FROM MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPT TO MODERN PRACTICE

The Longsword Techniques of Fiore dei Liberi

GUY WINDSOR

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INTRODUCTION

Sometime in the late 14th century, a master of knightly combat wrote a treatise that presents a complete vision of the art of arms as he saw it. His name was Fiore dei Liberi, and his treatise is called *Il Fior di Battaglia*, 'The Flower of Battle'. His work exists in four known manuscript versions, which cover the range of knightly weapons including sword, lance, pollax and dagger, on foot and on horseback, in armour and out of armour, as well as wrestling and other weapon combinations. In this book we will look at his sword material, out of armour and on foot. Before we dive in I should answer a few questions that may have occurred to you:

What can I expect from this book?

Who was Fiore and why should we take him seriously?

What are these four manuscripts, and how should we approach them?

What is a 'longsword' exactly?

Who is this Guy Windsor fellow and why should I trust his interpretation?

Ready? Let's go.

About this Book

In many respects this book is a new kind of academic work, in which I present my transcription and translation of the source material, comment on it, and present video examples of how I enact the content. It began as The Fiore Translation Project, a series of blog posts in which I translate and comment on *Il Fior di Battaglia*, the treatise written by Fiore dei Liberi, arguably the greatest master of knightly combat instruction of the fourteenth century. In this book I have edited the posts and reorganised them where appropriate. I have also added a lot of material that has not been published before.

I have left in some of the personal discursive matter, but edited out the post opening and closing remarks as they make no sense when the material is not formatted as a blog post. I have chosen to release the transcription and translation under a Creative Commons Attribution licence. You may do anything you like with that material, so long as you acknowledge where it came from. The commentary remains under my copyright.

Video links are included so that you can see how I do the actions Fiore described. These links are embedded in electronic versions of this book, and expanded so you can type them into a browser if you are using the print version. You can also find all the videos collected in one place for your convenience at this page on my website:

https://guywindsor.net/fiorelongswordvideos

These are not instructional videos, and if you choose to try things out it's entirely at your own risk. I take no responsibility for you unless you are under my direct supervision.

The genesis of this book was in Seattle, where I had a conversation with the excellent Michael Chidester, known for his work on the wonderful web archive of fencing treatises Wiktenauer.com, and we agreed that the world needs a new, free translation of Fiore's Getty MS. There is nothing wrong with the current published translation

by Tom Leoni, but a) it isn't free and b) in the interests of making the translation very clear, Tom tends towards oversimplifying the text.

I've never written my own translation of Fiore before, though I have had his book clear in my head for many years, partly because it's a monster of a project. I knew if I started at the beginning (the introduction), and worked my way steadily through the whole book, I'd get stuck, lose interest, and the project would fail. It's too big. So I decided to go through the bits I was most interested in first, and transcribe, translate, and comment on them as I went. My aim was to transcribe and translate the related sections of the other Fiorean manuscripts at the same time, as the whimsy took me. This has hopefully generated a lot of useful material for scholars of the art.

My process has been simple: each time I picked a section, and transcribed one paragraph of Fiore's text, straight from the manuscript, and translated it, made whatever comments seemed interesting and relevant to me, such as cross-references with other parts of the book, notes from my own experience and so on, then moved on to the next one. At the end of each section I comment on the section as a whole, and say how I think it fits into the rest of the book, the other manuscripts, and any related texts and systems.

The transcription is not supposed to be flawless, just clear enough so that where the text could be transcribed in more than one way, you can see which I've chosen. I have not modernised the text in terms of spelling or accents, but I have distinguished between *che* (that) and *ch'e* (that is) in the transcription. I have expanded all contractions and abbreviations as well, but not worried too much about the punctuation. Fiore uses it quite inconsistently anyway, so I have added commas and full stops where I think they belong. I have also included accidental repeats of words, crossed-out words, and other errors, because they're interesting. It's not my job to correct the master. The purpose of including the transcription is to make it clear how I'm reading the book, which informs how I have translated it.

It would be both academically unsound and foolish not to make use of the existing translations and transcriptions, so when called for I have checked the Wiktenauer transcriptions and translation (by Colin Hatcher), and Tom Leoni's, to see how they have solved

the problem. I don't always agree, of course, but you should be aware that this project owes a debt to their work.

By the time I had completed the *stretto* plays, the work had added up to a book-length project. Every section had been about the longsword, on foot, out of armour. That seemed like a coherent body of work, though obviously I ought to write up the Abrazare and Dagger sections as one volume, with another on the armoured combat, and perhaps a fourth on the mounted combat. Time will tell whether I get around to it – but if you write and let me know you really want me to, that will make it more likely.

Readers of *The Theory and Practice of Historical Martial Arts* may recall that I have a particular way of approaching fencing sources, which includes establishing three contexts that the source exists in: the historical context, the fencing context, and the martial context. I also like to create an annotated table of contents of the entire source, as a way of getting to grips with the overall context that the source creates for any given action described within it. Let's take a look at those contexts.

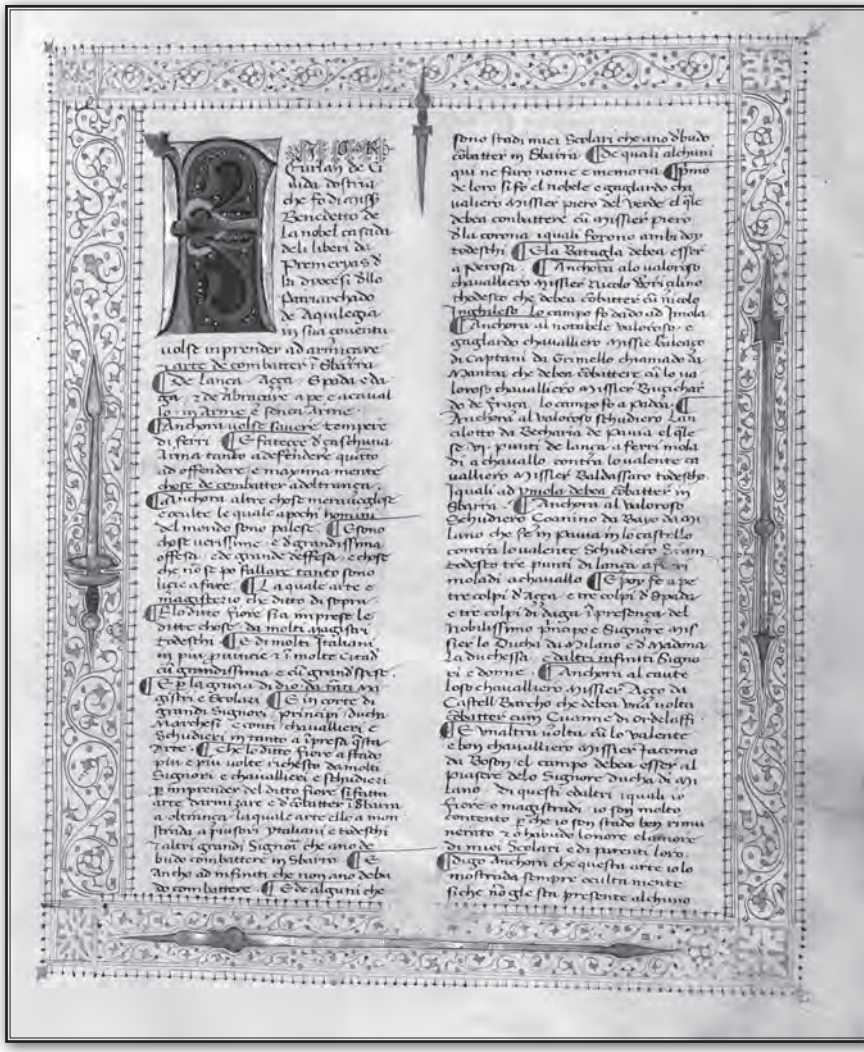
Historical Context: The Who? Where? and When? of Fiore dei Liberi

Fiore dei Liberi was a master of the art of arms (which he called *armizare*). He was born some time around 1350, and died some time after 1410. Most of what we know about his life comes from the introduction to his manuscripts, and from research done by Francesco Novati (who published the Pisani-Dossi manuscript in facsimile in 1902) and Luigi Zanutto (who published *Fiore dei Liberi da Premariacco e i ludi e le festi marziali in Friuli nel Medio-evo* in 1907). Dr Ken Mondschein has published an excellent summary of Fiore's life based on the manuscripts and these two early 20th century sources in his book *The Knightly Art of Battle* and his open source (i.e. free!) article 'On the Art of Fighting: A Humanist Translation of Fiore dei Liberi's Flower of Battle Owned by Leonello D'Este'. I highly recommend both, and am drawing on them for this summary of what we know.

The first lines of the Getty manuscript are:

> *Fior Furlan de Civida d'ostria che fo di misser Benedetto de la nobel casada deli liberi da Premeryas d'la dyocesi dello Patriarchado de Aquilegia in sua coventu volse inprender ad armizare e arte de combatter in sbarra…*

> Fior the Friulian from Cividale in Austria, son of the late Ser Benedetto of the noble house of Liberi of Premariacco in the diocese of the Patriarch of Aquileia from his youth wanted to learn the art of arms and the art of combat in the lists…



Let's unpack that name, shall we? We know the author as Fiore dei Liberi, but that's not exactly how he introduces himself. Firstly, it was normal for non-noble families to be named after the place in which they were born. The most famous example is perhaps Leonardo da Vinci: Vinci is just a town not far from Florence.

Friuli is an area in north-east Italy, bordering on Austria to the North, Slovenia to the East, and the Veneto to the West and South. It was initially created as a Lombard Duchy, and it has always had

a very clear cultural identity, so no wonder Fiore identifies himself as Friulian. Cividale is a town close to the Slovenian border, and Premariacco is a village just outside Cividale. So it would seem that his family was from Premariacco, but his home town was Cividale. Fiore was famous enough in his time that there are streets named after him in Cividale, Premariacco, and even Udine (the major city to the west of Cividale where Fiore lived and worked later in life).

The Patriarchate of Aquileia is the Church see (an area overseen by a bishop), with its episcopal headquarters in Aquileia, a town on the Adriatic coast about 40 km to the South of Cividale. So Fiore is being careful to locate himself firmly in terms of political region (Friuli), episcopal region (Aquileia), home town (Cividale), and social rank (son of a knight, from a specific town, Premariacco), with a particular surname (Liberi).

In the Pisani-Dossi manuscript he states that he is writing on 10 February 1409, which would be 1410 by the modern calendar,[1] and that he had been training for 50 years. This means he would have begun training in about 1360, and the usual age for boys of the knightly classes to begin training was about ten, putting his date of birth some time around 1350. Incidentally, in the Getty manuscript he claims 40 years of experience, suggesting that it was written in about 1400. This matches his reference to Galeazzo da Mantoa as a student: Galeazzo was a very famous *condottiere* (mercenary captain), who died at the siege of Medolago in 1406 – if he was known to be dead at the time of writing, it would probably be mentioned in the text.

This fits with what we know of Fiore's career: he was granted residency in the city of Udine on 3 August 1383, and in September that year he was commissioned to inspect and repair the crossbows and siege engines of the Udine arsenal. In May 1384 he appears in the Udine records as "Fiore the fencing master", and was in effect

1 Beginning in 1582, most European countries shifted from the Julian Calendar to the Gregorian. This process was haphazard: Britain changed over in 1752, Russia in 1918, and it also entailed a correction. In Britain this was of eleven days: Wednesday 2 September 1752 was followed by Thursday 14 September! For our purposes, it's clear enough that Fiore was writing in February 1410 by our reckoning.

a magistrate, being assigned to Gemona, about 25 km to the North of Udine.

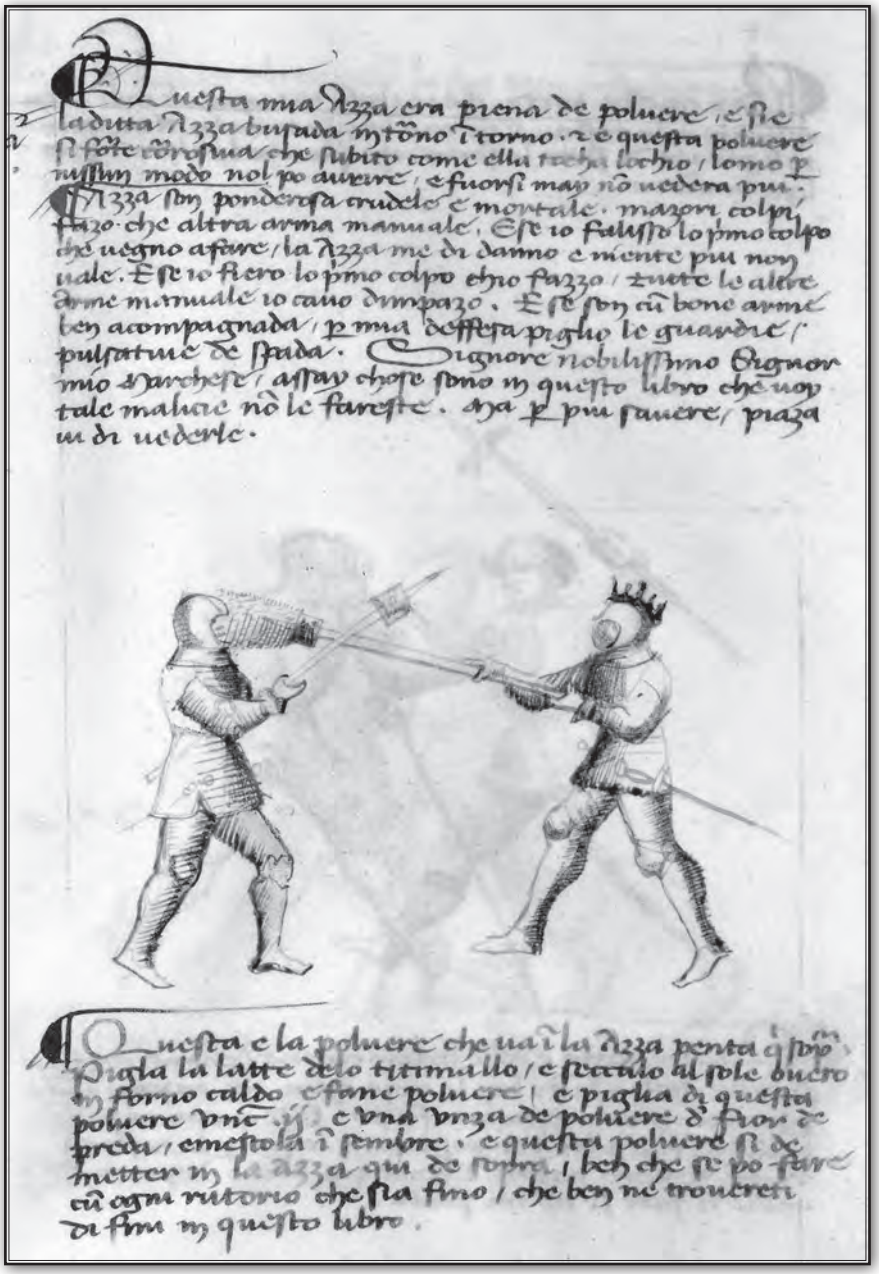
He names many of his students in the manuscripts, which I think we can take at face value, because these men would have been known to the likely readership, and so false claims would have been easily spotted. I recommend Mondschein's article as the place to go for a thorough description of those students.

The Getty and Pisani-Dossi manuscripts are both dedicated to Niccolò III d'Este, Marquis of Ferrara. Niccolò was born in 1383 and died in 1441, at the age of 10 becoming the Marquis on the death of his father Alberto in 1393. Born illegitimate, he was something of a player and a hypocrite – he had his wife and his illegitimate son Ugo executed for adultery, while nonetheless fathering at least 11 illegitimate children. He was married three times, and had five legitimate children too. Dedicating his work to the Marquis was no doubt a smart move on Fiore's part, as, especially towards the end of his life, he would have been in need of patronage. Whether he was successful or not we don't know, but it's interesting that the last words in the Getty manuscript are:

> *Qui finisse lo libro che a fatto lo scolaro Fiore che zo ch'ello sa in quest'arte qui l'a posto, zoe in tutto la armizare in questo libro e lo fiore Fiore di Bataglia per nome ello e chiamato. Quello per chi ello e fatto sempre sia apresiato che di nobilita e virtu se trova lo parechio. Fior furlan a voy si recomanda povero vechio.*

> Here ends the book that was made by the scholar Fiore, in which is that which he knows of this art, thus the flower of the entire art of arms is in this book, called by name the Flower of Battle. The one for whom it is made should always be praised, who is the example of nobility and virtue. Fior the Friulian to you recommends himself, a poor old man.

So he ends with some fluffy praise, both for his book and his quondam patron. Perhaps my favourite place where Fiore addresses Niccolò directly is on folio 37v of the Getty manuscript (more about that later), where he describes a pollax that has poison dust in the head.



This sort of dirty trick is not standard knightly behaviour, so Fiore writes:

> *Signore, nobilissimo signor, mio Marchese, assay chose sono in questo libro che voy tale malicie non le fareste. Ma per piu savere piazavi di vederle.*

> Sir, most noble sir, my Marquis, there are things in this book of such malice that you would not do them. But for the sake of knowledge it may please you to see them.

He then goes on to give us the recipe![2]

Niccolò was appointed *Gonfaloniere della Chiesa* by Pope Boniface IX in 1403. Literally 'Bannerman of the Church', this was effectively commander of the Papal armies, and the highest military honour available in the Papal States. If you imagine Italy as a thigh-high boot kicking the football that is Sicily, from the toe to just below the knee was the Kingdom of Naples. The Papal States ran from the knee to mid-thigh, and up the back of the leg as far north as Ferrara. It was a significant chunk of the Italian peninsular, and the largest single dominion after Naples. As for the rest of the peninsular, it was primarily divided into the Duchy of Milan, which controlled much of the north, and the Maritime States around the edges, chiefly Genoa and Pisa in the west, and Venice to the east, with Florence, Siena, Verona, and Lucca all powerful and important independent city states further inland. It's worth remembering that Italy did not become one nation until the Risorgimento, officially dated to 1861, but the last gasp of the civil wars that lead to final unification was (probably) the capture of Rome in 1870.

To compound the problem of these various city States, Papal states, and independent kingdoms all trying to expand their borders, within every state there was usually a division between Guelphs and Ghibellines: Guelphs supporting the Pope, and Ghibellines the Holy Roman Emperor.

Confused? You're not alone. I started writing this brief historical overview by compiling a map of the independent states in Italy in 1400, and gave it up after many hours because it would be accurate

2 See https://guywindsor.net/2014/05/blinded-by-botany-medieval-malice/ for details.

for one specific day in one specific year only. And probably not particularly accurate at that. The borders were constantly changing, and so were the alliances, and influences from abroad. Let's have a brief look at some of those external influences at work during Fiore's time.

The Holy Roman Empire was neither Holy, Roman, nor really an empire, but a loose confederation of mostly Germanic states. The terms Guelph and Ghibelline are italicised versions of German names. The Empire began with Charlemagne being crowned by Pope Leo III in 800ACE. Fiore was born during the reign of Emperor Charles IV, who died in 1378 and was succeeded by his son Sigismund. Fiore's birthplace is very close to the borders of the Empire, and it's telling that Fiore notes in his introduction that he studied under both German and Italian masters.

The French were also involved in Italian affairs. Aragon was especially important because from 1309 to 1377 there was a second Pope, known as the "antipope", further dividing loyalties. Leaving religion aside for a moment, Sicily was under the Aragonese crown from the mid-13th century until 1409.

And we mustn't forget the English. In 1345 Edward III defaulted on his Crown debts to the Florentine banks of Bardi and Peruzzi, which both collapsed. This caused a kind of recession, not helped by the Plague which ravaged Florence and much of the rest of Tuscany from 1345-1351. Sir John Hawkwood (ca 1323-1394), one of the best-known *condottiere* of the 14th century, made a fortune working as a mercenary. He began his military life probably as a bowman, before joining the White Company (a mercenary troop), swiftly rising to command it. Fiore would have certainly known of him, though there's no evidence I'm aware of that they ever met.

It would take many volumes of dense research to draw a complete picture of what was going on politically and militarily in Fiore's lifetime. The various states within Italy were continually renegotiating their borders with each other, creating and breaking alliances, and being affected by foreign influences. To find out more about any of these topics, I suggest searching Wikipedia for the keyword that strikes your curiosity (such as "Ghibelline"), reading the articles that pop up, and trawling through the references at the bottom of each

entry for book and article recommendations if you want to go deeper. If you prefer fiction, the series of historical novels by Christian Cameron beginning with *The Ill-Made Knight* are impeccably researched, and will give you a broader picture of what was going on militarily during Fiore's lifetime: the master himself even appears as a character!

For our purposes, it's enough to know that there was always a military action going on somewhere in the Italian peninsular, and the skills Fiore taught were in high demand because a great deal of the action was fought with the classic weapons of knightly combat: sword, dagger, lance and axe, on foot and mounted, in armour and without.

In summary then, we can take his book seriously as a martial arts resource because the man who wrote it was a skilled and respected military person, who could claim some of the greatest warriors of the age as his students in the art of arms, and who was sufficiently widely respected that he could reasonably expect the Marquis of Ferrara to actually read his book.

The Fencing Context

I visualise fencing context as a cross, with our target source in the middle, prior sources (if relevant) below, contemporary sources to either side, and later sources above.