**The Medieval European Knight vs.
The Feudal Japanese Samurai?**

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From time to time it is interesting to ponder the outcome of an encounter between two of history's most formidable and highly skilled warriors: the Medieval European knight and the feudal Japanese samurai. The thought of "who would win" in an actual fight between these martial experts of such dissimilar methods is intriguing. Who would emerge victorious or who was historically the better fighter is a question occasionally raised, but it is really a moot question. In the case of comparing a knight to a samurai, each warrior used armor, weapons, and methods oriented towards the particular opponents of their day and age. Therefore, neither can be looked upon as being universally more effective under all conditions against all manner of opponents. In one sense, it is like asking who are better soldiers, jungle fighters or ski troops? It depends upon the situation and the environment. Still, it's an interesting encounter to consider. Having some small experience in the methods and weaponry of each, as well as a few cross-training opportunities, I offer my humble thoughts on the matter.

**The Scenario**

First of all, we must ask where is it these two lone warriors would meet? Under what circumstances? Since the conditions of this imaginary fight could play a major factor, it can be proposed that such an encounter would best take place on a flat, firm, open field with no cover and plenty of room to maneuver. Though each is an accomplished horseman, it would also be conducive to have the single-combat duel occur dismounted, alone, on foot and without use of missile weapons. Interestingly, the same climate and weather for each would be just about right.

There are a great many intangibles to consider here. The ability of each combatant to read or size up their opponent and the threat they posed would be an important consideration. Are both to be briefed on the nature of their opponent and his armaments? Or will the encounter be a blind one in which neither knows anything about their adversary? We might want to just assume that each of our ideal combatants has been informed to some degree regarding the other and therefore mentally prepared and composed.

Of course, if we are supposing a clash between two "typical warriors", we must also ask exactly what will be considered typical? The knights of circa 1100 and the samurai of circa 1200 were roughly evenly matched in equipment. But the same comparative warriors during the 1400's for instance, were quite dissimilar. Each of the two historical warriors in question did fight with equivalent technologies, under fairly similar climates and terrain, and for similar reasons. But it's difficult to think in terms of a "generic" Medieval knight or a "standard" samurai warrior. With respect to a European knight, it's not easy to choose what nationality, and what type of warrior from which portion of the overall Middle Ages. With the samurai though, we are dealing with a single, homogenous culture and one in which versions of their historical martial traditions have survived, in one form or another, fairly intact. Thus we have a somewhat better idea of the average samurai's training and ability through the centuries than compared to contemporary European warriors. Then again, it's sometimes argued that today's version of modern civilian *budo* ("war ways") is not equivalent to the historical military *bujutsu* ("war skills") of the samurai. At the same time, while we may not have an extant tradition of knightly martial arts any longer, we however do have volumes of actual training manuals from the era describing in technical detail for us just what their skills and methods at the time were all about.

As for the knight, are we assuming he will be a maile clad Norman with sword and kite shield from the year 1066? An English or French *chevalier* of 1350 in partial plate with arming sword ready for duel in the *champ clos*? Will he be an Italian *condottieri* from 1450 resplendent in full regalia? Or will he be a Teutonic knight of circa 1400 in a head-to-toe suit of articulated Gothic plate-armor and bastard sword? Will the samurai be wearing the older box-like *Muromachi* armor and armed with a *tachi* blade? Or will he wear the later close fitting *Kamakura* period *do-maru* armor and use the more familiar katana? For that matter, would the samurai be allowed to use both his long katana and his wakizashi short sword together? These are significant matters that get at the heart of why such a question as who would "win" or who is the "better" fighter (or even whose equipment was better) really is unanswerable.

Of course, for the sake of engaging discourse let us hypothesize just what would happen if these two comparable individuals, each highly trained and experienced in the respective fighting skills of their age, were to meet on the battlefield in single combat to the death (!). As an amusing historical diversion we can at least make an educated guess to what would possibly be, not the result, so much as some of the key decisive elements of such an encounter.

**The Warriors**

We can reasonably assume that the personal attributes such as individual strength, speed, stamina, age, health, and courage, are fairly consistent between such professional warriors. Assuming we can somehow control for these attributes, we could match combatants with some equality. It would not be unrealistic to believe on a whole that neither was likely decisively stronger or faster than the other. Although, we can't discount physiology as a factor and this reasonably would be an advantage for the European (16th century samurai armor examples are sized for men around 5'3"-5'5", while European armor from the same period and earlier would fit men ranging from just under 6' to about 6'5"). Although, other evidence suggests average European heights in the 16th century were just above 5 feet. Interestingly, while the European concept of physical fitness among knights by the 15th century emphasized the classical Greco-Roman youthful physique of a narrow waist and broad shoulders on a lean frame, the Japanese ideal was one of a more mature man having a wider base and broader middle –no doubt reflecting the natural ethnographic characteristics of each race, but also influencing the fighting techniques they employed. To what degree this occurred is worth contemplating.

We might also want to consider the forms of warfare each swordsman was experienced in and focused upon. The early samurai engaged in a ritualized style of warfare where individual champions might fight separate battlefield duels following established protocols, as opposed to a later mounted archery style of combat amidst pike formations of lesser foot soldiers. Their clan warfare was decidedly feudalistic yet with acquiring and honor and renown also being a goal. Skirmishing was not also uncommon and there were a few large scale military expeditions to Korea and surrounding islands. But most combat occurred in the environment of the home islands.

Whereas in contrast, knights emphasized mounted shock warfare with couched lances, and off the field a concern for chivalric and judicial duels as well as tournaments of all kinds. The Western way of war for knights was directed more at a traditional battle of annihilation as part of an overall campaign of conquest. Yet, individual challenges, whether to the death or not, were frequent. Knightly arms and armor were the result of a dynamic interaction of Latin, Celtic, and Germanic cultures as well as Turkish and Arabic influences. The environment knights fought under was extensive and diverse, ranging from the cold of Scandinavia to the deserts of the Middle East, from the plains of Western Europe to the deep forest of the East, and the swamps, fields, and mountains in between.

There is also no question that athleticism, physical fitness and conditioning were integral parts of knightly chivalric virtue as considerable literary and iconographic evidence from the period testifies. As a youth, Samurai were not generally trained for any longer length of time than were knights or in any greater diversity of accomplishments. Along with combat training and courtly graces, a knight was typically taught to dance, swim, read poetry, play chess, to hawk and to hunt with a team, as well as fight as a unit in battle. Yet, in tournament and joust he was also tutored to excel as an individual.

We cannot overlook the role that culture might play in this contest. Samurai warriors existed in a hierarchical and conformist culture that rewarded obedience and loyalty over individuality. Knights existed in a more complex and fluid society that emphasized self-expression with a long tradition of reliance on individual initiative. Both cultures had experience fighting against outsiders and foreigners: the Europeans encountered the Turks, Mongols, Saracens, and others; the Japanese encountered the Koreans, Chinese, Mongols, and others. Thus, in considering the historical record on cross-cultural collisions in different locations, would we want to give the edge to the more socially diverse Europeans on this?

On an individual basis then, we must consider what effect might be played by the quality of fatalism within the samurai code of bushido, or rather the resolute acceptance of death that motivated the fiercest samurai. But then, we cannot overlook the quality of piety and faith that could motivate a noble knight to great feats, or of the ideals of chivalry that he might uphold to the death. It's possible a Medieval European knight would have a certain disdain and scorn for his foreign, "pagan" adversary. Of course, the Japanese warrior's well-known attitude of proud invincibility and readiness to die for his lord could equally make him vulnerable to an unfamiliar foe. Contempt for life and contempt for a dangerous, unknown opponent you might underestimate can be a disastrous combination. While courage is important, fighting spirit alone is insufficient. There are surely intangibles here that we cannot be measured with any reliability. These and other non-quantifiable, psychological factors aside, we are left with weapons, armor, and training.

**The Armor**

Armor changes things in swordplay. If you've never trained in it, you can't imagine how it affects your movements and execution of even simple actions. It has been said that while Europeans designed their armor to defeat swords, the Japanese designed their swords to defeat armor. There is a certain truth to this, but it's a simplistic view. The better Japanese armor was constructed of small overlapping lacquered metal scales or plates tied together with silk cords in order to specifically resist the slicing cut of the katana. It allowed good freedom of movement while offering excellent protection. But if it got wet, the silk cords soaked up water and it became terribly heavy. Though the earliest styles of samurai armor were designed with large square plates more as a defense against arrows, the later forms were intended primarily to be used by and against similarly equipped swordsmen and to lessen the tremendous cutting capacity of their swords. It was durable, effective, and provided for ample movement. But how would it hold up to the stabs of a narrowly pointed knightly sword? This is an important question.

Medieval European armor was designed and shaped more to deflect strikes and absorb blunt force blows from lances and swords. A knight's armor varied from simple byrnies of fine riveted maile ("chainmaile") that could absorb slices and prevent cuts, to well-padded soft jackets, and metal coats-of-plates which were designed equally to protect from concussion weapons as penetrating thrusts. Maile armor existed in numerous styles and patterns but arguably reached its zenith in 15th century Western Europe, where closely-woven riveted links could resist any drawing slice as well as being proof against many slashes and thrusts from swords. Maile of such equivalent was not used in Japan.

Generally speaking, European plate armor was designed primarily as a defense against sword points and other bladed weapons, whereas, Japanese armor was primarily designed more as a defense against arrows and spears. Significantly, it frequently had open feet and hands and a design that permitted archery. The knight's encased armor by contrast was idealized more for mounted charge with lance and or for dismounted close-combat. Japanese heavy armor contemporary with the period of the High Middle Ages knight was not considerably lighter than European plate.

A complete suit of fully articulated rigid plate-armor, which has been described as unequaled in its ingenuity and strength, was nearly resistant to sword blows and required entirely different specialized weapons to effectively defeat it. With its tempered steel and careful curved fluting it was just invulnerable to sword cuts-even, it can be surmised, those of the exceptionally sharp katana (some high-ranking 16th century samurai lords actually owned pieces of contemporary European armor, gifts and purchases which they even wore into battle -they did not prize them merely as exotica). Plate-armor for foot combat was well-balanced, maneuverable, and sometimes even made of tempered steel. It was well-suited for fighting in, and is far from the awkward, lumbering cliché presented by Hollywood. Unless you've worn accurate well-made plate of this kind, it is impossible to really know how it influenced the way a knight would move.

Without the necessary weapons designed intentionally to face and defeat plate armor, any fighter armed with a sword alone would have difficulty (katana or not). Indeed, full European plate armor with maile might very well damage the keen edge on particularly fine katanas. After all, we should not forget that despite the katana's vaunted cutting ability, the samurai were able to successfully rely on their armors as defense against it. There is every reason to imagine knightly armor would have been just as, if not more, effective. If we therefore assume the armors to be more evenly matched, say maile and partial plate for the knight as used around 1250, things would get more interesting. However, the samurai did often carry an excellent thick dagger which would have been quite useful. Curiously, each warrior was highly skilled in using their respective armor-piercing daggers and with close-in grappling (something not generally known about actual knightly fencing skills).

**The Shield**

We must consider whether the knight in this hypothetical duel will be armed in the familiar shield and short sword style or will use only a single long-sword? If armed with a shield, we must ask what kind? Will the knight employ a center-gripped type with front umbo or one worn by *enarme* straps? Will the shield be the highly effective "kite" shape with its superb defense or one of the smaller, more maneuverable convex "heater" styles? How about a thick steel buckler (a fist-gripped hand shield)?

There's a reason virtually every culture developed hand-held shields for close-combat and why they continued to be used literally for thousands of years. They were very effective. In 15th century Europe, it was only the combination of the development of full plate armor and two-handed swords combined with heavy pole-arms and powerful missile weapons that finally reduced the long reigning value of the shield in warfare. The Medieval style of sword and shield fighting is distinctly different from the two-hand grip and quick full-arm slashing cuts of Kenjutsu. Medieval short swords are properly wielded with more of a throw of the arm and a twist of the hips while making passing steps forward or back. Strikes are thrown from behind the shield while it simultaneously guards, feints, deflects, or presses. A sword and shield is a great asset over a single sword alone. Fighting with sword and shield offers a well-rounded and strong defense that safely permits a wide range of both direct and combination attacks.

A sword can cut quite well from almost all angles around or underneath a shield. Indeed, since the shield side is so well guarded, the opponent is the one limited to attacking to only one side –the non-shield side. While a large shield does indeed close off a tremendous amount of targets to an attacker, it also limits, to a far smaller degree, freedom to attack by the shield user. As it comes out from behind their shield to strike, an attacker's weapon can be counter-timed and counter-cut –and this is indeed one tactic to employ against a shield user. Yet a shield user's attacks are not at all one sided. A shield can be used offensively in a number of ways and at very close range.

Katanas are powerful swords used with strong techniques, but thinking they could simply cleave through a stout Medieval shield is absurd. Even with a katana a shield cannot simply be sliced through. Medieval shields were fairly thick wood covered in leather and usually trimmed in metal. Not only that, they were highly maneuverable, making solid, shearing blows difficult. More likely, a blade would be momentarily stuck in the rim if it struck too forcefully. Unlike what is seen in the movies, or described in heroic literature, chopping into a shield's edge can temporarily cause the sword blade to wedge into the shield for just an instant and thereby be delayed in recovering or renewing an attack (and exposing the attacker's arms to a counter-cut). Shields without metal rims were even favored for this very reason.

Kenjutsu (Japanese swordsmanship), though consisting of very effective counter-cutting actions, also has no real indigenous provisions for fighting shields. Although a skilled warrior could certainly improvise some, those unfamiliar with the formidable effectiveness and versatility of a sword and shield combination will have a hard time. The shield was not used the way typically shown in movies, video games, stage-combat, or historical role-playing organizations such as the SCA. Fighting against a Medieval shield is not simply a matter of maneuvering around it or aiming blows elsewhere. If a warrior does not really know the shield, or hasn't faced a good shield fighter, then they cannot be expected to know how to ideally fight against it.

**The Samurai's Sword**

In major battles among each warrior, a suit of armor was typically worn and a sword wielded in one or two-hands. For the knight, the primary weapons had always been the long lance and the sword, and to a lesser degree the polaxe, dagger, and mace. The sword was always the foundational weapon of a Knight's fencing training. For the samurai however, the sword was but one of three major weapons along with the bow and arrow and the yari (thrusting spear). We should consider that, despite their later acquired reputation for swordsmanship, the samurai's primary weapon was, in fact, not the sword. The sword really did not even become a premier weapon of samurai culture and reach its cult status until the mid to late 17th century when the civil warring period ended. It is something of a myth that every individual Japanese samurai was himself an expert swordsman (no more true than every wild West cowboy was an expert gunfighter). After all, the expression so associated with bushido is "the Way of the horse and bow", not "the Way of the sword." Besides, unlike knightly chivalric tales and combat accounts, the majority of single combats between samurai described in feudal Japanese literature took place with daggers not swords. But for sake of discussion, let us assume such for both fighters in this imaginary case.

As a sword, the Japanese katana is unmatched in its sharpness and cutting power. Furthermore, it is particularly good at cutting against metal (–but no, it only cuts through other swords in movies and video games!). However, Medieval plate armor is well known for its resistance to cutting, and cutting at a moving target hidden by a shield or a greatsword is not easy. While the edge of a katana is very strong with a sharp cutting bevel, it is a thick wedge shape and still has to move aside material as it cuts. Though this is devastating on a draw slice against flesh and bone, it is much less effective against armors. Realizing this, several styles of Japanese swordsmanship devised specific techniques not to cut at armor, but to stab and thrust at the gaps and joints of it just as the Europeans did against their own plate armor. *The primary technique for fighting nearly any kind of armor with most any kind of sword is not to cut but to thrust at the gaps and joints.*

Except for major interaction in Korea and encounters against the Mongols, the katana developed in comparative isolation and is not quite the "ultimate sword" some of its ardent admirers occasionally build it up as. The katana's exceptionally hard edge was prone to chipping and needed frequent re-polishing and its blade could break or bend the same as any other sword might (...and no, they won't slice through cars or chop into concrete pillars either). It was not designed to take a great deal of abuse, and is not as resilient in flexibility nor intended to directly oppose soft or hard armors as some forms of Medieval swords had to be.

The katana's design was not set in stone. It was changed and altered over the centuries like any other sword, being slowly improved or adapted to the different needs and tastes of their users in terms of cross section, curvature, and length. In the 13th century for instance, their points had to be redesigned because they were prone to snapping against the metal reinforced "studded" leather armor (essentially equivalent to European brigandine or armor) of the Mongols and Chinese. By the 18th century their blades, no longer used earnestly against armor, tended to be made longer, lighter, and thinner for classroom practicing.

True, the Japanese feudal warrior did have their own form of greatsword in the long *no dachi* blades, these however were employed specifically by lower ranking foot-soldiers against horses (and presumably, on occasion against pikes). So, we cannot draw an equivalency between these and Medieval greatswords used in knightly fencing arts or to the true two-handers of 16th century European battlefields.

Over all the katana was a very well-rounded design: excellent at cutting and slicing, yet good at thrusting, and suitable for armored or unarmored fighting on foot or horseback, either one or two-handed. It was a carefully crafted and beautiful weapon reflecting generations of artistry and fearsome necessity, but it was still only a sword –a man-made tool of well-tempered and expertly polished metal. Though the details of manufacture differed, they were made by the same fundamental scientific processes of heating and hand-working metal by shaping and grinding as were other fine swords around the world throughout history. Regardless of how they are designed or constructed, all swords have the same goals and perform the same functions: that of guarding against attacks while delivering their own lethal blows.

**The Knight's Swords**

Having equipped our samurai, we must turn to the sword to be used by our knightly combatant. It must be understood there was such a great diversity of knightly swords and armor types. European swords were, in a sense, always specialized rather than generalized designs: there were ones for foot combat, ones for horseback, single and double-hand ones, straight and curved ones, ones for armored and for unarmored fighting, ones for tournaments, ones for civilian duelling, ones ideal just for thrusting or for cutting only, and ones only for training.

A knight's arming sword was typically a one-handed weapon originally (but not always) intended specifically for use with a shield. Their blades are wide and fairly thin and rigid, with chisel-like edges intentionally designed for cutting through maile armor and deep into flesh and bone with a quick, forceful blow. They were light, agile, and stiff, yet very flexible to withstand the trauma of use. They too varied with time from the wider, flatter kinds to those rigid, tapering, sharply pointed and well suited for stabbing both plate and laminated armors. The later wide-based and acutely pointed style of bastard sword was superb at thrusting. So, even though Japanese armor for the most part was made up of the same quality steel as went into their weapons, European blades would likely not encounter anything especially difficult with it that they didn't already face.

Although the Medieval sword and shield combination was fairly common, longer blades useable in two hands were in widespread use from about 1250 to roughly 1600 in Europe. When we talk about Medieval European longswords or war-swords (or even greatswords), we are not dealing with a single uniform style. There were wide, flat blades with parallel edges well suited to powerful cuts. Later, swords specifically designed for facing heavier armor had narrower, much more rigid blades of diamond or hexagonal cross-sections that tapered to hard, sharp points. They were used to whack and bash at armor before stabbing and thrusting into joints and gaps. They were also employed as short spears and even warhammers, yet were still capable of cutting at more lightly armored opponents.

The difference between these two European blade forms is significant and once more underscores the distinction between the manner of using a katana and a straight Medieval European sword. The tapering blade form has a different center of balance and is often a lighter blade. Its point of percussion is located farther down the blade and its fine point is capable of making quick, accurate, and strong thrusts. The wider style can make a somewhat greater variety of strikes and delivers more effective cuts overall. But the later is more agile and easier to guard and parry with. It can also more easily employ its versatile hilt in binding, trapping, and striking. Its proper techniques and style of use is rarely depicted with any accuracy in movies and staged performances. Almost never is the proper historical usage shown with its tighter movements, various thrusts, and infighting with the hilt.

The reach factor also cannot be overlooked. Although a skilled fighter can effectively use a short blade against a long blade or vice versa, and although neither longswords nor katanas had standardized lengths, overall the katana in general is significantly shorter than European two-handed swords and great-swords. A longer two-edged weapon does have advantages -especially if used by a taller man against a smaller with a shorter single-edge weapon. Surprisingly though, the weights between the two weapons are actually very similar and vary within the same degrees.

Surprisingly, the longsword or greatsword is arguably a more complex weapon that the katana. Though there were single-edge versions, it generally has two edges that can be used, as well as a versatile crossguard and pommel permitting a variety of specialized techniques. Another element to consider is that European swords could be used in "half-sword" techniques where the second hand literally grips around the blade itself to wield the weapon in bashing, deflecting, binding, and trapping in all manner of ways that virtually make it a pole-axe or short spear. This was especially effective in fighting against plate armor. We must ponder would this be unusual for the samurai or just very similar to fighting with a short staff? Either way, with its especially sharp edge, a katana is not employed quite like this.

Knightly blades could be excellent swords, but are often denigrated merely as crude hunks of iron while samurai swords are venerated and exalted sometimes to the point of absurdity by collectors and enthusiasts (something the Japanese themselves do not discourage). Bad films and poorly trained martial artists reinforce this myth. The bottom line is that Medieval swords were indeed well-made, light, agile fighting weapons equally capable of delivering dismembering cuts or cleaving deep into body cavities. They were far from the clumsy, heavy things they're often portrayed as in popular media and far, far more than a mere "club with edges." Interestingly, the weight of katanas compared to longswords is very close with each on average being less than 4 pounds.

**The Swordsmanship**

It can be difficult for those not familiar with the nature of a Medieval longsword or greatsword to understand its true manner of use, since the general public as well as martial artists of Asian styles are far more familiar with the katana's style. So, if instead of a shield and sword we match a knight with a longsword or greatsword against the katana armed samurai this could make a significant difference. But, we must not fall into the mistake of judging the Medieval longsword in terms of what we know about classical Japanese fencing. It is a mistake to think the straight, double-edged Medieval sword with cruciform-hilt is handled like a curved katana.

While there are certainly similarities and universal commonalties between the two styles of swordsmanship (such as in stances and cuts), there are also significant and fundamental differences. They each make the same basic seven or eight cuts and can thrust. But as a curved blade with an especially keen edge, the katana is superior in the potential use of quick, short slices. Yet, as a long, straight blade tapering to a keen point, the longsword is a better thruster. Additionally, its dual edges, enabled by a graspable pommel, allow it to attack along more lines than just eight standard cuts. Having two edges to work with can quickly permit back-edge and reverse cuts. This permits a far larger number of strikes from different angles. These back edge cuts make up a significant portion of how the straight longsword was wielded and have seldom been appreciated or correctly demonstrated.

The katana is wielded in a quick-flowing manner with a torque of the grip as well as a push of the hips. Pulling a curved blade in this way makes it slice as it shears. The footwork is more linear with short quick hopping (even shuffling) steps. In contrast to the slicing slash of a curved, single-edged, Japanese blade, Medieval swords were made for hacking, shearing cuts delivered primarily from the elbow and shoulder and employing wide passing steps. The actions are larger with more fast whirling actions as the two edges are employed, the pommel alone gripped, or the hands changed to different positions on the hilt (such as placement of the thumb on the flat of the blade or upon the lip of the cross). As a straight blade it strikes more with a point-of-percussion on the first 6-8 inches of blade down from the point as opposed to the curved katana which uses more of just the first few inches. If we bring into the equation the Medieval bastard-sword with compound-hilt of side-rings and bar-guards as well as the waisted or half-grip handle using various methods of holding, this could also be a significant factor. Such hilts allow for a variety of significant one or two-hand gripping options and gives superior tip control for thrusting and edge alignment.

When contrasting these two styles of sword we should probably also keep in mind a number of points. We classify each as longswords because both were blade weapons designed for the same purpose, killing. It is from this fact that they even have any similarities we can compare. Differences between them are result of the particularities of their functions and the ways they accomplish their goals. We should also keep in mind that Japanese swords and sword-arts reflect a living tradition, and one with a long standing interest group in the West promoting its study. While in contrast, our Medieval heritage has for decades had virtually nothing but Hollywood fantasy and role-players misrepresenting it.

From this, it can be seen that a direct comparison of a European sword to a Japanese one is not possible. They are "apples and oranges", so to speak. They're both fruit, both delicious, but you can do different, though very similar, things with each.

**Educated Guesses**

As our hypothetical fight ensued, any number of things might happen. In the course of striking at one another, a chance blow by either side could possibly end the fight. The katana may or may not be able to make a lethal or incapacitating cut (something difficult to do against plate armor, let alone a maile coat with a shield). But the knight, unfamiliar with the aggressive style or nature of his opponent, might throw out a strike that makes him vulnerable to a well-timed counter-attack. Of course, the samurai might also underestimate the power of the Medieval sword's cleaving blows and agile thrusts, even against his armor. The average European two-hand sword is longer in handle and blade than the average katana by several inches to as much as a foot or more and is not at all slow. It has a versatile hilt used for binding, trapping, and parrying. But the katana is also a fast weapon that cuts strongly and guards well and comes in a variety of lengths.

Despite its considerable reach though, there are numerous techniques for infighting using the long-sword's "half" guards and there are many techniques for striking with a shield. But then the katana is very good at close-in slices, which a straight blade cannot effectively do nearly as well. Of course, against good armor such actions can be negligible and fighting against shields was relatively unknown in Japan. So on one hand, the knight's fighting style –either of close-in sword and shield clashing, or large passing steps with long-reaching shearing cuts and plunging thrusts with a longsword or greatsword –might prove decisive. On the other, the intense, focused, counter-cutting style of the samurai with his razor-keen blade and own experience in armored fighting might prove decisive. Then again, maybe they'd kill one another?

It could be argued that the samurai by nature could have a tactical advantage in attitude and fortitude as a result of the psychological elements of his training and fighting methods. He is well- known to have integrated unarmed techniques into his repertoire as well as having a keen sense of an opponent's strengths and weaknesses. Still, much of this is intangible and subjective. Besides, although not widely appreciated, it is now well-documented (particularly from Medieval Italian and German fighting manuals) that European knights and men-at-arms fully integrated advanced grappling, wrestling, and disarming techniques into their fighting skills. They also studied considerably on tactics and the military "sciences." There is no evidence to the myth that knightly martial culture was any less sophisticated or highly develop than its Asian counterparts –its traditions and methods only fell out of use with the social and technological changes brought about by advances in firearms and cannon.

While it is known that the average samurai had a large inventory of unarmed fighting techniques at his disposal, these too would be unlikely to play a part against a shield wielding warrior. Some could suggest that the samurai was simply a better swordsman and more tenacious warrior and would likely out-fight his European counterpart. Others could say, "No way," and argue a skilled, superbly conditioned knight in full plate armor using either a sword and shield combination or a longsword would be near invulnerable and brutally overpowering. Still others could rightly point out that such over-generalized statements either way are un-provable conjecture. There are so many elements to address and practitioners who are experienced in one form of sword art or familiar with only one type of blade and not others will tend to favor what they're familiar with. It is rare to find individuals with a deep grasp of the attributes of each method and the arms involved.

Those who think the Medieval sword and shield was and is just a "wham-bam, whack-whack" fight are as greatly misinformed as those who imagine the katana was handled in some mysterious and secret manner and can cut through anything as if it were a light-saber. Those who presume the use of Medieval long-sword merely involved a brutish hacking are also under a tremendous delusion. It is a mystery how such beliefs can be held independently of those who today assiduously study and train in the subject as a true martial art, and spend years in practice with the actual weapons. Perhaps this ignorance is due to watching too many movies or the influence of fantasy-historical societies with their costumed role-playing.

Medieval and Renaissance sword fighting is often viewed by the uninformed as a wholly subjective matter either consisting of merely brute force and ferocity, or else incapable of reasoned analysis and discernable principles. Both are equally inaccurate. It is sad when leading modern fencing masters (experienced only with the dueling style of light foils, epees, and sabers) will issue naïve, unschooled statements about how Medieval swords "weighed 20 pounds" or could only be used for "clumsy" bashing and chopping. There is a definite prejudice that the modern refined fencing sport is "superior" to earlier, more brutal methods. Without going into the history of warfare, it's important to state it is a myth that personal combat in Europe was entirely crude, cumbersome, and never an art. It may perhaps be true that, only in a modern cultural context, it cannot compare to the surviving systematized traditions of feudal Japanese sword arts. However there is sufficient evidence surviving that when paired with contemporary research has given us a much better under-standing of the function and use of Medieval and Renaissance European arms and armors to confirm that they consisted of a highly effective and dynamic "Science of Defence."

**Keeping our hypothesis broad**

To be fair, while there is an extraordinary amount of nonsense and fantasy surrounding historical European swords and sword arts, there is a good deal of myth and ignorance on the true teachings of historical Japanese fencing. While there is today an active subculture promoting and preserving historical Japanese *bujutsu* or practicing modern *budo* and a great deal is also known about their practice, the equivalent can not *yet* be said for "lost" Medieval or Renaissance fighting arts. But, at least for the latter, there are dozens of surviving technical guides from the period describing the actual methods and techniques of knights and men-at-arms in great detail.

So, given the complexities of the question of what kind of knightly arms and armor from what period we could consider in a hypothetical knight-samurai encounter, it might be easier to just imagine an unarmored duel, sword against sword, without shields. Let's assume that our gladiatorial fantasy would be fought by two respective 15th centurywarriors with single swords alone. In this way we essentially have two fighting men both experienced in using a long sword as well as fighting unarmored.

This solves a lot of questions. But even here the issue is problematic. We still need to ask what kind of katana and what kind of longsword? What length of blade and handle? There was no standard generic model for either weapon, after all. So, assuming that we choose two weapons of comparative dimensions, we could make the knightly longsword of the cruciform-hilted, double-edged, slightly tapering variety.

Under this scenario, the katana would have a slight advantage, we could imagine. It's adept in unarmored cut and thrust fighting where the slightest wound from its keen edge could perhaps sever a hand or disabled an arm. It could also thrust well and might even threaten a pressing or slicing draw if close in. The half-swording techniques of the longsword would also not be nearly as viable here, though its hilt design might prove very useful. While the longsword would be menacing in its quick and long-reaching thrust, its stabbing attacks would perhaps not be that unfamiliar to a samurai use to facing spears. On the other hand, the knight would himself not be that unused at all to facing a curved single-edged blade, likely being skilled in or familiar with such ones as the falchion, badelaire, messer, long *Grossemesser*, and even Turkish scimitars. So again, the outcome of the match would come down to intangibles of personal attitude and individual prowess. As to the issue of the deadliness of thrusting wounds versus cutting ones, well, the historical and forensic evidence does favor the lethality of stabs--but only in contrast to lacerating flesh wounds not deep cleaving blows.

Considering the many issues brought out in describing the modern reconstruction of historical European martial arts, contrasting them with the practice of Asian fighting arts is a legitimate area of speculation. If we had a time machine and for depraved research wanted to go back, grab a hundred random Medieval knights and an equal number of samurai, match them one on one and throw them at each other, we might be able to come up some statistical averages (and some serious ethical problems, as well). In one sense we are talking about very different approaches to armed personal defense in this comparison. But, then again it's all the same when reduced to two armed combatants facing one another in antagonistic combat. There are many universal commonalities and shared fundamentals between both European and Japanese feudal warriors, but there were also significant technical and stylistic differences in their respective approaches. If not, their martial histories and their arms and armors would not have been so distinct.

**So what can we really know?**

As can be seen, there are just far too many variables and unknowns to make a judgment either way for such a theoretical question as who could defeat whom between knights and samurai. The fight cannot be reduced to any generalized statements about who had the overall historical advantage in skill or who had the superior array of arms and armor. In matters like this we certainly cannot not invoke mystical principles or endless "what ifs" and still engage in intelligent conjecture. All we can do is give an opinion of questionable value. Still, it is an intriguing comparison to ponder objectively.

There is so much unnecessary emotion encountered when fervent proponents of one or the other schools of swordsmanship speculates wildly on this topic. Amusingly, before reflexively reacting with a strong opinion one way or another when thinking about this subject, we might want to stop and ask ourselves to ponder the same imaginary contest between *two* samurai, for example, a *Muromachi* era versus say, a *Kamakura* one. Or we could do the same for the knight, posing the problem of who would defeat whom, an 11th century Flemish knight or a 14th century Burgundian one? By doing this simple mental exercise we can see the inherent problems of arguing one way or another over such imaginary fights.

Keeping in mind that live demonstrations speak louder than any words, hopefully this writing has cleared away some of the prejudice on behalf of both kenjutsu students and Medievalists. I personally give only limited credit to occasions of cross-sparring by modern practitioners of each respective art, as they seldom can meet under mutually agreeable or equally advantageous conditions for very long. Personally, while I admire the techniques and principles of kenjutsu as generally being highly effective (but not specifically its modern methods of instruction), I cannot disregard the proven efficacy of the sword and shield method. Nor can I ignore the formidable utility and versatility of an excellent European longsword or great sword when combined with superior European armor –and the difficulty it offers when posed against the single sword. But a fine katana can be a truly awesome sword. I have long been an admirer of its form and function. However, not all of them were superb weapons and typically the quality of European blades is erroneously denigrated and dismissed. Also, my own understanding of the German and Italian longsword and great-sword methods of fence from the late 14th to early 17th centuries gives be considerable doubt that a skilled knight of any era would encounter anything too unfamiliar in facing a samurai swordsman of any era.

There are many other factors that still could be raised when speculating on a hypothetical combat between a knight and a samurai. In the end though, my own answer to the question of who would win is that it is unanswerable...*but would be an awesome experiment*. Being a great warrior is a matter of individual ability and technical factors that are not exclusive to any one culture or time period. The better fighter wins a fight, and whoever does win is therefore considered the better fighter –or at least the luckier one.