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Finding Bicornio

Bicornio, the two-horned guard, has proved the most elusive of Fiore's poste to pin down. There have been several interpretations to receive general currency in the Fiorean community over the last five years or so, but none have proved completely satisfying. This article is the story of the process by which I arrived at what I believe is the correct interpretation, and serves as a general illustration of the process of interpreting these sources.

Step one: the text

Questa e posta di bicornio che sta cossi serada che sempre sta cum la punta por mezzo de la strada. E quello che po fare posta longa po fare questa. E similmente dico de posta di fenestra e di posta frontale

This has been variously translated by scholars, all of which have stumbled over "*cossi serada che*", not least because *serada* (closed) is no longer in Italian usage (it remains in Spanish). I and many others also missed the construction "*cossi...che*", which simply means "so...that".

Price in *Fiore dei Liberi's Sword in Two Hands* (p.146), for instance, leaves "*cossi serada*" untranslated:

"This is *posta di bicornio*, which stands *cossi serada*, that is, it stands with the point in the middle of the line. And that which the *posta longa* can do, this can do. And similarly therefore as *posta di fenestra* and *posta frontale*".

Leaving aside the grammatical oddness of the last sentence, the translator has clearly not understood the construction *cossi... che*, nor the term *serada*, and had to twist the rest of the sentence into some sort of sense.

The Exiles translation, posted on their website in November 2007, reads "This is the *Posta do Bicornio* that "stays much public" that always stands with the point in the middle of the road. And that which *Posta Longa* can do this can do. And similarly I say this of *Posta di Fenestra* and of *Posta Frontale*."

"That stays much public" makes no sense at all. They have since upgraded the translation.

My own effort read "This is the guard of two horns that stands closed like this, and always stands with the point in the middle of the line. And that which long position can do, this can do. And I say the same of window guard and crown guard." I was not sure whether that meant that *bicornio* could do what *longa*, *fenestra* and *frontale* do, or that *fenestra* and *frontale* could also do what *longa* does. I sent the passage with a

query to Tom Leoni (in February 2007), who while confirming my impression that it meant the latter, took the time to correct my “stands closed like this”, a head-slapping moment when I recalled what I had learned on about the fourth week of my basic Italian course back in school. My current translation now reads:

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.

The text of the Novati version reads:

Posta de bicornio io me faco chiamar

Si io ho falsitate asay non men domiadar

Which means: I call myself the two horned guard/ I have such deception that none can beat me. Interesting, but doesn't really add anything.

As we know that bicornio can do what longa does, the text for longa is also required:

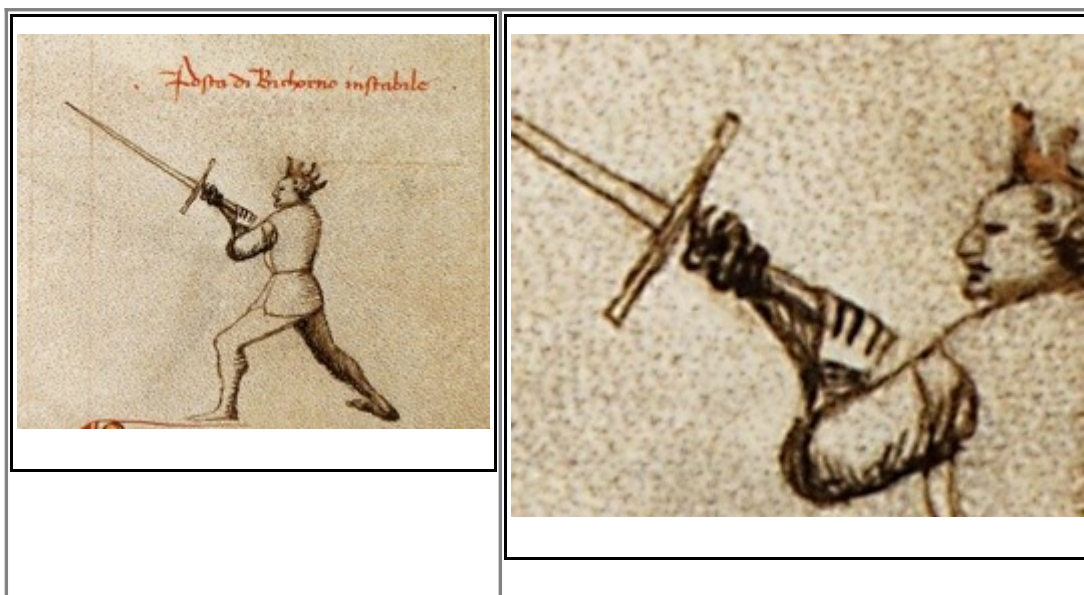
Posta longa si e questa piena di falsita. Ella va tastando le guardie se lo compagno po inganare. Se ella po ferir de punta la lo sa ben far e gli colpi la schiva e po fieri s'ela lo po fare. Piu che le altre guardie le falsita sa usare.

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 can do that well, and she avoids the blows and can strike if she can do so. More than the other guards she uses deceit.

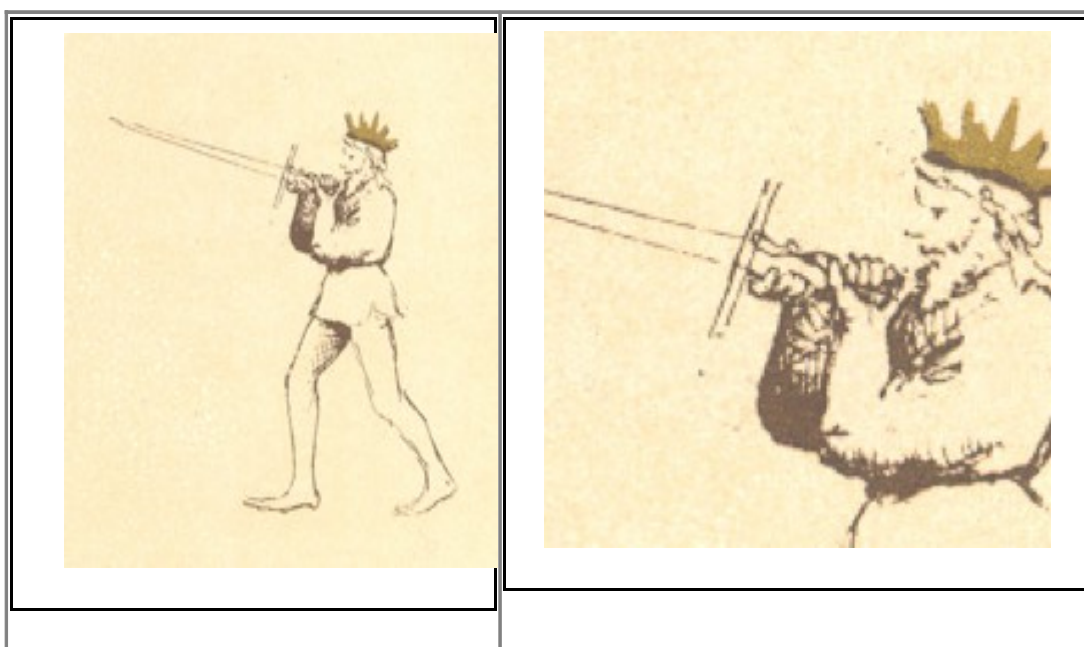
The name of the guard is not necessarily any indication of its function. Of the twelve guards shown, longa and breve (long and short) are obviously descriptive, and Fiore states that dente di zengiaro is named after the wild boar because it uses the same way of striking. None of the other guards are so described, and it is more likely that the names are a culturally specific mnemonic. In some recent internet discussion Kel Rekuta suggested convincingly that the guard is named after a small portable anvil used by armourers, but that is neither definitively established nor terribly useful in determining the guard's function.

Step two: the pictures

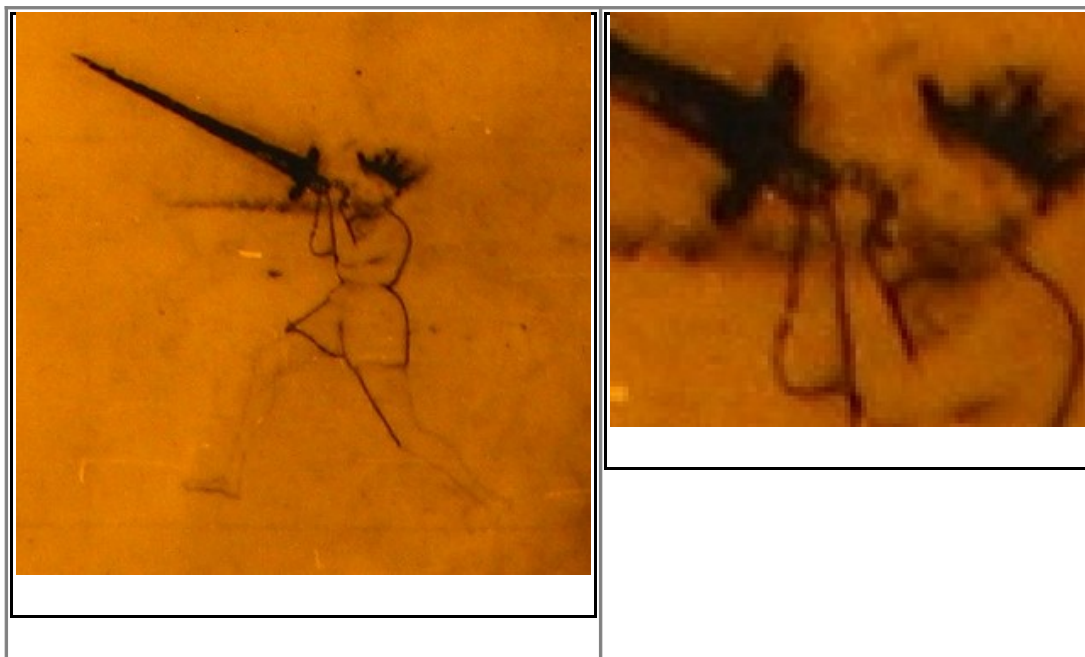
There are three illustrations of this guard, all of which have odd-looking hand positions. The Getty version has the left hand above the right forearm, and possibly turned so that the thumb is towards the chest, the back of the hand to the viewer.



The Novati clearly shows the left hand with the thumb towards the blade, but the right hand oddly open, with the thumb on the handle in line with the false edge of the blade.



The Morgan is regrettably damaged, to the point that the face of the person depicted is lost, and it looks as though parts of the image, including the hands, have been redrawn. This needs to be verified by examining the original, which I have not yet been able to do. As it is, the right hand is practically invisible, and the left is so crudely drawn that no definitive statement can be made about its position.



It has been established beyond reasonable doubt (by Sean Hayes for one, though not in print) that in art of this period, blades are never shown edge-on, and there is a convention in medieval art of rotating objects in the horizontal plane into the vertical to make them visible (a chess board is the best known example). This has lead most researchers to hold this guard flat-up, and some to also rotate the left hand on the grip.

While this kind of license is academically supportable, it is something of an open door to reading whatever we like into the illustrations. I have found that the vast majority of illustrations in these manuscripts are reliable, accurate depictions of what the illustrated position should look like. There are artistic mistakes, of course (the anatomically impossible lock shown in the bottom left illustration on page 16v springs to mind), but they are few and far between. So these ways of holding the guard are all very well, but do not accord with the pictures very closely, and make no particular sense of the text. Regarding the position of the left hand, the reversed position is unlikely because a) it is not clearly illustrated anywhere b) the usual position is clearly illustrated for this guard in the Novati and c) Fiore had previously illustrated five alternatives to the usual way of holding the sword on pages 24 recto and verso, yet not included there this strange reversal. That notwithstanding, I used both versions for some time, for want of something better. But I was never completely sold on any of them, mostly because I found I never used any of them in free fencing, and had to construct special drills for them to make sense in.

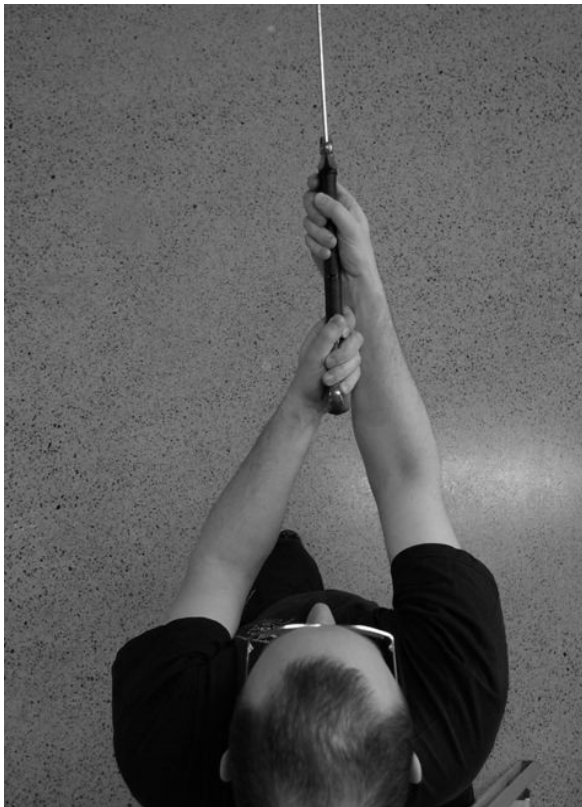
Having puzzled over this for some years, and having finally worked out what the text actually meant, it just took one final piece of the puzzle to slot into place. At WMAW 2006 in Dallas, Texas, I met Thomas Stoeppler, whose main area of research is the Liechtenauer system, who has a background in Chinese internal martial arts, and is also a licensed physiotherapist. I was intrigued by some of what he was teaching, and so invited him to teach a seminar in Helsinki. He came in August 2007, and focused

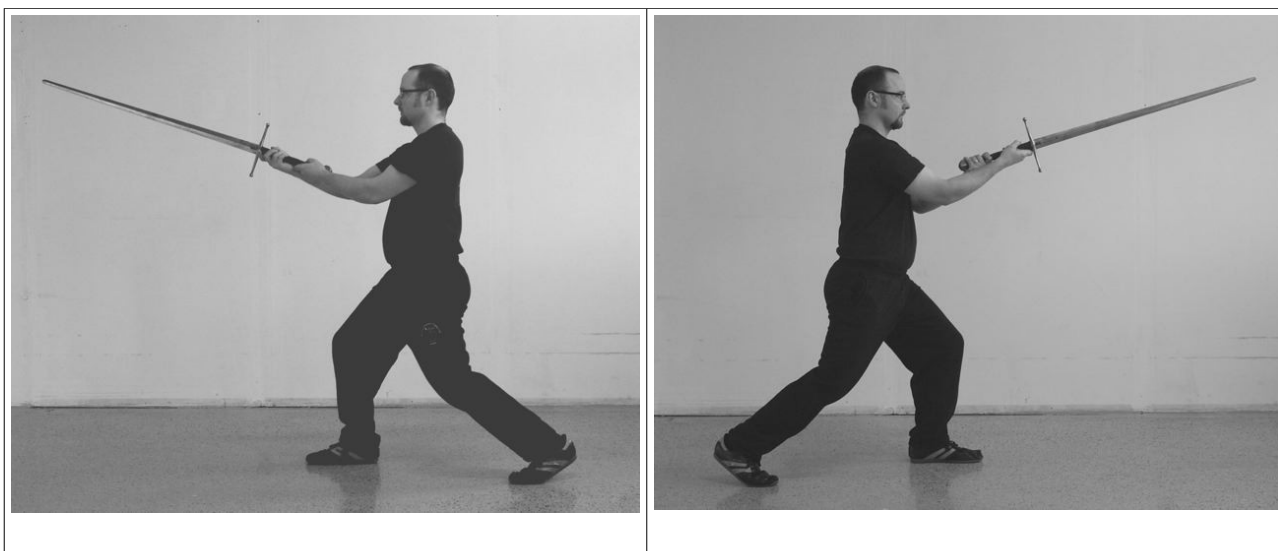
on his mechanical interpretation of Liechtenauer's longsword material, in particular Paulus Kal (recently edited by Christian Tobler), and the so-called Dobringer manuscript.

As a physiotherapist he is better qualified than most to analyse the structural aspects of movement and positions, which his other martial training has also emphasised. While he was demonstrating and explaining the langort position as illustrated in Kal, he pointed out that the contact between the wrists created a closed kinematic chain, which was self-supporting and hence very stable. A light went off above my head and I dashed across the salle to my copy of the Getty (ed. Malipiero). As I did so, a senior student looked at me and said "bicorno?". And there it was. Simple, absolutely supported by both text and pictures, and making abundant sense.

Bicorno found...

So, my interpretation of bicorno is held with the back of the left hand in contact with the inside of the right wrist, and the sword turned slightly in the right hand so that the thumb is on top, trued edge down.





The easiest way to get into the position is to start in *posta di donna*, and allow the sword point to drop forward, with the sword rotating around its centre of gravity. This is the single most efficient possible way to get the point in line from *donna* (and inspired by Stoeppler's explanation of arriving in *langort* from *Vom Tag*)

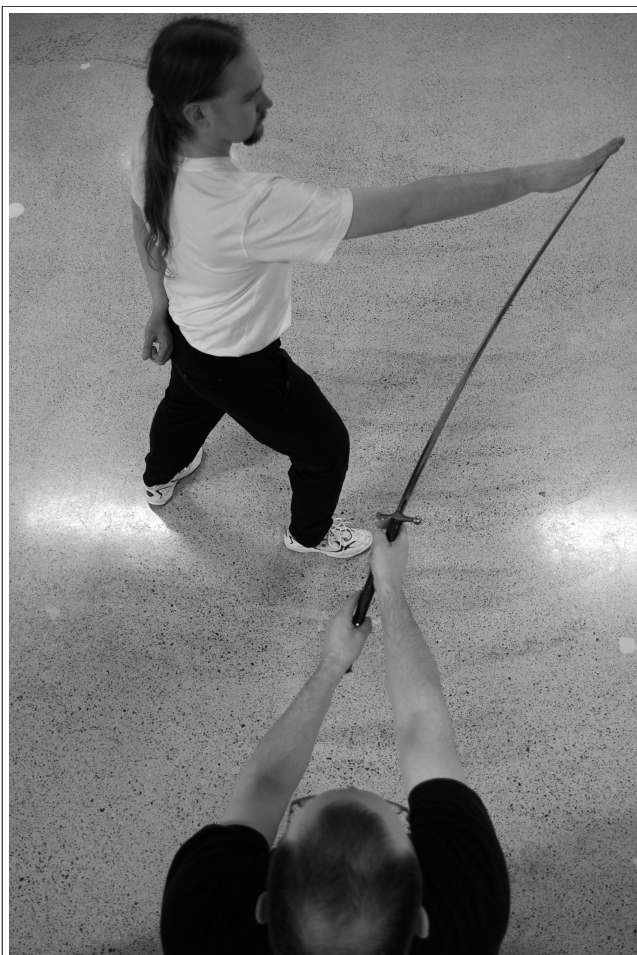
If we now examine the stability of this guard, and contrast it to that of *longa* (cf *The Duellist's Companion* pp 85-7 for details of the testing process) we see the following:

	Longa	Bicorno
True Edge	Stable	Unstable
False Edge	Stable	Unstable
Flat inside (left)	Unstable	Stable
Flat outside (right)	Unstable	Stable
Point	Stable	Stable

(Stable here means that the body can mechanically support pressure against that part of the sword.)

This reversal of the stability properties of the positions comes from the alignment of the blade relative to the forearm: in *longa*, the edges are in line with the bones of the forearm; because of the change of grip, in *bicorno* the flats, especially the inside flat, are supported by the forearm.

This reversal is so extreme that if we apply enough force to bend the sword by ninety degrees, the swordsman's structure is unaffected. Contrast with what happens to the swordsman's hands when *longa* is pressured in the same way:



This means, of course, that due to the closing up of the space between the hands, the thrust becomes much harder to parry: you have to literally bend the sword out of the line. This makes bicorno not only devastatingly fast to thrust with, but very hard to parry; literally, “the point stays in the middle of the line.”

The instability of the edges also means that they are very mobile; any attempt to break the thrust naturally creates a yielding action in the blade, and makes this position very good to feint with: as longa avoids blows (avoiding a blow is clearly the same thing as avoiding a parry; the blow to the blade is the *rebattere*, a beating parry common to this system), so does bicorno; start in donna, flick the point out to bicorno, as he parries, dip your point around his blade, and walk your thrust in.

Likewise, if we find ourselves crossed at the sword, either at the punta di spada or the meza spada, for example after parrying a fendente attack with frontale, the mechanically fastest possible riposte is to drop your point in his face, which is a) very fast b) hard to see and c) mechanically stable in the plane of the flat and so very hard to parry.

We have shown then the mechanical and tactical advantages of this position, and how the new interpretation follows the picture exactly, and makes sense of the text. The

last test of the likelihood of this interpretation being accurate was teaching it. Most fundamental techniques are simple and therefore easily taught. In seminars held in the USA, Sweden and Finland over the last few months, mixed-level classes were able to effectively enter and use this position with about 5-10 minutes of instruction. So, it is easy to do, fits the system perfectly, follows the picture and text precisely, and in every case against someone standing on guard prepared for an attack, I have landed the first strike with it, and struck again with the feint. So it thrusts well, and deceives well.

What more can anyone ask for?

Helsinki, June 2008