

Tactical and Technical notes on the twelve principle guards of the longsword, from *Fior Battaglia* by Fiore dei Liberi.

It has been long established by scholars studying *Fior Battaglia* that the guards of the longsword form the beginning and end of every movement of the sword, and sometimes a mid-point too. Fiore does not discuss this in detail, but comparison with Viggiani's *Lo Schermo*, and many years of practical experiment, have established this theory beyond reasonable doubt. The closest Fiore comes to stating this outright is in the text describing the boar's tooth guard, in which a fendente (a descending blow) finishes in that position. That aside, there is a wealth of information available to the swordsman in Fiore's text regarding the guards, which can cover the tactical use of the position, the techniques that can be done from the position, and the inherent characteristics of the position, all of which the swordsman should know before committing himself to actually using the position in combat.

In this essay I will analyse and comment on Fiore's instructions regarding the twelve cardinal guards of the longsword, rendering them accessible to the modern student of Fiore's art. He has previously shown us one of the guards (*posta di donna*, the woman's guard) in four variations, and four other positions which may be used for particular actions, on pages 22r to 23r. They of course repay study, and may form the subject of a later paper, but we are justified in beginning our study of the longsword guards on page 23v because there he says: "Here begin the guards of the sword in two hands."

Regarding the technical commentary it is vital to remember the context in which this art was to be used: in a judicial combat the duel would begin with the challenger making a committed attack, and the challenged party making the first defence. So, it is crucial to know which positions to attack from and which positions to await the attack in.

1: Tutta porta di ferro (Whole iron door)

Here begin the guards of the sword in two hands. There are 12 guards. The first is the whole iron gate, that stands in great strength. And she is good to await every manual weapon, long and short, and for which it has a good sword, that is not too long. And she passes with a cover and goes to the close. She exchanges the thrust and places her own. She also beats the thrusts to the ground and always goes with a pass to the close and against all blows she makes a cover. And standing in this guard, one may easily make defense against anyone who bothers him.

Tactical: you can use this guard against any other hand-held weapon, provided you have a good sword which is not too long. A good sword I suppose is one that will not break, and it must not be too long because being out to the side, leaving you open, your defence relies on bringing it quickly into the centre. This is a good defensive position.

Technical: Once your opponent has attacked, cover by bringing your sword across through the centre, while passing forwards into close range. You may also do the exchange of thrust play from here, and the breaking of the thrust. You can defend against all blows, by covering and passing forwards.

2: Posta di donna (woman's guard)

This is the woman's guard, that can make all seven blows of the sword. And she can cover against all blows. And she breaks the other guards with the great blows she can make. And she is always quick to exchange a thrust. The foot which is in front advances off the line, and that which is behind passes across. And she makes the companion remain uncovered and can immediately strike him for certain.

Tactical: you can attack and defend well from this position. You can use the powerful strikes (or the threat of power) available from this position to force the defender to leave his guard ("breaking" his

guard).

Technical: as well as the covers, and the blows which are obviously available from here, you can also do the exchange of thrust play (see page 26v). The footwork described here is identical to that described on 26v.

This guard is shown in several different ways; in the longsword section it appears 6 times (five on the right, once on the left), and once more with the pollaxe (on the right). I assume the text here refers to all of them if held on the right.

3: Posta di fenestra (window guard)

This is the window guard, that is always quick with malice and deceit. And she is mistress of covers and strikes. And she argues with all the guards, both high and low. And she often goes from one guard to another to deceive the companion. She places great thrusts and knows to break and exchange, these plays she can do well.

Tactical: This position can be used to deceive your opponent, and you can strike or cover from here (so it is useful offensively and defensively). You can oppose all the guards from here. Cross reference with the text for bicorno (the tenth guard) suggests that fenestra can also taste the guards (i.e. test them, by drawing responses from them), and can avoid blows (presumably made as parries against the thrusts).

Technical: the best strike from here is the thrust, and you can do the exchange and the break from here (see 26v).

Note: whether she goes from left side to right side window guards and back again (the left side variant is shown in the Pisani Dossi) to deceive the companion, or whether she goes from this guard into some other position, is not stated. However, the text on page 36r regarding fenestra on the left with a pollax suggests the former: "Window position I am called on the left, a short arm is made from me to the right. We do not have stability. One and the other seek deception, you will believe I come with a fendente, and (but) I pass one foot back, and I change guard. There I was on the left, I enter into the right. And I quickly enter the plays that come after".

4: Posta di donna la sinistra (woman's guard on the left)

This is the woman's guard on the left, that is always quick to cover and strike. She makes great blows and breaks the thrust and beats it to the ground. And she enters into the close play because of her knowledge of crossing. These plays this guard can do well.

Tactical: this guard is offensive and defensive, as it can strike and cover.

Technical: you can strike strongly from here, and you can do the breaking of the thrust from here. There is no mention of the exchange: cross reference with the text regarding middle iron door with the spear (page 39r) suggests why: Fiore says: "...these guards on the right side cover and with the cover pass and place the thrust. And the guards on the left side cover and beat aside and strike with a blow, and cannot place the point so well." This is true whenever the opponent strikes from their right side (e.g. from whole iron door or woman on the right): as the strike comes in towards the defender's left side, they have to beat it all the way across to their right if their defence is starting on their left.

You can also enter into close play easily from here after the cover (because you can't so easily keep the point in presence during your defence, and instead beat the incoming sword aside, there is a moment when both swords are off to the side, and so closing in is both easy and tactically sound).

5: Posta longa (Long guard)

This is long guard, and it is full of deceit. She goes tasting the guards of the companion to deceive him. She can strike with the point, she knows that well, and she avoids the blows and can strike if she can do so, more than the other guards she uses deceit.

Tactical: this is not a guard you stand still in: you enter into this guard while coming forwards, to draw out your opponent's defence and counter it. If he goes to strike you, you can get the point in first; if he tries to beat your sword aside, you can avoid his blade and then strike.

Technical: this guard is the end point of the thrust, and you can use it for feints. Though Fiore doesn't say so here, it is also the mid-point of the fendente and the end point of the sottano blows.

6: Porta di ferro mezana (middle iron door)

This is the middle iron door, because she stands in the middle and is a strong guard but she wants a long sword. She throws strong thrusts and beats swords upwards with force and returns with a fendente to the head or the arms and returns to her guard. However she came to be called "door" because she is strong and a strong guard [is one which] is bad to break without danger and come to the close.

Tactical: only use this guard if your sword is as long as or longer than your opponent's. If your opponent is in this guard, be careful when closing in, as you may get hit trying it.

Technical: you can thrust well from here. If attacked, beat the sword upwards (with the false edge), clearing it, and come back down with a cut to the head or arms.

7: Posta breve (short guard)

This is short guard that wants a long sword and she is a malicious guard that does not have stability. And it always moves and sees if it can enter with a thrust and with a pass against the companion. And this guard is more appropriate in armour than without armour.

Tactical: When in armour, you can use this guard to move around your opponent looking for an opening. Keep in wide measure (so the attack must be made with the pass).

Technical: Only thrust from here, and do so with a pass.

8: Dente di cenghiaro (boar's tooth)

This is the boar's tooth because it takes its method of striking from the boar. It makes great underhand thrusts and finishes to the face, and it does not pass forward; it returns with fendente, for example to the arms. It also makes the thrust to the face and goes with the point high, in which striking with the point it advances the right foot quickly, and returns with a fendente to the head and to the arms, and returns to its guard, and immediately makes another thrust with an advance of the foot, and it defends well against close quarters.

Tactical: This is primarily a defensive guard, as you do not pass from here. When your opponent gets close enough, presumably as he attacks, you can strike. This is a good guard to use against someone who wants to close in; you can keep him away with your point.

Technical: Thrust from here, and follow the thrust with a fendente. After the initial exchange, thrust with a step forwards of the front foot. Strike him in the face with a thrust, and return with a fendente; in other words transition rapidly and repeatedly between this guard and longa. Fendente blows (mandritto, i.e. forehand) finish in this guard.

We should also take into account here the instruction at the end of the sword out of armour section, regarding this guard held against attackers who will come with a thrust, a cut or a thrown weapon. See below for further discussion.

9: Posta di coda longa (long tail guard)

This is the guard of the long tail that lies on the ground behind, she can place thrusts and in front she can cover and strike. And if she passes forwards and strikes a fendente, she enters into the close play without fail. This guard is good to wait in, as you can quickly enter into others.

Tactical: Primarily a defensive guard, but you can attack from here, usually with a thrust or a fendente. Defensively, you can cover and strike, with or without a pass forward. You can also close in when striking.

Technical: good for covers and strikes, particularly the thrust and the fendente mandritto; attack from here to come to close play.

10: Posta di Bichorno (two horned guard)

This is the guard of two horns that stands so closed that it always stands with the point in the middle of the line. And that which long guard can do, this can do. And I say the same of window guard and crown guard.

Tactical: this guard can go tasting the guards, and may be used deceptively (cf. *posta longa*). The point is in the centre line, but out of presence, so it can oppose the three guards that stand in the point, which are named as middle iron door, short guard and long guard on page 22r. It makes very strong thrusts, and because it is stable across the flat, and unstable in the plane of the edges, it is excellent for deception. The thrust can be made very quickly from for example woman's guard, and can either force through the parry, or slip it.

Technical: there has been much discussion about this guard because the grip appears very counter-intuitive, and many ingenious interpretations have been offered. Some researchers think the left hand is held upside down to the normal grip (so thumb towards the pommel, not the point), which may help with guiding the thrust at certain angles. However, I see it as simply dropping the point until the pommel hits the right forearm, creating a position that is stable in the plane of the flat. This will be the subject of a future, illustrated, article.

The final sentence of the text is perhaps ambiguous; does it mean that *bicorno* can do everything that *longa*, *fenestra* and *frontale* can do, or that *fenestra* and *frontale* can also act as *longa* does? My interpretation, which was confirmed by native Italian speaker and noted researcher Tom Leoni, is the latter; so we can add the uses of *longa* to our interpretation of *fenestra* and *frontale*. I don't think that Fiore means that *bicorno* can do everything that *fenestra*, *frontale* and *longa* do.

11. Posta frontale ditta corona (Frontal or coronet position called "crown")

This is the coronet guard, called by some masters the crown guard, that is good for crossing and for thrusts she is also good, that if the thrust comes high she crosses it, passing off the line. And if the thrust comes low again she passes off the line beating the thrust to the ground. Also she can alternatively, when the thrust comes, pass the (front) foot backwards and come with a fendente to the head and to the arms, and come to the boar's tooth guard, and immediately throw a thrust or two, advancing the foot, and come back with a fendente into her own guard.

Tactical: this guard is primarily used at the moment of crossing the sword, and so is usually transitory. Fiore also distinguishes here between what to do with high thrust and with low ones; high thrusts are parried with a pass off the line (note, NOT *ala traversa*: this may be an avoidance step, or it may also indicate the same direction of the pass "across". Both work, both are supportable from the text; it is possible that Fiore is deliberately ambiguous here, and intends that we should do either action depending on circumstances.); low thrusts are beaten to the ground (thus broken; we should refer to the other guards that break the thrust, and those that beat it to the ground, and the plays of the *rompere* as shown on page 26v). This implies that high thrusts should not be beaten to the ground (which makes sense). From this guard you are also in position to cut downwards; so from here you can drop the sword on your opponent if he attacks. The only place where this is shown is on page 26r, against the attack to the leg. It seems likely then that you would only execute

this pass back and cut without covering the incoming sword if the attack is low. For example, if the first thrust is a feint, and your opponent knows that *longa* can be used deceptively; as you go to cross he avoids your sword, and thrusts underneath; then pass back and strike down to his arms. Note also that that blow ends in *cenghiaro*, and the instructions here echo those of that guard. The "own guard" at the end is clearly *cenghiaro* here, as the end point of the *fendente*. Incidentally, "...for thrusts she is also good, that if the thrust comes high..." suggests that *frontale* is "good" for thrusts in that it is good for parrying them, not necessarily for striking with them.

Technical: use this guard to parry, followed by a pass off the line; the only blow named from here is the cut down.

12: *Posta di dente zenchiaro mezana* (middle boar's tooth guard)

This is the middle boar's tooth because there are two boar's teeth, one is whole and the other is middle, it is called middle because it is in the middle of the body, and that which the said tooth does, so does the middle tooth. And in the way that the boar strikes across, in that way one strikes with the sword, that always strikes with the sword across the sword of the companion. And she always throws thrusts and uncovers the companion and always destroys the hands and sometimes the head and the arms.

Tactical: the text here tells you that this version of *cenghiaro* works the same as the previous version. It is probably added here to make up the cardinal number of twelve guards. It does not appear in the *Pisani-Dossi*, which repeats *fenestra* (but on the left, which in the *Getty* is only mentioned on page 31, and shown with the *pollax* on page 36r). Here though it is mentioned that the rising blow from this guard can be aimed at the sword, as a cover, where in the previous version, the only targets mentioned are the head, arms and hands. So, you may parry from here (much as from the middle iron door). Given that the measure must be quite long for you to be safely in this guard, it is not surprising that the hands are the principle target ("always destroys the hands, sometimes the head and the arms").

Technical: *fendente* can finish here, and you can thrust at the opponent or strike his sword or his hands. Incidentally you can enter this guard by executing a *volta stabile* (see below) from the *tutta* (whole) variant.

Given the prominence the guards are afforded in the treatise, it is perhaps surprising that so little mention of them is made in the text regarding the plays. The only significant remark comes on page 31 recto, where we have three companions threatening one master. The accompanying paragraphs read:

These are three companions who want to strike this master, who waits for them with a sword in two hands. The first of these three wants to throw his sword at the master. The second wants to strike the said master with a cut or a thrust. The third wants to throw two lances that he has made ready as is shown here.

To which the master replies:

I await these three in this guard, thus: in the boar's tooth. And in other guards I could wait, thus: in the woman's guard on the left; also in the window guard on the left. In this way he who is in the boar's tooth defends himself. This way and this defence the said guards must do. Without fear I await them one by one; and I cannot fail. Neither cut nor thrust, nor any hand weapon that is thrown at me. The right foot that is in front I advance out of the line; and with the left foot I pass on the traverse of the weapon that comes towards me, striking it to the reverse side. And in this way I make my defence. Making the cover I immediately make the offense.

Note the similarity of this play to that of the first master of the sword, who holds the sword in one hand:

You are filthy bad fellows and of this art you know little. Act, for words have no place here. Come one by one who knows how to do it, and even if you were a hundred, I will ruin all of you by this guard that I chose, good and strong. I step the front foot a little off the line, and with the left I pass across. And in this pass I cross the sword beating it, and I find him uncovered and strike him for certain. And if a lance or a sword is thrown at me, I batter all of them aside as I said, passing off the line. Secondly I do the plays that follow me. With this guard that I take for the sword in one hand, I make my art, as you see in the following pages. (page 20r)

Clearly then this defence works for any guard held on the left, of which fenestra, donna and cenghiaro are the only ones named, though the guard of the sword in one hand is shown twice (pp 20r and 22r). This also gives some inkling of how the basic defence, covering by beating the sword away (upwards or to the side), then striking, is done.

On page 22r, Fiore shows us two versions of *posta di donna*, and uses this point to make some general remarks about using the guards:

"We are two guards one so made like the other, and one is the counter to the other. And each of the other guards in the art, one similar to the other is the counter, except for the guards that stand in the point: thus *posta longa* (long position), and *breve* (short) and *meza porta di ferro* (middle iron gate) because point against point the longer makes offense first. And what one can do the other can do. And each guard can do *volta stabile* (stable turn) and *meza volta* (half turn)."

This gives the scholar a basic guide to using the guards tactically: provided the point is not in presence (i.e. threatening your person directly), you can match your guard to your opponent's; if he is in the whole iron door, you can be too. This is because you can do anything that the opponent can do. But if the point is in line, beware matching his guard unless your sword is longer than his. Taking into account his definitions of the stable turn and the half turn, it is clear that in any guard you should be able to pass backwards and forwards, and turn your weight from one foot to the other. This gives a much broader scope to the uses of the guards than a more static interpretation would allow. When taken with the more specific instructions regarding the individual characteristics of the guards, we have a comprehensive, if basic, fencing system. All that remains is to determine how to execute the blows and covers mentioned, and to work out the counters to them, and we are prepared for almost any longsword eventuality.

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