

Italian Fencing Manuals in the Sixteenth Century

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For the period between 1500 and 1650 approximately one hundred manuals devoted to teaching the art of fencing were published in various languages. The greater percentage of these books were in Italian and innovative Italian fencing techniques came to dominate the art of fencing in all of Europe. Before 1500, however, Italian and German manuals of single combat tended to be very similar (to judge by the manuals of Fiore dei Liberi, 1410, and Hans Talhoffer, 1443). After 1500 Italian methods move into the forefront, largely because of the invention and spread of the rapier. This paper was mostly concerned with three fencing books that radically altered the ways fencing was conceived and taught.

Marozzo's book (1536) was one of the most popular of its time—it went through four reprints within thirty years of its publication—but is a fundamentally old-fashioned, purely pragmatic manual in the style of Talhoffer's *Fechtbuch* of 1443. In reaction to Marozzo, Francesco Altoni wrote his *Monomachia* ca. 1537. Altoni's contribution was to impose a prior conceptual model

onto the skills of fencing. He dissected the thrusts and parries and regrouped them into sets and subsets of the nine major postures the fencing body can adopt. He recognized the need for the fencer to keep his balance, hence the need for all movements to be related to simultaneous compensatory movements. The body in Altoni, including the fencer's sword, is understood as an organic whole. He enunciates this discourse in terms of proportion, harmony, structure—a vocabulary that is derived ultimately from Vitruvius. Altoni's book remained unpublished, but was probably known to Camillo Agrippa whose *Arte dell'arme* appeared in 1553. Agrippa established a grammar for fencing based on careful geometrical analysis of the angles between the upper and lower parts of the limbs when lunging and retreating. His language is singularly abstract for the period and it is significant that his book could still be reprinted in 1604 when there were many newer manuals available.

This paper delineated the increasing degree of conceptualization and abstraction that occurs from manual to manual.