

Camillo Agrippa's 'Trattato Di Scienza d'Armes'



Agrippa was Milanese, an architect mathematician, and engineer. Since he was not primarily a Master of Fence, nor was this his livelihood he brings us a very pragmatic and mathematical viewpoint to fencing that is very different from some others of his time.

The first publication of his work, 'Trattato di Scienza d'Armes, con Dialogo Filosofia', was published in Rome in 1553 by Antonio Blado. In the work, dedicated to Cosimo de

Medici, Duke of Florence, Agrippa gives his method of swordplay via text which is explicative and clear as well as through illustrations that show both the initial stances as well as movement through an innovative use of 'stop-motion' illustrations.

In the preface of his work, Agrippa describes that the science of arms consists of justice, intelligence, and practice. Every man must determine for himself if justice calls for an act of arms. Life and victory depend on an intelligent use of arms. And practice gives life to theory.

Thus his theory of fence is based on simple yet effective principles, enabling the swordsman to not only defend himself, but also to live in a just and honourable manner. Agrippa was the first to advocate the four hand positions that were used by virtually every Italian master after him. These positions, when coupled with the guardia, help give an easy to use and understand nomenclature to determine exactly where the sword is in relation to the body, and the blades orientation to the opponent.

The four basic hand positions of Italian fencing:

Note: all hand positions are referenced to provide ease of understanding regardless of the dominant hand. The positions themselves are the same no matter which hand is used.



First position

First- The palm is to the outside of the fighter, thumb downward.



Second position

Second- Palm facing downward, hand parallel to the ground, thumb to the inside of the fighter.



Third position

Third- Palm to the inside, thumb pointing upward. Opposite of first.

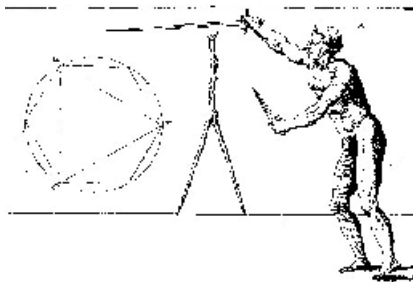


Fourth position

Fourth- Palm facing upward, hand parallel to the ground, thumb to outside. Opposite of second.

A guard (or ward) is any position the sword is held to achieve a desired effect, either offensive or defensive in nature. Prior to Agrippa, most Fencing Masters used a large number of guards, often giving them fanciful and elaborate names. Marozzo, a Master of the Bardi school and earlier contemporary of Agrippa's used upwards of 15 guards and gave them names such as 'Guardia di Coda Lunga e Stretta' or the 'Porto di Ferro Stretta overo Larga'. This was the tradition and Masters had used names such as these since some of the earliest manuals we have record of. Agrippa, applying a mathematician and architect's eye chose names that were simple and direct: one through four (Prima, Seconde, Terza e Quarta). In narrowing the number of guards used, Agrippa enabled a fencer to easily and readily understand the system while still retaining the effectiveness of his predecessors.

The four guardia of Agrippa:



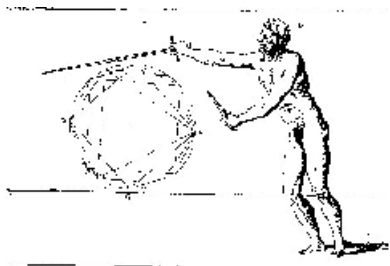
Prima (first): The position a man's blade takes when immediately drawn from its sheath. Hand and Arm high, palm facing outside (hand in 1st) point menacing opponent, blade slightly angled toward opponent's right chest (similar to DiGrassi's High Ward)

His explanation of the *prima guardia*:

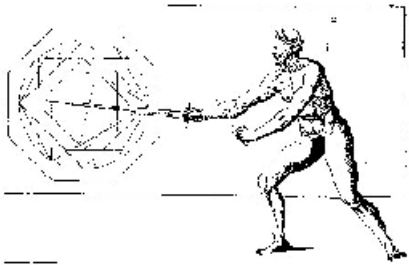
... whatever person you wish, who carries a sword at his side, stimulated by his own fury, or by some exterior provocation of words or deeds, having drawn the entire sword from the scabbard, extending his hand high to form a guard, which being the first that one makes immediately on having drawn the sword, shall be called... *prima*...

(... qual persona si uoglia che porti spada a lato, stimolata da propria furore, ouero da qualcha esterior prouocatione di parole o di fatti, poi che havera tratta la spada in tutto fore del fodero uiene stendendo la mano in alto a formar' una guardia, la quale per essere la prima che si facci subito cauata la spada si chiamera... la prima...)

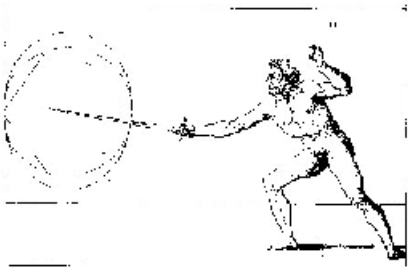
Note: Acamillo Palladini was openly critical of this guard in his work, claiming that the height and extension of the arm allowed an opponent to clear your blade too easily and that you would be unable to make an attack effectively from this ward. This author in part agrees with Palladini but feels instead that this ward was designed primarily to gain distance by menacing the opponent at the beginning of the action, rather than to be used as a static guard.



Seconda (second): Guard best suited for invitational attacks. Arm extended, approx. chest height, blade still menacing, angled slightly across body. Hand remains in 1st or 2nd Depending upon the interpretation of the text, and the situation, this guard can also be performed as a Broad Ward (see DiGrassi) or as a variant of Marozzo's Coda Lunga series.



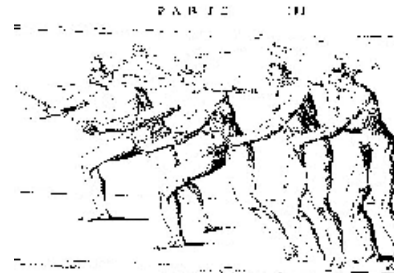
Terza (third): Easiest and most common of Agrippa's wards. Lower guard of about waist level, with the point of the blade menacing your opponents opposite shoulder, hand position is either 2nd or 3rd. (similar to diGrassi's Low Ward)



Quarta (fourth): This ward is most useful against adversaries who prefer cutting attacks to your left side. The stance is made by holding the sword on your left side with your sword arm crossing your body. The tip of the sword is angled up towards your opponent's right shoulder. Your hand should be in the fourth position. This guard position is more defensive in nature although you may use it to stringer (engage) your

opponent's blade (*italian: Trovare di spada*) and set up for gliding type attacks **such as the flanconade** as used in the classical Italian schools).

Agrippa illustrates the guards initially in one image with four figures. This serves the purpose of showing the progression from guardia to guardia but also gives the reader a brief glimpse into the interrelation between the guards.



The grip Agrippa advocates (as shown in the woodcuts) has the index finger over the crossbar. The thumb is placed either on top of the ricasso or on the false edge side of the ricasso. The grip is firm yet supple, without tension or tightness. In *prima*, *seconda*, and *terza*, the left hand is armed with a dagger, while in the illustration for *quarta*, the left is unarmed and elevated to the height of the head. *Prima* and *seconde* have the feet close together while *terza* and *quarta* have the legs flexed and feet spaced fairly widely apart.

Agrippa also advocates an extended guard, stating 'there are some individuals who say that a thrust delivered by drawing the sword arm back will be easier to execute, will have greater force, and will be more secure' He does not agree: 'by keeping the sword arm well extended the weapon travels along a straight line, moves more rapidly, and therefore has the advantage.' He also remarks that in pulling the sword arm back and then thrusting forward there is a loss of time which gives the opponent a chance to counterattack. Keeping the sword arm extended and the point in line was of vital importance to Agrippa.

The blade actions that Agrippa uses are roughly similar to those of Marozzo. While the terms and illustrations are sparse, it is the authors understanding that the text of Agrippa illustrates the concepts well.

The basic Italian cuts are:

Tondo	A circular cut delivered horizontally
Sgualembrato	An oblique downwards cut
Fendente	A vertical downwards cuts
Montante	A vertical upwards cut
Redoppio	An oblique upwards cut

Each of these cuts must be made with the center of percussion or ‘sweet spot’ of the blade. This is located at different area for each blade, but is always in the latter third of the blade. Damage is yielded through the use of percussion with incision. The cuts should be executed either from the shoulder (without bending the arm) or just from the wrist, with a wheel-like, swift motion. This latter cut is called *stramazzone* and is quite powerful, especially when delivered to the head (*stramazzone* = Italian "stramazzone", meaning "falling with force"). Although the *stramazzone* brings the sword momentarily out of line (performing almost a whole circle), it does so rapidly, and the rest of the arm stays put against the opponent. Because of the combination between the lightness of the blade and the necessity of a more contained arc, the cuts were performed *a segatura*, i.e. incorporating a slicing motion that, ideally, would involve the whole of the *debile* (foible) in order to be more effective.

--Note the *segatura* is a component of the technique, not the whole of the technique.

His words describing what we would call disengagement in time are:

... without moving the arm from its position, lowering the point as much as necessary to evade the opposing sword, and turning the hand, directing the point toward the right side of the enemy, and quickly, with the thrust of the hand, and with a step forward with the right foot, all in an instant, you should be able to strike the adversary...

(... perche senza mouere punto il braccio del suo loco, abbassando alquanto la detta punta, co schifar la spada contraria, & volgendo la mano in giro, verson la parte destra del nemico, et breuemente, co' l spingere d' essa mano, & col passar innanzi, di pie dritto, tutto in vn tratto potrebbe inuestir l' auersario...)

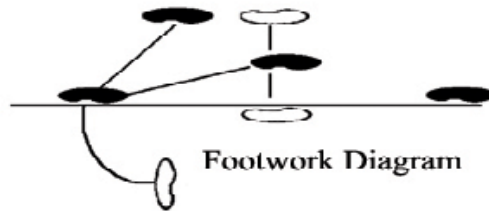
Agrippa believed that the eyes should also focus on the sword hand.

‘... for everyone’s maximum security it shall be best (in my opinion) to fix the eyes on the sword hand, which is the source of the principal and nearest thrusts...’
(... per sicurezza maggiore di ciascuno il meglio sara (secondo il parer mio) l' affissar' li occhi ne la mano de la spada da la quale procedono le principali, & piu vicine botte... .)

Proper hand positioning, the use of the guards, and eye contact are all important aspects of the system of defence developed by Agrippa. However, fencing is not static, but

variable and dynamic. The basic movements used to place yourself in a advantageous and safe position are known as footwork. Footwork and body positioning are used in conjunction with the positioning of the weapon to remove a threat. Engagement of the blade along with proper footwork minimizes the danger of attack from your opponent. Within the 'Trattato', Agrippa details a number of different types of footwork. Much like the guardia, Agrippa's footwork is simple and easy to learn, but very sophisticated.

Footwork of Agrippa:



Passo- This is simply the advance as studied in modern fencing. The advance is made from the guard position in order to get within attacking distance. To perform an advance the right foot is moved forward a short distance in the direct line, and then the left foot is brought up to return to the same position. Throughout the advance the body should stay in relatively the same position. The advance is very useful for a number of situations:

1. The passo is best for making up distance on the opponent's retreat.
2. For slowly regulating distance.

Riunate- This is the retreat of modern fencing. A recovering step, initiated with the rear foot. The Riunate is the reverse of the Passo. It is used to step back out of reach of an adversary or to draw the opponent out of balance.

Gran Passo- 'Great Step' This is a deep demi-lunge. To perform the gran passo, begin by extending your sword arm forward. As a continuation of this extension, shift your body forward. Don't bend your body as you are shifting it; keep it erect, going forward from your ankles, not from your hips. As you are about to lose your balance extend your left leg forcefully until it is straight and lift the right foot to step straight out with it and the whole body. The right toes leave the ground last, the right heel touches the ground first. Body and right leg move together. When the foot has landed, the body continues forward and downward until the kneecap is directly over the instep.

Passata- Closely related to the Passo, the Passata is nothing more than a full step. The rear foot comes forward, past the lead foot in a straight line, reversing the positioning of the feet.

Mezzo Passo- A step to one side, also known as a traverse. To traverse right, the right foot moves a half-pace to the right, then the left foot follows.

Intagliata- The intagliata is a forward offline step done with the forward leg. This side step is performed by stepping across the body with the forward leg.

Inquartata- The *inquartata* called for a displacement of the body from the line of attack by pivoting on the leading heel while simultaneously throwing the rear (left) leg backwards and sideways to the right. The body was removed from danger, while the defending blade was left in center-line to contact and oppose the adversary's sword.

Along with many other Italian Masters of the day, such as Marozzo from a few years earlier, Agrippa advocated a system of thought spoken of today as the Italian Circle. The concepts used in the Circle are simple:

- 1) Expansion/contraction
- 2) Angulation
- 3) Timing of the hand & foot.

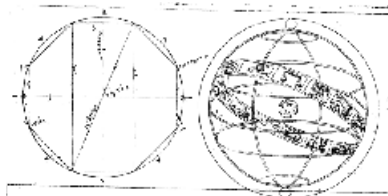


Along with these principles are three distances

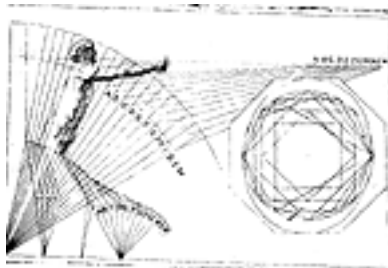
- 1) Normal: with swords extended the tip of the sword is at your opponent's guard
- 2) Close: With arms extended the guards are together
- 3) Grappling distance: Hand is inside the inside of the opponent's guard.

The basic ideas behind the principles are as follows:

1) The principle of expansion/contraction is that for all attacks you must expand out towards your opponent, and any defensive actions require a contraction of the circle around you to protect yourself.

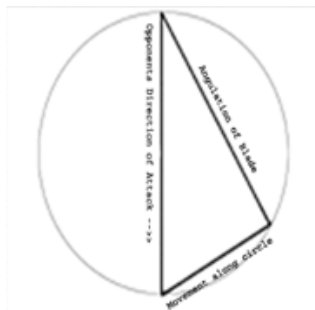


2) The principle of angulation states that you will use angle of blade to attack your opponent. Opposition is important when dealing with angulation. Opposition may be used on the attack or in defense to take your opponent's point away from you, taking their point to the perimeter of the circles surrounding you.



3) The principle of the hand & foot states that the hand and foot must finish movement at the same time on attacks. As the thrust or cut lands the moving foot must land at the same time. This timing of attacks is what gives the Italian schools their dynamic flow during combat. The free flowing combat of Agrippa is epitomized in a phrase from Maestro Andrea Lupo Sinclair: *'Il piede sostiene la mano, la mano difende il piede'* ('the foot supports the hand, the hand defends the foot')

The use of all three of these principles is readily explained in this illustration:



Fighter A attacks along the diameter of the circle between the two fighters using the principle of expansion and contraction to close the distance. Fighter B moves along the circle, bringing

(Tattershall School of Defence)

the blade into contact with fighter A at the same time as his foot is placed at its final place. This forms both the angulation necessary as well as uses the principle of the hand and the foot.

Agrippa did not parry, per se, however displacing and deflecting actions were used to produce a safe and desired result. These actions (*parrare*- 'to set aside') were done with the false edge of the blade in preparation for an attack. They were used in conjunction with the body's movement to enable the fighter to hit without being hit.

Drills and practice are paramount to the internalization of any fighting system. The following are a number of drills to be used to begin developing familiarity with Agrippa. Nothing however can replace competent and experienced instruction.

Drills:

These actions may be practiced solo, with a partner, or in opposing lines with multiple participants. Protective gear is a must when multiple students are involved. Right-handed participants are assumed, reverse for lefties.

1) Practicing lines of attack-

Opposing a padded hanging target with marked target areas (head, chest, abdomen, etc.), the student assuming his ward at passo distance. He makes attacks to the specified areas while using the passo.

- a) Having made sufficient repetitions with the above, the student moves to gran passo distance and begins the drill anew.
- b) Students may assist each other by randomly calling target areas for other students. Switch responsibilities after short reps in each distance.
- c) Add in other footwork types, making attacks with angulated motion as well as variant footwork.

2) Answering a thrust with a cut.

Student A extends his weapon as to thrust. From a mid or low terza, student B uses the falso filo (false edge) to crisply beat the incoming weapon upward and to the right (contraction) taking care not to bring his own weapon more than about a foot over the head of A. B uses an intagliata in conjunction with the beat to move offline and forward (expansion), the opposite direction in which A's blade is now traveling. B continues the motion by cutting fendente with the elbow and wrist to A's arm or head.

- a) B uses the larger gran passo instead of the intagliata (in the same direction of footwork) and describes a teardrop shape with his sword, cutting A roverso squalebrato or roverso tondo (both true/right edge- dritto filo).

3) Answering thrust with a thrust.

Student A thrusts in seconda or Quarta hand position. B rotates his weapon hand to Quarta and uses the dritto filo (true edge) to beat aside A's thrust (contraction), setting up

B for a punto roverso. Guarding with the left hand B finishes with a punto roverso to a's abdomen or chest while stepping passo (expansion). Completed with blade engagement, B uses his thrust to continue deflecting A's thrust.

Without engagement, B's thrust from his inside (punto roverso) keeps his weapon between himself and A's weapon.

4) Answering a cut with a cut.

Student A cuts fendente from the wrist. B raises his hand above his head in prima (first position) to stop the cut while slipping his forward foot back slightly (contraction). The foot stops as oblique blade to blade impact is made. B thrusts A in the chest or face (expansion).

Selected Bibliography and Resources:

The resources that we have available for Research into the Western Martial Arts is immense and awe-inspiring. Without many people I would be completely lost and confused while trying to understand the wisdom and skill of our forebears. To that end I would like to thank William Wilson, Maestro Andrea Lupo Sinclair, Maestro Ramon Martinez, Maestro Paul MacDonald, Stephen Hand, Gary Chelak, and all my students in the Phoenix branch of the Tattershall School of Defence. Without your examples and perseverance, this work and others like it would not be possible.

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