

German longswords revisited

Late-medieval south-German sword-makers as brokers of urban martial culture

Background | Southern Germany in the 14th cent. has already become one of Europe's most important centres of metallurgy, with Nürnberg and Passau as leading technological innovators. In effect, swords from the region, especially from the latter town, were in high demand across the Empire and to the east and south of it.

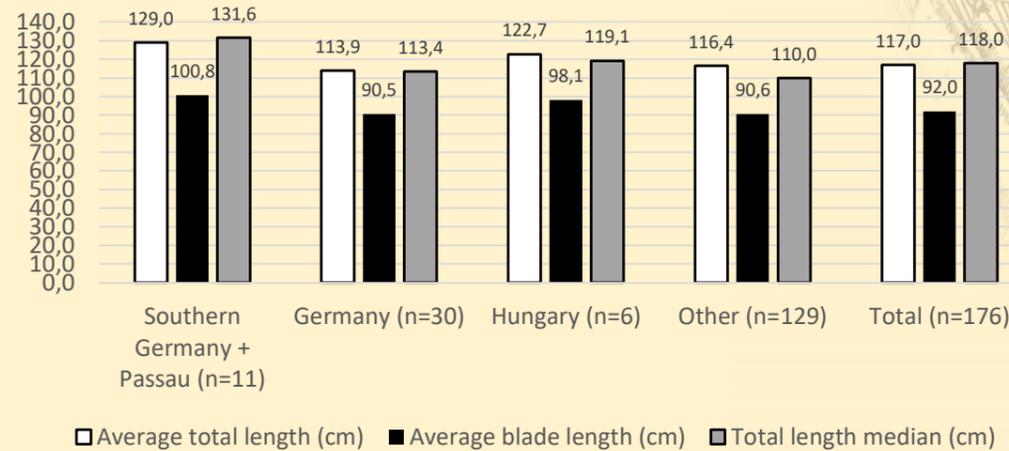
At the same time, south-German lands were also an arena of violent power struggles between the feudal aristocracy, land-owning clergy, lower knights, and burghers. It was also a frontier zone between the feudally-organised Empire and the revolutionary Swiss and Czech domains.

Hence, it seems an interesting coincidence that the very same region famous for its sword-makers was also the birth-place of German state-organised martial sport of longsword fencing in the 15th cent. (Jaquet, 2015).

Hypothesis | Southern Germany developed a local type of large sword („longsword”, *langes swert*) reflecting region's unique martial legacy which would later be adopted as the primary weapon by the very first imperially-recognised fencing fraternity in Germany, *Marxbrüder*, founded in Nürnberg (1487).

Oakeshott, E. (1997) | *The Sword in the Age of Chivalry*. Woolbridge.

Jaquet, D. (2015) | Fighting in the Fightschools late XVth, early XVIth century. *Acta Periodica Duellatorum*, 3(2), 47-66.



Data | A dataset was compiled which grouped published swords of the large types according to Oakeshott (XIIIa, XVIa, XX), totalling 176 completely-preserved specimens. Statistical analyses were performed on the dataset to check if the place of origin correlates with metric traits.

das swert ist recht zam eyn woge / |den ist eij swt gros vnd swer / |zo mus der klos auch dornoch swer syn / recht zam noch eyn° wogen...

(fols. 14r-15v, fight book HS3227a, Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nürnberg, ca. 1400)

Grans espées d'Allemagne (Oakeshott, 1997, p. 43)

Interpretation | Earliest *Fechtschulen* were recorded in Switzerland and Swabia in the 15th cent. and spread throughout the Empire in the 16th cent. Together with them travelled a type of blunt sword, currently known as *fechtswert*, used as a training analog for „the long sword” (*langes swert*). Preserved specimens sport total lengths much closer to those seen in south-German swords than in any other group (M=131.7, Me=130.5). This suggests tight cooperation between sword-makers and fight masters in the early stages of urban fencing development in Germany which resulted in creation of a fighting method centred around the local southern (Swabian?) „long sword”, subsequently popularised across the Empire along with the *fechtschulen*.

	Southern Germany (n=11)			Other regions/unknown (n=160)			U	p	r
	M	Me	SD	M	Me	SD			
Total length (cm)	129,38	132,90	10,16	117,76	117,25	11,66	358,00	<0,001	0,25
Blade length (cm)	100,81	104,25	7,41	91,93	91,75	8,85	308,00	<0,001	0,25

Methods & Results | Mann-Whitney's test results indicated that swords from Southern Germany were significantly longer than those from other regions or of unknown provenance taken together.