

The sabre in 19th century Greece

George Zacharopoulos
Hoplomachia Academy

Abstract – This article gives a brief overview on Greek sabre sources with a special focus on Philipp Müller’s and Nikolaos Pyrgos’ treatises. The article does not aim to give a complete list of treatises neither to analyze the any of the mentioned books in details – rather it aims to give an insight in those two books which might have had the most important impact on the development of the Greek sabre fencing in the 18th and 19th Centuries.

I. A BRIEF HISTORY

Although Greece has a rich history of warfare since antiquity, curved blades were always a minority. The straight two-edged blades were more popular in battlefields, duels, even in art and folklore.

The first examples of curved swords in Greece are the *κοπίς* (kopis) and the *ρομφαία* (rhomphaia). Kopsis was a short single edged sword with an inner curved blade, between 50-65 cm of length. The blade gets wider towards the tip in order to enhance its cutting ability. It is similar to *μάχαρα* (makhaira-big knife/sword) and the Iberian Falcata and was used between 4th and 5th century BC.

Rhomphaia on the other hand was like a two handed pole-sword. A slightly curved or straight blade attached to a big two-handed simple wooden grip and with a tremendous cutting power. It was used almost exclusively by the Thracians around the 4th century BC.

During the late period of the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) and more specifically since the beginning of the 13th century, the appearance in hagiography of single-edged curved swords with a blade length between 70cm-100 cm, becomes more frequent. A weapon designed for use on horseback, with a possible descent from Central Asia. Laonikos Chalkokondyles, a 15th century Byzantine historian, wrote in his treatise “Proof of histories”¹ – first published in Latin in 1556 – that the Turks were exploiting the power of their curved swords using strong descending cuts as opposed to the Germans and Hungarians who used the thrust more often. Also Lampo Birago , a 15th century Italian historian, claims in his treatise “Strategicon adversum Turcos” (1452-1455)² that the curved swords were already known to Greeks by the name “spatas”. We are also aware from various sources that the Greek mercenaries “stradiotti” who served under the

¹ Babuin, Andrea: *Τα επιθετικά όπλα των Βυζαντινών κατά την ύστερη περίοδο, 1204-1453* (Πανεπιστήμιο Ιωαννίνων, 2009) [Babuín, Andrea, *The offensive weapons of the Byzantines during the late period of 1204-1453* (Ioannina: University of Ioannina, 2009)], p.52

² Babuin, *Τα επιθετικά όπλα των Βυζαντινών κατά την ύστερη περίοδο, 1204-1453* (2009) [Babuín, *The offensive weapons of the Byzantines during the late period of 1204-1453* (2009)], p.53

Venetian command in the end of the 15th century were using curved cavalry swords aka sabres. Additionally, the notion that the sword which the Byzantines called *παραμήριον* (paramerion, meaning: next to the thigh) was a short sword with a curved blade is unconfirmed, since paramerion could be any kind of knife/sword with curved or straight blade.

Moving forward to the 18th and 19th centuries when Greeks were under Ottoman rule. It was natural that the prevailing types of swords in use were that of Turkish origin. There were two types of swords that were really popular amongst the Greek people at those times: the *γιαταγάνι* (yatagani) and the *πάλα* (pala).

The yatagani was obviously the weapon that the Turks called yatagan³. It was a large knife (or a short sword) with an inner curve which was used for domestic works and as an auxiliary weapon in battle. It was very common in the Ottoman Empire between the 18th and the 19th centuries.

The pala is not to be confused with the straight blade cavalry sword which the Germans called *pallasch*. In Turkish language, *pala*⁴ means (amongst other things): a flat sword of different kinds. So in general Greeks were calling *pala*, any kind of sword with a broad and long blade (as opposed to the *yatagan*) with the most popular ones being the Turkish *kılıç* or the Arabic *scimitar*, actually a sword with a curved blade which can be used on foot or on horseback.

In short, it was after the end of the revolution and the crowning of the Bavarian Otto as King of Greece in 1832 that the Greeks started to use, train or study the weapon we call in HEMA today military sabre.

II. THE TREATISES

Philipp Müller's «*Θεωρητική και πρακτική εισήγησις της Σπαθασκίας*» (Theoritiki ke praktiki eisigisis tis Spathaskias) and Nikolaos Pyrgos' «*Οπλομαχητική. Ξιφασκία και Σπαθασκία*» (Hoplomachitiki. Xifaskia ke Spathaskia) are indeed the only surviving fencing treatises written in the Greek language. Although written and published in the 19th century – Müller's in 1847 and Pyrgos' in 1872 – they are the only texts focused exclusively on historical fencing that we are aware of until today. In a country like Greece, with a great history of wars and swords since antiquity, we have not yet discovered anything prior to them. But we do not lose hope....

³ Cherevichnik, Denis *To the question of the origin of yatagan* in In: History of Antique Arms Researches 2016, pp. 17-35. (Kiev: Insitute of History of Ukraine NASU, 2017)

⁴ Miles, George C., *Turkish Pala "Sword" and Its Derivatives* (Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 50, 1930), p.255

II.1. Φίλιππος Μύλλερ: Θεωρητική και πρακτική εισήγησις της Σπαθασίας – 1847

Unfortunately, little is known about the life of Philipp Müller. We know for sure that he was a fencing teacher at the Royal Military School⁵, as it is clearly stated in the title page of his treatise, but there is no information about his personal life.

From a Bavarian document of military movements and transfers (Verordnungsblatt des Königlich Bayerischen Kriegsministeriums No 1 Mit 78. of 1870) we are informed that an officer named Müller was transferred from the 5th “Großherzog von Hessen” infantry regiment to the 3rd “Königin Mutter” artillery regiment and arrived in Greece as an artillery officer, possibly assigned to the “Artillerie-Fussbatterie” (Artillery Foot Battery). Still we cannot confirm that it is the same Müller since the document is of a much later date (1870) and the name Müller is very common in Germany.

He was probably fluent in ancient Greek due to his Bavarian Gymnasium education which we assume he had as a Bavarian⁶ and this might be one of the reasons he chose to write his treatise in Greek with the aid of the Greek artillery lieutenant K. Kossantelis in the editing, as stated in the prologue of his treatise.

I managed to discover a spicy detail⁷ about his life from the archives of the Greek magazine *Εστία* (*Hestia*, 1893-1895): Müller had fought a duel against Dimitrios Tzavelas (the son of the Greek revolution hero Kitsos Tzavelas) scarring Tzavelas permanently on the right side of his face. The reason of the duel was an Algerian woman...

In the beginning of his treatise he has dedicated a whole paragraph acknowledging the King of Greece, Otto. It is highly probable that king Otto endorsed Müller’s book since Müller was an officer of the Greek Army and of Bavarian descent like the King himself. King Otto was the first King of Greece after the revolution and he reigned in Greece from 1832 until 1862.

It is rather funny that the first fencing treatise in Greek language was actually written by a German. But when we come to think of it, it makes perfect sense since under the Ottoman rule there was no fencing culture in Greece like in the rest of Western Europe. Therefore his treatise is of great importance as a part of the post-revolution Greek culture.

⁵ The military school of Greece was established in 1828 by the governor Ioannis Kapodistrias with the purpose to upgrade the tactical army with educated and capable officers. The organization of the school was assigned to the Bavarian colonel Karl Wilhelm von Heideck. The first director of Greek origin was the lieutenant colonel Spyros Milios in 1840. The school still exists today.

⁶ Semrad, Alexandra, *Educational expansion and social composition of secondary schools: Evidence from Bavarian school registries 1810-1890* in: Munich Discussion Paper, No. 2015-14 (München: Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Volkswirtschaftliche Fakultät 2015), p. 5

⁷ Kontogiannidis, Anastasios, *The prodigal son of chieftain Kitsos Tzavelas* (Η Μηχανή του Χρόνου, 2014). Original source : *Hestia Magazine* (1893-1895)

Before we actually getting into the treatise itself a clarification of a couple of fencing definitions the way they were used in the Greek language in the 19th century might be of help: in Greek the word *σπαθασκία* (spathaskia) actually means : training with the *σπάθη* (spathi aka sabre), which is different by definition from the word *ξίφασκία* (xifaskia) which means: training with the *ξίφος* (xiphos: ancient Greek word defining a double edged sword with a straight blade).

So it is clearly stated by the title of the treatise and by the author himself later on, that the treatise is exclusively about the sabre and not about a la contrepoinde. He is highly influenced by Friedrich Christian Christmann (author of the “*Theoretisch-Praktische Anleitung des Hau-Stoßfechtens und des Schwadronbauens nach einer ganz neuen Methode*”, 1838). Although he not only claims to follow Christmann’s system but also states that he has amended and improved it⁸.

Müller’s treatise on sabre is highly detailed, divided in lessons and covering a variety of issues like: how to choose a proper sabre or the code of conduct in the fencing hall etc.

In his first chapter he covers everything about the weapon itself and the necessary protective equipment.

In the second chapter he proceeds to the main position (guard) and footwork. Müller describes all the necessary steps and includes exercises of how to train them as opposed to Pyrgos’ treatise which only describes the movements. This is one of the main differences between these two treatises: Müller’s is a full system divided into lessons and exercises and Pyrgos’ is more of a “do and do not” manual.

The following chapters include all the cuts and parries as well as all the actions on the blade (beating, circling), counter offensive actions, feints, in tempo attacks and so on.

Another difference from Pyrgos’ treatise is that Müller does not include the thrust in his system and he does not explain why. There are cuts with the false edge (using the sharp part near the tip) but not even one thrust. Maybe it is due to the fact that the weapon Müller prefers and teaches is the curved sabre and not the straight one like Pyrgos.

In his fifth chapter he presents his training method in 24 lessons as an exercise guide which the aspiring sabreurs can easily follow and practice either on their own or under the guidance of a teacher.

His concluding chapter, number six, is where the maestro unfolds his personal experience through a series of advises like⁹:

⁸ Φίλιππος Μύλλερ: *Θεωρητική και πρακτική εισήγησις της Σπαθασκίας* (Αθήνα: Τυπογραφίας Κ. Ράλλη, 1847) [Muller, Filippos, *Theoritiki kai praktiki eisigisis tis Spathaskias*, (Athina: Typografias K. Ralli 1947)], prologue

⁹ Μύλλερ, *Θεωρητική και πρακτική εισήγησις της Σπαθασκίας* (1847) [Muller, Filippos, *Theoritiki kai praktiki eisigisis tis Spathaskias*, (Athina: Typografias K. Ralli 1947)], chapter six, pp. 67-82

– **Against the left-handed opponent**, the right-handed sabreur must not attack against the inner side.

– **Instructions for the left-handed.** Above all the left-handed sabreur must bring his right shoulder back, turn his body more and set the sword hand in such a way so that he is sufficiently protected from all the cuts against his outer side

– **Against the unskilled.** Unskilled is the one who follows his instinct and passion without knowing the rules of the art. The best way for the skilled sabreur to answer these attacks is to make use of the following rules.

- a) Guard himself by stepping in circular patterns which he must start with his right foot when he steps from left to right and his left foot when stepping from the right to left.
- b) By withdrawal of both his arm and body, letting the cuts pass through – cuts are always wide and easy to observe when executed by an unskilled sabreur – and at the same time by counter-cutting to the head or the arm.

As the intense assault of the unskilled will not last long, due to the fact that his strength lessens by the intensity of effort, it will be easy for the skilled sabreur to win.

– **About the assault.** This is one of his largest paragraphs, spread in three pages, providing critical advices on actual fighting. For example:

When facing an opponent about whom the sabreur knows little (or not at all) concerning how he fights or how strong he is, then he must focus on his defense and test his opponent from a safe distance using simple, tight feints without lunging.

The sabreur must avoid using low cuts as much as possible, be it cuts to the thighs and knees. He can use low cuts only as feints otherwise he is exposing the upper openings which are more difficult to defend...

This part about the assault is very important because it offers practical solutions and suggestions to problems and difficulties which the student will face when he actually starts to fence.

– **Observations for the students.** Anyone who wishes to learn swordsmanship, should take into consideration that it will not be possible to advance in only a few weeks or months and that the first lessons are less than pleasing and enjoyable, in fact quite boring, but this should not discourage people from pursuing the art because these lessons are highly valuable and serve as the basis for the more essential parts of swordsmanship.

– **Teaching swordsmanship.** The teacher must make sure that his students fully learn and understand the first principles of swordsmanship because it is obvious that if the student does not fully learn the basic principles he will not be able to benefit from the advanced lessons that will follow as he should.

Of course he elaborates more on each of the above but we cannot present his full analysis in an article.

What is interesting though is his code of conduct in the fencing salle where he lays twenty-two rules of behavior, some of them being:

- a) Foul language, profanities, singing and screaming are forbidden.
- b) Taunting and mocking anyone after making a mistake is not allowed and not forgiven in any case because this will upset the orderliness and the serenity needed inside the hall and it may lead to more unpleasant results.
- c) Every visitor must enter the hall with his head uncovered and stay this way until he exits the hall.
- d) Smoking is not allowed inside the hall.
- e) During the bout, if the teacher addresses a student he must remove his face protector before replying.
- f) The student must accept any encouragement or negative remark by his teacher with great attention and obedience and not with frustration or resentment.

Only some examples of the rules are listed here considering the space limits of the article. They were selected because most of them can be easily applied to the modern fencing hall. Müller's treatise is also available in English.¹⁰

In conclusion, Müller's 117 pages treatise presents a complete system of fencing with the sabre, following a specific pedagogy divided in lessons, exercises, advises, information on proper equipment and behavior rules. It is a fine example of German sabre fencing.

II.2. Νικόλαος Πύργος: Οπλομαχητική. Ξιφασκία και Σπαθασκία – 1872

In 1862, King Otto (the royal sponsor of Müller's treatise) was banished from Greece. His successor, King George the First, arrived from Denmark a year later. He ruled Greece for 50 years until his assassination in 1913. This historical background is to be considered in order to understand that Greece's re-connection to the West and its culture – including the activity of fencing – was relatively fresh, as only a few decades back Greece was under the Ottoman rule.

Nikolaos Pyrgos was the first *Maître d'armes* of Greek origin. He was teaching the art of fencing at the Military School (like Müller) as it is clearly stated in the title page of his treatise. He wrote treatises on gymnastics and fitness pedagogy: *Ανόργανος παιδαγωγική γυμναστική* (anorganos pedagogiki gymnasyiki), *Ημιοργανική παιδαγωγική γυμναστική* (hmiorganiki pedagogiki gymnastiki) and of course his 1872 treatise on fencing. Amongst others, he trained two Olympic champions:

¹⁰ Zacharopoulos, George - Stypas, Ilias G, *Philipp Müller: "Theoretical and Applied Introduction to Swordsmanship-1847"*. (Adaption/Interpretation and translation) (Glasgow, UK: Fallen Rook Publishing, May 2017)

his son Leonidas who won the gold medal in men's foil at the Olympic Games of 1896 and Telemachos Karakalos who won the silver medal in men's sabre at the same games.

Pyrgos was a teacher of the French school of fencing as opposed to his contemporary Greek maestro Iliopoulos who was teaching the Italian one. It is remarkable to note that Pyrgos' fencing terminology is still in use in the Greek Armed Forces. There is a theory saying that Nikolaos Pyrgos was a student of Müller, but I have failed to confirm it and in my opinion it seems unlikely since they were following different fencing schools.

The chronological difference of 25 years between Müller's and Pyrgos' treatises is critical, because classical fencing at the end of the 19th century was very slowly starting its development into a sport only activity and the maestro himself taught fencers who participated in the first modern Olympic games years later.

It is also evident from its title that the treatise is not only about sabre fencing but also about foil fencing. As a matter of fact the sabre part in his treatise is relatively small compared to the foil, only 35 pages.

The short prologue of the maestro in the treatise is followed by a ten pages introduction written by someone with the initials *E.Δ.Ρ.* including a brief history of fencing and dueling. The interesting part is that the writer condemns dueling as "barbaric but sometimes a necessary evil of our society" and also criticizes the sabre (curved sword) as a vulgar and barbaric (sic) weapon introduced to Europe and Greece by the Persians, Tatars and Turks. On the other hand he glorifies the epee/foil (straight sword), held by Leonidas of Sparta, Alexander the Great and the Christian knights of the medieval times. He concludes this strange introduction by congratulating the maestro Pyrgos for his choice to dedicate most of his treatise on the use of the epee and not the sabre. The real name covered by the initials *E.Δ.Ρ.* is unknown.

As stated by the maestro himself in the prologue, he follows the terminology and teachings of La Boëssière¹¹ (obviously referring to the son, Antoine Texier La Boëssière who wrote the fencing treatise "Traité de l'art des armes" in 1818 and not the father Nicolas who is credited with the invention of the fencing mask) as taught in the best schools of France.

This is one of the reasons that the foil – which at that time was taught either as a practice weapon or as a training tool for the smallsword, one of the dueling weapons – holds such a major and important role in his treatise. Not only it consumes around 130 pages but the maestro says that even the sabreur and the lancer need to know how to fence with the foil first, before they proceed with their weapon of choice.

One of the basic characteristics of this treatise is that it is not divided in lessons. It presents the basics of each weapon, exposes the advantages and disadvantages of each action, and is concentrated on the correct how and when of every action.

¹¹ Πύργος, Νικόλαος, *Οπλομαχητική. Ξιφασία και Σπαθασία* (1872), prologue

Concerning the sabre: the maestro writes that the sabreur cannot handle his weapon properly if he does not already know the basics of the foil. The foilist on the other hand, must not invest a lot of time in learning the sabre but mainly train with it in order to get used to the weight of the weapon. That is because a foilist who can combine the skills of both weapons is far more dangerous against a sabreur who only uses the wide movements of the sabre.

So clearly the maestro considers the sabre as an inferior weapon to the foil/smallsword/epee as opposed to the treatise of Müller which is dedicated entirely to the sabre. Müller's military background surely justifies his preference.

The first thing we observe in Pyrgos' introduction about the weapon, is his disapproval of the sabreurs who use a system based on dodging in order to defend themselves, meaning jumping back and forth all the time, as they are unable to connect their defensive and offensive actions due to the wide and long tempo they use in their movements. He clearly writes that this type of fencing is not sabre fencing but *ραβδομαχία* (ravidomachia aka stick fighting) and that it should not be considered artful.

He definitely prefers the straight sabre over the curved one, although he writes that there are a lot of variations in the curvature or the width of the blade. His preference towards the straight blade stems from the fact that in his system he also uses thrusts, as opposed to Müller who uses only cuts. Let's not forget that Pyrgos advises to learn the foil first which the base of all fencing is, and then proceed to the sabre.

He then quickly proceeds to present the eight cuts covering all directions and to explain the position of the hand in each of them, followed by the eight parries and their names (numbers).

As he already stated in his prologue his treatise is not compiled by lessons. He presents the basic material and then he adds comments and advice on them and other related matters. For example he writes that the safe distance in sabre is a bit wider because the hand of the sabreur is exposed to cuts, or how to employ feints by circling of the blade, whipping or beating the opponent's blade, contra tempo attacks etc. In the part where he discusses counter attacks is where his main difference to Müller's treatise lies: besides the cut, he also employs the thrust as a very effective way to counter attack.

By the end of his sabre section there are two pages with general observations and advice to the sabreur which are quite interesting, some of them being¹²:

- When the opponent press strongly in the bind, cut at his hand or thrust at his chest.
- Keep your edge slightly sideways in order to avoid disarms by whipping.
- For the opponents who jump right and left all the time in order to reach the openings use the thrust.

¹² Πύργος: *Οπλομαχητική. Ξιφασκία και Σπαθασκία* (1872), p. 172

- Do not step when you beat the opponent's weapon because you are exposed to danger in case you fail.
- It is safer to direct your cuts towards the hand or body of the opponent
- It is wise to press, beat or threaten before you execute an attack. After your attack you must retreat immediately into a safe guard.
- If you want to counter attack with a cut after a parry towards the other side, keep in mind to retain the pressure on the opponent's blade.

In conclusion, Pyrgos' sabre section is like a quick guide on the use of the weapon, relatively small, but very inclusive and precise. He may not present a systematic method consisting of lessons as it is customary, but his observations and advice offer to the reader a holistic view on how to fence with the specific weapon in context.

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