

# “THERE IS BUT ONE ART OF THE SWORD...”

Gregory Mele and Christian Tobler - July 2010

*I am the sword and I am lethal against any weapon; lances, axes and dagger are worthless against me. I can become extended or withdrawn; when I get near the opponent I can enter into close play, perform disarms and abrazare. My art is to turn and to bind; I am expert in defense and offense, and always strive to finish in those. Come against me and feel the pain. I am Royal, enforce justice, propagate goodness and destroy evil. See in me the Cross, and I will give you fame and a name in the Art of Arms.*

*Fiore dei Liberi, il Fior di Battaglia (1409)*

The goal of this class is to demystify, and in some cases debunk, some cherished internet memes, the differences separating the art of the sword in two hands as laid out by the northern Italian master Fiore dei Liberi and his counterpart north of the Alps, Johannes Liechtenauer. Much electronic ink has been spilled on specific technical differences to the detriment of understanding and recognizing common tactics and approaches to the fight.

Some of these misconceptions may ultimately trace to the very different ways in which we have received our primary data about both traditions. Fiore's work is presented for a patron, and stresses an exposition of concepts via text accompanying his description of his guards. Conversely, the major glosses of Liechtenauer's verse are light on initial exposition, choosing instead to reveal concepts through a large collection of techniques. This difference can lead to the perception that Fiore's battery of techniques is simply 'smaller' than Liechtenauer's - a misconception easily dismissed through examination of Fiore's conceptual writing and the many variations on technique implied therein.

We will examine five groups of techniques here, with an eye towards seeing not only how similar they really are, but also how and, perhaps more importantly, *why* they differ.

## I - ZORNHAU AND THE MASTERS OF ZOGHO LARGO

Both masters include methods for dealing with varying degrees of pressure, should the swords cross. Three major scenarios can be delineated: A) you win the bind and are strong, B) both are equally strong in the bind, and C) he wins the bind with some strength. Much of what separates Fiore and Liechtenauer in this series of plays relates to differing preferences for measure, *not* vastly different tactical outlooks. This difference in controlling measure comes not in the play, but in the initial crossing, wherein the dei Liberi school will step into the attack with their *left* foot forward, whereas the

Liechtenauer tradition will step away from the attack with a pass forward of their *right*. This relates to the two methods of defeating a cut: move into it before it is in full force, or step out and along its arc, so that it has crossed its point of maximum extension and is actually entering its recovery phase as you encounter it.

To be clear, both masters uses both solutions. However, it is this preference for a “default” position that affects the specifics of their plays. By moving into the attack with his left foot, dei Liberi is seizing the centerline while keeping his sword hand refused, denying his opponent an easy grapple with his left hand. Conversely, Liechtenauer’s pass forward allows him to more easily wind up and down along the sword blade without fighting his own structure, and creates a pattern of pass right – change lines – pass left, that is arguably more instinctual than stepping into the line of attack. Both solutions have their virtues and exploitable weaknesses, and both are designed to answer the same set of problems.

#### *A – When You Win the Bind:*

If you are the stronger one in a bind, simply exploit your ownership of the centerline. The only thing separating the two masters here is which leg leads, Fiore with the left foot, moved slightly towards the left (*into* the attack), and Liechtenauer with the right, having passed forward with it (*away* from the attack). But in each case you strike into his attack: if you are the stronger in the bind, thrust to him.

#### ***Fiore – 1st Master of Zogho Largo***

*Here begins the play of two handed sword, in wide play. This Master has crossed his sword at the point with this opponent, and says: when I am crossed at the points, I quickly turn my sword and strike the opponent on the other side with a fendente to the head and arms; or I thrust to his face, as you will see next.*

*I have given you a thrust to the face, as the Master before me had said.*

#### ***Liechtenauer – Zornhau-Ort***

*When you come to him in the Zufechten and he strikes from his right side above to your head, then strike also from your right side from above without any parrying wrathfully onto his sword at the same time as him. Then if he is soft at the sword, shoot the point straight in forward and long, and thrust to his face or breast. Thus plant upon him.*

#### *B – When the Bind is Neutral:*

In a neutral bind, you must do something to prevent his sword from striking you as you continue to attack him. Fiore accounts for his sword by seizing it by the weak; Liechtenauer winds against the weak, simultaneously locking out the enemy’s sword

and placing the point. Both cases use the same principle: the opponent can offer no resistance when pressure is applied to his weak. And again, it is primarily measure that dictates the response: with the left leg leading, the blade grab, using the left hand, is practical; with the closer measure arising from Liechtenauer's initial action, the winding makes better mechanical sense.

### ***Fiore - Debole Grab***

*My Master (whom we saw earlier) taught me that when I am crossed at middle of the sword, I should step forward immediately and grasp his blade as shown, so that I can strike him with a cut or thrust.*

### ***Liechtenauer - Winden to Ochs***

*Note: this is when you strike in with the Wrath Stroke and he parries it and remains in the parrying strongly on the sword: then remain also strong against him with your sword on his, and go up with your arms, and wind on his sword with your hilt in front of your head, and thrust above to his face.*

### ***C - When He is Strong in the Bind:***

Many options are provided throughout both systems for dealing with strong parries. We'll explore two sets of equivalent techniques. Each stresses the concept of *not* attempting to oppose strength with strength.

The 1<sup>st</sup> option uses the idea of attacking *behind* his parry.

### ***Fiore - Face or Arm Cut***

*Here we are crossed at the middle of the sword, in wide play. As soon as the cross is made, I glide with my blade over his hands, and if I pass with the right foot out of line, I can push a thrust to the opponent's chest, as you will see directly.*

Contrast this with Filippo Vadi, who wields a long sword and advises:

*The half time is only a turn  
of the wrist, quick and immediate to strike.  
It can seldom fail  
when it's done with good measure;  
and if you note my writing,  
he who lacks practice does not leave well the bind:  
often the turning blow]  
breaks the other's brain with its good edge.  
Of all the Art this is the jewel,  
because at once it strikes and parries.*

This takes us almost directly to the teachings of Liechtenauer:

### ***Liechtenauer – Duplieren***

*Note: when he strikes to you from his right shoulder, then strike also at the same time from your right with strength above to his head. If he parries and remains strong on the sword, then instantly go up with your arms and push your pommel under your right arm with your left hand, and strike with the long edge with crossed arms behind his sword blade to his head.*

The 2<sup>nd</sup> option uses the concept of yielding to his strength to attack on a new line on the other side of his sword. The masters are very close in their solutions here:

### ***Fiore – Colpo di Villano***

*This action, called the peasant's strike, is performed as follows. Wait for the peasant to launch his cut with his sword. As you wait, stand in a narrow stance with your left foot forward. When he attacks, step with your left foot offline to the opponent's right, then perform an oblique pass with your right foot, catching his cut with the middle of your sword. Let his sword glide to the ground, and immediately respond with a fendente to the head or arms, or with a thrust to the chest as you will see next. This play is also effective using a sword against an axe as well as against a heavy or light staff.*

### ***Liechtenauer – Abnehmen***

*If he then becomes aware of the point and parries strongly by pressing your sword to the side, then slash upwards with your sword on his blade, up and off of his sword, and strike to his other side again on his sword blade to the head. This is called the "taking away above"*

## **II – KRUMPHAU AND ROMPERE DI PUNTA**

These two techniques leverage the advantage of striking hard into an attacker's blade, binding it aside and thereby clearing the centerline. Only subtle variances distinguish Fiore's and Liechtenauer's application of this idea. Liechtenauer maintains his standard diagonal pass, which is what gives the Krumphau its "crooked" form. Dei Liberi uses a mezza volta, a turn of his body, so that his center of mass actually faces into the attack. Again, while the techniques are not identical, to achieve a similar goal of using a step offline and an attack against the opponent's hands or weapon to drive his attack into the earth, opening him to an immediate riposte.

### ***Fiore – Rompere di Punta***

*In this play, which is called breaking the thrust, the student has his arms high, makes a fendente while stepping and passing offline and throws the opponent's*

*thrust sideways, almost at mid-blade, to beat it to the ground. Then, he immediately goes to the close play.*

*The student before me has beaten the opponent's sword to the ground, and I am completing his play. After beating his sword to the ground, I forcefully place my right foot on his sword, which will either break it or prevent it from doing me any harm. But it's not enough: as soon as I have done that, I strike him under his beard or in the neck with my false edge, and immediately come back with a fendente to his arms or hands, as shown.*

### **Liechtenauer – Krumphau**

The Krumphau, or “Crooked Stroke”, can counter an Oberhau by binding the blade hard, then coming back for a riposte:

*If you want to weaken a master, then while he strikes an Oberhau from his right side strike a Krumphau with crossed hands against his sword.*

*[...] When you strike him with the Krumphau against his sword, from the sword (vom Schwert) immediately strike upwards against his head with the short edge. Or after the Krumphau wind the short edge at his sword and thrust him into the breast.*

## **III – THE SHORTENED POINT**

### **Fiore – Punta Corta/ Punta Falsa**

*This play is called false thrust or short point. Here's how it's done. I feint a strong mezzano to the opponent's head. As he forms his parry, I lightly strike his blade, then immediately circle my sword to the other side, grasping it almost at mid-blade with my left hand. I can then place a quick thrust to his throat or neck. This play is better in armor than without.*

### **Liechtenauer – Technique against a Parry**

If your Oberhau is parried, you can strike around, but come into the half-sword grip to attack your opponent at close range:

*If you strike an Oberhau from the right and if you want to end the fight, then note: when he parries, immediately strike around (i.e., to the other side) with the Zwerchhau. Grab the blade of your sword with the left hand and thrust into his face. Or attack one of the other openings you can reach best.*

## IV - ABSETZEN AND SCAMBIAR DI PUNTA

The idea of quickly closing the line with one's sword while placing the point against the opponent is common to both systems of fence. The only difference lies in the preferred path taken by the sword.

### *Fiore - Scambiar di Punta*

*This play, called exchange of thrusts, is done this way. As the opponent attacks you with a thrust, step out of line with your front foot, then pass obliquely also offline, crossing his sword with your arms while thrusting in his face or chest with your point high, as shown.*

### *Liechtenauer - Absetzen in Pflug*

*Note: do the setting off thus: when you come to him in the Zuffechten and he positions himself against you as if he intends to thrust, then set your left foot forward and stand in the guard Pflug [Plow] on your right side and provide an opening on your left side. If he thrusts to that opening, then wind with the sword to your left side against his thrust with the short edge on his sword and set it aside. And with this, step with your right foot and thrust instantly to his face or breast.*

## V - KRON AND FRONTALE

Kron, the "Crown" of the Liechtenauer tradition, and "Frontale", or "Frontal" guard of Fiore's and Vadi's writings, are high forward guards held in the centerline. Whereas the other parries are strikes, containing either a counterattack, the threat of counterattack, or the ability to strongly displace the blow, these guards are meant to "stop" an attack in its tracks, allowing the swordsman to rush in, grab the blade, kick, etc. They are used to answer attacks safely, but must be used judiciously, since they are relatively static.

### *Fiore - Frontale*

*This is the Posta Frontale, which some masters call the Guard of the Crown. This is good for crossing the opponent's sword, as well as against thrusts. Against a high thrust, cross the opponent's blade while passing out of line. Against a low thrust, also pass out of line, beating the thrust to the ground. You can also operate this way: against a thrust, pass back while delivering a fendente to the head and arms down to Dente di Cinghiaro, then immediately follow with one or two thrusts with the extension of the front foot, and finish with a fendente that gets you back in that guard.*

## **Liechtenauer – Kron**

The Crown is used to answer a high attack directed close to the centerline. In particular, it is mentioned as the only described defense against a *Scheitelhau* (“Scalp Stroke”). The defender begins in Alber (“Fool’s guard”) and lifts his weapon high to pick up the attack. It’s important to not remain in this position, but close to grapple or effect some other technique:

*When you strike a parting strike and he displaces with the hilt high above his head, then this displacement is called the Crown (Kron). From there one can rush in.*

## **VI – CONCLUSION**

*First, you should note and know that there is only one art of the sword, and this art was developed many hundreds of years ago. And this art is the foundation and the core of any fencing art and Master Liechtenauer understood and practiced it in its completeness. It is not the case that he invented this art – as mentioned before – but he has travelled many lands, willing to learn and experience the same real and true art.*

Anonymous, Ms. 3227a (c.1389)

*This whole art and expertise Fiore acquired from several German and Italian Masters, in many provinces and towns, with much labor and expense. And by the grace of God, Fiore learned so much from so many Masters and students, and in the courts of such great lords, princes, dukes and marquises, counts, knights and squires, that he was himself often asked teach. Several lords, knights and squires came to me, Fiore, for instruction on the art of arms and of prolonged combat in the lists; this art I taught to many Italians and Germans who had to fight in the lists, as well as to countless others who did not.*

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