



XIITH INTERNATIONAL GATHERING OF
HISTORICAL EUROPEAN MARTIAL ARTS

The Rotella swordplay - Part 1

SALA D'ARME
ACHILLE
MAROZZO
Associazione culturale e sportiva

General Overview and disclaimer

This booklet is meant to be used as a compendium to the workshop. Many of the concepts expressed herewithin will be meaningful only after having attended the class. We will be giving some basic concepts on the Bolognese School, in order to better understand the most complex techniques expressed by the Masters in the Rotella Swordplay.

Please note that many of these concepts are the result of years of hard study, and they usually require some years of practise in order to be mastered.

The Rotella

The Rotella is the iconic Renaissance shield spread throughout Italy from the start of Renaissance Humanism to the late XVII century.

It represents the latest evolution in embraced shileds, and was always wielded using one or more straps on the forearm, and a flexible handle (ropes or leather strap) on the hand. In some rare findings we can also see metal handles for the hand.

It varies from 50cm to 60cm in diameter, and it is always bumped. It weights from 2Kg to 4Kg, and it was usually made of different materials; mainly steel and leather, but we can also find some rare wooden findings. Sometimes it had an archaic umbo on the center, or even a brocco (a barbed tip).

The first Master that gives us the exact proportions of a Rotella is Francesco Altoni (ca. 1540), whom refers to its dimensions in diameter as the distance from the hip to the neck. Marco Docciolini, some 60 years after, describes the Rotella's diameter to be extended as the full extension of the arm. Both measures are indeed compatible with the findings.

On the practical point of view, the first Master explaining how to actually wield a Rotella is Giacomo Di Grassi, in 1570, which also gives different examples on how the Rotella should not be used.

Giacomo Di Grassi - Ragion di Adoprar Sicuramente l'Arme - 1570 "Della Spada et rotella" (excerpt)	
Source	Tranlsation
<i>Dico la rotella da diversi, uomini et diversi tempi esser stata in molti modi tenuta et adoprata [omissis] et non mancano ancora à tempi nostri uomini che la tengono per non stancarsi appoggiata alla coscia [omissis] Et altri anchora tenèdo tutto il braccio piegato sel hano tenuta oportta alla vita tutta piana non si curando per poter guardare la pancia a perder quasi in tutto la vita de l'inimico [omissis] non sapendo di quanta importanza sia il vedere l'inimico et fare altri effetti, che tenendola detto modo non si possono fare.</i>	The Rotella has been used and wielded by different men and in different times in many ways [omissis] and even in our times there are men who bring it placed against the thigh, so that they don't get tired [omissis] And others who take it in front of their abdomen, completely flat, with their arm completely folded, so that in order to protect their stomach, they completely miss the sight on the opponent [omissis] knowing how important it is to see your opponent and being able to do many things which can't be done if you wield the Rotella in this way.

Di Grassi also shows us how the Rotella should actually be wielded in combat

Giacomo Di Grassi - Ragion di Adoprar Sicuramente l'Arme - 1570 "Del modo di tenir la rotella" (excerpt)	
Source	Tranlsation
<i>[omissis] Per tenir dunque la rotella in modo che ella difenda tutta quella parte di vita dal genoccio in su, et che si possi veder l'inimico bisogna tenir il braccio se non diritto al meno piegato si poco che nel gombitto faccia un grand'angolo ottuso di modo che l'occhio possa con il raggio passando presso alla circonferenza della rotella che è vicina alla mano vedere tutto l'inimico dal capo a i piedi, et tenendola in questo modo la parte convexa di fuori della rotella difenderà tutta la parte sinistra, et la circonferenza dalla parte della mano difenderà con pochissimo moto tutta la parte destra la testa e le coscie [omissis]</i>	In order to wield the Rotella so that it protects from the knee upwards, and that you can see the opponent, you have to place the arm not completely extended, but creating a large obtuse angle with the arm, so that your eye could pass with a ray to the (part of the) circumference of the rotella that is near the hand and see your opponent from the head to the feet, and wielding it in this way, the convex part of the shield will protect the whole left part, and the circumference on the part of the hand will protect with few effort and movement the whole right part, the head and the thighs

These two excerpts from Di Grassi perfectly show us how to wield the Rotella. Summarizing:

- The arm has to be almost fully extended
- The Rotella should be wielded so to see completely your opponent from head to feet
- The Rotella can be used to parry all the attacks from your opponent

This just gives us a basic idea on the use of the shield. However, we have to consider that Di Grassi is a late Author of the Bolognese School, and that earlier Authors like Marozzo, Manciolino and the Anonymous Bolognese used the Rotella in a slightly different way, mainly to the fact that Di Grassi focuses his technique on thrusts, while earlier authors used in their swordplay a well balanced mix of thrusts and cuts.



Before examining the actual use of the Rotella, we have to introduce some basic concepts of the Bolognese School, which will greatly help us in understanding the Rotella swordplay.

The Side Sword

The side sword is the typical one-handed sword used throughout the XVI century in Italy. We could spend literally hours trying to describe the different models, variations, shapes, but we just need a general overview on it, in order to avoid confusion later on.

Basically speaking, a Side Sword is a double-edged sword, which varies in length from 100cm to 110cm. The point of balance is in most of the cases at 3 - 4 cm from the cross section of the hilt.

We can find several models, all of which have at least a protective ring for the second finger of the hand. Late XVI century models could have a complex system of protective arcs thought to greatly enhance the protection on the hand.

While many of the Rotella plays concentrate on hitting the hand of the opponent, the sword used by the Anonymous Bolognese (the earlier Bolognese School Author) was probably lacking much protection, and we can also see on the 1536 edition of Marozzo's Opera Nova that the depicted side swords have little protection for the hand, mainly consisting on protective arcs for the 2nd finger.

This leads to one of the most important concepts in the Rotella swordplay: the hand has to be constantly protected by the shield, both while attacking, and while receiving attacks.

Guards used in the Rotella Swordplay

The guards used by the Masters to describe their techniques are the same among the whole Bolognese School, starting with the Anonymous Bolognese, and ending with Dalle Agocchie. There are 12 to 14 guards (depending on the author). Even if they use many of them in the techniques, we can focus on only some of them, in order to simplify the study of the Rotella Swordplay.



Guards used in the Rotella swordplay

Coda Lunga e Alta



- Left foot onward
- Opening to the left shoulder
- Arm almost extended
- Hand in second position
- Hand slightly on the right of the knee
- Tip towards the opponent

Porta di Ferro Stretta (Larga)



- Right foot onward
- Opening to the right shoulder
- Arm almost extended
- Hand in third position
- Hand directly above the right knee, or slightly to the left
- Tip towards the opponent (Stretta)
- Tip towards the ground (Larga)

Coda Lunga e Stretta



- Right foot onward
- Opening to the left shoulder
- Arm fully extended
- Hand in second position
- Hand slightly to the right of the knee
- Tip towards the opponent's face

Guardia di Faccia



- Right foot onward
- Arm extended towards the opponent
- Hand in fourth position
- Tip towards the opponent



Glossary of the most commonly used blows:

We are giving some basic glossary on the words that Bolognese School Masters used to describe the various blows so to avoid confusion while examining the techniques.

Mandritto	A cut executed from your right side to your left side. Mostly targeting the left side of the opponent.
Roverso	A cut executed from your left side to your right side. Mostly targeting the right side of the opponent.
Falso.	A cut executed with the false edge of the side sword. Can be Mandritto or Roverso.
Falso Impuntato	An upward Mandritto Falso that becomes a thrust when discharging the blow.



Basic Concepts

In order to summarize the basic concepts of the Rotella swordplay, we will examine the most iconic techniques from Marozzo, Di Grassi and the Anonymous Bolognese

First Basic: always protect the hand under the Rotella

When using the Rotella for the first times, it's usual to bring the blows not caring about the hand. This leads to an obvious advantage to the opponent, whom can strike your hand remaining completely protected by the shield.

We can see this basic concept applied both defensively and offensively by Marozzo:

Achille Marozzo - Opera Nova - 1536 <i>Cap. 102 Della prima parte de spada e rotella & serai paciente</i>	
Scholar	Opponent
Coda Lunga e Alta <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oblique step (right foot) and upward Falso to the right hand of the opponent (Rotella protecting right hand) • Left foot follows • Roverso to the left leg of the opponent • Step back (right foot) with Roverso to cover Coda Lunga e Alta	Thrust, Mandritto, Roverso

Achille Marozzo - Opera Nova - 1536 <i>Cap. 105 Che tratta, in questa quarta parte, del patiente</i>	
Scholar	Opponent
Coda Lunga e Alta <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step forward, Mandritto to the opponent's hand and Roverso to the opponent's legs • Step backward and Roverso to the opponent's hand • Step backward and thrust to the opponent's face (hand under the Rotella) Coda Lunga e Stretta	Thrust towards the face



Achille Marozzo - Opera Nova - 1536 <i>Cap. 108 El qual dinota come tu sei rimaso in coda lunga & alta</i>	
Scholar	Opponent
<p>Coda Lunga e Alta</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oblique step and Roverso to the opponent's hand • Upward Falso to the opponent's arm (under the Rotella) • Step backward and Roverso to the opponent's head • Step back and thrust to the opponent's face (under the Rotella) <p>Coda Lunga e Stretta</p>	<p>Mandritto (to the head or to the legs), Roverso or thrust</p>

Achille Marozzo - Opera Nova - 1536 <i>Cap. 110 Dello agente e del paziente in la detta coda longa e stretta</i>	
Scholar	Opponent
<p>Coda Lunga e Stretta</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step backward and Mandritto to the opponent's arm <p>Cinghiara Porta di Ferro Stretta (<i>Porta di Ferro Stretta with left foot onward</i>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oblique step, parry with the false edge (upwards), Roverso to the opponent's legs and upward Falso to the hand • Step back Roverso (towards the opponent's right side) <p>Coda Lunga e Alta</p>	<p>Thrust, Mandritto to the head or to the legs</p> <p>Mandritto, Roverso or Thrust</p>



Second Basic: always put the sword under the Rotella when parrying

At a first glance it could seem that the Rotella can parry any kind of attack from the opponent.

While this is true for attacks coming from upward, it can be really dangerous parrying opponent's attacks to the legs using only the Rotella.

Moreover, a skilled opponent will always try to feint an upward cut to your head, and then try to hit you to the advanced leg.

This peculiarity of the Rotella swordplay leads to another basic concept, which is broadly used by Anonymous Bolognese in his techniques:

Anonymous Bolognese - early XVI c. - 2 nd Volume <i>Di Spada et Rodella - First play</i>	
Scholar	Opponent
Coda Lunga e Stretta (but with left foot onward) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandritto to the opponent's leg (without passing Porta di Ferro Stretta) • Bring the right foot back and <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thrust to the chest or... 2. Mandritto to the face or... 3. Mandritto to the right arm Coda Lunga e Stretta (left foot onward)	Same guard Brings the sword under the Rotella in order to parry the attack Step forward and Roverso to the right leg

Anonymous Bolognese - early XVI c. - 2 nd Volume <i>Di Spada et Rodella - Second play</i>	
Scholar	Opponent
Coda Lunga e Stretta (but with left foot onward) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Falso Impuntato • Step forward and Mandritto to the advanced leg 	Any guard Brings the sword under the Rotella in order to parry the attack



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before discharging the Mandritto, half turn with the wrist, hit the opponent's sword with the false edge, moving it to your left, and creating an opening, • Roverso to the leg <p>Coda Lunga e Stretta</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step backward and thrust (under the rotella) <p>Guardia di Faccia</p>	
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Third Basic: Always try to open the opponent guard before striking

When dealing with the Rotella, it's obvious how difficult it is to succeed in hitting a skilled opponent.

While most of the techniques focus on countering the opponent's attacks, a skilled player may find really usefull taking the initiative.

The Masters make much effort in explaining how to bypass the opponent's defenses, with some very smart techniques.

Giacomo Di Grassi - Ragione di adoperar sicuramente l'armi - 1570

Della spada et rotella - Della offesa di guardia alta (second part)

Scholar	Opponent
<p>Guardia Alta (right foot onward, arm high up, slightly behind the head, hand in first position, tip to the opponent's face)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong and determined thrust to the opponent's head, from his left side, over his Rotella • As soon as the tip overlaps the opponent's Rotella, oblique step (to the left) • Move the sword to the right across the circumference of the opponent's Rotella • Step forward and thrust to the opponent's torso (Inside the opponent's Rotella) 	<p>Raises the Rotella trying to parry the thrust, thus covering his line of sight</p>

Anonymous Bolognese - early XVI c. - 2nd Volume

Di Spada et Rodella - Sixth play

Scholar	Opponent
<p>Coda Lunga e Stretta (but with left foot onward)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move left foot forward, and left thrust to the chest (feint) 	<p>Coda Lunga e Stretta</p>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring the Rotella forward to increase protection • Right oblique step to the left of the opponent, bring the sword backwards, Falso Impuntato (or thrust) to the opponent's left side • Quick step forward (left foot) towards the opponent, thrust to the chest between his sword and his rotella • Right foot follows along • Roverso to the leg (or to the face) while following with the right foot <p>Coda Lunga e Stretta</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step backward moving to Guardia di Faccia (probably trying a thrust under the Rotella, if necessary) <p>Guardia di Faccia, then Coda Lunga e Stretta</p>	<p>Probably raises the sword, or moves the Rotella to the right, opening his left side</p> <p>Parries / dodges</p> <p>If he somehow parries or dodges</p>
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Achille Marozzo - Opera Nova - 1536 <i>Cap. 104 Della tertia parte, per essere con la stoccata agente</i>	
Scholar	Opponent
<p>Coda Lunga e Stretta</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step forward and thrust under the Rotella • Bring the left foot back towards the right one, crossed step with the left foot and Falso Impuntato (right over the opponent's Rotella) • Step forward (right foot) and feint a Mandritto to the legs • Roverso to the legs (left foot follows) • Step backwards and Roverso to the face (on cover) <p>Coda Lunga e Alta</p>	<p>Doesn't move</p> <p>Probably raises the Rotella to avoid the Falso Impuntato</p> <p>Brings the sword down to the left side protecting the legs</p>

