

The use of the German battle sword in the late 16th and early 17th century

by Björn Rüter

In the course of the 16th century, the armories in German-speaking countries were virtually flooded with large two-handed hands, some of which were flamed and equipped with huge hilts. The existence of this exceedingly striking weapon is obvious and has occupied many fencers of the historical arts including myself for a long time. Because one question has so far remained largely unanswered: How were these weapons used and what were they created for? This article tries to present all researchers with a basis under which aspects a thesis should be created and at the end it also creates its own.

A weapon in the context of its time

First, the context in which this weapon was used should be clarified. Unfortunately, there are only very few sources on the use of such a weapon. Most of the fencing books of this time dealt primarily with judicial duels or fencing without armor in duel situations. There the use of weapons in battle or in a military unit is largely left out. The weapons described range from daggers over one-handed weapons such as the long knife or rapier over long swords to various polearms such as the halberd and the murder ax. The German battle sword is rarely mentioned and technical descriptions of this weapon remain extremely rare. The battle sword is largely limited to battle descriptions, mentions of some military theorists and contemporary paintings.

Still the connection of many fencing books of the 16th and 17th centuries to the military is evident, as the clothing worn and fencing weapons used were typical of the armed conflicts of the time. In the background of the illustrations in fencing books one can often see drummers and other gleemen, the typical entourage of a field army. In addition, it makes sense to learn the handling of a weapon first in a duel situation. Once you have learned how a weapon works in one-on-one combat and have fully understood its concepts, this knowledge can also be applied in battle. In my opinion, the highest form of fencing is the duel. Here you can perform and apply the full variety of art techniques. In contrast, in the field battle one concentrates more on simpler techniques that work in close coordination respectively under strict command with the troops as a whole. Was the battle sword thus not a typical duel weapon and found its existence exclusively in the military environment or was it subordinate to another type of weapon? Is that the reason it doesn't appear in the established fencing books of that time?



Exercises in the arms trade (Virgil Solis, around 1550)

To answer these questions, we first take a closer look at the military training of the mercenary armies. It can be assumed that exercises in large units were only carried out later, still rarely, and only after the newly recruited servants had been integrated into a mercenary army. These cautious

conclusions are based on the lack of quantitatively sufficient evidence in form of paintings of such exercises and corroborate the already expressed suspicion by Hans-Michael Möller (Möller 1976) that "the drills and the design of tactical formations were more the subject of academic military instruction than part of military practice." Accordingly, the prospective servants and soldiers were dependent on individual training from professional fencing masters and their schools. A soldier could not hope for an education in the arms trade within the civic contingent or in the military. Just like military service itself, training to be a mercenary was apparently a matter under private law. Image evidence leaves no doubt here (Rogg 2002). It was only towards the end of the 16th century that these structures were to slowly break up with new army reforms like those of the Dutch governors from the House of Orange. Until then, it was mostly up to the feldwebel and the moira masters to ensure order and discipline in the ranks. It was not until later, around the turn of the century and before the Thirty Years' War, that instructional texts and so-called drill exercises were published, for example written down by Johann Jacob von Wallhausen, or published by Jacob de Gheyn in extensive series of images. "Trillen" means to plague oneself or to turn and chase (Frisch 1741). According to a work on Georg Frundsberg, the so-called father of the Landsknechte (* 1443 to +1528), such "drill" practices were still largely unknown at the beginning of the 16th century (Barthold 1833). There is therefore no prospect of comprehensive training on the battle sword in the military context either, since even the formal training introduced later aimed at integrating the individual into the military collective rather than teaching the soldiers the handling of the weapons themselves. An exception to this are some publications from the early 17th century, which describe the increasingly common arquebus and the well-tryed pike using some rather vague instructions and techniques in copperplate engravings (e.g. Gheyn 1608).

So the only sources seem to be the war books of some long-serving mercenaries in which the battle sword is mentioned. Here the sources tend to be more superficial when it comes to working with the weapon. Establishment of the regiment, functions of the offices and organization of entourage and servitude, salary, siege and legal verdict are in the focus of the descriptions on the craft of war. However, some valuable information can be obtained on which I will go into detail in the following.

The German battle sword in German military theory

Naturally, for my research I mainly used sources from the second half of the 16th century. At first glance, the works of Leonhard Frondsperger appear to be particularly well suited for this: *Of war regiment a. order* from 1555 and the *War book* from 1573, printed in Frankfurt am Main. His writings deal with the entire war system of his time and contain an impressive piece of past military theory. In it it is described how in a battle order the "short weapons" should be set up behind the third rank of pikemen, covered on the sides, i.e. protected by other pikemen and arquebusiers. One can say that the departments of the "short weapons" belonged to the three major troop types of the infantry alongside the pikemen and the arquebusiers. Each of these groups had their own specific areas of responsibility. So do the short weapons. This type of weapon included halberd, feather pike, murder ax and battle sword. So all of these weapons were used in the same battle context. But what was the exact purpose of these short weapons in the troops?



The trabant was versatile (Fronspurger's description on war offices - 1573)

In Fronspurger's description on war offices we find a role equipped with halberds that performed special tasks: the trabant. They served partly as a guard for princely persons, high officials and the Landsknecht colonels, partly as executors of their orders. But also the protection of the flag in the battle formation was given to the bearers of the short weapons, which can be inferred from Fronspurger's description of the office of the feldwebel. Thus, they were also responsible for protecting the flag bearer in a battle formation. Although the trabants are often depicted with halberds or feather spear, it can be assumed that some of them wore battle swords. As is already known, the "short weapon" category includes not only the widespread halberds, murder ax and feather spear, but also the battle sword. Since guard services, protection orders and the execution of orders evidently were given to this troop pool, all appropriate weapons were probably used for this purpose. There are also enough examples of bodyguards wearing battle swords such as that of the bodyguards of the Prince Archbishop of Salzburg, Markus Sittikus. Image sources, however, remarkably often show the halberd for such services. But guard duties weren't the only duties of the trabant. In the office description of Fronspurger from 1573 about the trabant it goes on: "Then when one deals with the enemy, we are also in the battle formation. As with others like us, until the enemy has shown himself to give way. To our lords we are devoted, with that we earn honor and gold." So trabants were also assigned to the troops of the short weapons in a battle order. Fronspurger explains a context in the battle in his early work from 1555 with the following words: "*For the ninth / he should battle sword / halberd / pole axe / and short weapons like that / order to wield the sword / if the attack got too grim and close together / that the long weapons they / don't well want to use / that he then let the same work.*" So as soon as the long pikes have been deprived of their range advantage, the short weapons, like the battle sword, should ensure a certain defensibility in the close battle. The exact goal remains a mystery, because the fewer short weapons could by far not replace the fighting power of the pikes.

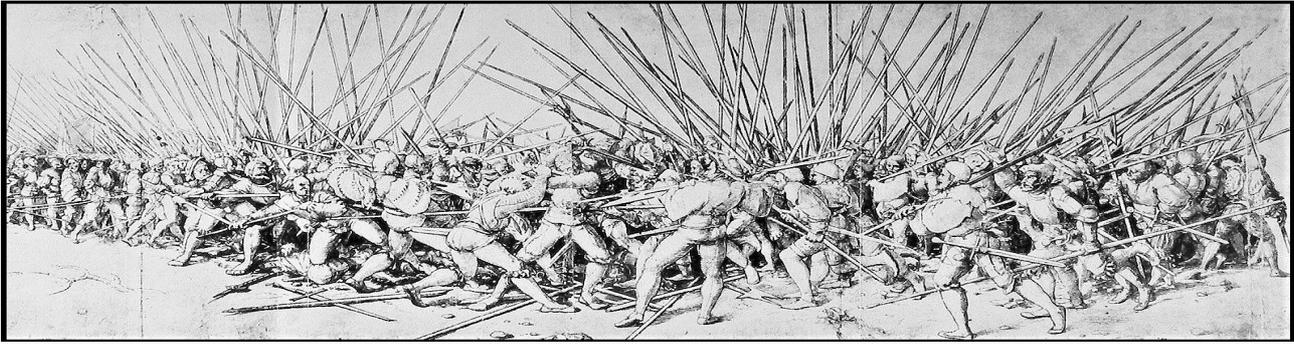
To shed a little bit more light on the use in battle, we come to another source: The *Militaris Disciplina* by Hans Wilhelm Kirchhof from 1602. This extremely informative source gives the reader a realistic representation of German warfare in the Reformation era. This work is dedicated to the Hessian Count of Solms and deals with siege warfare, fortifications, army and service regulations, jurisdiction in the army and above all the importance of the infantry. Kirchhof himself served as a mercenary inside and out of his home county for a long time. His precise elaboration is thus coined by his own experiences and memories which gives the reader a reliable insight into the reality of the war.

However, before we get to Kirchhof's description on tasks of the "short weapons", it is interesting to mention that a battle sword was not uncommon in battle formations. At least according to Kirchhof's remarks, it can be assumed that often a significant part of the short weapons were battle

swords. That at first may seem surprising, as in the various sample rolls from the Holy Roman Empire that provide information about soldiers and their equipment recruited from various cities, only rarely does a man bring his own sword with him. But the following statements can be found in Kirchhofs *Militaris Disciplina* in a chapter on the marching order during the journey. According to this, the campaign of the infantry is led by nobles and high offices, followed by marksmen and double mercenaries. I do not want to neglect to mention that at this time a double mercenary was not necessarily a trabant with a short weapon or a battle sword, as is often assumed, but rather a well-equipped pikeman in good armor or of noble descent (Kirchhof 1602, Wallhausen 1616). After that a whole rank of almost 50 men with battle swords follows, optionally also with other short weapons. Then again three ranks pikemen and again a whole rank with battle swords, etc. In this context the battle sword appears to be very present – sometimes highlighted amongst other short weapons, sometimes on its own. A rarity of this weapon in a regiment is not conveyed in this source. Even today there are considerable stocks of battle swords of former sovereigns in various armories in German-speaking countries. The fact that battle swords from private stocks are rather rare goes in line with the various, still preserved pattern rolls mentioned above. A supply from armories seems more likely for this kind of weapon. This can be explained by the efforts of new army forms (Lipsius 1598) and is also confirmed by the following note in the *Manuale Militaris* or *War Manual* by Johann Jacob von Wallhausen from 1616: "*A soldier should arm himself with those weapons / if his captain has placed them on him / for a captain generally knows better / which he is most comfortable with / than the soldier himself.*"

Let us now come to a formation ready for battle. In Kirchhof's example for a description of a battle order, a whole regiment consists of 15 pennons of 300 men each. Each pennon is divided into ranks, i.e. long rows shoulder to shoulder, of 51 men each. The pennon are divided into three main groups that are placed one behind the other. First the blood pennons, followed by the middle pennons and at the end by the last pennons. In these there are mostly five, seven and three pennons of approx. 300 men in the order already mentioned. A single pennon itself is always flanked by five double mercenaries in good armor at both ends of its members so that the bare soldiers are well covered and the pennon retains a good appearance. There are also ranks of short weapons, which are covered by three double mercenaries each on their flanks as well. Then there are the arquebusiers who cover the entire flanks of a formation.

Now that we have a rough overview on the battle order and can safely assume that one major part of the short weapons were battle swords, let us now investigate the use of the short weapons. To do so, we take a closer look at the front rows of the blood flag. Here the first three ranks consist exclusively of nobles in good armor and well-equipped double mercenaries, armed with pikes. Often a rank of arquebusiers is positioned between the first and second row of pikes to fire at attacking pennons. Behind this three to four ranks strong front a whole rank with short weapons and battle swords follows. Kirchhof elaborates on its purpose with the following words: "*For the causes / when the enemy is pushing the foremost ranks back / that they do not have room with pikes / to defend themselves / these with short defenses make room / and should relieve them.*" And this makes perfect sense if you consider that the pikes had an average range of 5-7 meters. This range advantage can quickly become fatal for the pikemen. The short defenses here seem to be essential in their responsibility to protect of the pikemen. This is done either by exerting pressure on the opposing attack formations with breakouts or by their work in the dense crowd in order to regain said room or at least by keeping the troops able to defend themselves in narrow spaces.



Der schlechte Krieg - Im Nahkampf war die Pike nutzlos (Hans Holbein - frühes 16. Jahrhundert)

However, another use of the short weapons even before such close combat situations occurred can be concluded from the sources. Kirchhof reminds the people of war with the following words for the onslaught on the enemy: *" / even up to the enemy's order / when then with a great shout they start / now hold together hard again man by man / that the enemy can not break in so easily. They should use diligence / to cut the down enemy's spears / and cut off at the front / stab in the face as well. The marksmen should not shoot before / they have their man for certain / and can not miss."*

Two interesting things were mentioned here. Firstly, the soldiers seem to fear that the enemy might invade their own ranks. As mentioned above, this is to be prevented or at least resolved again by the short weapons once it is possible. At the same time, one can suspect that this was also a legitimate offensive tactic to break through enemy lines. This was certainly not the responsibility of a pikeman, but rather of the short weapons. In addition, Kirchhof reminds us to push and hold down the pikes and cut them off. Also this endeavor is not to be expected of a pikeman and was more likely to be the responsibility of a soldier with a halberd or battle sword. The last point in particular is interesting because the topic of cutting off pikes is a hotly debated topic. I myself have paid little attention to this option so far, as it has always seemed rather unlikely to me to cut through a pike with a sword. This requires several hits on the same spot, which should prove difficult - a pike is usually not immobile and a held pike can take a lot of power from the cut as it is free to be moved. The simple fact, however, that the soldiers were instructed to first push and hold down the opposing pikes and then destroy them makes perfect sense and doesn't sound impossible. A pressed down staff is fixed and the power of the strike goes directly into the weapon. In addition, with this approach there is no risk of an opponent's thrust, as the swordsman is not in the front row where he would be an easy target. A good, strong, downward-facing strike can do a lot of damage to a fixed pike. The existing reports about severed pikes, as are in many sources with prepared battle reports from Fornovo (1495) and Marignano (1515) are given, are often viewed critically. But here, an experienced warrior admonishes the reader to use this approach and gives explicit instructions on breaking pikes.

Slowly we get a clearer view on the function and use of a battle sword in the context of a field battle. In summary, one can say that the short weapons, to which the battle sword belongs, represent a support force that gave the pikemen room to work appropriately. At the same time, they could have made sure to bind pikes during the pike lines of the battle fronts and, ideally, to break them to render them useless. Smaller breakouts are also possible. In addition, one must also mention that short weapons were sometimes also the weapons of the higher offices of the infantry. Not only as a distinguishing feature, but also because of their smaller size compared to that of the pike, which gives the always very busy officers more mobility on the battlefield. With this somewhat clearer view on the context of use, one should now turn to the distinguishing features of a German battle sword before working out a selection of suitable technical concepts.

The nature of the battle sword and its peculiarities

At the end of the second half of the 16th century, increasingly larger battle swords emerged compared to previous decades. In particular, the southern German production sites in Passau, Nuremberg and Munich should be mentioned here. These battle swords differed noticeably from early battle swords of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century, and also from their Iberian counterparts. Overall, they were longer, heavier and, in particular, the ratio of handle to blade length differs, usually now in a ratio of around 1:2 (Melville 2018). The curved, opulent quillons of these swords replaced the S or 8 parry and ricassos up to the horns were often covered with leather. In addition to this special crossguard design and the increased size, the blades were also often "flamed" in a wave shape. Nowadays the term Flammberger has established itself for such swords, but is also often rejected in the professional world.

The horns in combination with the leather part of the ricasso indicate for me an increased use of various half-sword techniques and fits very well with the technical concepts of Marozzos that are described below. The horn and parry offer the wearer a greater degree of security than the halberd or spear does. The serrated or wave-shaped blade is particularly suitable to cut through light armor such as leather or fabric – in addition to its threatening overall appearance. While a straight blade can slip off more easily, a serrated edge bites into the material to be cut much more easily. Just like bread with a hard crust that is easier to cut with a bread knife than with a straight, smooth blade.



Replica of a German battle sword from the late 16th century (Ulrich Langbehn - 2020)

Although a battle sword, like the halberd, was a short weapon, its properties are different. A long blade like that of the battle sword in direct comparison to a polearm has the advantage that it is more difficult to grasp and control with the bare hand. In addition, a weapon with a long blade is an advantage in dense crowds where there is no room for large strikes. A mere "putting on" and cutting could have been enough, while a halberd is only suitable for cutting to a very limited extent and is only suitable for thrusts when both hands are positioned relatively close to the center. It was only the combination of the various short weapons and the personal or assigned preference of a special weapon that apparently constituted the strength of the force. This made the battle sword the most expensive short weapon, but it also one with some technical advantages. But what connects all short weapons is their common area of responsibility, their shortened length in comparison to the pikes in the crowd and their potential for powerful strikes.

Battle sword without a source - a thesis

So what were the battle sword techniques like? There are numerous sources on great swords from the Iberian region, but the Portuguese, Spanish and Italian sources seem to concentrate mainly on civilian purposes. Some of them have very flowery patterns of movement that are unsuitable for a battle order and the weapons used in some cases differ noticeably in terms of their design and size when compared to their German counter piece. It would therefore be overly simplified to generalize

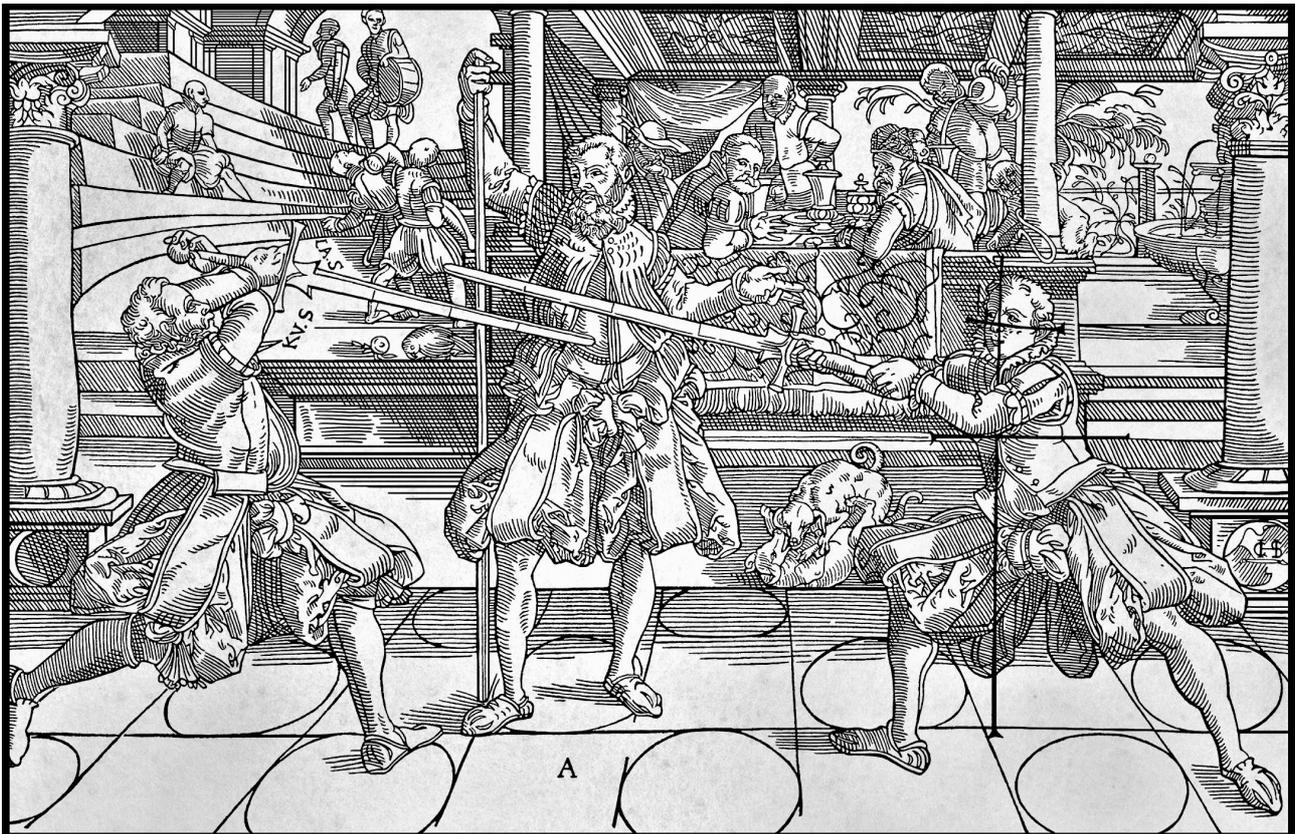
the entire range of great swords beyond regional boundaries, over different use cases and over a period of several generations. It is certainly helpful to take a look at the Iberian sources, especially with regards to body mechanics and general sword handling. But the bottom line is that the areas of use are simply too different to just transfer detailed techniques. In short: fencing books about the German great sword have so far remained undiscovered or are simply don't exist. Iberian sources are helpful, but do not represent the same context.

Here and there, however, the German battle sword is mentioned in contemporary sources, for example in the *Exploration of the Knightly Art of Fencing* by Andre Paurneindt from 1516. Unfortunately, this source is not very insightful for the exploration of battle sword techniques. In this treatise the battle sword is merely mentioned by the fencing master to deliberately exclude it – alongside the side-sword and the estoc: „*The first chapter teaches how to use advantage in the long sword which is used with both hands / as a battle sword / side-sword, estoc and other many more / that I omit for brevity.*“ Whether the fencing master omits these specific weapons for reasons of space or because of the great similarity of these weapons to the weapons covered remains uncertain. In addition it was already pointed out that the battle sword at that time was very different from that of the late 16th century.

Similar applies to the Goliath fencing book. The fencers shown in this book's figures carry very large swords in relation to their body size, but whether these are sword techniques that were meant to be used with the battle sword is purely speculative. And here, too, the manuscript unfortunately falls into a wrong time and the weapons fall into a category of what today is called Feder.

There are still numerous Iberian sources of the Montante and the Italian Spadone. Without question, these are also great swords, but unfortunately for the most parts they are smaller, lighter and have shorter handles. Also, once again, they focus on non-military use. However, they cover a few interesting techniques, for example against halberds, defending a bridge of a ship (Dom Diogo Gomes de Figueyredo's Memorial Da Prattica Sie Montante from 1653) or fighting opponents with shields (Domingo Luis Godinho's Arte de Esgrima from 1599). It cannot be denied that great swords were also used in Spanish and Italian armies. Nevertheless, there was a downward trend at the beginning of the 16th century and except for battle reports no records for that former military applications have not survived from this era,. Most of the techniques covered in later Iberian works of the late 16th and early 17th centuries originate from a civil context and even in the aforementioned applications of Figueyredo and Godinho, the military application is not the focus. The use against many to protect one's own integrity remains the primary goal of the last-named sources.

So, summarized, in the European sources of the long sword there is no adequate answer to our initial question. The Iberian sources are a guide, but can only be used to a limited extent to construct techniques. But what if you think outside the box and look for alternatives beyond the sources on long and great swords. In the context mentioned above, battle swords were used together with polearms. The increased length of the handle or the leather-covered ricasso for half-sword techniques of later battle swords also facilitate the use of polearms considerably. At the same time, the use appears to be rather simple and by far not as varied as the techniques in the dueling instructions in the fencing books about bare fencing with the long sword. Instead of focusing on sword techniques or Iberian Montante techniques on the great sword only, it is also worth taking a look at the handling of polearms. The short weapons of the Landsknechte are one and the same type of weapon within the pennon. So why not apply the concepts of the polearm to the battle sword?



Fencing with the sword (*Thorough Description of the Art of Fencing*, Joachim Meyer, 1570)

A fencing treatise that immediately presents itself as a very suitable candidate for this endeavor is Joachim Meyer's *Thorough Description of the Art of Fencing* from 1570 – not only because it is my focus area in historical fencing, but also because of the broad scope of this rich and comprehensive source. This book does not only have techniques of the half staff, halberd and the pike. Rather, it combines wrestling, polearms, sword techniques and one-handed weapons in a single system. So if you decide to use polearm principles for the battle sword, you are well served with this source. And as it cannot be denied that simple sword techniques can also be used for the great sword, a closely linked fencing system is the perfect basis.

Joachim Meyer himself was a fencing master from Strasbourg. At this time the art of fencing was in full bloom and after the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 a largely peaceful phase of rest began for the Holy Roman Empire. In the rest of Europe, however, all sorts of denominational wars sparked such as the Huguenot Wars in 1562 or the war between the Netherlands and Spain in 1566. So there was still enough work for all sorts of warlords or the civic armies and therefore many fencing masters had the opportunity to pass on their knowledge. It is interesting to mention that Joachim Meyer also dedicated a book to the Count of Solms, just as Kirchhof did with his *Disciplina Militaria*. The fact that Joachim Meyer also had experience with the battle sword is evident from his writings that he wrote before 1570 in which he mentions the battle sword in a fencing piece with the dussack: "*The sixth driving. Is the double change / An outbound hew / especially a strong on for the battle sword. This one thus do.*" He also refers to the field battle in his printed work of 1570. For example in his foreword and also in some of his technical instructions such as in the pike. There it says: "*A short lesson on how you use your pike in serious matters to the field / and after your advantage should lead.*" Joachim Meyer's work thus represents a magnum opus of the art of fencing and the craft of war.

In order to use the battle sword for the applications described in the previous section, it is now necessary to develop technical concepts. Primarily we look for concepts for driving away enemy soldiers, for tying pikes and techniques that are suitable for close combat in the tumult of battle. Secondary are concepts that serve to protect people or property.

If we continue to pursue the idea of applying the handling of polearms to the battle sword, we come across interesting concepts in Meyer's techniques of the halberd. At the beginning of this chapter Meyer gives us instructions about the so-called driving. Such activities can be found in a variety of weapons, for example in the dussack or the long sword. They are basically repetitive movement patterns. These build up pressure, stimulate and threaten the opponent without directly looking for a weapon bind. However, not every driving is suitable for the battle sword. The sense and purpose of a drive always remains the same, but each drive is different in its execution and sometimes too cumbersome for a heavy, two-handed weapon. A differentiation must be made there. The halberd drives are, however, ideal for the battle sword. The two-handed stabs of the bar and halberd can also be effortlessly adapted to the battle sword. As far as the hews are concerned, the principal hews from the long sword are used, whereby one should be careful to avoid crossed hand positions and instead use the short edge, similar to the change hew. As a guide, one should consult the driving through the cross from the halberd. Here, too, a special hew concept avoids crossed hands. This repertoire can be used to drive away enemy soldiers, even in close formations.

To find techniques to bind onto pikes, a look at an Italian source is recommended: *Opera Nova* by Achille Marozzo from 1536. There the Italian fencing master describes how to use a sword against long pikes. His hand positioning between the parry and the horns is particularly interesting. This hand positioning is also particularly suitable for smaller strikes, thrusts and driving in front of the chest. The same concepts as when driving away enemy soldiers can also be carried out in tight, small movements with a half sword grip and are well suited for confined spaces or when the battle sword fencer is slowly running out of breath.

With this repertoire, the breakouts or the overcoming of pikes can also be well designed. Joachim Meyer gives additional instructions on this in one of his earliest works from 1561.

With regard to the secondary aim, the use in personal and property protection, the battle sword probably reaches its limits. Although a representative battle sword underlines the importance of a dignitary, they can only be used to a limited extent with the techniques mentioned above in this guard service. The usually bigger size of the German battle sword compared to that of the Montante is a disadvantage in the fight against many as individuals.

Summary

The battle sword of the late 16th century was primarily a heavy infantry weapon used to cover the foremost rows of pikes together with other so-called short weapons. It secured the space required by the pikes by pushing back enemy lines. It also tried to tie down and destroy the pikes of the enemy pikemen. In the dense crowd they were useful weapons to defend the troop and it cannot be ruled out that they penetrated the enemy lines to destabilize the formation. The increased size and weight compared to the Spadone or Montante was appropriate for the depicted area of application, as powerful, simple blows were in the focus. The large dimensions of the battle sword were only slightly in the way of using the half sword grip in the smallest of spaces. A secondary use for personal and property protection against several opponents is possible, although somewhat limited, due to the large dimensions. The handle between the parry and the horns could have been helpful here as well. In some cases, the battle sword was also used as an officer's weapon in addition to the halberds.

Polearm techniques, especially many of the halberd techniques, and rudimentary long sword techniques can be practically applied to the battle sword. Iberian sources are helpful for the body-mechanical implementation. So one can say that a battle sword is a hybrid of polearm and sword and this is reflected accordingly in its usage.

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