Collection, De Walden Library 14/10. Palladini, Camillo. *Discorso di Camillo Palladini Bolognese sopra l'arte della scherma. Come l'arte della scherma è necessaria à chi si diletta d'arme* (circa 1600).

3 In the original: *due giri, o sian due circoli*.

4 See: <http://hroarr.com/article/hack-slash-in-the-age-of-reason-italian-rapier-against-multiple-opponents/>

# On Fencing

In fencing there are two arcs, or rather circles, the *dritto* and the *roverscio*.<sup>5</sup> These are divided into four simple blows:

1. *Sotto*
2. *Risotto*
3. *Sopra*
4. *Risopra*<sup>6</sup>

Whereas there are twelve composite blows:

<i>Sotto</i> and <i>risopra</i>	<i>Sopra</i> and <i>risopra</i>	<i>Sotto</i> and <i>sopra</i>
<i>Risopra</i> and <i>sotto</i>	<i>Risopra</i> and <i>sopra</i>	<i>Sopra</i> and <i>sotto</i>
<i>Risotto</i> and <i>sopra</i>	<i>Sotto</i> and <i>risotto</i>	<i>Risotto</i> and <i>risopra</i>
<i>Sopra</i> and <i>risotto</i>	<i>Risotto</i> and <i>sotto</i>	<i>Risopra</i> and <i>risotto</i>

## Attacking with two steps

To employ these said blows, both simple and composite, you should (in my view) perform them with two steps, starting with your left, before quickly returning back with the same two steps you attacked with. You should employ neither more nor fewer steps in defence, never turning your back on your enemy.

With the simple blows, they should accompany your steps in twos: two forward and two back, as I described above. This is because on your first step, which is always performed with your left foot, you should beat your enemy's sword. With your second step, passing your right foot forward, you should attack your enemy.

You should then quickly return back, with the same sequence of two steps you attacked with. During this retreat you should take care only to defend, and not attack. Again be advised never to turn your back on your enemy while withdrawing.

## Attacking with three steps

To attack with three forward steps, again you should defend on retreating, in the same sequence of three steps, not withdraw with fewer or more steps than you used in attack, never turn your back on your enemy, and as before parrying while you take the three steps back.

The three steps you perform forward in attack should start with your right foot, not with your left as described during the attack with two steps.

The blows you should deliver during attacks with three steps are the following:

<i>Sopra</i> , <i>risopra</i> and <i>sopra</i>	<i>sotto</i> , <i>risotto</i> and <i>sotto</i>
<i>Risopra</i> , <i>sopra</i> and <i>risopra</i>	<i>risotto</i> , <i>sotto</i> and <i>risotto</i>

Otherwise with the four simple blows described above, one at a time.

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<sup>5</sup> *Dritto* and *roverscio* are common fencing terms, indicating cuts generated from the sword side (the right side for a right-handed fencer) and the non-sword (left) side respectively.

<sup>6</sup> *Sotto*, *risotto*, *sopra* and *risopra* literally mean respectively: below, “rebelow”, above, and “reabove”. Sadly Cassini does not further define these terms, and they do not direct correspondly with the terms of any other known fencing masters.

## Attacking with one step

You can also attack your enemy with one step at a time, employing the two arcs, or rather circles I mentioned at the beginning: the *dritto* and the *roverscio*. You can advance and withdraw as you please, as the opportunity presents itself.

Fencing with two swords can be performed with three attacks. The first is with the *sotto*, employing the *sotto* with both hands. The next with the *sopra*, using the *sopra* with both hands. The last and most difficult is with the *sotto* in one hand and the *sopra* in the other. Conversely you can employ one hand immediately after the other, as soon as one finishes the other beginning, with either the sequence of one or two steps.

With these three methods of attacking with two swords, you cannot so easily observe the sequence of steps, which is rather difficult given the length of the swords and the continuous movement. Also your arms and your feet cannot resist fatigue for as long as with the other attacks described above.

From the above exercise with two swords, you can easily learn to fence with a sword and cape, buckler, gauntlet, with sword and rotella, and with sword and dagger. Although they are different typologies of arms, they are very similar, and are employed with the same sequence of two steps forward and two steps back.

In this manner all the blows, whether simple, that is one at a time, or composite with two or three in a row, should finish with the right foot forward and not the left. Then you should retreat with the same sequence of steps you used to attack the enemy, not taking more or fewer.

Always study the enemy in order to oppose him with the said attacks, or alternatively with the same blows he uses, but in the right tempo, so that as one finishes the other begins.

As St. John Chrysostom says in Homily 42, because of the ignorance of those producing them, often medicines of the body kill rather than heal, likewise he states that those who do not know how to employ arms wound themselves.<sup>7</sup> The reason being is that they seek actions that can harm, rather than help.

To further explain and understand the above method of fencing, here we would need examples, or rather figures to demonstrate and denote the site, place, tempos and blows, as well as the actions and movements that are possible or often performed in such situations.

However those who are curious, and dedicated to the military arts can best learn them (in my opinion) only through practice with swords, or training versions thereof, without further explanations or figures; in their own homes or in public schools of this discipline, and not through images and descriptions here.

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<sup>7</sup> This is possibly a reference to the following passage:

“Many, throwing themselves prostrate, and striking the ground with their forehead, and pouring forth hot tears, and groaning bitterly from the heart and stretching out their hands, and displaying much earnestness, employ this warmth and forwardness against their own salvation. For it is not on behalf of their own sins that they beseech God; nor are they asking forgiveness of the offences committed by them; but they are exerting this earnestness against their enemies, doing just the same thing as if one, after whetting his sword, were not to use the weapon against his enemies, but to thrust it through his own throat. So these also use their prayers not for the remission of their own sins, but about revenge on their enemies; which is to thrust the sword against themselves.”

Schaff, Philip. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Volume IX St. Chrysostom*. (New York, Cosimo, 2007).

To avoid being drawn out, and boring the reader, I will omit and not place any here. Both for the above reason, and because people can do without them, since they lack the vital spirit to demonstrate and situate the movements and blows, the tempo and distance, the difference between one place and another. Furthermore since this work is short and brief, it seems to me in no way worth the cost to design and produce beautiful images.

For me it suffices, for now, to have shed some little light on the blows described above, and the manner of applying them when necessary. It depends on young combatants to exert themselves as much as they can to put them into practice, always guided by the unwavering requirements of reason.

### Thanks

Thanks to Marco De Filippo for sharing his views on this text, and to Francesca Terminiello for reviewing an earlier draft of this article.



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