

A brief look at the mounted combat
in *Fior di Battaglia*

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1 Introduction

The purpose of this article is to give the reader a short presentation of the mounted combat section of the treatise *Fior di Battaglia* written in Italy 1409 by Fiore dei Liberi. Today there are four known extant copies of the treatise. They are usually identified as the Getty, Morgan, Pisani-Dossi and BnF manuscripts after their current locations. The Getty manuscript is now held at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, USA. The Morgan manuscript is located at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, USA. The Pisani-Dossi manuscript is currently in the private collection of the Pisani-Dossi family in Italy. This manuscript is dated 1409 and is the only one that is actually dated. It is also known as the Novati manuscript from a facsimile in the book *Flos duellatorum in armis, sine armis, equester, pedester* by Francesco Novati published in 1902. The BnF manuscript exists at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, France.

The intention of this article is also to clarify some of the more complex parts of mounted combat not explained in detail in the treatise. I presume that the majority of you, the readers, are well acquainted with historical swordplay on foot and the treatise at large, but not well informed and skilled in horse riding and mounted combat. Fiore dei Liberi names some of his most famous students and their accomplishments in feats of arms in his foreword. These students and their deeds can be confirmed by other sources. And since at least some of Fiore's students were quite successful in this art, I dare say that Fiore knew what he was writing about. Besides the cultural differences between Fiore and his readers today, we also have to acknowledge the fact that he expected his readers to already know the basics of mounted combat. For example, Fiore never tell us how to ride or how to hold the various weapons. For the modern student this presents a necessity to interpret the treatise since information is omitted from the text. But with careful study of the manuscripts combined with practical exercises, the missing information may be worked out.

Tom Leoni has published his English translation of the Getty manuscript; this translation naturally helps the English-speaking world to understand the meaning of the original text. To further help our understanding of what Fiore dei Liberi meant, we may look to other books on riding and mounted combat written at the time of Fiore. One of the more interesting books on the subject is *Livro da ensinança de bem cavalgar toda sela*, written in 1438 by the King of Portugal Dom Duarte. This book has been translated into English and interpreted by Antonio Franco Preto. Dom Duarte, according to Preto (2005), shows a great deal of insight into the human psyche when dealing with the problems that may occur when controlling ferocious horses and the fears this might involve. He presents solutions to his readers on how to ride better and strike harder with the lance, spear and sword. Another source is Sydney Anglo's interpretations of a vast number of manuscripts and books written at, or around, the time of Fiore. We should additionally look to the modern writers on swordplay and riding for further assistance. Guy Windsor writes about the basic handling of the longsword, the kind of sword used by Fiore him self, in his book *The Swordsman's Companion*.

On the subject of riding and horses' natural reactions we have the authority Perry Wood. In his book *How to create the Perfect Riding Horse* he let us know how to create a horse that is perfect for our intended use of him.

2 The mounted combat section

The sections containing mounted combat in the four known extant manuscripts of *Fior di Battaglia* are quite similar to each other. There are techniques covering the use of heavy lance against heavy lance, spear against spear, sword against spear (as well as vice versa), sword against sword and unarmed fighting, in that order. The section ends with techniques for a man on foot against a single mounted attacker. Fiore uses the same word *lanza* for both the heavy lance and the spear. We must keep this in mind and also understand that the techniques for the heavy lance can easily be used with the spear. However, it is quite impractical to use the spear techniques with the lance due to the weapon's larger size and heavier weight. The heavy lances were intended to be as heavy as possible and Dom Duarte, according to Preto (2005), explains how important it is to practise the handling of the lance on foot before you do it mounted. Not only does this train the correct handling, but it also helps in finding out the maximum weight of the lance you can use correctly. This is crucial since it is physically dangerous to use a lance that is so heavy that you can not handle it properly.

2.1 Getty

The mounted combat section in the Getty manuscript consists of 33 illustrations covering 12 pages. The section is located at the end of the treatise starting on folio 43 recto. The written text in this manuscript is in plain medieval Italian.

Something to consider when comparing this manuscript to the other three, is that in this one the illustrations accompanying the techniques for the heavy lance show the riders using shields. There is also a separate illustration where Fiore explains the counter to the technique where the opponent gets thrown to the ground together with his horse.

2.2 Morgan

The mounted combat section in the Morgan manuscript consists of 32 illustrations covering 13 pages. The section is located at the beginning of the treatise starting on folio 2 verso directly after the foreword. The text in this manuscript is, also, in plain Italian.

The riders are not depicted using shields in this manuscript. The illustration to the counter to the technique where the opponent gets thrown to the ground together with his horse has been omitted, but the counter is explained in the text of the technique itself. There is an additional illustration in the beginning of the

techniques for sword against sword, which shows crossing of the swords close to the hilt. The accompanying text explains that neither of the riders have an advantage and what one can do so can the other.

2.3 Pisani-Dossi

The mounted combat section in the Pisani-Dossi manuscript consists of 32 illustrations covering 12 pages. The section is located towards the end of the treatise, but not last, starting on carta 29 A. There are some additional techniques on dagger against sword and on pole axe after the mounted combat section. The text in this manuscript is composed of short rhyming paragraphs in Italian.

When using the heavy lance the riders are depicted using shields in this manuscript. And the additional illustration with the crossing of the swords is present. There is no illustration or text about the counter to the technique where the opponent gets thrown to the ground together with his horse.

2.4 BnF

The mounted combat section in the BnF manuscript consists of 19 illustrations in full colour covering 10 pages. The section is located at the beginning of the treatise starting on folio 2 recto directly after the *segno* page¹. The text in this manuscript consists of short paragraphs in Latin.

There are no shields depicted in this manuscript. Throughout the mounted combat section several counters are omitted compared to the other three manuscripts. Additionally, two techniques are absent: how to tie a rope at the end of your lance or spear to pull the opponent to the ground, and how to take the reins away from the opponent.

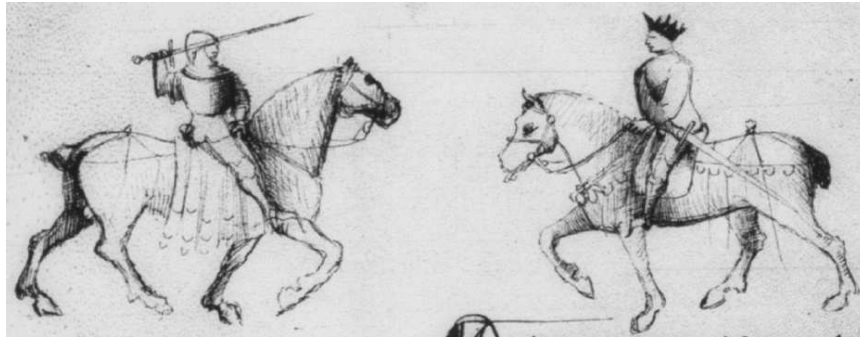
3 Cutting the horse's head

When dealing with sword blows whilst mounted we naturally have to take the mount's head into account. However the horse's head is in the way of the blade as little as for example our own wrist is in the way of the hilt when doing sword handling exercises on foot. Windsor (2004) teaches us to slightly adjust the angle of the sword to have the crossguard miss the arm. With a similar minor adjustment of the cutting line during mounted cutting the horse may keep its head.

In the mounted combat section Fiore does not show us all the seven blows of the sword. But the blows he shows us indicates what can be done. For example, the

¹ Page with an illustration depicting the seven blows of the sword and four animals representing the virtues: caution, speed, courage and strength, needed to excel in this art.

Master of *Coda Longa*², with the sword low on the left side, will have the sword travel up and over to the right side (fig. 1). I think it is reasonable to say that a descending blow from the right to left would have the sword travel in the same path and completely miss the horse's head. Practical cutting exercises whilst mounted tell us that it is possible to execute *fendenti* and *sottani* blows on both *mandritto* and *riverso*.³



1. Master of *Coda Longa* to the right with his sword low on the left and the opponent on his right, folio 45 verso, Getty manuscript.

4 Passing the opponent

In mounted combat and especially when riding at high speed we always pass the opponent. The side on which we pass the opponent change with the weapon at hand. When using the heavy lance with shield we want to pass to the right of the opponent. As we have our shield on our left arm it would just be unwise to have the oncoming lance on our right side. In 1548 Quixada tells us, according to Anglo (2000), “that the lance should be aimed across the horse towards the left”. Or as Basta advised the knight in 1612, according to Anglo (2000), “to cross his lance over his horse's neck, past its left ear; gain the left side of his opponent”.

When using the spear or sword we want to pass the opponent to the left, as this give us extended reach and increased manoeuvrability. As right handed sword-wielding riders we simply can not reach as far on the left side as on our right without disturbing the horse. When leaning out from the horse we can make him lose his balance or acquire problems in steering him and not being able to choose on which side we will have the opponent. Steering the horse is not primarily done by the reins but, as Wood (2007) lets us know, with our whole body and it is especially important how we use our legs. In order to have good contact with the horse and thereby enabling excellent steering, we need our body to be relaxed and

² When Fiore introduces a new guard he does so through a Master named after the guard he is depicted in.

³ *Fendenti* sword blows are descending in a slight angle to the vertical. If the sword is travelling on the same line but in the opposite direction it would be a *sottano*. *Mandritto* in the context of cutting implies forehand and *riverso* backhand. For a right handed swordsman *sottano riverso* would start low on the left side and end high on the right side.

in balance over the mount. Therefore it is not recommended to overreach on any side, tensing up and thus losing contact with the horse. Dom Duarte, according to Preto (2005), repeats throughout his book that you need to stay upright in the saddle to solve all kinds of dangerous situations you might find yourself in.

Quixada, according to Anglo (2000), also lets us know that riding with lances “has to be done on the left hand side, and sword blows have to be done on the right hand side”. This implies that we should pass to the right when we use a lance and pass to the left with the sword. Fiore do tell us through the Master of *Coda Longa* to pass to the left when using the sword, see the text from the Master of *Coda Longa* below. But Fiore never mentions the passing side when using the heavy lance.

This position of the sword is called *Coda Lunga*; it is very good against the lance and any other handheld weapon, as you ride to the right side of the opponent.⁴ Bear in mind that thrusts and *riversi* must be beaten out to the side, and not upward; *fendente* should similarly be beaten out to the side, lifting slightly the opponent’s weapon. From this guard, you can perform the plays illustrated.

Master of *Coda Longa*, folio 45 verso, Leoni (2009).

However, through the second Master of *Coda Longa* he lets us know that “the opponent comes towards you to the left”, see the text from the second Master of *Coda Longa* below. I am inclined to believe that Fiore means when we pass to the right. Especially when he claims that the same guard of *Coda Longa* counters *all* the blows.

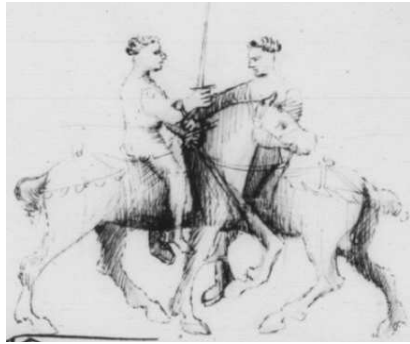
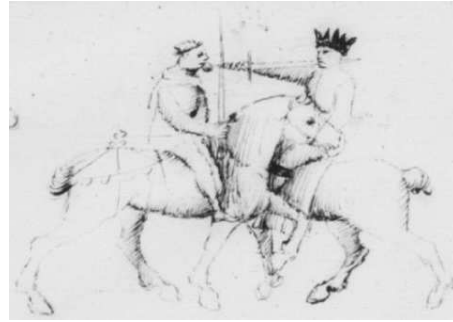
This same guard of *Coda Lunga* is good when the opponent comes towards you to the left, as does this one. Bear in mind that this guard counters all the blows on the *mandritto* and the *riverso* side, and is usable against right- or left-handed opponents. We will now see the plays of *Coda Lunga*, from which you always parry as I have described in the first illustration of the guard.

Second Master of *Coda Longa*, folio 45 verso, Leoni (2009).

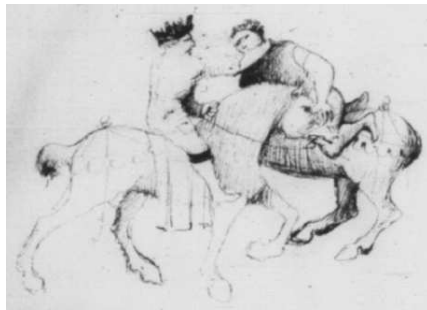
Furthermore in the sixth and eighth plays of *Coda Longa* and in the fourth play of *abrazare*⁵ they all pass to the right (figs. 2-4).

⁴ That would be on the opponent’s right side or to the left as we would think of it.

⁵ *Abrazare* is unarmed fighting or grappling.

2. Sixth play of *Coda Longa*.3. Eighth play of *Coda Longa*.

2-3. The riders are depicted passing to the right while using the sword, folio 46 verso, Getty manuscript.



4. Fourth play of *abrazare* where the riders are depicted passing to the right, folio 47 verso, Getty manuscript.

In the three other manuscripts the sixth and eighth plays of *Coda Longa* and fourth play of *abrazare* the riders are all depicted passing to the left. Could the illustrations in the Getty manuscript just be some errors by the artist? Actually, since what we want and what we get are two different things, there would have been passes to the right with the sword, especially during a *mêlée*⁶. Therefore it would not surprise me if Fiore shows us some of the mounted swordplay that actually works while passing to the right. And also why, when he explains that the eighth play of *Coda Longa* counters *all* plays before this, he has the riders passing to the right, see the text from the eighth play of *Coda Longa* below.

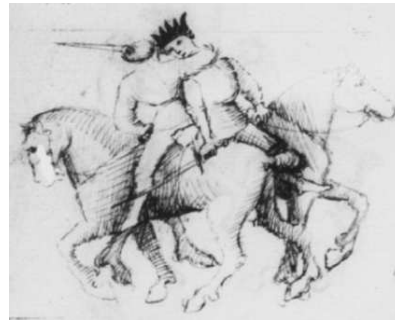
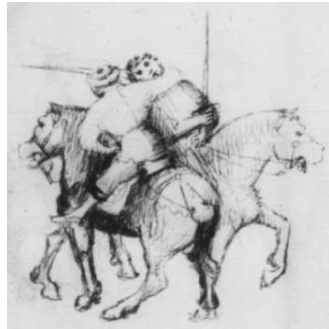
This is the eighth play, which counters all the plays before this – especially those of mounted sword and their Masters in *Coda Lunga*. When the Masters or students are in this guard, I attack them with thrust or other blow, they will try to parry. So when I deliver a thrust or other blow, I quickly turn my sword and strike them in the face with the pommel. Then I pass with my quick cover and strike the back of their head with a *riverso tondo*⁷.

Eighth play of *Coda Longa*, folio 46 verso, Leoni (2009).

⁶ *Mêlée* is the mounted combat that occurs after a cavalry attack when all the riders are mixed together in a sort of chaos.

⁷ *Tondo* is not further explained by Leoni, but would from the context imply a kind of horizontal cut. The later Bolognese swordsmanship tradition has *tondo* defined as a horizontal cut.

Practical exercises with and without horses let us know that the plays of *Coda Longa* are quite easily performed while we pass to the right. There are of course some differences. In the sixth play, which is the counter to the disarm in the fourth play, there is far less time to perform it on the left side due to the fact that we have our sword arm across our chest. We simply can not continue the action behind our chest if needed, as we can on our right side. Also the fifth and seventh plays need to be performed differently from the manner they are depicted for obvious reasons (figs. 5-6).

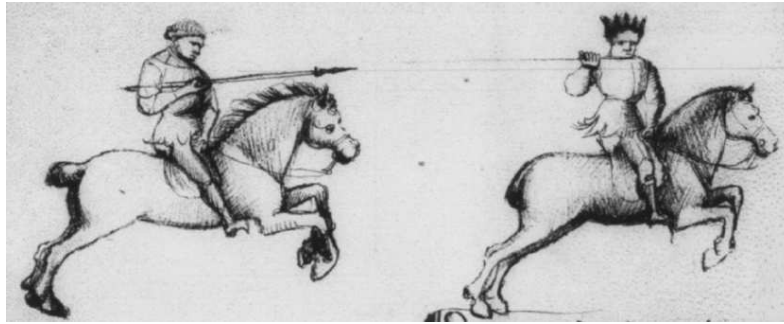


5. Fifth play of *Coda Longa*. 6. Seventh play of *Coda Longa*.

5-6. Fifth and seventh plays of *Coda Longa* where one of the riders have his sword arm around the opponent's neck, folio 46 verso, Getty manuscript.

5 Disengaging from combat

The important matter when running away is from where the opponent is closing in. Whether we are in or out of armour is not as important. Again with the limited reach on our left hind side we would prefer if we were caught up on the right side. Gaiani in 1619, according to Anglo (2000), even instructs the knight “to keep any ditch or other obstacle to his left, so that a pursuing enemy is forced to overtake on the right”. I would therefore presume that Fiore in the last play of spear against spear wants to remind us to engage a pursuing opponent from our right side to be able to continue the fight (fig. 7). That Fiore points out the fact that the Master who is running away is out of armour, see the text from the last play of spear against spear below, can not be significant. Especially since the same Master in the Pisani-Dossi manuscript is in armour, and in the BnF manuscript at least the horse has armour.



7. Last play of spear against spear where the Master is running away and turns to his right to face the pursuing opponent, folio 44 recto, Getty manuscript.

This Master who's fleeing is not armored; while his horse runs fast, he throws backward thrusts with his lance to strike his opponent. If he turned to his right, he would be in *Dente di Cinghiaro* with his lance, or in left *Posta di Donna*; he could parry and strike as is possible in the first and third plays of the lance.

Last play of the spear against spear, folio 44 recto, Leoni (2009).

6 Conclusions

In the section with mounted combat in the treatise *Fior di Battaglia* Fiore dei Liberi covers the use of heavy lance, spear, sword and unarmed fighting. Even though the four known extant manuscripts are quite similar to each other, there are differences. When studying the manuscripts they act as supplements to each other.

When dealing with mounted combat we must remember that we are first and foremost riding a horse and have to adjust our actions accordingly. It is of utmost importance that we stay upright and relaxed in the saddle in order to enable excellent steering and thus be able to ride in the direction and at the pace we want to ride. This will also aid us in our quest to use the horse to our advantage over the opponent.

With our limited reach on our left side when using the sword, we would prefer to pass the opponent to the left. However, this might not always be possible, but Fiore shows us mounted swordplay that works both when passing to the left and right.

It is vital to know where the opponent is, not only when facing him, but also when running away from him. With our limited reach on our left hind side we should engage a pursuing opponent from our right side to be able to continue the fight.

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