





RAPIER

circa 1600-1620.

Overall Length: 102,5 cm.

Blade Length: 86,4 cm.

Weight: 933 g.

Provenance: Private Collection, Sweden.

Engraved Inscriptions on the blade, outer side: BERNS,

inner side: IOHANNES,

both sides:

VIVA EL REY PHILIPP III (Long live King Philipp III),

SOLI DEO GLORIA (Glory to God alone),

REY DE ESPANNA Y PURTUGUAL (King of Spain and Portugal).

Very fine blade by Iohannes Berns¹, Solingen (Germany), the signature inlaid with brass, ricasso with two slight fullers, double eagle mark struck two times on each side, first segment with four deep fullers, engraved with the inscriptions as mentioned above and surrounded by decorations, followed by a segment of hexagonal section, the last third of the blade of diamond section, tapering to an acute point.

Hilt type Norman No. 39², decorated with silver encrusting against a blackened ground.



¹ Weyersberg, A.: (1926) Solinger Schwertschmiede des 16. und 17. Jh, p. 11.

² Norman, A. (1980): The Rapier and Small Sword, 1460-1820, pp. 102-105.

must have been a great challenge for Iohannes Berns and the other craftsmen, involved in the process. It is remarkable, that he inscribes it on both sides with a reverence to King Phillip III of Spain and Portugal. This rapier was probably never intended for a member of the Spanish court. The inscription simply served to boost the marketability by providing it with the aura of being Spanish. We will discuss this further below.

Along with the wonderful blade the precious silver-encrusted hilt suggests, that this rapier belonged to a high-ranking owner. Silver-encrusting was a technique popular in different places, foremost in German speaking lands and England, but there are also examples from Netherlands, France and Italy.³

In his discussion of the present hilt type, Norman remarks, that the “inner guards are of the very simplest form so as to allow the hilt to rest comfortably against the wearer’s side when sheathed. The conclusion one must draw is that they were designed much more for appearance than for use.”⁴ This seems an interesting thesis against the background of the known comparative pieces.

³ Haedecke, H. (1982): *Blankwaffen*, p. 84; Norman, A. (1980): *The Rapier and Small Sword, 1460-1820*, pp. 360-362.

⁴ Norman, A. (1980): *The Rapier and Small Sword, 1460-1820*, p. 105.

Comparative pieces

A rapier with a similarly shaped hilt was presented to the Elector Christian II of Saxony on Christmas 1610.⁵ With its gilded brass hilt, fine engraving and an integrated watch in the pommel it was designed as a pure luxury accessory, not intended for any practical use.

At the Livrustkammaren Stockholm, the Royal Swedish Armoury,



Rapiers made for the Squires of Gustaf Adolf II.⁶

⁵ Haenel, E. (1923): *Kostbare Waffen aus der Dresdner Rüstkammer*, pl. 59; Seitz, H. (1968): *Blankwaffen II*, fig. 22.

⁶ Cederström, R. Malmberg, G. (1930): *Den Äldre Livrustkammaren 1654*, No. 108, pl. 49.

there is group of swords with the same type of hilt, manufactured to be carried by the squires at the wedding of Gustav II Adolf and Eleonora of Brandenburg in 1620. All of these have blades from different workshops in Solingen.

Background

The Rapier

During medieval times it was not common practice to carry a sword in a civilian context. For a knight it would have been considered improper behavior attending a polite courtly event dressed with his sword. This changed in the Renaissance at about the 1520s, when it became more and more commonplace for men of elevated social status to wear a sword together with their civilian dress in everyday life. There were several reasons for this. First, in times of increasing violence there was the necessity of self-defense against robbery and street fights. Albeit wheellock pistols already existed, the sword was the weapon of first choice to make precautions against suchlike situations, since it was quicker at hand in close combat and more convenient to carry.

A nobleman also had to be prepared at any time against intrigues and attempts of murder in courtly life, and last but not least, for the duel. Duels of honor became increasingly fashionable, whereas in medieval times the duel was predominantly fought in order to determine a judicial ordeal. Often hotheads provoked duels on the most trivial of pretexts and it became inevitable for the courtier to carry a sword and know well how to use it.

At the beginning of this development until the middle of the sixteenth century, a sword worn with the civilian dress did not differ very much from the sword used in battle. This began to change and the rapier appeared as a weapon that was exclusively designed for the civilian context. It had a long slender blade which was ideal for thrusts as fast as lightning, the most effective way in order to fight an enemy not wearing armour. So, the main characteristic of a rapier is that it would have been fairly useless on the battle field, but optimized for fencing against a single civilian enemy, or at worst, a small group in a street fight.

The more the evolution of the rapier went forward, the more varieties of blades and hilts were manufactured in the course of time. This process depended closely on the development of fencing techniques.



Scenes from a fencing school, illustrated manual by Joachim Meyer.⁷

⁷ Meyer, J. (1570): *Gründtliche Beschreibung, der freyen Ritterlichen unnd Adelichen Kunst des Fechtens*, dritter Teil, pl. LXIII.

The demand for professional training grew with the custom of wearing swords and rapiers, that was satisfied by fencing schools. People could learn and develop their skills from professional instructors. Masters like Joachim Meyer, Achille Marozzo or Camillo Agrippa, just to mention three, published richly illustrated fencing manuals⁸, that entailed an international reputation – a valuable source for scholars in our present times. Some masters travelled also to courts in foreign countries, providing lessons to their members.

So much for the practical aspects of the rapier. However, limiting the discussion to this would be like considering an expensive watch of our days as a pure instrument for knowing the time. You can use it for this, but there is a lot more about it, a representative function communicating the social status of its owner to his environment. The rapier formed part of the civilian dress as a kind of a luxury accessory, that had to express the rank and financial power of its wearer. Rapiers like pieces of art were manufactured, their hilts being decorated in the most magnificent ways involving all crafts of metalworking, like gilding, silver encrusting, damascening, iron cutting or blueing. Whole sets of matching components with rapier, hanger, belt and dagger, made according to the individual desires of the client completed the look of a dress, often ordered on a particular occasion, like a wedding. The desire for a representative piece let sometimes people risk their bankruptcy.

⁸ Anglo, S.: *Sword and Pen: Fencing Masters and Artists*, pp. 151-175, in: Capwell, T. (2012): *The Noble Art of the Sword*; Grotkamp-Schepers, B. et al (2015): *The Sword – Form and Thought*, pp. 158-161.

For example, Arthur Throckmorton, son of Sir Nicholas Throckmorton of Coughton Court in Warwickshire ordered a costume and richly decorated rapier for an appearance before Queen Elizabeth I in 1583. In order to pay for this, he had to sell some of his lands and also borrowed a great deal of money on which he would pay interest for many years.⁹



Peter Paul Rubens, 1650.¹⁰

⁹ Ashelford, J. (1996) *The Art of Dress: Clothing and Society 1500-1914*, pp. 28,37, cited in Capwell, T. (2012): *The Noble Art of the Sword. Fashion and Fencing in Renaissance Europe 1520-1630*, pp. 46-47.

¹⁰ Peter Paul Rubens - *The Artist and His First Wife, Isabella Brant, in the Honeysuckle Bower*. His silver-encrusted rapier in the center expresses civilian confidence, wealth and status.

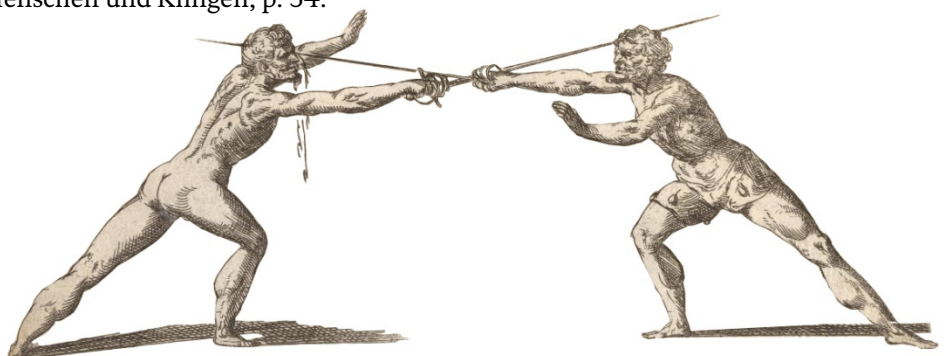
Around 1600, when the fashion of wearing a rapier reached its peak, the desire for a representative piece led to a particular remarkable phenomenon. Members of the high aristocracy like the Elector of Saxony, who was always surrounded by guards and generally did not engage in duels, ordered the finest rapiers ever made. These were decorated in a way, that made them useless for fencing, being pure luxury items for representation. A hilt made of gold or pure silver, enameled or decorated with diamonds and other gems was too soft for parrying an opponents attack. Any decoration for a rapier designed to be used was limited to the techniques, that could be applied to a hilt forged of steel, like gilding, silver encrusting, damascening, engraving or steel cutting.¹¹

Solingen

Since medieval times swords had been manufactured in Solingen, about 35 km north of Cologne, an internationally important metropolis in this age. Long time scholars presumed Cologne was a major center for the production of blades, knives and swords in the 11th and 12th century, since this city was a great market for these products. Dealers exported these over the river Rhine to other regions, not only in German speaking lands. For instance, French medieval heroic epics mention, that the swords of their knights came from Cologne (!): “un autre espie, qui de Coulogne vint”, “l’espeye de Colonyn”, “grans espées de Coloigne”, “une hespee. . . feite outre lo rin. A Cologne en sa cite”.¹²

¹¹ Capwell, T. (2012): *The Noble Art of the Sword. Fashion and Fencing in Renaissance Europe 1520-1630*, pp. 29-33, 46-47, 58, 83, 112-113; Seitz, H. (1968): *Blankwaffen II*, pp. 30-32.

¹² Schultz, A. (1889): *Das höfische Leben zur Zeit der Minnesinger*, pp. 6, 13, cited in: Haedeke, H. (1994): *Menschen und Klingen*, p. 54.



However, at a closer look this assumption does not make so much sense. It is known that crafts involving the use of fire were not very welcome within the city walls of Cologne, because of the danger and also the great demand for heating material, which caused its prices to rise. Furthermore, in order to run watermills, necessary to move the grindstones and hammers in the manufacturing process, small streams in a region with a lot of gradient were the first choice. You did not find these in Cologne and the river Rhine was not very well suited for this purpose.

So, it seems a reasonable thesis, that the swords sold in Cologne came from Solingen, long before the first documental evident supports the manufacture of blades in this place in the year 1212. Since products of Solingen were not signed before the 16th century, these were simply considered originating from Cologne, the market place where they were dealt.

The requirements for producing swords and knives were ideal in Solingen. Raw iron could be sourced in the neighborhood and numerous streams in this mountainous region provided the necessary hydropower for hammering, grinding and polishing the blades. Charcoal, made from the rich forests was readily available.

Since the beginnings the whole manufacture process was divided among specialized professions, like sword smiths, hardening agents, grinders and the Schwertfeger, responsible for polishing the blade, completing it with a hilt and dealing with the clients. This early division

of labor and professionalization led to a very high quality of the products and their international reputation, already in medieval times.

Still, Toledo was the most famous center for blades in Europe and also Milan had a great reputation until Solingen became the primary place of manufacture at about 1600. In order to benefit and foster the marketability of their products, masters from Solingen had never hesitated to copy foreign marks or boost their image by the semblance of a Spanish origin, even after the relevance of Toledo started to vanish and Solingen dominated the European market in the 17th, 18th and even 19th century. Heinrich Kohl, for example, signed his blades with ENRIQUE COL EN ALEMANIA, sometimes with the additional inscription ESPADEIRO DEL REI. As a true malapropism a blade from Solingen is known with the signature SEBSATIAN HERNIE, standing for the famous bladesmith Sebastian Hernandez. In a similar context the inscription VIVA EL REY PHILIPP III REY DE ESPANNA Y PURTUGUAL on our present example was probably meant to provide the blade with a Spanish aura, albeit Iohannes Berns signs with his full name and mark. Berns had never worked in Spain and the presence of the reformist's motto SOLI DEO GLORIA together with a reverence to the strict catholic Spanish King is obviously somewhat contradictory.

Notwithstanding the attempt of profiting from foreign brand images, the actual quality of the present blade was at least the same if not better, compared to a good one from Toledo, in a time, when blades or complete swords and rapiers from Solingen were exported all over Europe.

The new leading role of Solingen can be exemplified by an occurrence back in 1593. Pope CLEMENS VIII from the house of the Aldobrandini presented a sword to the French King on the occasion of his second conversion to the Catholicism. It had a blade by Peter Münch of Solingen. When Henri IV. married for the second time, the pope again gave a sword as a present, this time with a blade by Peter Munsten. It is remarkable that the pope preferred blades from Solingen masters on two occasions, albeit he could have bought these from Milan, Brescia or Padua, where also excellent blades were made.¹³

¹³ Haedeke, H. (1994): Menschen und Klängen, pp. 54-55, 61-66, 76, 81; Seitz, H. (1968): Blankwaffen II, pp. 259-270.





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