

AN ESSAY  
CONTAINING

A DETAILED COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

OF THE TREATISE OF HENRI DE SAINT DIDIER

to the treatises of Giovanni Antonio Lovino, Domingo

Luis Godinho, and Pedro de Heredia, illuminating

their technical similarities, in order to establish

a place for Saint Didier's treatise, very

useful and beneficial to all

supporters of the arts

of Mars.

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## Sources

Saint Didier's treatise on the sword alone was published in 1573 in Paris, dedicated to Charles IX of France. It contains an essay on the secrets of the sword, along with 64 images of an instructor (the Lieutenant) teaching his student (the Provost) sword drawing, counters, geometric footwork patterns, disarms, and more intricate counters. It concludes with an essay on the similarities of swordplay with the forerunner of tennis (*jeu de la paulme*). To understand this text, it's important to keep in mind that the demonstrations depict the Lieutenant teaching the Provost, rather than depicting a fight between two combatants.

Lovino's manuscript was written in Italian sometime between 1574 and 1589, to Henry III of France. It consists of 66 illustrations showing mostly duels over matters of honor, followed by a dialog on the secrets of arms. It covers drawing the sword, sword alone, grappling with the sword, sword and dagger, cloak, buckler, and round shield, two swords, hand-and-a-half sword, two-handed sword, multiple opponents, polearms, and horseback.

Godinho's manuscript was written in Spanish in 1599, though the author is Portuguese. It's unillustrated, almost 140 folios long, and covers drawing the sword, sword alone, sword and round shield, buckler, dagger, and cloak, two swords, two-handed sword, multiple opponents, and ways to gain the upper hand before a fight begins.

Heredia's manuscript was written in French, probably in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The author is presumed to be Pedro de Heredia, although no author is given. Two sets of illustrations have been found, and it covers sword alone, disarms, countering the "mathematical play," sword and dagger, sword and cloak, and grappling with the sword.

## Secrets of the sword

Saint Didier outlines six points which will help one understand the secrets of the single sword. The first is that there are only two stances, either left foot forward, or right foot forward. Of the two, Saint Didier prefers the left foot forward, as it gives more time and space to attack and defend (4r). Within the techniques he depicts, any forward step is with the rear foot passing forward, and any rearward step is with the front foot passing back. In addition to which foot is forward, Lovino also specifies the distance between a combatant's feet in a stance (*passo*), including when the feet are together (*voto*), something Saint Didier depicts only before drawing the sword. Lovino does not give a preference for a particular foot in front. Godinho gives no preference either, except to say that it's better to put the left foot forward when the sword is fingernails-down (40v). Godinho advises stepping in the manner of a natural walk, but that one can also step while keeping the right foot in front (13v). Heredia prefers the right foot in front, weight over the left leg (4), and has four methods of stepping, only one of which has the left foot passing the right (8).

The second point in Saint Didier's essay is that there are three guards: low (hip-height), middle (shoulder-height), and high (just above shoulder-height). The low guard has a right variation and a left variation, although they are considered the same, as the low guard is often used to draw an attack to the upper body (Saint Didier 4v). Lovino states that of all the guards, two are the most useful: outside (palm-down) and inside (palm-up), and that they can be done high or low (2). Godinho has no explicit guards, but speaks of the sword arm being fingernails-up or fingernails-down. He sometimes mentions an opponent having the sword lowered, which draws an attack to the upper body. Heredia uses guards numbered one to four (5), matching with Agrippa's four guards.

For the third point, Saint Didier defines all strikes as either a forehand cut (*maindroict* or *avant main*), a backhand cut (*renvers* or *arriere main*), or a thrust (*estoc*). He states that all strikes are one of these three types, specifically rejecting the Italian *fendente* as never being truly straight down, and therefore either forehand or backhand, and he also dismisses the Italian division of thrusts into *stocatta* and *imbrocatta* (Saint Didier 6r-7v). Lovino uses the term *imbrocatta* only once (6), using *stocatta* or *punta* the rest of the time to refer to a thrust. He has many more labels for his cuts – in addition to *mandritto* and *roverso*, he uses the qualifiers of *fendente*, *sgualebrato*, *tondo*, and *montante*. Godinho classifies all strikes as forehand cut (*tajo*), backhand cut (*reves*), or thrust (*punta* or *estocada*). Heredia divides thrusts into *estocade* (fingernails-up) and *brocade* (fingernails-down), and divides cuts into *cortelade* (forehand) and *revers* (backhand), using the term *stramaçon* once (76).

Saint Didier's fourth point is that there are six targets for the three strikes: low forehand cut to the back of the left knee (*jarret*), low backhand cut to the back of the knee (*jarret*), high forehand cut to the shoulder, high backhand cut to the shoulder, thrust to the left nipple, thrust to the right nipple (5r). None of the other authors give these explicit targets, although Heredia does mention a backhand cut to the back of the knee (*jarret*) twice (80, 82).

The fifth point is one that Saint Didier makes in many places in his treatise, that one must attack and defend at the same time with the three strikes. However, the bulk of his defenses show the Provost defending with a parry and merely presenting a thrust. This apparent contradiction can be explained by the occasional reminders that the Lieutenant is instructing the Provost. Given this, it makes sense that the student would simply present the thrust to the instructor, showing that the defense is correct, rather than following through to actually thrust at the instructor. Lovino's defenses are nearly all parries followed by a counter, rather than defending and attacking at the same time. Godinho's first chapter provides three general rules for defense: defend the outside fingernails-down, the inside fingernails-up, and defend and attack with a thrust at the same time (12r). This bears a striking resemblance to Saint Didier's counters, as 17 of the 25 counters he describes as crossing the sword to present a thrust are explicitly described as fingernails-down or fingernails-up; most of the remaining reference the position of the back of the hand as up or down. Heredia does not often describe defenses in sword alone, stating that the right side of the body is for offense, while the left side is for defense (7). When defenses are described, they are sometimes parry and riposte, and sometimes defense and offense at the same time, usually dodging the body or using the left hand to deflect.

Saint Didier's sixth point is that one must recognize the blows that are possible and their counters, and for this, one has to watch the point of the opponent's sword (5v). None of the other authors speak on this subject.

## Sword drawing

The beginning of Saint Didier's treatise depicts the Lieutenant showing the Provost how to draw the sword in one of three ways (21v-26r). The first is to step back with the right foot and draw the sword back into a middle or high guard. The second is to keep the right foot near the left and draw the sword upward before settling into a guard. The third is to put the right foot in front, and draw the sword, turning the hand fingernails-up, then complete the draw by stepping back with the right, and turning the hand so that the back of the hand is up.

Lovino also begins his treatise with sword drawing (1-2), but only teaches one: stepping back with the right foot and drawing to an outside guard with the palm down. Godinho's third chapter shows his method of sword drawing, which is to step back with the right and remain fingernails-down (13r). Heredia doesn't cover drawing the sword.

## Countering the blows to the six targets

The next section of Saint Didier's treatise is dedicated to showing the counters against the blows to the six targets. After the Provost's counter to the initial strike, the Lieutenant follows with two more strikes, either cuts or thrusts, to the high line on both sides. The Provost's counter to each successive blow is shown and described.

The first blow is a low forehand to the back of the left knee. The Provost steps back to counter with a forehand cut to the Lieutenant's sword arm. Saint Didier explicitly says not to cross swords on a low cut, as some ignorant teachers say to do (29v). Next, the Lieutenant recognizes the cut to the arm and immediately lifts the arm to give a high backhand cut, which the Provost defends by crossing the sword and presenting a thrust. Again, the Lieutenant recognizes that the Provost will defend the backhand, and so he will *desrober* below the Provost's hilt and give a high forehand cut, which the Provost defends by crossing the sword and presenting a thrust. The second series mirrors the same pattern, but introduces the thrust as a possible follow-up: a low backhand to the back of the right knee, followed by a high forehand cut or thrust, and *desrober* below the hilt to high backhand cut or thrust. The Provost again counters with a backhand cut to the arm, crossing nails-up with a thrust, and crossing fingertips-down with a thrust, respectively. Saint Didier does not define *desrober*, but always qualifies it as going below the opponent's hilt or sword. The modern French *dérober* is a fencing term that indicates an evasion of the blade from the opponent's attempt to contact it with his own.

The remaining series of attacks by the Lieutenant follow a predictable pattern. The third is a high forehand, followed by *desrober* to high backhand and *desrober* to high forehand. The fourth is a high backhand, followed by *desrober* to high forehand and *desrober* to high backhand. The fifth is a thrust to the left nipple, followed by *desrober* to high backhand and *desrober* to high forehand or another thrust. The final series is all thrusts: first to the Provost's right side, *desrober* to thrust on the left, *desrober* to thrust on the right again. All of the counters to these are the same; to the forehand cut or the thrust on the left, the Provost will cross the sword nails-up and present a thrust, and to the backhand cut or the thrust on the right, he will cross the sword nails-down and present a thrust.

Lovino always deals with a low cut by withdrawing the leg and parrying. He describes parries to high cuts and thrusts as well, but generally not with a thrust at the same time. A counter-thrust is advised in one place, when the attacker's thrust is formed improperly (Lovino 9). He also does not describe how the sword travels from inside to outside after a feint.

As stated previously, Godinho's general rules call for defending nails-up or nails-down with a thrust given to counter cuts and thrusts, both high and low. Although Godinho does describe cutting the sword arm or elbow to counter cuts, he doesn't specifically mention it against a low cut, though he does describe a cut to the arm when it is lowered (22r). The most frequently-advised counter to a low cut is withdrawing the leg and attacking the head, but he doesn't advise against crossing the swords low. Godinho does describe freeing (*librar*) below to evade a defense, following it with both thrusts and cuts to the high line.

Heredia's defense against a low cut is to withdraw the leg and give a cut to the head at the same time (82). Counter-thrusts against other thrusts are advised, but never against cuts, which are always parried, then followed with a thrust or another cut. Heredia uses the term *desrober* once to describe evading a beat from the opponent's left hand (67), seemingly equating it with the Italian-derived *caver*, which is used throughout the treatise.

## Triangle and quadrangle stepping

Each of the previous blows in Saint Didier's treatise was accompanied by passing the rear foot forward; the next section is a series of three high blows wherein the first is delivered by passing the rear foot forward, and the subsequent blows are delivered with one of the feet moving laterally. For the triangle stepping, the Lieutenant passes his right foot forward with a high thrust, followed by moving his right foot to the left and *desrober* to a thrust or backhand, followed by moving his right foot to the right to its previous position and *desrober* to a thrust or forehand. In defense, the Provost passes his left foot backward for the initial blow, but remains in place for the two subsequent blows; the sword crosses nails-up and nails-down, presenting a thrust, the same as in the previous section.

For the quadrangle stepping, the Lieutenant passes his right foot forward with a high thrust, followed by moving his left foot to the left and *desrober*, followed by moving his right foot to the left and *desrober* to a forehand or thrust. No strike is described for the second step of the quadrangle, but the reference to the illustration and the description of the Provost's defense seem to imply that it would be a high backhand or thrust, fitting with the pattern established previously in the treatise. The footwork and counters for the Provost are the same as those described in the triangle stepping.

The other authors occasionally speak of moving to the right or left, but give no detail on the footwork.

## Disarms

Saint Didier presents four disarms, each ending with the point of the sword at the opponent. The first is from a high crossed position on the inside, where the Lieutenant throws a high forehand cut or nails-up thrust, the Provost defends, then steps in with the left foot, grabs the Lieutenant's quillons with the left hand, twists the sword under the arm and steps back. The same disarm is shown by the Lieutenant as a counter to the same disarm, after delivering the forehand or thrust; the Provost executes the disarm as well, and both end up with the other's sword, stepping back to put it in their right hand.

The second disarm is shown by the Lieutenant, who feints a high forehand cut or thrust to draw the Provost's defense, then steps forward with the left and *desrober* to a high backhand cut, which the Provost attempts to defend, but the Lieutenant grabs the Provost's quillons with the left hand, having his sword crossed strong-to-weak, presenting a thrust. The Provost is then shown doing the same disarm to the Lieutenant, after the same series of attacks by the Lieutenant, but successfully recognizing the feint and defending the backhand cut.

The third disarm is shown again by the Lieutenant, who gives a high forehand cut or thrust, which the Provost defends. The Lieutenant then grabs the flat of the Provost's blade and twists it under his arm, presenting a thrust. The Provost is then shown performing the disarm after defending the Lieutenant's initial attack.

The last disarm is partially demonstrated by the Lieutenant; he delivers a high forehand cut or thrust, which the Provost goes to defend. The Lieutenant then circles his point under the Provost's sword and over his arm, remaining nails-up, and grabs the Provost's blade near the point. He then tells the Provost that he can press down with his hand and disarm the Provost, which the Provost will do to him next. The next illustration depicts the Lieutenant having given a high forehand cut or thrust, and the Provost performing the same disarm.

Neither Lovino nor Godinho have disarms, although both make use of grabbing the opponent's hilt while striking the opponent. Heredia also grabs the opponent's hilt to strike, but also describes two that have the effect of disarming the opponent. The first is done by parrying an opponent's thrust on the inside and grabbing the hilt which, combined with the force of the parry, will remove the enemy's sword from his hand (Heredia 68). The description of the second is less clear:

You can also have your point under the enemy's guard inside, and finding his a little high, you will circle below his guard to the joint of the arm outside, the point a little inside the arm in order to cross better, and at the same time you will lead his sword with the hand outside under your sword, so the sword will be forced to be removed. (Heredia 68-9)

## Intricacies of the sword alone

The final series of actions that Saint Didier presents deal with low cuts and their defenses. Saint Didier repeats the assertion that crossing the sword against a low cut is the mark of an ignorant swordsman, and says that throwing a low cut serves to determine whether the opponent is clever or not (79v). The Provost is shown first crossing the sword to defend against a low forehand, then shown defending against the same attack with a cut to the arm. The next series shows the danger of crossing the sword against a low cut: the Lieutenant attacks with a backhand cut to the back of the right knee, and as the Provost comes to cross swords, the Lieutenant changes his target to the Provost's arm. The last illustration shows the counter to a cut to the arm. The Lieutenant gives a backhand cut to the back of the right knee, and as the Provost goes to cut the arm, the Lieutenant raises his sword arm and crosses the Provost's sword, presenting a thrust to the chest.

Lovino and Heredia don't deal with cuts to the arm against a low cut. Godinho describes a forehand cut to the arm when the opponent's arm is lowered, with one of the counters to it being a nails-up thrust against it (22v).

## Conclusions

What all four treatises have in common is a reliance on two hand positions for their defense with the sword. Lovino calls them the inside guard and outside guard, but the other three refer to them as nails-up and nails-down, which is also used to describe how a thrust is delivered. Although Heredia commonly uses the terms *estocade* and *brocade*, he defines them as nails-up and nails-down, respectively (13). Saint Didier's counters and tactics align most closely with Godinho's, as both prefer a counter-thrust that defends and attacks at the same time, rather than a parry and riposte, and both eschew beats to the opponent's blade before attacking.

The nails-up/down terminology is characteristic of old Spanish swordsmanship (Pacheco 49v, 153v; Vélez 62r). Its presence in both Saint Didier and Heredia could mean that they were influenced by Spanish swordplay; Saint Didier never mentions where he learned to fence, and the Heredia treatise is presumed to be written by a Spaniard, containing some techniques of Spanish origin, including defense against "mathematical play." Alternatively, the nails-up/down terminology may also be a part of early French swordplay, especially southern France, as Saint Didier refers to himself as a Provençal gentleman throughout his treatise. Heredia uses many Italian terms, which might indicate that they were imported and fused with a native French or Spanish style.

The division of strikes into simply forehand cut, backhand cut, and thrust is a common feature in all Spanish fencing, and one that is shared by Saint Didier. Given the other similarities of Saint Didier's style to those of the examined authors, it's likely that his treatise represents a style native to southern France, which would of course share similarities with styles from neighboring Spain and Italy. This would suggest the idea of a continuum of styles across Iberia, France, and Italy, with various elements of commonality between them.

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