

# The Spear of Fiore dei Liberi

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*With a short spear I await you in this way,  
I will invite you [to attack] with spears short and long.<sup>1</sup>*  
Filippo Vadi, *De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi* (c.1482)

The historical fencing treatises teach two different forms of combat for the spear or *lanza*. The “Common Method” utilized two to three principle guards, was used with any length weapon, but favors longer spears and fighting in formation. The “Dueling Method” was optimized for using the spear in single combat, usually within the context of the armoured duel or feat of arms. As such, the thrusts are usually made with the support of the entire body, and the spear is often used like a staff to strike, hook or throw the opponent if the initial thrust fails. In the *Flower of Battle*, Maestro Fiore dei Liberi shows the latter method.

Note that although the “common” guards appear several times in dei Liberi’s treatise, he never refers to them by name. They are simply the starting guards used by the Player and the two ending positions of the Scholar’s basic defense from the left and the right sides, respectively. It is unknown if they ever had proper names, but a clue to what they *might* have been called can be found in his section on armoured swordsmanship, where the same two guards are respectively called *posta breve serpentina* (short serpent) and *serpentina lo soprano* (high serpent).

## Of Guards

*We are three masters in guard with our lances and we agree to take these [guards] from the sword.<sup>2</sup>*

Whereas the Common Method is specifically designed to always stand with the point in-line to threaten an immediate straight thrust, the guards of the Dueling Method generally stand with the point off-line. In Fiore dei Liberi’s system for the *lanza*, only the *poste di finestra* on either side actually stand with their points on line, but all of the guards use the same basic defense:

*All the guards that stand off the line with the short lance and the short sword are sufficient to await every long hand weapon. And these [guards] from the right side cover and with the cover pass and place a thrust. And the [same] guards from the left side cover and beat aside and strike with a blow, and cannot thus place the point as well.<sup>3</sup>*

Fiore’s system has six *poste*, or guards, three from each side. He depicts his right-hand guards with a right hand lead and his left-hand guards with a left-hand lead.

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<sup>1</sup> Filippo Vadi, *De Arte Gladiatoria*, fol. 28r. Translation mine.

<sup>2</sup> Getty Ms. Ludwig XV.13, Carta 41. Translation mine.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

**Tutta Porta di Ferro** (Full Iron Gate).

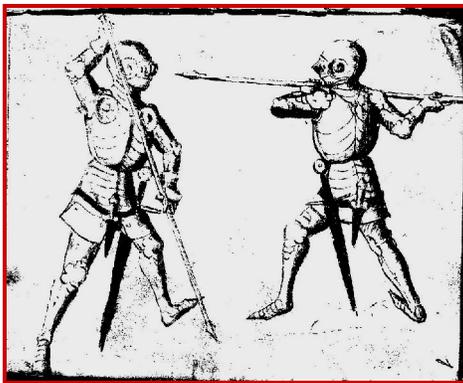


*I am the first, standing in "tutta porta di ferro", to quickly beat the enemy's spear. Stepping with the right foot on the side out of the way, and moving transversely, I'll beat your spear on the left. So moving and beating, and then stepping while thrusting, it's a thing that cannot fail!<sup>4</sup>*

In this first guard on the right, the spearman stands in a forward stance, left leg forward, back straight, and the right heel raised. The lanza is carried almost vertically, with the spearhead up and the lower haft angled slightly forward and across the center line. The hands are carried high on the haft, the right hand nearest the spearhead, with the thumbs forward.

A variation of *tutta porta di ferro* is shown in *Codex Vindobonensis 11093* that has the spear head placed on the ground, and the heel carried high in the right

hand. Reversing the position of the spear head makes the stance very similar to Vadi's variation of makes the *posta* play more like the guards from the left, as we will see in the individual techniques, below. It also allows the combatant to lower his rear hand and instantly be ready to cast the spear, a common way to initiate the judicial duel.



Variations on a Theme: *Tutta porta di ferro* held with the point-down, from *Codex Vindobonensis* and Vadi

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. All *postes* translations are mine.

### **Porta di Ferro Mezzana** (Middle Iron Gate)

*I'm set with my spear in middle iron gate, ready to deflect and strike. He who wants may attack with half spear or staff. Deflecting with a step I don't lack a counterstrike; as in all the offline guards with the short spear and with the short sword, it suffices to wait for the (attack of) longer hand-held weapon. And those on the right side cover with a covering step and strike with the point. And the left side guards cover and beat and strike with a blow, and you cannot use well the point.*

In the second *posta*, the spearman again stands left leg forward, this time with the weight notably on the forward leg. The torso is somewhat squared. The hands grasp the spear with one hand in the middle and one a quarter of the way forward from the heel



Vadi's variation of *Porta di Ferro Mezzana*

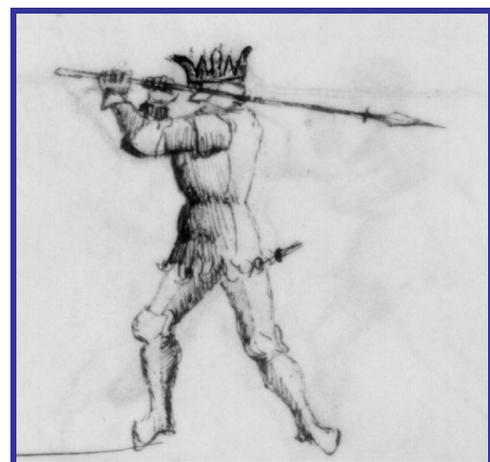
in a thumbs forward grip. The *lanza* is angled down so that the head is pointed down and to the right, and the shaft is carried under the left arm.

Filippo Vadi shows a variant of this guard that has the right foot forward.

### **Posta di Finestra la Destraza** (Right Window)

*I am the noble stance of right window, ever ready to deflect and strike, and of the long spear I don't much care. As with the sword, I wait the long spear in this stance, which deflects and hinders any thrust. I can thrust and deflect stepping sideways, in a play which we'll finish.*

The third and final guard on the right is identical to the corresponding longsword *posta*. The left leg is forward, the left shoulder is rotated forward, and the body weight is shifted onto the rear (right) leg. The spearman's head looks over his left shoulder and his hands are carried well to the rear on the spear. The point of the *lanza* is angled slightly down and across the body, so that it points at the adversary's right side.



### **Dente di Zenghiaro** (Boar's Tooth)

*We are three guards on the left side, and the first is Boar's Tooth. Those on the right side do the same that we do on the left side. We move out of the way by moving aside the forward foot. And we strike with left side thrusts. And all the right or left side techniques end in deflecting the thrust, as no other attack is possible with the spear.*

The first *posta* on the left is a mirror of *tutta porta di ferro*, except the weight is placed more heavily on the rear (left) foot. The *lanza* is carried almost vertically, spearhead up, heel angled slightly forward.



### **Vera Croce** (True Cross)



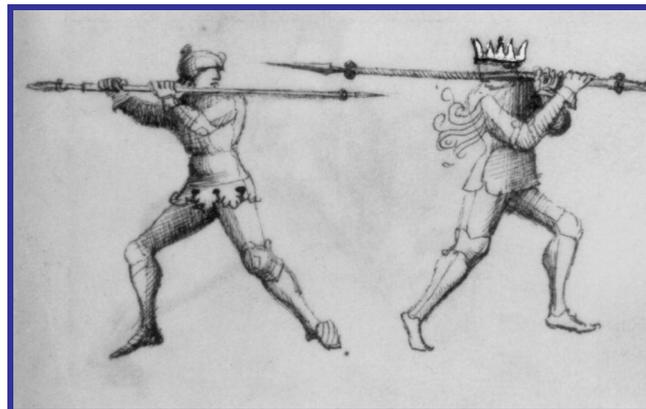
*I wait in the stance of True Cross. You are too near, play clear. I have the right foot forward, I think I'll turn it, and I'll deflect your spear out of the way towards the right hand. My point won't fail, yours will.*

In *posta vera croce*, the spear is carried at waist height, the point to the rear. The left side of the body is completely refused, so that the feet are both angled back and away from the opponent to the left. The head is turned to look over the right shoulder, and the weight favors the rear leg. In the Getty Ms the spear is carried almost horizontally, but in the Pisani-Dossi the spear head is held lower than the heel, much like the longsword guard *coda longa*.

### **Posta di Finestra la Sinestra** (Left Window)

*I am set in a left window stance. If I don't strike you with the point you'll have played well. I'll keep the point high and the arms low, and I'll go out of the way on the left side. Moving with the rear foot, I'll put the point in your face without defense. We three can do the play I have explained. If I do it to you one time, you'll never want it done again.*

The final *posta* mirrors the third guard for the right side. The body position is similar to that of *posta vera croce*, but the weight is almost fully on the rear (left) leg. Because the left hand leads, the wrists are crossed.



*Vera Croce* opposing the Straight Guard of the Common Method. Note the Player and Scholar are using the same lead, but carrying the spear on opposite sides of the body.

### *Drill: Poste Progression*

- Begin in *posta tutta porta di ferro*
- Make a *volta stabile* to the left, so that the torso rotates forward to the left and the bodyweight falls onto the left leg. As the body pivots, tuck the spear haft under the left arm and drop the point, finishing in *porto di ferro mezzana*.
- Make a *volta stabile* to the right, so that the weight shifts back onto the rear leg. As you make the volta, push the heel of the spear out from under the armpit and to the right. Lift the arms high, wrists crossed and slide the right hand back closer to the left. This is *posta di finestra la destra*.
- Forcefully uncross the wrists, swinging the spearhead around in a mandritta blow as you traverse to your left with your left foot. Passing forward with the right foot, slide the lead (right) hand up the haft, finishing in the *Low Guard* of the Common Method.
- From the Low Guard, pull the lead (right) hand up and over to the left side. Slide the left hand up to the right and then quickly pass the right hand to where the left hand's previous position, finishing in *posta dente di zenghiaro*.
- Make a *volta stabile* to the left onto the rear foot and lower the spearhead so that the lanza is carried at waist height, heel forward and slightly higher than the rear hand. This is *posta vera croce*.
- Shift your weight further onto the left foot and push the spearhead up and forward so that the wrists cross, while sliding the left hand back towards the right. This is *posta di finestra la sinistra*.
- Finally, slip your right foot to your right side as you strike out with the spear in a *riverso sottano*. Passing forward with the left foot, uncross the wrists to finish in the *Straight Guard*.

## Of dei Liberi's Plays of the Spear

Maestro Fiore's spear section only contains three techniques: a common defense from the right, a common defense from the left, and a single counter to both. In all of these plays, the Player is fighting from the Common Method's "*serpentina lo soprano*". These basic defenses are based on two plays we've already seen with the sword: the *scambiar di punta* (Exchange of Thrust) and the *rompere di punta* (Breaking the Thrust).

### **Scambiar di Punta**

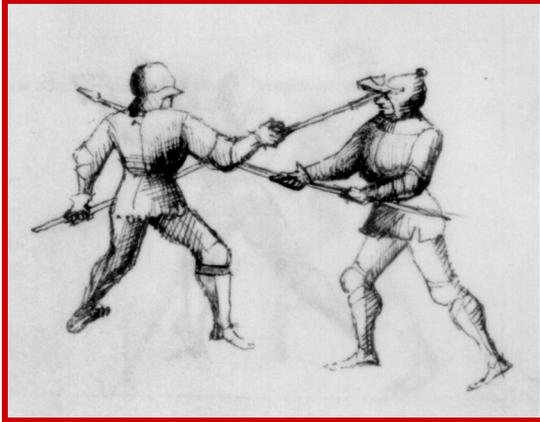
In the sword plays, Fiore describes the hand and footwork of the *scambiar* very carefully:

*This play is called the exchange of the thrust, and is performed this way. When one delivers a thrust to you, quickly advance your front foot off the line and pass with the other foot obliquely, also off the line, traversing his sword with your arms low and the point of your sword high into the face or chest, as depicted<sup>5</sup>*

In the play of the lanza this technique remains largely unchanged. The Player stands in either the Straight or Low Guard of the Common Method, with either hand leading. The Scholar waits in one of the three right side *poste*.

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<sup>5</sup> Getty Ms., Carta 28V (page 26v). Translation mine.

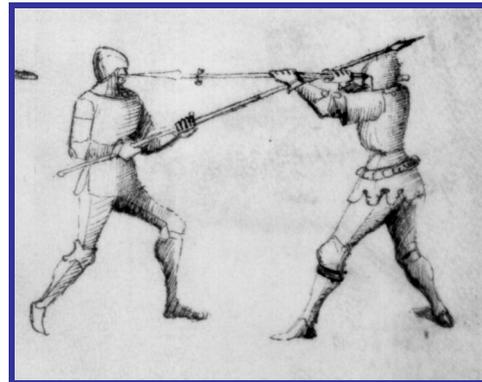


The Exchange of Thrusts from the right side.

As the Player attacks, the Scholar steps into the attack by traversing to the left with his left foot. At the same time, he sweeps his haft across his body with his left hand, parrying the Player's attack. He then passes forward with the right foot, setting the point into the Player's face. The Scholar's finishing position is a right hand lead Low Guard. As when performing the Exchange of Thrusts with swords, it is crucial that the hands (especially the rear hand) are kept low and the arms straight. This will take the Player's spear well out of presence.

This play should be practiced from *tutta porta di ferro*, *porta di ferro mezzana* and *posta di finestra la destraza*, and against carried, couched and flung thrusts executed with both right and left side leads.

Rather than *scambiar di punta* from the sword in two hands, the basic play from the left can be compared to the universal parry taught in the *spada d'un mano*. The Scholar uses the same basic defense from the three left-side guards, but he strikes into a different line for the counter attack. The Player attacks as before. As he does so the Scholar slips his right foot to the right, into the attack. He simultaneously sweeps his spear's haft across his body to parry. He then passes in with the left foot along the opponent's centerline and places the thrust, finishing in a right Straight Guard.



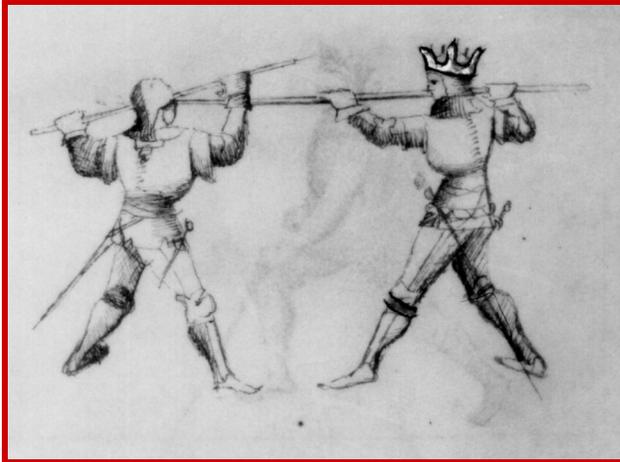
The Exchange of Thrusts from the left side.

This left side play should be practiced from *dente di zenghiaro*, *vera croce* and *posta di finestra la sinistra*, and against carried, couched and flung thrusts executed with right and left side leads.

### Counter to the Scambiar di Punta

*This is the contrary of the three spear plays that finish as shown before. I want to explain the way to do it. When I seem my spear missing the foe's body, I turn my spear and hit with the shod heel. And so these plays are not of great worry for me.*

The purpose of the *scambiar di punta* is to use footwork and a strong guard to forcefully take the centerline from the opponent in a counterattack with opposition that drives his spear offline. However, if the Player is well-versed in the principles of spear fencing, and sensitive to playing in the bind, the strength of the Scholar's attack also informs his counter: a spearman should attack with a heel strike anytime his spear head is knocked wide, and cannot instantly come back into presence with a cavazione! This is the technique taught by dei Liberi's sole *Contrario* of the *lanza*.



The Counter to the Exchange of Thrusts.

landing. By striking an almost vertical sottano, the Player first strikes his opponent's lead hand, which is guiding the attack. Even if his blow is weak or a bit late, this should divert the attack, and allow him to follow up with a thrust of the heel to the armpit or groin or to simply fly out and attack with the spear head once more. When timed properly, however, the Player will both parry the arm and strike his opponent in the face, or at least finish with his spear's heel in front of the Scholar's face. From here there are many different follow-on actions possible: repeated face thrusts with the heel, a heel strike followed by a pass back and thrust with the spear head (as taught in *Zogho della Lanza, Part One*), a collar throw (see below), or a variety of other grapples and hooks with the heel to the Player's arms and neck.

As with the *scambiar di punta* itself, the counter can be executed from either a right or left side guard.

### Neck Hook and Pull Down from a Missed Exchange

Fiore dei Liberi's spear fencing is derived from his sword defenses against the thrust, adapted to the mechanics of a polearm. We have looked at the first of these, which is the *scambiar di punta*. Should the Scholar's thrust miss its target, or be turned on his armour, the most effective response comes from the *rompere di punta*. Maestro Fiore describes this play as:

*After I have beat aside his sword to the ground I forcefully place my right foot over his sword. Either I break it or I hold it in [such] a way that he cannot control it any more. And if this is not sufficient, soon after I place the foot over his sword I quickly strike him with the false edge of my sword under the beard, into the neck. Then I quickly return with a fendente of my sword to the arms or to the hands as depicted.<sup>6</sup>*

As the Scholar's spear head passes offline, he pulls back with his lead hand, and pushes out with his rear one, striking the Player in the neck with the "false edge" of his spear's shaft. The length of the spear provides a great deal of leverage, transmitting a great deal of force into the strike. After the blow unbalances the Player, the Scholar may then use the spear's shaft as a "hook" across the back of the opponent's neck to pull him to the ground. From here, he attacks with a thrust to whatever target is convenient. This play is used any time the Scholar's parry takes his spearhead offline, be that from a missed Exchange of Thrusts, a low bind with both spear heads driven to the ground, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Getty Ms., Carta 28V (page 26v). Translation mine.