

Early Iberian Fencing

by Tim Rivera

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Sources

Although Jerónimo Sánchez de Carranza is commonly known as the father of Spanish fencing, systematized Spanish swordplay existed before the publication of his work in the late 16th century and persisted into the 18th century. The problem with determining the nature of this “common” fencing is that we have little first hand material. Of the three known Iberian authors who wrote before Carranza – Jaime Pons and Pedro de la Torre in 1474, Francisco Román in 1532 – no copies of their works have yet been located; in order to determine their content, we rely on later authors who cite those works.

A manuscript fragment (in Spanish) dating to 1580 has been located, which appears to a transcription of two paragraphs of an older work.¹ There is no reference to the title, author, or date of the original, but it bears a strong resemblance to a complete manuscript called Art of Fencing (*Arte de Esgrima*), written in 1599 by Domingo Luis Godinho. Both are devoid of any of the theory or terminology which is characteristic of Carranza's *verdadera destreza*, and are strongly based on the “nails-up” and “nails-down” positions that later authors say is characteristic of the older or common style.² In addition, two other fragments on the rules of the *montante* (two-handed sword) have been found: one from 1599 reciting the rules of Pablo de Paredes,³ and the other a scribble of *montante* rules in the margin of a theology book published in 1563.⁴

Manuscript 1580

The following English translation of the MS 1580 fragment is based on the transcription in the paper by Drs. Valle and Curtis in which it first appeared.⁵ The first paragraph follows (ellipses indicate text which could not be reconstructed in the transcription):

Firstly, a nails-up ripped *tajo* [*rasgado*] and withdrawing the right foot that is in front, and taking it and continuing with a nails-down *reves*, withdrawing the foot, and taking the left foot forward with a [...] that doesn't uncover the body, and then the right foot with a *reves* in the same small manner, and like this give four similar, and turn back to [...] with the right foot, playing the sword in this same manner that [...]

This reads very similarly to the first part of Godinho's fifth chapter:⁶

...the disciple will be positioned with the feet together, and putting in the right foot, he will put in a *tajo*, extending as much as he will be able, and when the *tajo* goes withdrawing, he withdraws the foot that he had placed at the same time, putting it where he took it. Then he returns to put in a *reves*, extending it the most that he will be able, and in the *reves* passing, he withdraws the foot as he withdrew with the *tajo*. Then he puts in a *tajo* with the left foot... Then in this form he puts in the right foot with a *reves*, and goes cutting with this step however much will be necessary.

These passages seem to describe the same rule, which Godinho calls “How to cut.” A ripped *tajo* (or *tajo rasgado*) is a cut that is often mentioned by Godinho, and is equated with breaking (*romper*, which is mentioned by many authors) in his seventh chapter.⁷

The second paragraph in the MS 1580 fragment offers more:

ahead and after testing [*tentando*] the opposing sword on the inside [...] it will remain, give him a thrust to the eyes and if he will put it in below mine, lifting it up. But if he will remove it quickly and give me a thrust to the chest on the outside, I will raise the point of my sword a little to [...] and will part his sword to the outside and give him a *reves* and taking the foot back I will be established with the sword point to the eye [...] would be the opposite, if he would come to me on the outside [...] to me, I will place mine nails-down, if he will enter to me on the inside I will place my sword nails-up, always aiming a thrust to the best place on him, always defending my body with the guards of the quillions direct nails-down direct nails-up according to what I say above.

Testing (*tentando*) the sword and following with a nails-up thrust to the face is listed as the first vulgar (common) technique by Carranza.⁸ Godinho advises testing frequently, even describing the same technique as MS 1580:⁹

The two armed nails-up, if one of them will go to test the opponent's sword, and he consents to it, he travels with a nails-up thrust to the eyes.

It is also a technique that Luis Pacheco de Narvaez described as having a Spanish origin and being little-used elsewhere.¹⁰ The latter part of the second paragraph in the MS 1580 fragment is what Godinho describes as the three general rules in his first chapter:¹¹

The first is that every time that a person would be attacked by his opponent on the right side, whether by a *reves* or any thrust, it has to be defended with a nails-down thrust. The second is that every time that one would be attacked on the left side, whether by a *tajo* or any thrust, it has to be defended nails up. The third is that it not only has to be defended by being parried, but with said thrusts injuring the enemy.

Art of Fencing (1599, Domingo Luis Godinho)

Godinho was Portuguese, but wrote the treatise in Spanish (with bits of Portuguese grammar and vocabulary). The manuscript is unillustrated, almost 140 folios long, covers sword alone, sword and shield, sword and buckler, sword and dagger, sword and cloak, two swords, and *montante*. It describes a comprehensive system that contains most of the elements that contemporary authors attribute to the styles of the old authors.

The primary position described by Godinho is established with the point of the sword to the enemy, with the hand either nails-up or nails-down. He also describes various postures that depart from this, with the sword held high or low, giving counters when the opponent attacks into the openings created. Pacheco says Román called it inciting (*incitar*) or inviting (*llamar*) an attack, though Pons was the first to write about it.¹² As both a counter and an attack, Godinho describes a thrust to the hand,¹³ which Pacheco says only de la Torre approved of and wrote about.¹⁴ Against a nails-up thrust on the inside, one of the most frequent counters described by Godinho is called thrusting by the same edges (*por los mismos filos*), which de la Torre also advised, calling it wounding by the same attack (*erir por el mismo acometimiento*);¹⁵ in Pacheco's depiction of common Spanish fencing, he also described thrusting by the edges (*por los filos*).¹⁶

Godinho's method of fighting with other weapon combinations is built on the foundation of the sword alone. With sword and shield, Godinho says that all attacks are better given low,¹⁷ which is the same advice given by Pons and Román.¹⁸ With sword and dagger against sword alone, Godinho says that it is best to parry with the sword and wound with the dagger,¹⁹ which de la Torre also advises.²⁰ Fighting with two swords is taught by Godinho in rules, with many of the same contexts and movements as the *montante*. His first two-sword rule is a *reves* with the left sword, followed by a *tajo* with the right.²¹ According to Pacheco, de la Torre (who claims to have invented his method of fighting with two swords) describes a similar movement of parrying with the left sword and wounding the left arm with the right sword.²²

Montante

There are many sources for the *montante*, due to several 17th century *verdadera destreza* authors including rules for its use.²³ Three 16th century sources have been found, ranging from a complete work (Godinho), to a terse description of rules (de Paredes), to anonymous notes scribbled in a margin. The twelve *montante* rules of Pablo de Paredes were related by a Flemish man named Jehan L'hermite who learned them in Spain. Each rule is a short sentence with no elaboration; Paredes had written them down for L'hermite, who decided to reproduce the notes in his book. L'hermite had forgotten the rules for two swords that he was taught, saying that he never found them in a written form.²⁴ The last is a short list of seven *montante* rules which were penned in the margin of a theology book.²⁵ Much like L'hermite's list, they are short sentences with no elaboration.

There were said to be seven *montante* rules before being expanded by Román to include contexts such as narrow or wide streets.²⁶ Godinho gives rules for *montante* use in contexts such as facing another *montante*, narrow street, surrounded in a wide street, four streets, or plaza, facing two shieldmen, guarding a lady or cloak, and separating a fight;²⁷ Carranza mocks these same rules with his satirical depiction of a common fencing master who names the rules attacking at four streets, guarding a cloak, defending a girl, leaving a narrow street without a lesson, cleaning a plaza, surrendering to two shieldmen, making a *montante*-wielder contradict himself, and putting in peace.²⁸ The twelve rules of Pablo de Paredes contain many of the same contexts, including making space, a narrow street, guarding a cloak, a round plaza, and a wide street. Pacheco also says that the old-style fencers make a horizontal cut to the legs with the *montante* against two shieldmen,²⁹ which is Godinho's fifth rule.³⁰

There are many similarities in movements across the three sources, but one rule in particular is common to all three. The anonymous marginalia gives it as the fourth rule:

Three flying *tajos* [*volados*] and turn with another three *reveses*.

Lhermite gives it as the fourth rule of de Paredes as well:

Three turns with three *tajos* entering, and three *reveses* leaving.

While Godinho gives it as his tenth rule, for being surrounded in a plaza:³¹

...established on the left foot, he cuts a *tajo*. Then he cuts another putting in the right foot, in a manner that he goes sideways, alternating left and right foot, cutting *tajos* in a continuous motion, circling himself in a wheel with the *montante*, giving a *tajo* at each step, which may be up to three or four, and not passing five because of the danger that it can have in weakening the head. These steps with *tajos* finished, he returns to where he started with other steps with *reveses*, in the same order as the *tajos*, giving a *reves* at each step of the foot, and circling his whole body with the *reves*.

Conclusion

Godinho's *Arte de Esgrima* is the only complete treatise on Iberian swordplay that has been found which is not based on *la verdadera destreza*. Having been written after Carranza published his work, but before any of Pacheco's publications, it originates from the beginning of the shift away from the old style. The similarity between the MS 1580 fragment and Godinho suggests that Godinho draws from an earlier tradition, though it is missing some elements of what the old authors wrote. There is enough similarity to fragmentary contemporary sources and references that later authors made about the methods and terminology of the old style to say that Godinho's treatise can be taken as a representative example of common Iberian fencing, as a continuation of the styles of the old authors from the 15th and 16th centuries.

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