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Interpretation of Fiore dei Liberi's Spear Plays

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Abstract – How did Fiore Furlano use a spear? What is the context, purpose, and effect of entering a duel armed with a spear? My article- originally a successful thesis work for an Ars Ensis Free Scholler title- describes in detail what I found out by studying primary sources (Fiore's works), related sources (contemporary and similar works), and hands-on experience in controlled play practice, as well as against uncooperative opponents.

In this work I cover the basics- how to hold the spear, how to assume Fiore's stances, how to attack, and how to defend yourself. I also argue that the spear is not, in fact, a preferable weapon to fence with in Fiore's system, at least not if one uses it in itself. It is however, a reach advantage that has to be matched, and thus the terribly (mutually) unsafe situation of spear versus spear occurs.

As a conclusion, considering context and illustrations of spear fencing, I argue that the spear is only to be considered paired with other weapons, like dagger, or sword. In fact, following Fiore's logic, we can assume he used the spear to close the distance to use a weapon he feels more in control with.

Keywords – Fiore, Furlano, Liberi, Italian, duel, spear, Ars Ensis

I. PROCESS OF RESEARCH

The article itself is largely devoted to trying to point out the less obvious points to make about this specific style of spear fencing. Seeing how Fiore (henceforth referred to as Fiore, Fiore de'I Liberi, Fiore Furlano, or the master) does not devote that many pages to the weapon I fear it is easily disregarded, written off as a straightforward implement. While it is true that it is a simple weapon, the contextual information it provides warrants analysis and speculation, hence this work was created.

Thankfully Fiore Furlano's manuscripts¹ have been transcribed and translated in many versions already, laying down basis for this research.² Wiktenauer, the online HEMA wiki proved an invaluable asset in this case, not for taking what is written there on face value, but to organise and direct my research into related topics. It helped with contextualising resources by date and location. It also includes quite reliable translations of primary and related sources.

Naturally, the primary sources wield the most meaning when coming to conclusions. I researched writings and videos of other interpretations on the Fiore's spear, sadly most didn't go too much in depth, justified by the brevity of the section in Fiore's works.

Related sources, like Philippo di Vadi³ and the *Die Blume des Kampfes*⁴ manuscript group served as a way to double check patterns I noticed ideas I had in relation to the core material. They provided insight into the context and thoughts I had thereon.

Alongside the theoretical research, I also engaged in extensive practice with implements as similar to a spear as possible. I practiced stance transitions and thrusts from various positions, and did paired practice of the play included in the material, from all stances.

In this study, I speculate about the differences and changing context of duels in armour. I do not have first-hand experience with armoured combat; hence I can only extrapolate from written sources and the descriptions of those who do. However, Fiore points out on many occasions that armour is not necessary for his art. In fact he usually writes so

* Acknowledgment: The following article is an edited version of my thesis work for Ars Ensis, that I wrote in order to become *Free Scholler*. The original work contains more of the basic information upon which I build my conclusions, and is found here: http://www.arsensis.hu/pdf/FS_DJ.pdf. In this article I don't provide the material I'm analysing, which can be found in the original work, or on Wiktenauer, nor do I detail basic terminology of Fiore's martial system. The conclusions I reach are based on the interpretation of Fiore's system taught in Ars Ensis and, I'm sure, in other groups similarly.

Special thanks: Joeli Takala, for being my inside consultant; Francesco Perciballi, for being my outside consultant and help with translations; Máté Kerese, for being my thesis judge; Michael Chidester, for his work on Wiktenauer and translations; My brother Jan, and my father Sándor for helping me photograph the material; Attila Törösvári, for pointing me in the direction of further researchable material; The boffering group in Kouvola, Finland, for giving me opportunity to train with them; Mátyás Miskolczi, for asking me to make this Acta Periodica edit.

¹ Fiore Furlano, *Fior di Battaglia*, before 1404 (MSM0383). Fiore Furlano, *Fior di Battaglia*, ca.1404 (Ms. Ludwig XV 13). Fiore Furlano, *Flos Duellatorum*, 1409 (Pisani Dossi MS). Fiore Furlano, *Florus de Arte Luctandi*, ca. 1420 (MS Latin 11269).

² I mainly used Michael Chidester's translation of the Morgan manuscript with my consultant, Francesco Perciballi's small corrections, see: misc. authors, "Fiore de'i Liberi" (Wiktenauer).

³ Philippo di Vadi, *De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi*, ca. 1482 (MS Vitt.Em.1324).

⁴ Anonymous, [Cod.5278], ca.1420 (Cod.5278). Anonymous, [Wolfenbüttel Sketchbook], ca.1465 (Cod.Guelf.78.2 Aug.2°). Ludwig von Eyb, [Eyb Kriegsbuch], ca. 1500 (ms B.26). Anonymous, *Büech von fechter Vnnd Ringstückchen zů Ross vnnd Fuoß*, ca.1623 (Cod.10799).

when armour is necessary, useful or a hindrance for a described technique, which he does not do when dealing with spears.⁵

To test my theories against uncooperative opponents I joined a group in Kouvola, Finland, which held padded weapon fighting trainings. Most of their weapons were under a realistic weight, but the polearm they provided me with was of a similar enough handling as I imagine Fiore's spear would have been, however slightly more unwieldy. It was also soft enough on both ends to thrust and hit with relative safety. I had the luck to be able to test the material not only against other similar implements, but weapons of varying lengths and combinations. This would not qualify as reliable testing of any historical combat, were it not for the fact, that I mostly used the opportunity to test theories largely independent of the quality of the implement: distance management and movement flow.

II. DUEL TACTICS OF FIORE'S SPEAR

Herein I will attempt to present a whole picture of the actual process of spear fencing, according to Fiore Furlano. I see the material as a collection of tactical aspects, all of which are equally important. They are also largely interconnected, and pose a challenge, as to what to start with. I will attempt to follow master Fiore's flow of information.

Here begins the art of the noble weapon called spear; in the beginning of battle, on horse and on foot, is its use. And whoever watches it with its dashing pennant should be frightened with great dread.⁶

II.1. Overall Goal

Fiore Furlano points out in the beginning of his material that the spear is to be used in the beginning of combat. This shows us a scenario where other weapons might follow after the spear. It makes sense, since it is the longest weapon he deals with, and it requires a considerably larger fencing distance; measure is key. It is also apparent, that Fiore does not want to stay in spear distance, as detailed later.

However, his material does detail spear-on-spear combat, and prepares the pupil for such a confrontation, and the possibility of ending combat at this stage. He also praises the threat posed by the strong thrust of the weapon. His material greatly details one thing: displacing the opponents thrust.

This shows a single main goal when dealing with a spear: When facing a spear, one has to put themselves in a position where the opponents point is off line, and they themselves are past the point, essentially rendering the opponent's spear point useless.

⁵ All four widely known manuscripts include a separate section for armoured fencing. Unarmoured sword sections allow for the inclusion of armour. Both the Getty, and the Pisani Dossi includes armour in the illustrations when it's dealt with, while the Latin shows it inconsistently. See Fiore Furlano, *Flos Duellatorum*, 1409 (Pisani Dossi) fol. 23r and Fiore Furlano, *Fior di Battaglia*, ca.1404 (Ms. Ludwig XV 13) fol. 28, as examples.

⁶ Fiore Furlano, *Fior di Battaglia*, before 1404 (MSM0383), fol. 9r.

This way of approaching fencing distance and attack works, unless countered by the turn of the shaft and attack with the other, metal encased end (pedal). This is, however, very difficult to do in the miniscule amount of time the spear actually takes to make contact once pushed to thrust, especially if our spear is properly beaten off line. Another difficulty, and my own conclusion, is that the counter can be just as easily countered symmetrically, effectively ending the phase of spear fencing in the melee, and forcing both sides to move on to shorter weapons, or *abbrazzare*. This, however, is my own addition, as Fiore explains only the counter with the pedal.

II.2. How to hold the spear

From the fact, that all the stances depicted in the source material use hand positions of considerable variation, we can deduce a few key points.

The first thing that becomes apparent is that the “top” hand, the one higher on the shaft changes depending on the side -left or right- of the stance. The top hand, at least in the case of the stances shown by the master, is always the one that corresponds to the side: Right side stances use the right hand and vice versa.

This means that if one wishes to switch the side of their stance, they also might need to switch the position of at least one of their hands. Which one, depends on the next point of consideration:



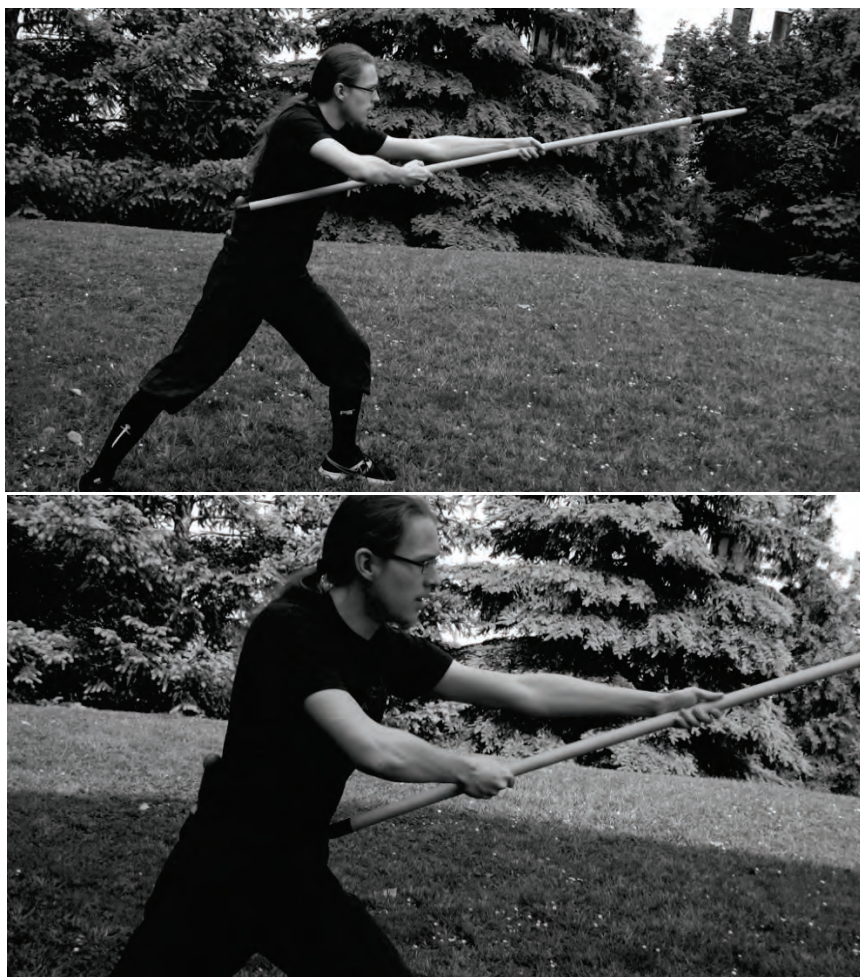
Fig. 1: Average position of hands. (Photographer: Sándor Dobi)

At least the lower hand has to be at most an arm's length up the shaft (Fig. 3). This means that the spear can be held pointing outwards in front of the spearman only if it fits under their armpit, otherwise it will get caught on their side (making changing sides impossible while keeping the weapon pointing in line at the same time.). In fact, from testing movement with the weapon, I would recommend putting one hand about a forearm's length from the “pedal”, or the metal capped butt end (Fig. 1). About the other hand:

Fiore mentions on many occasions that the spear is held short, to deceive the opponent. The spear is also way more controllable when your hands are far apart, which is important for accurate thrusts, and dominating the centre line. This puts the top hand's ideal location

around the middle, or slightly above the middle of the weapon for stances and defence. However, for the sake of offensive actions, it has to be gripping the weapon loosely, so it can slide, thus adjusting the distance and reach. (see Fig. 4) That is not to say that the weapon always slides when executing a thrust, since if we want more penetration power, we have to have a firm grip on the weapon. However, the hands may slide together even before offensive action is taken. Fiore does not devote text to this mechanic however, and I only feel it safe to assume based on the illustrations, which do not show a definitive way to thrust, but feature various positions for hands.

These points add up to the conclusion that the grip on the spear should be flexible and light for the most part, with an authoritative, stable position for thrusting and the contact moment of defence.



*Fig. 2 and 3: The spear is held lower down in order to avoid it getting caught on one's chest.
(Photographer: Sándor Dobi)*



Fig. 4: The top hand may slide down to extend reach. (Photographer: Sándor Dobi)

II.3. On defending

It is important to note that defence and offence blend together, and it is unclear whether the stances are purely reactive, or if the play is the result of both spearmen attempting to take control of the centre line. Fiore himself states that the defence in the play is good because it offers offence at the same time.

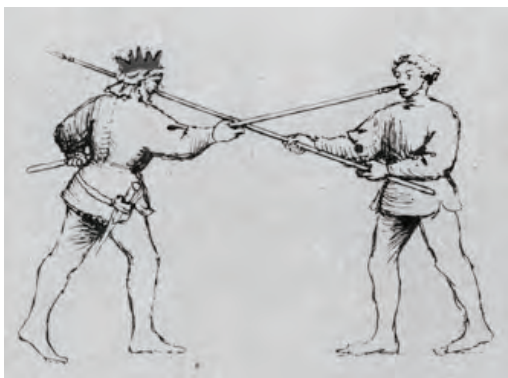


Fig. 5: The play shown in the manuscripts. Fiore Furlano, *Flos Duellatorum*, 1409 (Pisani Dossi ms, fol. 15v). Reproduced from Novati's edition.

II.3.1. Objectives

...we step out of the way, first advancing the foot which is behind (as was said, out of the way), and with our thrusts on the right side we make a

bargain. And to finish the beat, both the right side and the left converge in a thrust so that other offenses with the lance cannot follow.⁷

The plays on both sides are about first making the incoming thrust harmless, and the opponent helpless against our counter-thrust. They do, however, have different way of achieving this, depending mostly on the side of the initial stance, and the opponent's stance and hands.

On the right side, we are facing our opponent, stance fully turned towards the threat. Here our tactic can be to stop the attack before it fully develops, stepping *ala traversa*. *Tutta Porta di Ferro*, and possibly *Mezza Porta di Ferro* are efficient at this, as we can easily move our whole body and spear in the desired direction, making for fast reactions. Fenestra is better at the other way we can go from here, stepping outside, turning inwards. Here our tactic is to evade the thrust, and by creating a slightly asymmetrical situation, binding the opponents spear in a way that is advantageous to us.

On the left side, however, we are turned away from the opponent **with** *volta stabile*. Our mass rests on the leg that is farther from the opponent. We are ready to give ground, but we are also ready to create great force by just turning our body. Here one of our tactics is a retreat, simply stepping away from the opponent, following the mass on our farther leg. This is useful when we are holding our spear too extended to be able to thrust if we were to move any closer to our adversary. It also might work if we notice our opponent charging in too vehemently and leaving us no space to thrust⁸. The other thing we can do, is stepping with our left (farther) leg off the line. This way we create the asymmetrical and advantageous bind I already described. Furlano also points out, almost as a side note that the guards on the left do not thrust well, but are used to beat away incoming attacks and *colpi*, hit the opponent.⁹

Here it is essential to point out the method with which one should beat away, or exchange the incoming thrust. The smart spearman will recognize that the human body is taller than it is wide, and will strive to displace incoming points to the side, never in panic pulling their shaft up, or pushing down. Vertical displacement only slightly alters the final destination of the thrust, but it is hopeless to defend such a fast action in this direction. It is also paramount to move away from the initial target position of the incoming attack.

A conflict of interest arises in one's own movements when they wish to swipe across- in front of their own body, at the same time trying to keep their point in line for a thrust. The conflict lies in the simple fact that an effective displacement requires a somewhat vertical weapon. This results in a movement culture that is very much about pivoting around our lead leg- making *tutta volta*, and only bringing our point in line at the ends of movement, when we assume a stance, and when we defend ourselves with it. We also

⁷ Fiore Furlano, *Fior di Battaglia*, before 1404 (ms M0383), fol. 9v.

⁸ "I wait in the Stance of the True Cross, for you are too close for my play. I return backward the right foot which is in front, and I will beat your lance out of the way..."- Fiore Furlano: *Fior di Battaglia*, before 1404 (ms M0383), fol. 9v.

⁹ "...while the guards of the left side cover or beat and then strike with blows, but cannot thrust very well with the point." "- Fiore Furlano: *Fior di Battaglia*, before 1404 (ms M0383), fol. 9r.

find ourselves making the spear's centre of mass orbit around ours, keeping the spear quite close to our body.

II.3.2. Beat, not bind

Of The various displacements found in other parts of Fiore's material two are recommended by the master to use against incoming thrusts. These are *rebattare* and *scambia di punta*, with the omission of *incrossada* and *rompera di punta*.¹⁰

Rebattare (beating away) is advised for all stances except for left Window, and is in this case is most of the displacements. Usually It is the only viable option, considering the lack of a crossguard, or any defensive attachment on the spear, which would allow for tighter control of the opponents weapon. The master mentions beating towards the ground, when describing options from the Right Window. This is a result of that particular stance defending with a wide step outwards, and the particularly short, wound up grip on the spear. It is not, however, described as *rompera di punta*, as it is in the longsword material.

The Right Window also offers an opportunity for exchanging the incoming thrust (*scambia*), which I would also attribute to the sizeable length of the spear above the top hand in this particular stance. It allows for the opponents weapon to slide along it, while being displaced.

A point of concern I immediately faced when trying out the material, is the position of the point of contact in relation to the hand. Furthermore, the question of bind versus beat arose. The material has no written comment on the matter, therefore my speculation follows:

The lack of a crossguard deceived my longsword fencer mentality when trying to displace my partner's thrust. My fingers immediately received the weight of the opponent's momentum as their spear slid along mine down to my hand. There also is also no definite answer in the source materials. From manuscript to manuscript, the point of contact changes from above the hand, to between the two hands, to on the top hand. One answer could have been armoured gloves, but the sources do not take a definite stance on whether armour is a requirement for Fiore's fencing. Therefore, returning to the earlier point; about the displacements being beats (*rebattare*), and not binds (*incrossada*), I believe the safe assumption is that all displacements need a considerable application of force to send the incoming weapon bouncing off ours, and keeping our fingers away from the danger of breaking or simply losing grip. We cannot also speak of a "bind" without sharp blades crossing each other, giving a kind of control. The second option is to receive the opponent's attack between the hands (holding the spear wide). The third option is the exchange of thrusts detailed previously. Usually, however, the point is less about feeling and controlling the opponent's spear, and more about displacing it enough to allow for a counter thrust.

It is also notable that Fiore's stances with the spear also offer good protection if the thrust were to come towards lower body parts. One can always lower the displacement, or as in the case of Full Iron Gate, or Boar's Tusk one can swipe across the lower body with the pedal side of the weapon.

¹⁰ The avenues of defence are usually described along with the stances.

II.4. On attacking

And it makes great thrusts which are dangerously strong, and with a single one it can give death. And if in the first blow it makes its due, then pole axe, sword, and dagger will all be upset.¹¹

II.4.1. First thrust

As Fiore points out in the first paragraph of the spear material, making the first thrust can put even greatly more sophisticated weapons in peril. He also makes it understood that only one thrust can be all one needs to kill their opponent.

He does not offer an ideal stance to thrust from, only showing the pupil doing it from a high, right side stance. It does not, in fact, offer good force generation, and oddly enough depending on hand position, does not even prime the counter to the displacement of the initial attack. Fiore does point out when one of his stances, like the Window, offers good thrusts, but most of the stances he shows don't even have the point in line for an attack. Then again, thrusting with a spear is the most intuitive thing one can do. The question might be less about how, and more about when.

*1.1. A spear can be brought to bear with astonishing frequency, pushing it forward and pulling it back takes very little time compared to distance. This is one of the reasons it is very dangerous to stay within this distance. Two spears can easily pass next to each other resulting in both combatants receiving a thrust. The first thrust is about dominating the centre line, and either killing the opponent outright, or putting ourselves in a better position for what follows. "...I give a turn to my lance and strike with its butt, since it has as good iron in the butt as in the point."*¹²

My opinion is that the spear is quite simply not a "safe enough" implement to fence with. I believe my later points will supplement this, and will show how the master himself also preferred combat with more control. Staying in spear distance, even if we momentarily have our point on line, is not safe, considering that we have no reliable way of preventing the opponent's spear to thrust us back.

Therefore the time for the first thrust is, quite simply, right before dashing in from spear distance. It either ends with us pushing the spear deep into the opponent, assuring they can't wound us back, or performing the counter to their displacement and ending up in a distance too short for spear. Retreating out of distance can be an option, but considering the lack of control options for the spear, one would still be in considerable danger from a following thrust by the wounded opponent.

Against other, shorter weapons we find ourselves in an inherent advantage of distance. Here the initial thrust becomes a question of thrusting fast, relentlessly disallowing the

¹¹ Fiore Furlano, *Fior di Battaglia*, before 1404 (Ms M0383), fol. 9r.

¹² Ibidem.

opponent to close the distance to us, or being prepared to use the pedal (metal cap) and our own side-weapons.

II.4.2. Possible attacks

The most obvious attack performable with the spear is the thrust. However it is obvious from Fiore's descriptions, and the fact that even he treats it as interchangeable with a staff¹³, that hitting actions are an option. The immense momentum behind the parries done from the guards shown can either deflect an incoming attack, or in the same movement hit the opponent in the head or shoulder. Thrusting is the most preferable first action, it makes little sense to swing at a person awaiting us with a spear due to the longer time needed and shorter reach we could have. Striking with the pedal is also an option, but is very contextual.

II.4.3. How to thrust

Fiore Furlano doesn't detail the thrust, probably assuming the simplicity of it warrants no explanation. However I believe a number of important points lead up to a simple conclusion that is worth mentioning. My impressions based on trial follow:

Two points of interest contribute to preparing an effective thrust, both mentioned earlier. They are: Holding the spear wide, and keeping it short. They create proper distance management and distance deception while providing enough power generation for the thrust.

The top hand, quite high up on the weapon, grips it lightly, and will act as the direction controlling hand. We can grip tight, and perform short, strong trusts, or loosen the grip, and gain distance, as the weapon slides in the top hand. The bottom hand provides most of the power, and has no other objective but to push the spear forward.

Fiore emphasizes distance deception by keeping the spear short¹⁴. It is immediately apparent, that a spear should not be held far in front of the user, as it offers no flexibility in the thrust distance. Keeping the spear point as close as possible comforts the opponent into closing the distance. However the spear needs minimal time to extend into a thrust, which is also more powerful this way, as it originates at the spear fencer's centre of mass.

The student also steps with all thrusts, which does not seem necessary, but after further consideration, it synchronises the legs with the position of the hands, and primes the counter-play shown in the material.

II.4.4. Asymmetry

A fairly complicated conclusion that can be deduced from all points mentioned above is that the side from which the thrust originates, and conversely, the side from which it is defended is very significant, as is the position of the hands, and mismatch can create situations for which Fiore's material does not prepare the reader.

¹³ The weapon behaves essentially like a staff, and is even shown used against a spear later.

¹⁴ "And all the guards that stay off to the side with shortened lance or shortened sword are sufficient to await any extended hand-held weapon;" -Fiore Furlano, *Fior di Battaglia*, before 1404 (ms M0383), fol. 9r.

As long as the attacker's top hand corresponds to the side from which the defender parries (symmetrical), the counter can be managed (the position of the legs might force an advance instead of a full step). If not, the counter would force crossed arms, an uncomfortable stance, and loss of time (Fig. 7). Alternatively, an attack on the same side might be possible, but inventing techniques is outside the scope of this article.

This also means for the defender that parrying asymmetrically is desirable, as it shuts the attacker out of the centre line almost completely (Fig. 6). However, considering the fact both fencers gain by attacking first, perhaps symmetrical fencing is desired by both.

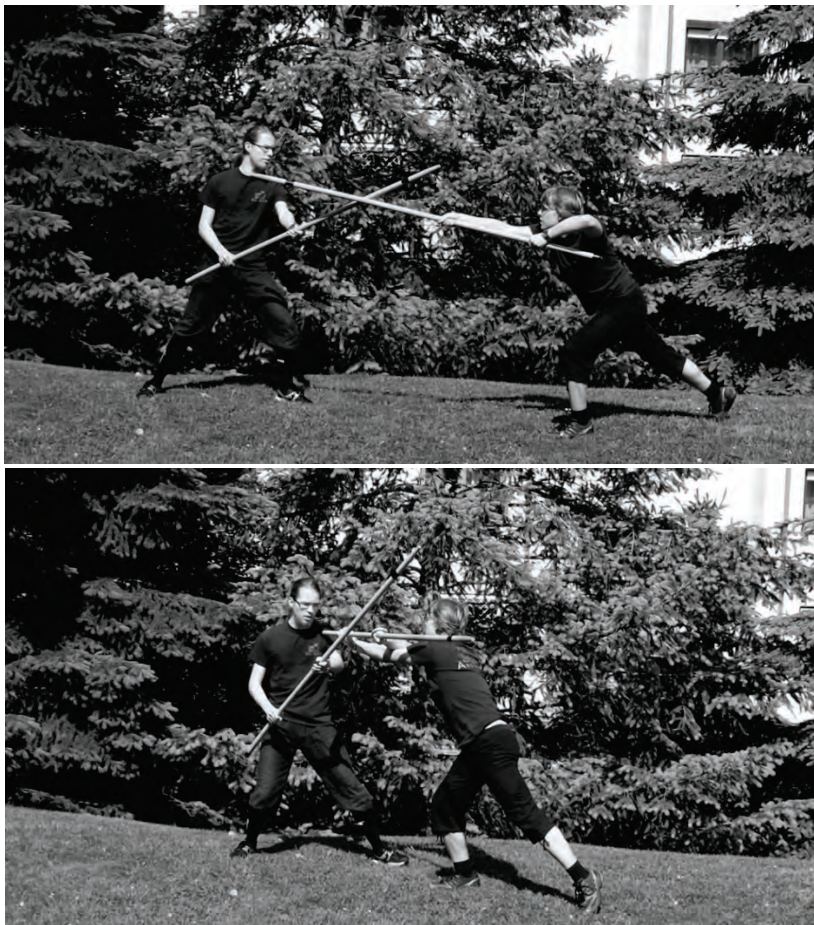


Fig.6 and 7: Asymmetrical Play. (Photographer: Sándor Dobi)

II.5. Movement towards abbracciare

II.5.1. The hypothesis

While studying the spear material of Fiore Furlano I came to one defining conclusion, which is not explicitly stated by the master, but is quite obvious to me after thorough inspection of the works. Fiore uses the spear briefly, to close the distance to the opponent, and move on to weapons in which he can exercise more control, like dagger combat, or wrestling. The throws and submission holds from other sections would of course work with a spear too, given the right context¹⁵. In fact, spear distance is arguably the most dangerous to fence in, due to the lack of control options with and against such a weapon. I am convinced Fiore himself preferred closing the distance from here. I have hinted at this point previously, however here I will present the evidence and logic behind the claim. My conviction does not exclude any existing interpretations of Fiore's spear material, simply aims to expand on what is known. I advise the reader to keep in mind: speculation follows.

II.5.2. In Fiore's words:

Fiore states that the spear is used in the beginning of combat, hinting at a continuation of combat after the use of spear. The technical knowledge presented also moves towards shorter distances without considering an opportunity for staying in spear distance.

II.5.3. Daggers

The first hint I noticed about the manuscripts that got me thinking about the possibility of the spear working in the context of shorter weapons are the daggers drawn on the belts of the spearmen in the material. In fact, after thorough comparison, no other section in Fiore's works has fencers depicted with other weapons than what the section is about, none have sidearms added, with the notable exception of one page in the Getty manuscript: On this page (fol. 37v), that follows the poleaxe in armour material, Fiore describes a weapon similar to a spear, but with a container of corrosive powder. And this exclusivity of sidearms is universal among all four manuscripts. The daggers are not always visible, however, but appear consistently enough exclusively in the spear sections. This shows that the daggers shown are important to understanding spear fencing, but the historical context made pointing it out with text obsolete.

Fiore also depicts how to wield a spear/staff and a dagger at the same time, parrying the opponents spear with his, and attacking with the dagger. In fact, I believe the spear fencing material teaches us as much about getting past the spear's distance, as it does about actually using the spear (See Fig. 8 and 9).

¹⁵ While Fiore himself does not hint at this (only by including them in the same martial system), other sources- like Talhoffer manuscripts- show submission holds and throws with spears.



Fig.8 and 9: The spear is discarded for a dagger. (Photographer: Sándor Dobi)

II.5.4. Implications to and from the rest of Fiore Furlano's works

My impression is that Fiore, as expressed through the kinds of techniques he uses, prefers to exercise control in all sections of his martial art style. This is evident in his swordplay also, which features an equal portion of *gioco largo* and *gioco stretto* plays, which in turn make use of his extensive wrestling knowledge, upon which all of his other sections are based.

The spear, however, offers very limited control capabilities. Used against someone with a shorter weapon, the control is exercised through distance management. But Fiore seems to universally move towards body contact and physical pins.

Against a spear, the focus is mostly on getting past the tremendous reach of the weapon, and less on the tool we use to achieve this.

II.6. In summary

In the beginning of combat, equipped with a spear facing a similarly equipped opponent, according to Master Fiore, our duel would follow the following steps:

Taking initiative is key, it is advisable to thrust first at the opponent, stepping into spear distance this way.

The opponent is forced to defend, at the same time attempting to get past the measure of spears, either finishing the fight with a counter thrust, or at the very least displacing the incoming attack.

Provided the attacker is still alive, there is no other way to move to safety having their thrust pushed off target, but further inwards. The butt end of the spear, or other means of control are used to move past the opponent's point, and deal a debilitating blow.

From here, depending on the success of the counter it is a matter of finishing off the opponent. Alternatively both combatants draw shorter weapons (e.g. daggers) or wrestle.

III. CONTEXTUALISATION

III.1. When and How

The next and last main question that remains after inspecting how a bout on spears would work is in regards to the conditions in which the bout would happen. Period duel customs is a topic for another thesis work way larger in scope, and in lack of translated contemporary sources, I can only take “common knowledge”, and Fiore's writings as a basis. However I believe a simple case can be made for the spear's place in such duels, in context of other weapons. After examining further sources, I firmly believe the spear was regarded as something not enough for a duellist to solely fight with, but was an advantage that had to be matched if one wished to use it.

We know from Fiore dei Liberi himself, that he preferred armoured duel combat, what he called “in the barriers” (*in sbarra*) and advised his students to restrict themselves to it too. He did, however present his art as a possibly lethal one, and apparently used it to walk away from duels with sharp swords unscathed on five occasions.¹⁶

We can also read him recounting his students, e.g. *condottieres*, fight duels with various weapons with honour¹⁷. His recollection mentions spear on horseback, but not on foot. Therefore I see two options in which two men stand against each other with spears, in the barriers:

¹⁶ He did that with swords, however.

¹⁷ Piero del Verde, Niccolo Voriçilino, Galeazzo de Capitani da Grimello, Lancillotto da Becharia de Pavia, Gioanino da Bavo and Sir Açço da Castell Barcho

The straightforward option, as Fiore himself says,” in the beginning of combat is the spear’s use”. The two combatants enter the duelling ground on foot carrying a spear, most probably equipped with at least one other weapon, be it a sword (shown used along the spear in related sources, like the *Wolfenbüttel sketchbook*) or a dagger (illustrated in the manuscripts). The questions that arise concern the poleaxe. If given the option, one might surely opt for the more versatile poleaxe, which Fiore himself devotes more pages to. This counterpoint can be further counterpointed with the possibility of the lack of arms and armour, be it for financial or cultural reasons (duel to the death, which we know, Fiore wishes to prepare us for; or simple bravado). It can also be personal preference, the spear being drawn significantly longer than the poleaxe.

The less obvious option is the possibility of both combatants falling or getting off their horses after initially entering the duel mounted, carrying a spear/lance. In this scenario the obvious first weapon at hand is put to use. However, the master does not describe such a possibility with text or picture. Furthermore, the mounted plays do not show any weapons carried other than the ones in use. This may not be a significant point, or it might support the idea that once forced off the horse, such a duel would end. However, Fiore does show the same play of the spear against a mounted opponent, which means this either happened in duel, or in other context (battle).

The question of armour remains: how does it affect the use of the spear? As stated in the beginning of the article, I have little to reliably go on with regards to armour. Fiore states within his poleaxe material, that the hardened point of that weapon penetrates armour. No such note exists in relation to the spear, and it would be quite unrealistic to expect is to go through a breastplate. This makes the spear’s use about targeting gaps in armour, which is increasingly hard, the longer the implement. In any case, my conclusions about the danger the spear poses as a fencing weapon are only strengthened by the ability to defeat armour.

In the context of spear as a beginning weapon, it makes closing the distance less of a challenge, and also justifies other weapons being readily available. As is the case with most other weapons shown by the master, it can be used with and without armour, according to him. What actual threat a spear poses to a person fully clad in period armour is something I fear is outside the scope of this article. Examining all four available manuscripts gives me the impression, that a variety of armour, and degrees of armour would be expected in the fights Fiore describes, it’s not just a binary- fully clad or practically naked.¹⁸

III.2. Supplementary material by Fiore

In the *Pisani Dossi*, and the Latin *Florius de arte Luctandi* Fiore includes methods of approaching a spearman using daggers, staves and clubs. The principle seems consistent: get past the point of the spear, using whatever implement you have in the left hand, wound with the dagger (Fig. 10). The way the spearman should counter such approaches

¹⁸ Previously listed evidence supports this hypothesis: Armour is shown when absolutely necessary, and in various stages of completeness otherwise. Techniques exist to exploit lacks in armour.

is also discussed. Having the shaft of the spear still in the hand one can block dagger thrusts by raising it into the attack.

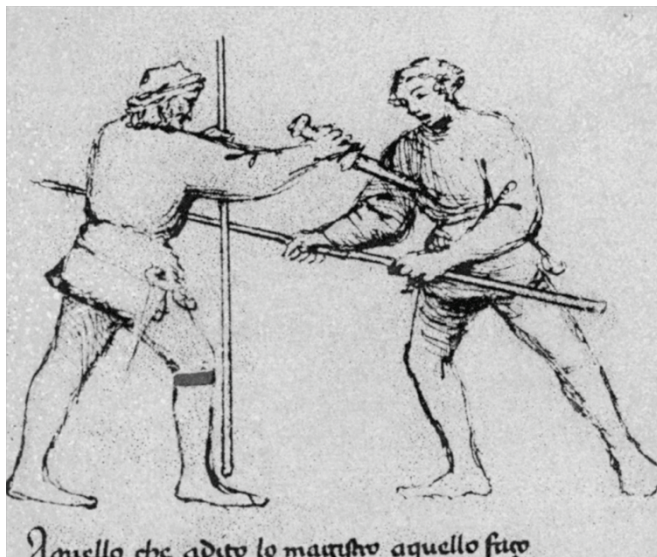


Fig. 10: Dagger used with a staff. Fiore Furlano, *Flos Duellatorum*, 1409 (Pisani Dossi MS, fol.15r). Reproduced from Novati's edition.

Another use of the spear shown by the master is against a mounted, lance wielding opponent. Again, the principle is the same: Thrust! If displaced, use the pedal. The stance is named Boar's Tusk, however it is different from the stance shown in the spear material, rather looking exactly like the Boar's Tusk in the sword section. The same stance is advised for awaiting shorter weapons and thrown attacks.

Relating to the above mentioned question of armour, the *Pisani Dossi* also includes ways of displacing the spear using one's vambraces (Fig.11). Here it isn't an issue, or might even be an objective, to displace downwards, onto one's breastplate. All in all, in this case the objective may be to avoid getting thrust in a gap in your armour.

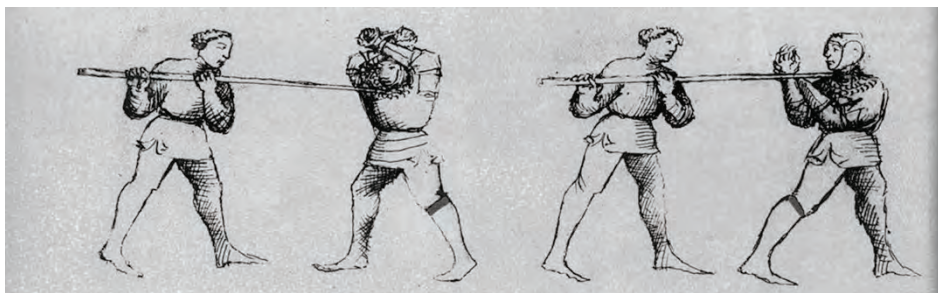


Fig. 11: Armour used to deflect spear. Fiore Furlano, *Flos Duellatorum*, 1409 (Pisani Dossi MS, fol. 16r). Reproduced from Novati's edition.

III.3. Examining related sources

Caution is to be advised, when exploring similar material, dealing with the same weapon, or the same plays, from Fiore's students or contemporaries. It provides clues about the material at hand, but exactly because of a different context, might be dealing with a completely different form of fighting. Alternatively it might have been imperfectly copied (or a difference of opinion might exist).

Such is the case when examining Philippo di Vadi's *De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi* which includes a half-complete copy of Fiore's spear material. It can be safely assumed that Vadi had access to master Fiore's teachings by reading his works as he lived slightly later. He even expresses the same views on the target audience of this art, down to a very peculiar similarity in wording. However, for instance, his *Mezz'a Porta di Ferro* (Half Iron Gate) has the legs switched. In fact, the same stance in the sword material also has the legs switched. From a practical standpoint these variations are not bad, as in they are not completely impractical. The *Mezz'a Porta di Ferro* with the right foot forward (more like a *Denti di Zenghiar* in longsword) offers better opportunities for thrusting, too.

However the intent with which Fiore introduced the stance is somewhat lost, as it does not offer good enough options for displacement of incoming thrusts. Vadi's treatise also does not feature daggers or any other sidearm drawn on spearmen. This might be indicative of a difference in mentality. Where Fiore sees an obstacle to overcome, Vadi sees an opportunity to fence in a way that ends the duel at the stage of spears.

Another set of source material related to Fiore's work in content is the four manuscripts: Cod.5278; *Eyb Kriegsbuch* (ms B.26); *Büech von fechter Vnnd Ringstückchen zñ Ross vnnd Fuoß* (Cod.10799); and [Wolfenbüttel Sketchbook] (Cod.Guelf.78.2 Aug.2°), grouped together and commonly known as *Die Blume des Kampfes*, a literal translation to German of Fiore's *Fior di Battaglia*- "The Flower of Battle". These are believed to be a continuation of the same martial arts tradition Fiore was a master of due to the significantly similar structure and technical overlap. They are dated from around Fiore's time to the early 17th century. It is important to note that Fiore never states he invented what he shares in his works, but that he wishes to be remembered as a master of this particular art.

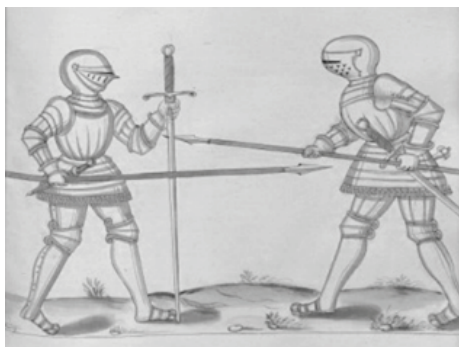


Fig. 12: Spear used with longsword. Anonymous, *Büech von fechter Vnnd Ringstückchen zñ Ross vnnd Fuoß*, ca.1623 (Cod.10799, fol. 148r). (c) Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Wien.

None of these German treatises have text to accompany the spear material. The spear material included ranges from very similar to that of Fiore, to somewhat more detailed but textually not explained use of the spear in fully armoured duels along with other weapons. The most interesting iteration on Fiore's work appears as swords are being shown grabbed along with the spear (Fig. 13). This means they are more readily available, and that daggers might not be a necessity. In some cases the sword is held in the off hand, used to deflect spear thrusts as Fiore would use a staff or a club (Fig. 12). In the case of the *Wolfenbüttel Sketchbook*, the spear is shown used along a sword in fully armoured combat (Fig. 14). In the Cod.10799, illustrated with relatively high quality watercolour images, the same difference in the *Mezza Porta di Ferro* appears as in the case of Vadi.

The pattern of spearmen being illustrated with daggers and other side-weapons continues loosely. What can be quite surely stated is that the spear is being shown in the context of other weapons and in complex, armoured bouts. I believe it opens the very wide question of how duels and tournaments looked like in the Europe of the Renaissance. What place did the spear, and in fact, every other weapon have in the process of such bouts?

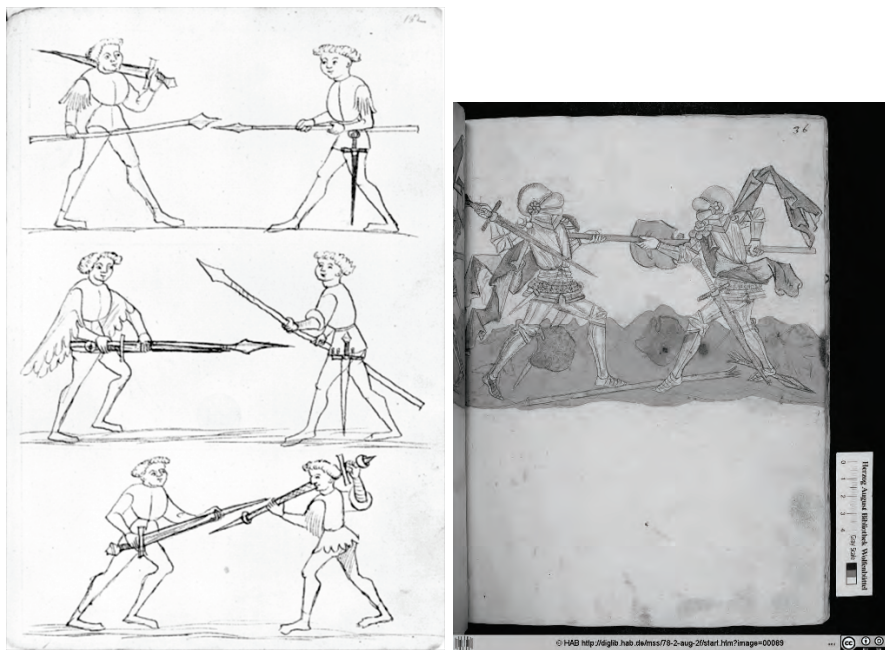


Fig.13 and14: Various uses of longsword with spear. Left: Anonymous, Cod.5278, ca.1420 (Cod.5278, fol. 182r). (c) Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Wien. Right: Anonymous, *Wolfenbüttel Sketchbook*, ca.1465 © HAB Wolfenbüttel: Cod. Guelf. 87.2 Aug. 2°, <<http://diglib.hab.de/mss/78-2-aug-20/start.htm?image=00089>>

III.4. Areas of further research

The most on-hand direction of further understanding would be comparative research. To discover and analyse contemporary martial arts traditions that perhaps had different objectives and context, would shed more light on the objectives and context of the tradition Fiore himself represented. Primarily European sources are interesting in this regard, but to get a full picture neighbouring culture groups might also provide insight. In this case the limit of knowledge is nowhere in sight.

A similarly interesting direction of research is the rules and customs of duels in renaissance Italy and Europe in general. If one could get detailed insight into the process of the fights Fiore calls *in sbarra*, or how the duels of his students happened from weapon to weapon, we could place the spear, and all other weapons discussed within the manuscripts into proper context. There is one source that has caught my eye, which unfortunately has no English translation, and is quite lengthy. It is a work by one 15th century Italian jurist Paride del Pozzo- *De re militari et de duello*. It reportedly describes contemporary military and duel laws and customs. Parts of it were adopted by Achille Marozzo in his fifth book- *Opera Nova*, in 1536 (the parts in question also have no translation).

Furthermore, the very nebulous and difficult question remains concerning the objective of learning martial arts in Fiore's time. Was fighting duels in controlled situations its own thing, or was it a peacetime application of battlefield skills? How does this material apply to all different kinds of combat? Philipppo di Vadi states his teaching is useful "in all warlike situations" from battles to riots. However, the spear material included seems to have limited applicability in formations, it seems like an exclusively single combat oriented material.

Researching the above points in depth would make one not only fully aware of how to duel with a spear, but in possession of all knowledge needed to conduct a duel reminiscent of renaissance Europe.

IV. SUMMARY

Fiore Furlano, and the tradition of European martial arts that he represented does not provide us with a lot of technical material concerning the spear. They certainly do not give a full picture of how a spear duel could look like. It is clear, however, that the practitioners of this art knew of a lot of aspects of spear duels and duels in general, that they treated as obvious, and only hinted at with depictions or descriptive notes, or not at all.

The simplicity of the spear material is justified by the weapon itself being a plain implement that does not offer too much variation in defence or offence. It is further justified by the intuitive use of the weapon. It consists of three stances on each side, and one play, which can be done on either side. The objective of Fiore's art in this case is to get past the point of the spear -no matter what implement we are using- and wound in the process. The play has one counter which gets both combatants too close to continue using their spears effectively. The position of the hands and method of defence needed practical research, but ultimately offers a simple flow of motion. However, I found enough proof to claim that the spear is supposed to be treated in the context of other weapons.

The daggers depicted exclusively at the spear plays, the tendency to move past the point and into shorter distances, and the fact that the spear is possibly too dangerous a weapon to stay in its ideal distance, hints, if not proves, that the ultimate objective of the material within the spear section is to teach the fencer to close the distance from the phase of spears in a way that puts them in an advantage at the distance of shorter weapons. This concept of the spear being used in combined weapon duels is also depicted in later sources related to those authored by Fiore in structure and content.

The secondary sources, those that resemble Fiore's work show the spear sections similarly, but often with striking differences. Some offer more, others less information, and it is unsure whether it's personal preference, or change of context throughout the following centuries. Based on Fiore's self-description it is also unsure whether Fiore is a definite authority above the other sources.

These findings open the question of how exactly such duels functioned, what weapons and armour did the participants have access to in what time and place reference. The spear's status in such bouts is also an interesting direction of further research. In essence, the use of the spear would vary greatly depending on context.

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