



Crossing Swords

*An analysis of the crossings of the sword in Fior di
Battaglia*

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With thanks to Ilkka Hartikainen and Christopher Blakey, who between them sowed the seed that led to this article.

Chi me guardera facendo in me crose, de fatto d' armizare gli faro fama e vose.

Who makes of me a cross, I will make famous in the art of arms.

This is the sum of defence with the sword- make a cross with your sword against your opponent's and you will prevail (provided you do it right).

Fiore gives us four distinct groups of plays done sword against sword, which are:

- The Sword in One Hand
- The sword in Two Hands, Zogho Largo
- The Sword in Two Hands, Zogho Stretto
- The Sword in Armour

If we study them as examples of the crossings of the sword, an interesting pattern emerges.

Both the Pisani Dossi and the Getty Mss have the section of the sword in one hand first. In this section, the master crosses from the left side, under the incoming attack. The parry is made with the master's sword coming up and under the player's. Provided the parry is successful (i.e. the attack does not land), this can come to only two possible situations.

- the player's sword stays extended forward, over the master's sword. This is actually the most common result, for two reasons. Firstly, the player may reorient his attack to meet the sword as it rises (a very common, often unconscious, reaction to the anticipated contact), or secondly, he may be of equal structural stability, and so his descending sword is as stable as the master's ascending sword, and so the blades meet at a momentary impasse.
- the player's sword is beaten aside (so the master "wins" the cross)

If the first possibility occurs, the master will enter with the first play- using his left hand to control the player, and freeing his sword to strike.

If the parry beats aside the incoming attack, then there is an opening to strike on that same side- the master does this in the second play.

One of the principle advantages of covering from the left side is that the possible variations of the crossing is greatly reduced, and by using one hand, the master creates a situation in which it is even easier to predict the outcome of the cross, and hence prepare his follow-on technique. Pedagogically, this section is a simplified introduction to the crossings of the sword for the scholar- if the line is open, strike, if not, enter with the left hand and strike.

In the Morgan, the section ends here, and is immediately followed by the cover from the left side (*zenghiaro*, boar's tooth, is illustrated) with the sword in two hands, which comes at the end of the *zogho stretto* section in the Getty and Pisani Dossi.

The rest of this section gives further examples of what may occur after the cross, depending on how the player has attacked, and how he reacts after the parry. It is important to note at this point that all the plays can be done if the player does a) nothing, b) pulls back or c) pushes in, but they work most easily if the pattern established in the first three plays of *abrazare* after the remedy master is followed.¹

¹ Christopher Blakey of PHEMAS noted that the first three plays of *abrazare* after the remedy form a pattern that repeats throughout the treatise- a way of simplifying the opponent's reactions, and giving the scholar a set of general instructions: in brief, if he does not react in time to the remedy, hit him; if he pulls back, follow; if he pushes in, change line. This will be more fully explored in a forthcoming article by Mr. Blakey.

The eleven plays then look like this:

Play No.	Cross equal/ master wins	Player does nothing, pulls or pushes	Scholar's action:
1	Equal	Nothing	Enters and strikes
2	Wins	Nothing	Strikes
3	Equal	Pulls back	Enters and strikes
4	Equal	Pushes	Enters, wraps and strikes
5	Wins	Pulls back	Grabs pommel and disarms
6	Wins	Pushes	Pushes elbow and strikes
7	Wins	Pushes	Continues 6 th play: Pushes elbow and cuts throat
8	Wins (player thrusts)	Nothing or pulls back	Grabs elbow, strikes
9	Wins (player thrusts)	Nothing or pushes in	Continues 8 th play: pushes elbow, takedown
10	Wins (blow to head)	Nothing or pulls back	Grabs elbow, strikes
11	Wins or loses (in armour)	Any	Strikes with half sword

What we have then is a microcosm of the system as a whole: the apparent repetitions of plays start to make sense. 1st and 3rd look almost identical; 8th and 10th likewise. 11th seems to make no sense as the player is apparently just standing there- the point is, as the text says, no matter whether he has cut or thrust, I cover and strike in this particular way. It's an instruction to use half sword when in armour (to direct the point into the gaps).

In summary, this section could be paraphrased thus:

When someone strikes, parry while stepping offline (to the right)

If his sword remains in the way, use your left hand to open him up and strike. If he pulls back, keep a hand on him to follow him; if he pushes forward, wrap him up.

If the sword is beaten aside, strike. If he pulls away, grab his pommel and disarm- if he pushes in, the same extension of the left hand will find his elbow. Push it to turn him and strike.

If he thrusts, you're bound to win the cross, so the swords end up on the ground to the right. So grab his elbow and strike.

If he hits really hard, drive his sword down and grab the elbow and strike.

If he's in armour, use halfsword.

When we get to the sword held in two hands, covering from the right, there is a much greater variety in the possible crossings that stem from a successful parry. Fiore arranges them into two sections: *zogho largo*, and *zogho stretto*. This refers to the position of your opponent's sword after the parry- is it wide, or close?

There has been much discussion over the past ten years regarding what these terms really mean- and therefore how best to translate and interpret them. Some of this confusion stems from a not entirely coincidental wordplay. *Zogho largo*, wide play, is fairly straightforward. *Zogho stretto*, close play, is both wrestling-type close quarters technique, and a situation where your opponent's sword is so close to you after the parry that it is too dangerous to

leave the bind to hit him- so you have to enter in, keeping the contact between the swords (in Fiore's terms, "pass with the cover and come to the close play" 28 verso et.al.). This is also exactly how the terms are used in the Bolognese sources, some 100+ years later. Guards that have the point forward, threatening the opponent, are *stretto* (as in *porta di ferro stretta*); guards that have the point offline are *largo* (as in *porta di ferro larga*). When the swords meet (such as when an attack is parried), if the points are in presence, it is considered to be *giocco stretto* (which is also the term used to describe the dagger and wrestling plays), if the points are wide, it is *giocco largo*. (*Zogho* and *giocco* are the same word- the former is Fiore's preferred spellin, the latter is a later and more standard Italian spelling.)²

Within the first section, we have two separate remedy masters. The first crosses at the point of the sword. If this were done with the points low (so threatening the opposing swordsman), the players would be out of measure, so this is only a relevant crossing if the points are high. The instruction is very simple. If you have won the cross (so the direct line to his head is open), hit him (second play). If it isn't, then it doesn't matter whether he has opened your line or you are both stuck in the middle- just hit him on the other side of his sword (first play). Note that this is exactly the same order as in the sword in one hand section- first comes the more common, equal cross, then comes the more unusual completely successful cross. This is because coming to the crossing at the tip of the sword as shown only happens if the attacker strikes from his right, and as the defender parries from his right, the attacker redirects his blade to meet the rising parry. This will usually result in the direct line of the riposte being closed.

² I am indebted to Ilkka Hartikainen, whose research into the Bolognese brought this up, and who first coined the idea that the crossings in *Fior di Battaglia* are defined according to the position of the swords, not the players.

If the attack is successfully parried, both points may end up wide- the attackers blade has been beaten aside, and the defender's blade has followed it. This happens when the cross is made at the middle of the sword (and the attacker has not redirected to intercept it). From this crossing (first play) come three plays- strike directly over the arms and thrust to the chest (2nd); grab his blade with the left hand and strike to the head (this stops him from getting away) (3rd); or grab his blade and strike to the shoulder while kicking him in the knee (the player has to be quite close for this to work) (4th). So again a pattern of player a) does nothing, b) pulls back, c) pushes in seems to fit.

Next we have the peasant's blow where, as you come to the crossing, he blows through your parry, and his point remains wide.³ You hit him on the other side (now there's a surprise) (5th). If he pulls back, you follow him (6th). If he pushed in, he would just get hit as your sword comes around.

The seventh play is an interesting outlier- the player cuts to the scholar's leg. This could happen before or after the cross (a strict following of Fiore's introduction would suggest after the cross). In any case, you slip your foot back and strike the head- his sword is wide, and yours is not.

It is only in the Morgan manuscript that the three possible crossing points of the sword are explicitly compared (*punta di spada*, *meza spada*, *tutta spada*), but the 8th play appears to show a crossing at the *tutta spada* (near the hilt). The correct action is apparently to kick the player in the nuts (I'm sure he deserves it). We might summarise this as "if the swords are crossed near the hilt, enter from underneath". It belongs in the *zogho largo* because the points are very wide.

³ This happens naturally if a properly structured *frontale* meets a full-force *mandritto fendente* aimed at the middle of the blade. The hands stay where they are, the blade whips round. If *frontale* meets the same blow aimed at the head, the blow glances off the blade, as the defender's edge finds the attacker's flat.

Next is the exchange of thrust (8th play)- when parrying the thrust, it is sometimes possible to do so while keeping your point in line- his point goes wide, yours does not. If you miss, you reach in with your left hand and grab his handle, while passing forwards (almost the identical play to the follow on from the crossing of the sword at *zogho stretto*). This is because your sword is close to him, but you can't strike. So you enter (10th play).

If you parry his thrust but your point goes wide, you have broken his thrust- so drive it to the ground (11th play) and immediately "*vene ale strette*" (go to the close [plays])- i.e. simply bring your sword up (and cut him in the throat, returning with a *fendente* to the head or arms). If he pulls away, you get the arm (12th play). If he stays close, you can reach his head (13th) if he parries, hook your handle over his forearm and enter (14th).

The 15th play follows on from the breaking of the thrust, *or can be done when crossed with the player*, push the elbow and strike him as he turns. The implication is that the points are wide, but he has choked off the inside line, leaving the outside line open. Fiore doesn't say so, but it looks like the crossing may have been done from the left (at the end of the section he states that we have had remedies and counters from both *mandritto* and *roverso* sides). In any case, it continues (into the 16th play) just like the 6th play of the sword in one hand.

The final plays of the *zogho largo* (17th and 18th) are the *punta falsa* and its counter- the scholar attacks with a *mezano* to the head, and as the player covers, the scholar strikes his blade lightly, and turns his sword to the other side, entering with half-sword to place the thrust. (Note how this section ends with half-sword, and the admonition that this play works better in armour). In terms of the crossing, the scholar sets up a cross where the contact is with the point of his sword against the middle of the player's, with both points wide, thus is able to turn to the other side of the player's sword (which he wouldn't have time to do if both are crossed at the middle). It is therefore a special case of a wide-play crossing. The

counter requires that the player is not forced into too wide a parry, and as the scholar turns his sword to the other side, the counter-remedy master turns his point into the scholar's face, while stepping offline and coming to half-sword.

At the close play, the cross is only made at the middle. Both swords are threateningly close to the opponent- if either leaves the bind, he is likely to be struck immediately. The oft-repeated instruction is that when crossed in the close play, pass with the cover- which is why the defender's right foot is forward despite him having covered from the right. The text explicitly states that either fencer can do any of the plays that follow- in other words, the cross has not conveyed an advantage to either. The three plays after the cross (which is the first play) can again be done according to the player's actions- if there is time, the scholar can reach over and grab the handle of the player's sword (2nd play). If the player pulls back and closes the line, the scholar enters with a pass, grabs the arm with his left hand, and pommel strikes. If the player pushes against the bind, the scholar can easily yield and pommel strike (no need to use the left hand as the player's sword is busy). From here you can also go to the fifth play and cut the throat.

The sixth play seems like a throwback to the first of the sword in one hand- we are on the inside of the player. This would happen if he is weaker in the bind than we are. So we use the left hand to control his sword, and strike, or wrap his sword (7th play), which tends to happen if he pulls back. This feels like a follow-on from the second play- we are on the same side there too.

The 8th play, where we shove our hilt under his hands and force him open, then wrap both his arms (9th play), shows us what to do if the bind is truly equal- he is not open on the inside, nor has he forced through to the outside. So we literally take control of the middle.

This sequence continues into the ninth play- when, after wrapping his arms, you have finished hitting him (why stop there?) you throw your sword to his neck and throw him to the ground. The image

here is very like that for the 5th play; we just get there a different way.

The 11th play is particularly interesting, as Fiore states that it follows from a cover from the *roverso* side, but doesn't show the crossing in the Getty- to see it we must look to the Pisani Dossi (carta 23B upper left). Of course, if the cover had blown through the attack, we would be in wide play, so we can assume that the player has oriented himself to control the sword as it rises. And that is exactly what we see in the image. The continuation of the play in the Pisani Dossi (the 14th play of the section, but as it follows a new master, the second play of the second master of *zogho stretto*) is a wrap very like that which we saw in the 9th play (and will again in the 13th); but here he simply pushes the pommel of the player's sword to send his point wide, and thrusts from below.

The 12th play is again a special case; "if someone parries from the right side, grab his sword and hit him"- exactly what we did in the 3rd play of the 2nd master of *zogho largo*- so why is this in the *stretto* section? My guess is that for the attacker to pull this off (as opposed to the defender), he must a) ensure that the parry doesn't throw his point too wide, b) given that his attack has been parried, the player's sword is closer to him than his is to the player and so a cross much like that shown at the beginning of this section has occurred. Also, to be close enough to grab, the defender's sword must have come pretty close to the attacker- which is not necessarily to be expected (the attacker's sword must obviously come close to the defender if the attack is a real threat). The 13th play is again a matter of what to do when you're done hitting him after the 12th play- drop your sword (maybe it's blunted from hitting him so hard?) and use his to throw him to the ground.

In the 14th, we return to the idea of using the left arm against his hands, and wrapping him up- Fiore explicitly refers to the third play of the first master of dagger here. How we get there is again just a variation on the 2nd play, where we grab the handle with our left

hand. The 15th and 16th plays are counter-remedies to the 14th, and most interestingly, one goes down to the left, and other goes up to the right- exactly patterning the 2nd and 3rd plays of the *abrazare*. Which one you do depends on how the player is applying the *ligadura*- if you manage to break it early, you end up in the first one; if you're late for the first one, you can still do the second. The 17th play shows what happens when your left hand, going in to control the sword, goes between his hands (so you end up on the right wrist). With the same turn to the left, you send his point wide, and can hit him at your leisure.

The 18th play is an oddity- at least at first. The text states that it happens when one goes with a *mezano* blow against a *roverso mezano*, covering and passing, and throwing one's sword to the neck of the player. This begs the question, why would anyone want to attack with a *roverso mezano*? It's a pretty unnatural and unusual strike, especially as Fiore expressly states (on page 23 recto) that it is done with the false edge. Looking back through the treatise, we find only one place where the *roverso mezano* is used- immediately following a breaking of the thrust. So, I do this play as a counter to the breaking of the thrust- after the break, as the player cuts for the throat, throw a true edge *mandritto mezano* to his neck, while passing forwards, and you get exactly the illustration. We might think that this play belongs in the *largo* section, but given that it is stated that the breaking of the thrust leads to the *stretto*, it makes sense to put the counter here. At the moment the swords cross after the break, both are indeed in presence.

The last five plays (19-23) show four disarmings. Interestingly, they appear in the *zogho largo* section of the Morgan (which omits the breaking of the thrust altogether). This only makes sense if we consider what happens to the points of the swords as the disarmings are made. In contrast to all the other plays in this section, *both* swords are pushed wide. The scholar's sword point is thrown back over his shoulder in the first three, and he even drops it to perform

the last of them (how wide can you get?). The upper, middle and lower disarms all show the same cross- after the initial cover, presumably that of the master of the *zogho stretto* crossing, the scholar binds the player's sword with the handle of his own weapon, and reaches over, between, or under the player's hands to perform the disarm.

An alternative way to enter these plays is with a wide-play crossing from the left (i.e. a successful parry, for instance from boar's tooth); this may be the preferred entry in the Morgan.

Finally, the last master waits in boar's tooth, or the left side woman's guard or window guard, to make the crossing from the left with the sword in two hands. There are no plays illustrated from this position- we cannot complain as the likely outcomes have all been covered.

The final crossing of sword against sword on foot is, unsurprisingly given how the sword in one hand and *zogho largo* sections both ended, done in armour, with a half-sword grip. It is a cover from the left, done from the true cross guard. This is not an accident of the language- it's the true cross because it makes a true cross with the player's sword.

The distinction between wide and close play is not especially relevant when both combatants are in armour; nothing short of a full-force blow from a pollax will do much good in the wide play, so it's all about getting in close, and finding the gaps in the armour. So Fiore doesn't distinguish between the close or wide play in armour- if it must be categorised, then all sword plays in armour belong in the *zogho stretto*.

To sum up, then: when the fight opens, either one fencer is struck (by the attack, or by a counterattack such as sniping the hands), or, more commonly, the swords cross. When that happens, you must observe two things only:

- Is his sword close enough to threaten me? If yes, enter without leaving the bind (close play). If no, you may leave the bind to strike (wide play).
- Is the direct line open? If yes, strike in that line (or use your left hand to come to grips in that line). If no, strike (with blade or pommel, with the assistance of a left-hand grip if needed) on the other side.

This holds true for every play of sword against sword in the entire system, and indeed in any system.