

The Rapier: Examining Problems in Etymology and Typology

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Abstract – Modern rapier typologies have defined the current scholarly definition of the rapier and related weapons. Much of this understanding is derived from three authors: A.V.B. Norman, Claude Blair and Ewart Oakeshott. However, these typologies face challenges when analysed in detail, in particular when examined alongside the etymology of the word *rapier*. This article contains a discussion of Norman, Blair and Oakeshott’s interpretations and reconsiders the emergence of the term *rapier*, arguing that the history of the term and the modern understanding of development of the weapon do not necessarily correlate

Keywords – rapier, typology, rapière, sword, sidesword

I. INTRODUCTION

‘The evidence for what was meant by the word rapier at a particular period is very confused.’¹

A.V.B. Norman’s comment in his 1980 publication, *The Rapier and Small Sword* – arguably one of the finest typological surveys of rapier forms – remains true over forty years later. The term ‘rapier’ still causes some debate: as recently as 2023, Matt Easton posed the question ‘what makes a sword a rapier?’ in his popular video blog, *Schola Gladiatoria*.² The definition of a rapier varies according to discipline: HEMA practitioners may interpret a sword as a rapier through its function, as a tool defined by ‘practical application’ from the teaching of a fight book. A museum curator would conceivably approach a rapier’s classification by its place in a historical context, or particularly within a typology. As will be seen, the word *rapier* in the early modern period had at times a loose application. The intent of this article is to provide a summary of the main, modern definitions for a rapier and to discuss the various issues in providing a general categorisation of the weapon, including a discussion of the etymology of the word.

II. DEFINING THE RAPIER

The modern scholarly perception of what constitutes a rapier arguably comes from an anglophone tradition of fencing writers and museum curators, in particular A.V.B.

¹ Norman, *The Rapier and Small Sword*, p. 19.

² Easton, ‘What makes a sword a RAPIER?’

Norman, Claude Blair, and Ewart Oakeshott.³ Broadly, these authors have defined the rapier as a weapon forming part of civilian dress, not therefore a military weapon, and which used a blade primarily for thrusting, with a cutting ability ranging from some to little. Norman's *The Rapier and Small Sword, 1460-1820* remains probably the most comprehensive overview in English, with an excellent discussion on the origins of the rapier. At the time of writing this article, various facsimile and online versions are available. Norman highlights how the wearing of swords as part of 'civilian' dress as depicted in art was relatively common in Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth century, though several examples appear in Italian art in the fourteenth century.⁴ However, Norman does not provide a definitive 'start-date' for the rapier itself, suggesting that it developed as a thin-bladed sword, quite different to the somewhat heavier *estoc* or 'tuck'.⁵ Norman asserts several sword types were not rapiers as their blades were too broad: in his opinion, the rapier had only limited cutting ability.

Claude Blair's *European & American Arms, c. 1100-1850*, published in 1962, is increasingly dated but his work on arms and armour is foundational: Norman, a close friend of Blair, draws heavily on his work. Hard copies of his texts are quite rare but, like Norman's, are available online. In his book, Blair is more precise in dating the rapier than Norman (who tends to be quite cautious), stating '[t]he characteristic sword worn by gentleman with their civil dress from the third decade of the sixteenth century onwards was the rapier.'⁶ Blair goes on to write that the origin of the term *rapier* is obscure, probably from the Spanish *espada ropera*, but that the earliest known reference to *rapier* or 'épée rapière' dates from France in 1474.⁶ In his view, earlier rapier forms were lighter than an arming sword, but suitable for cutting and thrusting. He goes on to write:

[i]n Italy, where the modern art of fence seems to have had its real origins, a fencing-sword with a very long (up to as much as 60 in.), slender, two-edged blade had been developed in the early sixteenth century. With the spread of Italian methods of swordsmanship to the rest of Europe this blade was adopted for the rapier and from c.1560 onwards the term *rapier* was applied almost exclusively to a fencing-sword for civilian use.⁷

³ It should be emphasised that Norman, Blair and Oakeshott drew on a significant range of non-English scholarly works: Norman's bibliography is particularly extensive; Norman, *The Rapier and Small Sword*, pp. 411-24.

⁴ Norman, *The Rapier and Small Sword*, p. 20.

⁵ Norman, *The Rapier and Small Sword*, pp. 22-23.

⁶ Blair, *European & American Arms*, pp. 6-7. Blair cites the Spanish writer Enrique de Leguina for *espada ropera*: Leguina, *Glosario de Voces de Armeria*, pp. 121, 438.

⁷ Blair, *European & American Arms*, p. 7.

Notably, therefore, Blair asserts that the term *rapier* was almost universal across Europe with a corresponding spread of Italian fencing methodology. This can be challenged, not least by the existence of the Spanish *destreza verdadera*, but also due to the fact that the word *rapier* was far from standard across Europe, as will be discussed below.

Ewart Oakeshott is probably the most prolific of the three authors summarised here; many of his books have been republished and are also widely available online, and his typologies for swords are widely used. However, Blair criticised Oakeshott for failing to spot fakes and reproductions when creating his typologies.⁸ Further, the availability of his works may have led to the perpetuation of some myths, for example, outside of this topic, that castle staircases only spiral clockwise.⁹ In his book *European Weapons and Armour*, Oakeshott expresses some antipathy to the rapier, stating ‘there are shortcomings, practical and aesthetic, about the rapier’, appearing to share George Silver’s distaste expressed in the latter’s treatise of 1599, which Oakeshott quotes repeatedly.¹⁰ Oakeshott follows Blair by saying ‘it was not until the second half of the [sixteenth] century that the true specialised rapier, a weapon suitable for thrusting only, came into being’, though he goes on to say that the ‘true age’ of the rapier does not occur until the seventeenth century. Oakeshott even asserts that no ‘true’ rapier can be used in the same manner as a sword:

The only way in which the average rapier can be distinguished from the average Sword is by its ‘look’ and its feel in the hand. If you feel that you could cut off a man's arm with it, then it is a sword. If not, a rapier.¹¹

These authors therefore determine the rapier to have unclear origins, probably Spanish, but that it did not emerge as a ‘true’ rapier form until the end of the sixteenth century. Blade width and ability to thrust are a distinctive characteristic though notably many typologies follow hilt design rather than blade type.

At a superficial level the definitions above remain largely unchallenged, though scholars have tended to follow Norman’s more cautious approach to definition rather than Oakeshott’s strident assertions. Tobias Capwell for instance has suggested the wearing of swords with ‘civilian’ dress was a common practice by nobles and certain affluent middle classes by the early sixteenth century, in part to demonstrate status but also because of the growing duelling culture.¹² Capwell considered that the sword worn by civilians up until the mid-sixteenth century did not greatly differ from that worn by

⁸ Tzouriadis, “‘What is the Riddle of Steel?’”, p. 5.

⁹ Oakeshott, *A Knight and his Castle*, pp. 70-71.

¹⁰ Oakeshott, *European Weapons and Armour*, pp. 136-37; Silver, *Paradoxes of Defence*.

¹¹ Oakeshott, *European Weapons and Armour*, p. 137.

¹² Capwell, *The Noble Art of the Sword*, pp. 29-30.

soldiers, but thereafter the ‘fighting context’ led to the development of a thinner, thrusting sword.¹³ Similarly, José María Peláez Valle in his analysis of the development of Spanish swords eschewed strict definitions, preferring to generalise that the Spanish rapier sword or *espada ropera* was worn by soldiers and civilians in civilian dress as a defensive weapon as well as a fashionable adornment.¹⁴ As for the origin of the weapon, most scholars also prefer to keep with the idea that a rapier form emerges in the sixteenth century.¹⁵ One notable exception to these definitions is Ada Bruhn Hoffmeyer in her article ‘From Mediaeval Sword To Renaissance Rapier’.¹⁶ Writing in 1963, Hoffmeyer attempted to link the development of the sword to various ethnic groupings inside Europe, such as Latin and Germanic. Rather like some of Blair’s assertions, her theories are dated and fall down in the detail, yet nevertheless her wider work in developing typologies was foundational. One aspect of her theories that would perhaps reward revisiting is the influence of North African fencing and sword forms. The Spanish and Portuguese were quick to utilise Moorish light horse tactics and weaponry, including the *adarga* shield; given this adoption and wider cultural exchange in the region it would be unsurprising if there was an influence on sword development.¹⁷

III. CHALLENGES

As with any attempt at categorisation, difficulties arise at the detail. Norman, Blair, and Oakeshott aimed to place swords into typologies that followed an evolutionary trend, which predisposes the idea of an ‘advancement’ in style. They were perhaps influenced by Bashford Dean’s work on arms and armour, who was an ichthyologist by profession.¹⁸

¹³ Capwell, *The Noble Art of the Sword*, pp. 32-33.

¹⁴ Valle, ‘La Espada Ropera Española en los Siglos XVI y XVII’, p. 147. This interpretation is confused somewhat by the tendency of various kings, princes, and nobles to have portraits depicting them in full armour with elegant rapiers, for example, Philip IV in parade armour, by Gaspar de Crayer, c. 1628; Equestrian Portrait of Charles I by Anthony van Dyck c.1638.

¹⁵ See Capwell, *The Noble Art of the Sword*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁶ Hoffmeyer, ‘From Mediaeval Sword to Renaissance Rapier’, pp. 5-68.

¹⁷ A French dictionary of 1606 defines the *adarga* as ‘a kind of shield almost square & pleated across in the shape of the letter S, which the Spaniards still use in the frontier places of Africa in the manner of the Africans, which they call *Adarga*, and Languedoc *Targue*, so say the French, also saying *Targue*, although they have almost abolished the use of it’. (‘...une espece de bouclier presque quarré & plissé par travers en la forme de la lettre S, dont les Espagnols usent encore és lieux frontiers de l’Afrique à la façon des Afriquains, qu’ils nomment *Adarga*...’. Ranconnet, *Thresor de la Langue Francoyse*, p. 618. Outside of this study, it is interesting to speculate on the development of the *targa* based on de Ranconnet’s definition. For a modern description of the *adarga* see *The Complete Encyclopaedia of Arms & Weapons*, pp. 17-18. For a brief overview of the use of Spanish *jinete* light cavalry, who used the *adarga*, see Fallows, ‘Against the Arabs’, pp. 58-59.

¹⁸ Tzouriadis, “What is the Riddle of Steel?”, pp. 6-8.

Iason-Eleftherios Tzouriadis has highlighted the pitfalls inherent in creating evolutionary typologies, not least by ‘scholars falling into the trap of finding patterns simply because they are looking for them’.¹⁹ Second, while these authors allude to fight books and there are some general discussions on use as outlined above, function is not tied to any typology in any depth: the development of fencing in fight books has generally been studied separate to that of the physical development of the sword. Arguably, this has meant that while the rapier’s use as a fighting weapon is acknowledged, emphasis has been placed the development of the rapier by stylistic change (and that of the hilt) rather than its application as a tool.²⁰ The fencer’s own individual physique and skillset are not taken as variables. Even where blade type is analysed, issues can follow, for example if a thin, ‘rapier’ blade was changed for something broader; does the alteration mean the sword was no longer a rapier and if so, at what point of blade thickness does it cease to be one type of weapon and become another?

Third, *rapier* is anachronistic: contrary to Blair’s belief that the word spread across Europe, Spanish, Italian and French fight books do not use the term, preferring *espada*, *spada* and *espee/épée*, and many if not most do not describe the type of sword used.²¹ As is discussed below, *rapier* is a contemporary term which has been reapplied in the modern period: while it may appear ‘obvious’ that a fight book outlines a rapier system, this is nonetheless an interpretation. Sydney Anglo has discussed the difficulties of the term ‘rapier’ in some length and has highlighted the variety of rapier weapons illustrated in fight books, many of which would not fall into Norman’s, Blair’s, and Oakeshott’s definitions. Indeed, Anglo has suggested that the narrow thrusting blade that would conform to the ‘true’ rapier does not appear until Ghisliero’s fight book of 1587 and later in the seventeenth-century texts of Capo Ferro, Giganti, and Fabris.²² As Anglo wryly states:

[t]he terminology of the sword is a labyrinth of [t] confusion, despite various scholarly attempts at establishing typology to facilitate academic discourse. The problem arises principally from the fact that medieval and renaissance masters were completely indifferent to the needs of modern scholars. They rarely defined their terms and, when they did, were even more rarely explicit.²³

Modern categorisation of fight books by type may bring further complexities. HEMA practitioners often describe early modern treatises emphasising the use of the cut

¹⁹ Tzouriadis, “‘What is the Riddle of Steel?’”, p. 6.

²⁰ Anglo, *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, p. 99.

²¹ Notable exceptions being Capo Ferro, *Gran Simulacro dell'Arte e dell'Uso della Scherma*, p.7; Ghisliero, *Regole di molti cavagliereschi essercitii*, p. 25; Thibault, *Academie de l'Espée*, pp. 14-15.

²² Anglo, *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, p. 102.

²³ Anglo, *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, p. 95.

as ‘sidesword’ fight books, the term usefully providing a way to differentiate from later ‘point oriented’ rapier fight books. Fencing writers have highlighted the modernity of the term and Ken Mondschein has criticised use of this term as a neologism to be avoided.²⁴ However, the origin of the term ‘sidesword’ requires further investigation. It does not seem to appear in contemporary fight books, except as an action or a description (i.e. ‘drawing from the side’ or ‘wearing a sword at the side’); for example, Marozzo states ‘and touch your buckler with the pommel of your sword, on the inside side...’.²⁵ Yet, Italian museum curators have, for a considerable time, used the term *spada da lato* while their English-speaking counterparts use *sidesword* less frequently. However, Norman and Oakeshott did draw on Italian scholars such as Lionello Boccia and Eduardo Coelho who used the term *spada da lato*, and the English curators were no doubt aware of the term.²⁶

Sidesword has an interesting history in English; the earliest English reference of *sidesword* found in research for this article is from a description of a British Member of Parliament in 1824: ‘without court-coat, pigtail, or sidesword, up the member for Westminster started...’²⁷ A slightly later reference of 1830 describes a ‘bold dragoon with his side sword’.²⁸ Interesting to note that, in this period, the first English-Chinese dictionary of 1815 translated *Yaou Taou* as ‘a sword to hang at the side’ (side as in waist), while the first English-Japanese dictionary of 1830 translated *Wa-gi Za-si* as ‘side sword’ (side as in flank or side of the body).²⁹ Whether these translations applied the English term *sidesword* to other languages or if the term was introduced or reintroduced from outside of Europe is unknown and, without further research, speculative. The term ‘side sword’ was in use by English-speaking martial artists following Far Eastern traditions by the 1980s, before the modern rise of HEMA in the 1990s, but my assumption is that the modern use of *sidesword* came from Italian curators’ use of *spada da lato*.³⁰ Nevertheless, *sidesword* has been applied to different types of swords at different times.

²⁴ Mondschein, ‘The Italian Schools of Fencing’, p. 305. Guy Windsor and Eric Lowe have each highlighted the modernity of the term; Windsor, *The Duellist’s Companion*, p. 17; Lowe, *The Use of Medieval Weaponry*, p. 65.

²⁵ ‘e li tocherai elbrochiero con il pomo della Spada da lato’, translation Swanger, *The Duel*, p. 85.

²⁶ For example, see Boccia and Coelho, *Armi bianche italiane*, p. 155.

²⁷ ‘Sir Francis Burdett, Bart. M.P. for Westminster’, *The Albion*. An entry in the *Calendar of State Papers* for 14 December 1561 reads ‘The Duke of Florence “is half in rothe” with King Philip, and there is like to fall of his side sword and fire.’ I have discounted this appearance of ‘side sword’ at present as this can be read several ways. *Calendar of State Papers*, p. 442.

²⁸ ‘History of William Wigmore’, p. 16. Where referring to the modern HEMA use, I have standardised to *sidesword*.

²⁹ Morrison, *A dictionary of the Chinese language*, p. 218; Medhurst, *An English and Japanese, and Japanese and English vocabulary*, p. 42.

³⁰ See for example Hallander, ‘The Secrets of the Korean Sword’, pp. 22-23. For the development of HEMA, see Jones, *A Cultural History of the Medieval Sword*, pp. 176-81.

The HEMA use of *sidesword* is a generalisation, and the devil is in the detail: Giovanni Dall'Agocchie, writing in 1572, asserted the thrust was superior to the cut, yet modern practitioners of his system would probably consider he used a sidesword.³¹ Reprints also pose interesting problems. Achille Marozzo's 1536 fight book, *Opera Nova*, was reprinted multiple times, with the 1567 edition containing some revisions by Achille's son, Sebastiano.³² Further editions were made in 1580 and 1615, well into what Norman, Blair, and Oakeshott would describe as a rapier period; book catalogues of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also reference a 1668 edition.³³ Similarly, Giacomo di Grassi's *Ragione di adoprare sicuramente l'Arme* was written in 1570 and translated into English in 1594, the translator changing *spada* to *rapier*, stating that:

I thought good to aduertise thee that in some places of this booke by reason of the acquiuocation of certaine Italian wordes, the weapons may doubtfully be construed in English. Therefore sometimes fynding this worde *Sworde* generally vsed, I take it to haue beene the better translated, if in steede thereof the *Rapier* had beene inserted: a weapon more vsuall for Gentlemens wearing, and fittest for causes of offence and defence...³⁴

The question therefore arises as to how far readers of these later editions continued to practise as di Grassi and Marozzo originally described, revisions allowing, or instead derived their own learnings from these books to apply to their own system. The 'reuse' of earlier texts by early modern fencers is a fascinating topic outside of the scope of this article, but the main point is that too narrow an interpretation of a fencing system and its associated weapon (as well as the intention of a fencing author perhaps writing for their legacy) can prove problematic.

IV. THE ORIGIN AND USE OF THE WORD 'RAPIER'

Turning now to the contemporary use of the term *rapier*, various forms of the word are known from the late medieval and early modern period, including the German *rappier*, the French *raprière* and the Spanish *espada ropera*. The majority of etymological work occurred piecemeal before the late twentieth century; the late nineteenth-century fencing writer

³¹ Agocchie, *Dell'Arte Di Scrimia Libri Tre*, p. 14f; 'Dell'Arte di Scrima Libri Tre (Giovanni dall'Agocchie)'.

³² Marozzo, *Arte dell'armi di Achille Marozzo Bolognese*.

³³ *A catalogue of the libraries of John De Pestors*, p. 62; *A Catalogue of the Library of Harvard University*, p. 509; Osmond, *Dictionnaire typographique, historique et critique des livres rares*, p. 453; Bauer, *Bibliotheca Librorum Rariorum Universalis*, p. 199; Haym, *Biblioteca italiana ossia Notizia de' libri rari italiani*, p. 202.

³⁴ di Grassi, *Ragione di adoprare sicuramente l'Arme*; di Grassi, *Di Grassi, His True Arte of Defence*, 'An Advertisement to the courteous reader'.

Egerton Castle provided the following theory for the origin of rapier, which Norman later quotes:

[t]he etymology of the word Rapier is obscure. Some derive it from the German *rappen*, or *raffen*, to tear out. Others connect it, through *raspière*, to the Spanish *raspar*, to scrape or scratch. Mercutio, stabbed with a rapier, exclaims about “a cat, a dog, a rat, to scratch a man to death.” Others, again, will see in it a derivation of *ῥάπίς*, a rod. We incline towards the German etymology, were it only for the reason that the word Rappier occurs in some of the earliest German printed books. Rappier in German must have been a slang word (the rapper, or beater, akin to our own word rap, to strike) soon adopted as a technical one. This is precisely what has happened in the case of the German student’s “Haurapier” which is now universally called “Schläger” (again the rapper, the beater). The word was adopted in England to express the new fashion in swords (many of them of German importation then even as now).

The word does not occur in Spanish or Italian works, and in France the word *rapière* (except from the pen of modern novelists) always was applied somewhat contemptuously to swords of portentous lengths, of outrageous and outlandish fashion.³⁵

Castle’s interpretation, while useful, should be treated with caution: Castle cites no source, and his wider examination of historical fencing was very much whig teleology. The availability of his text has, much as with Oakeshott’s work, perhaps led to the perpetuation of some modern myths (in particular the idea of cumbersome medieval weapons).³⁶ The scholar Sir Guy Laking acknowledged in 1921 that there was controversy around the origin of the term but nonetheless went on to paraphrase Castle’s suggestion of *raspière*, *raspar*, and *rappen/raffen*.³⁷

Victor Gay in 1928 suggested that the earliest reference to the rapier was in 1270 within Philippe Mouskes’ chronicle, which appears to suggest an individual was being armed with a rapier:

Son hiaume prist et relaça

³⁵ Castle, *Schools and Masters of Fencing*, p. 329. Iason-Eleftherios Tzouriadis has suggested an alternative definition from the Greek would be *ραπίζω*, to strike fast with a cutting motion. Iason-Eleftherios Tzouriadis, message to the author, 11 December 2024. I am extremely grateful to Dr Tzouriadis for his kind help and advice while researching and writing this article.

³⁶ For example, see Anglo, *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, pp. 102-03, 337 n.94.

³⁷ Laking, *A Record of European Armour and Arms*, p. 262.

Et çaus rapiele c'on kaça.³⁸

Blair dismissed this but unfortunately does not state why; possibly he felt the term too early to mean a rapier. As will be discussed below, tying the term to what modern curators considered to be the form of a weapon may be questionable. That being said, the word 'rapiele' appears in the fifteenth-century *Morte D'Arthur* with a meaning of 'return' or 'revoke'.³⁹ Therefore, the context for *rapiele* in Mouskes' verse may be misleading.

A more definite candidate for earliest reference is from an anonymous Spanish satirical poem, *Coplas de la Panadera*, dating to the mid-fifteenth century, which contains the phrase *espada ropera*.⁴⁰ *Ropera spasa* is mentioned in a Catalan poem in the fifteenth-century manuscript *Jardinet d'orats*; the manuscript is dated to 1486, but the poem may be earlier.⁴¹ A reference with a precise date is from 1468 in *Relación de los inventarios que se hicieron en los bienes muebles que tenia el duque don Alvaro de Zúñiga* which identifies an 'Otra espada ropera, dorada y avirada'.⁴² The French 'Rapière' appears soon after in 1474 in a letter of remission: 'Icellui donna au suppliant de la dite espee rapière sur la teste', while a separate reference to *rapière* appears in 1485.⁴³ Castle, Norman, and others appear to have missed what may be the earliest French reference to *rapière* in print, in *Le mystère de la passion iesuscrist* (c.1490, though written in 1486), where various weapons including the *rapière* are listed in the chapter on the 'Assembly of Tyrants'.⁴⁴ Two years earlier, a register of prisoners in Paris in 1488 identifies the *rapière* as part of an outfit a gentlemen might wear, as well as with some of the disreputable context the rapier may acquire. Three brothers of the religious order of Our Lady of the Carmelites in Paris were arrested while drinking with four prostitutes in a tavern in the Rue au Maire. The three monks were described as wearing clothes that the order forbade, but also weapons, including one *rapière*, which they had a right to bear.⁴⁵

³⁸ On the basis that *kaça* is related to *laça* (to lace), a tentative translation is 'His helmet took and laced / and his rapier he laced.' Gay, *Glossaire archéologique du Moyen Age et de la Renaissance*, p. 287. With thanks to Thibault Ghesquière for his help on this challenging translation.

³⁹ *Le Morte Arthur*, p. xxvi.

⁴⁰ Domínguez, 'El Manuscrito de las "Coplas de la Panadera" de la Biblioteca Colombina y Capítular de Sevilla', p. 85.

⁴¹ Ms. 151, fol. 55r. I was alerted to this reference from the following: Manuel Valle, 'Sobre el nombre ropera', *Asociación Española de Esgrima Antigua Foro de discusión*, 29 April 2004, <<https://esgrimaantigua.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=350>> [accessed 12 December 2024].

⁴² 'Another rapier, golden and sharp' Blair, *European & American Arms*, p. 7.

⁴³ 'He gave the supplicant [a blow] with the said rapier sword on the head.' Gay, *Glossaire archéologique*, 192, p. 287. The 1485 reference is Lille, Archives du Nord, B 1703, fo 100 ds IGLF.

⁴⁴ Michel, *Le mystère de la passion iesuscrist*, p. 140r. Omer Jodogne has highlighted the first print may have been earlier than 1490: Michel, *Le Mystère de la Passion*, pp. x-xi.

⁴⁵ Longnon, *Paris pendant la domination anglaise (1420-1436)*, pp. 344-345 n.3.

Based on current research, it is possible that the term first appears in the British Isles in c. 1503-4: an entry from the accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland details a payment ‘For gilt hilt and plomet to the rappyer and ane new scheith to it’.⁴⁶ For England, an early reference is from July 1520 in the expenses of Sir Edward Guldeford: ‘for a hammer, 2 butters, 2 pr. of princers, 2 rapiers, 3 calking irons, 9s. 4d’.⁴⁷ However, given the associated items are all tools, there is some doubt that the rapiers mentioned were indeed swords. A later reference is perhaps more certain, appearing in correspondence from Frederic Count Palatine in Heidelberg to Arthur Plantagenet, 1st Viscount Lisle, on 30 November 1539: ‘Having joined my brother, the Elector here, my men have sent to my house without my knowledge, the rapier I promised you; but I will send it to you as soon as I arrive.’⁴⁸ Six years before, a language primer for Mary, daughter of Henry VIII, translated the French *raprière* to ‘the spanische sworde’, which provides an interesting insight into contemporary assumptions of the weapon’s origin.⁴⁹ That being said, Edmond Howes, who continued John Stow’s annals in 1614, wrote that the ‘fight of rapier and dagger’ began in England in the twentieth year of Elizabeth I’s reign (1578); Egerton Castle and the curator John Hewitt inferred from this that the rapier began to make its appearance between 1570 and 1580.⁵⁰ Norman, Blair, and Oakeshott do not appear to have been influenced by this dating but some modern scholars still use this inference.⁵¹ However, as demonstrated here, the appearance of a term and the memory of the introduction of a weapon’s use may not tally.

In German-speaking areas, *rappiere* and *rappier* appear from at least the 1520s. Writing under the pseudonym Symon Hessus, the reformer Urban Rieger wrote a book *Argument duses biechleins* in 1521 in which appears the sentence ‘...sie sein so hefftig erzürnet wenn gleych ein hencker da were der dich ermordet so weren sie mit iren Rappiere gnug gewapnet dich zu ertodten.’⁵² Another example appears later in a 1526 report on the debates at Bern on the reforms undertaken by Ulrich Zwingli.⁵³ A third instance of *rappier* appears in the anonymous *Copey etlicher brieff so ausz Hispania kummen...* of 1535, while

⁴⁶ Paul, *Accounts of Treasurer of Scotland*, p. 224.

⁴⁷ *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 3*, p. 344.

⁴⁸ *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 14*, p. 215.

⁴⁹ Wés, *An Introductory for to Lerne to Read*, p. 908.

⁵⁰ Stow, *Annales*, p.1024; Castle, *Schools and Masters of Fencing*, p. 20; Hewitt, *Ancient armour and weapons in Europe*, p. 662.

⁵¹ For example, see Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, p. 51.

⁵² ‘...they are so mightly enraged as if an executioner were here to murder you, so well apt are they with their rapiers to kill you’. Rieger, *Argument duses biechleins*, p. 14^v. I am grateful to Oli Walter for the translation.

⁵³ Murner, *Ein worhafftigs verantworten der hochgelorten doctores vnd berren*, p. 6^r. I am grateful to Emanuel Meyer and Julian Ronneberger for their assistance with this work.

Heinrich Eppendorf's *Römischer Historien Bekürtzung* mentions a *rappyer* in 1536.⁵⁴ The use of the term therefore appears earlier than Paulus Hector Mair's use in the 1540s, who has at times been suggested as first using the term in German.⁵⁵ Also of interest is Joachim Meyer's comment in 1570 that the rapier 'is a newly discovered practice with the Germans and brought to us from other people'.⁵⁶ This may suggest that the diffusion of the term, the weapon, and its study as a martial art occurred at differing rates.

The Dutch use of *rapier* appears to have echoed that of the German.⁵⁷ Petrus Curius's Latin-Greek-Dutch dictionary *Rerum maxime vulgarium congesta vocabula*, first printed in 1538, contains the word *rappiere*.⁵⁸ *Rapier* is mentioned in the 1554 *Hier beginnen seer schoone christelijcke ende euangelische sermoone[n]* by Josse Clichtove, and later in the 1563 translation of Claude Paradin's *Alliances généalogiques des rois et princes de Gaule, Princelijcke denijsen ofte wapenen van M. Claude Paradyen*, where it occurs a number of times, including 'Die küfachtighe menschen dient seer Swel die Deuse van eenman diemet de punt vaneen rapier'.⁵⁹

The word even entered into Latin: the 1733 edition of *Glossarium ad scriptores mediae et infimae latinitatis* identifies the word *rappieria* as being use in a text of 1511.⁶⁰ Fifty years later, François Marc's *Decisiones aureae in sacro Delphinatus...* (1561) contained the sentence '...vidit aduerfarium, qui ponebat manum in eius ense seu rappieria...'.⁶¹ However, this incorporation was not consistent; Mair, for example, used the term 'Ensis Hispani' ('Spanish Sword') in his compilation manuscript *Opus Amplissimum de Arte Athletica*.⁶² By contrast in 1579, Heinrich von Gunterrodt used 'framea' ('sword' in late

⁵⁴ Eppendorf, *Römischer Historien Bekürtzung*, p. 32.

⁵⁵ See for example Capwell, *The Noble Art of the Sword*, p. 31.

⁵⁶ Meyer, *The Art of Combat*, p. 173.

⁵⁷ Due to language limitations, I have not been able to confirm whether the Dutch use is as early as the German. For an excellent survey of the rapier in the Low Countries, among other weapons, see Gevaert and van Noort, 'Evolution of Martial Tradition in the Low Countries', pp. 376-409.

⁵⁸ Curius, *Pappa rerum maxime vulgarium congesta per locos in puerorum gratiam*, p. 17^v.

⁵⁹ Clichtove, *Hier beginnen seer schoone christelijcke ende euangelische sermoone[n]*, p. 223^r. 'The cunning people serve the devil with the point of a rapier'. Simeoni, *Princelijcke denijsen ofte wapenen van M. Claude Paradyen*, p. 160^r.

⁶⁰ Du Fresne, *Glossarium ad scriptores mediae et infimae latinitatis*, p. 1107.

⁶¹ '...he saw the adversary, who put his hand on his rapier...'. Marc, *Decisiones Aureae in sacro Delphinatus...*, p. 192^v.

⁶² Mair, *Opus Amplissimum de Arte Athletica*, fol. 57^r. Whether *Ensis Hispani* is a tantalising indication of Spanish swordsmanship in German-speaking areas would require more research.

Latin) in the main text of his work *De Veris Principiis Artis Dimicatoriae*, which he defines in German beside the Latin as *rappier*.⁶³

V. ETYMOLOGY VS TYPOLOGY

Various forms of the word *rapier* had therefore come into usage in certain European languages by the mid-sixteenth century, which on first review suggests that Blair's argument in favour of a pan-European term holds true. However, the appearance of a term does not necessarily correlate neatly with the typologies outlined above. As Norman and other authors acknowledged, *espada ropera* and *raprière* appear in the mid- to late-fifteenth century and yet there does not appear to have been any detailed study investigating what these terms meant to people at the time or indeed how common they were. An assumption could be made that if a term is entered into a text, the intended audience understands that term. That audience could of course be select and be privy to technical language but given the appearance of *rapier* in a variety of texts, the suggestion may be that *rapier*-type words were known and used prior to entering into written form. This would push the term back in time: determining whether it reaches back as far as Victor Gay's proposed date of 1270, however, would require further detailed research.

The use of the term also changes. As outlined above, Castle viewed the French *raprière* to be applied contemptuously, though this does not seem to be the case. *Raprière* does appear in the 1499 satirical text *La Grant nef des folz du monde* but is not in itself derided as 'outlandish' or 'outrageous' as Castle would have it. However, as seen above, *raprière* is identified in 'matter of fact' official records as well as in Michel's 1486 religious text, *Le mistère de la passion iesuscrist*. Furthermore, *raprière* is also listed among other weapons (including *espees*) in a celebration of King Charles VIII's invasion of Italy in 1494, in André de La Vigne's *Le Vergier d'honneur nouvellement imprime a paris* (1502).⁶⁴ Robert de Balsac's *La nef des princes et des batailles de noblesse avec aultres enseignemens* in 1502 identifies the *raprière* as a weapon that should be taught to young princes and nobles.⁶⁵ *Raprière* as a term was therefore used and one would assume well known by the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Both Michel's and la Vigne's texts list *raprière* among other military weapons, suggesting that, at this time, the *raprière* may not have been considered a civilian sword. *Raprière* appears to have continued in use throughout the sixteenth century, certainly into

⁶³ Gunterrodt, *De Veris Principiis Artis Dimicatoriae*, sig. D3. Bert Gevaert has suggested that *framea* came from the German for 'throwing spear': Gunterrodt, *A sbort treatise on the true principles of combat*, p. 24, fn. 129. However, I have preferred to follow the interpretation that *framea* was from the Latin originally denoting a throwing spear used by the ancient Germans but which in later Latin meant 'sword': 'framea', Latinium, n.d., <<https://latinitium.com/latin-dictionaries/?t=lsn18701>> [accessed 12 December 2024].

⁶⁴ La Vigne, *Le vergier d'honneur nouvellement imprime a paris*, p. 27^r.

⁶⁵ Balsac, *La nef des princes et des batailles de noblesse avec aultres enseignemens*, p. 15^r.

the last quarter, but by the beginning of the seventeenth century was perhaps falling out of use. Pierre de Bourdeille, Seigneur de Brantôme, writing between the 1580s and his death in 1614, considered the *rapières bien trenchant* as antiquated, though he may have been specifically referring to this term rather than *rapière* in general.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, *rapière* became associated with an antiquated weapon and by the mid-seventeenth century, *rapière* was used more by poets; certainly the French fight book authors and translators avoided the term, preferring *espee*.⁶⁷

VI. CONCLUSION

Rapière was therefore a well-established term in France, appearing considerably before research to date has considered it was used in England, the Low Countries and German-speaking areas. The same could be suggested for the Spanish *espada ropera*, which does not appear to be used much beyond the early sixteenth century, but again further research is required.⁶⁸ The age and duration of the term does not neatly mirror typological periods of the rapier suggested by Norman, Blair, and Oakeshott, who were more concerned with constructing typologies than etymology, but their use of *rapier* could be argued to have strengthened the idea that a single term can be applied to the coherent evolution of a weapon form. *Rapière* and *Espada Ropera* would suggest that *rapier* terms had different meanings at different times and for different weapons. Indeed, Norman himself identified that the word *rapier* in England by the late seventeenth century often denoted what today would be identified as a smallsword.⁶⁹ Yet this evolution of the term was not consistent; Donald McBane, writing in 1721, briefly discusses the rapier and poignard and how to fence against them with the ‘small sword’.⁷⁰ As with many words, the term *rapier* has developed through a semantic change with its definition changing by language, region, and time.⁷¹

Classifications are easy to pick apart in the detail and this short review should not be seen as an attempt to devalue typologies wholesale. As stated earlier, Norman in particular remains an excellent and detailed study of the rapier, and the general definition

⁶⁶ Bourdeille, *Discours sur les duels de Brantôme*, p. 24.

⁶⁷ For examples in poetry, see Saint-Amant, *Les Oeuvres du sieur de Saint-Amant*, pp. 166, 240, 246, and Billaut, *Les chevilles de Me. Adam menvisier de Nevers*, p. 314. For fight books, see Dancie, *Discours des armes et methode pour bien tirer de l'espee et poignard*, Bordeaux, Archives Municipales de Bordeaux, MS 66S230; Dancie, *L'Espée de Combat ou L'Usage de la Tire des Armes*; Sainct-Didier, *Les secrets du premier livre sur l'espee seule*; Villamont, *Traite ou instruction pour tirer des armes*.

⁶⁸ I am indebted to Manuel Valle Ortiz for sharing his thoughts on this.

⁶⁹ Norman, *The Rapier and Small Sword*, p. 27.

⁷⁰ McBane, *The Expert Sword-man's Companion*, pp. 51-53.

⁷¹ For a general discussion on semantic change, see Stehling, *Semantic Change in the Early Modern English Period*, pp. 28-34.

of the weapon remains sound. However, there is still considerable opportunity for research, not least the contemporary understanding of the term by region and by period. The rapier in practice and in perception had a wider and more varied family than simply George Silver's 'childish toy wherewith a man can do nothing but thrust'.⁷²

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⁷² Silver, *Paradoxes of Defence*, p. 32.

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