

## Florentines Doing "Florentine"

### Combat with Two Swords According to Francesco di Sandro Altoni (c.1540) and Marco Docciolini (1601)



*The "duel of the century" between Ascanio della Corgna and Giovanni Taddei in 1546, conducted with full and half-length swords and an armoured forearm.*

## Combat with Two Swords According to Francesco di Sandro Altoni (c.1540) and Marco Docciolini (1601)

Far from being a modern conceit, combat with two swords at once is described in a number of treatises on historical fencing. Counting Italian sources alone, this combination is covered in no fewer than eleven known treatises.<sup>1</sup> No mere novelty, Di Grassi esteems two swords as the strongest combination short of polearms, while Palladini notes it is particularly apt for dealing with multiple opponents.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore encounters with two swords are attested beyond the technical literature. Two swords, one shorter than the other, with an armoured forearm were used in at least two famous duels in the sixteenth Century involving the renowned *condottiere* Ascanio della Corgna, against the Count of Carpegna (in Bologna) and Giovanni Taddei respectively (the latter, on the 26<sup>th</sup> March 1546, was dubbed the “duel of the century”, watched by nearly three thousand people and later painted by Niccolò Circignani in 1575).

While Martin du Bellay recounts another notable duel with two swords between the Seigneur de Sarzay and the Seigneur de Veniers in 1538, in the presence of Francis I of France.<sup>3</sup>

The use of the term “Florentine” to denote the practice of fighting with two weapons (or more specifically two swords) is ahistorical, originating within the Society for Creative Anachronism (the SCA) in the 1970s.

Nonetheless treatises by Florentine masters have survived to the present day, notably the works of Francesco Altoni (who wrote an unpublished treatise most probably around 1540) and Marco Docciolini (published in 1601) which ironically include the play of two swords.<sup>4</sup>

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1 The known Italian examples being: Agrippa (1553) sig.O1r-O3v, Altoni (2007) p.105-107, Docciolini (1601) p.49-56, Manciolino (1531) sig.46r-48r, Marozzo (1536) sig.22v-24v, Di Grassi (1570) p.85-86 & p.132-136, Lovino (c.1580) sig.51r-52v, Lucino (1589) p.75-78, British Library Additional Manuscript 23223 sig.20v, Palladini (c.1600) sig.68v-70r, and Cassani (1603) p.6-7.

2 Di Grassi (1570) p.132; Palladini (c.1600) sig.69v.

3 Du Bellay (1569) p.269-270.

4 Compared with the other technical sources, the methods of these two Florentine masters, translated below, most closely resemble that of the Bolognese master Camillo Palladini; who like both Altoni and Docciolini, also recommends that two swords be the first discipline to be taught after the sword alone.

## The "Florentine School"

Towards the end of his long life, in 1601 in Florence, Marco Docciolini published a concise exposition of his fencing method and philosophy. Representative of an enduring Florentine tradition, Docciolini's system is distinct, if not wholly unrelated, from those of contemporary masters from other regions, whose works are better known within the modern historical fencing community.

Docciolini can be posited as belonging to a discernible Florentine tradition. His work appears most closely related to the manuscript treatise of Altoni,<sup>5</sup> another Florentine whose work seems to have been composed around 1540, and whose dedication suggests he was the fencing master to Cosimo I de' Medici. In contrast to the better-known works of near contemporaries Manciolino and Marozzo, and presaging Agrippa, Altoni favours attacks with the point, executed from a lunge (although described only in vague terms).

Altoni proposes three principal guards: high, middle and low; which are further subcategorized between guards for the left, center, or right (for a total of nine core guards). Altoni then includes left foot forward variants for each guard (which he terms *assalti*) as well as a *guardia d'unicorno*, and three additional minor guards he does not describe: *guardia chinghiara*, *guardia della volpe*, and *posta sagittaria*.

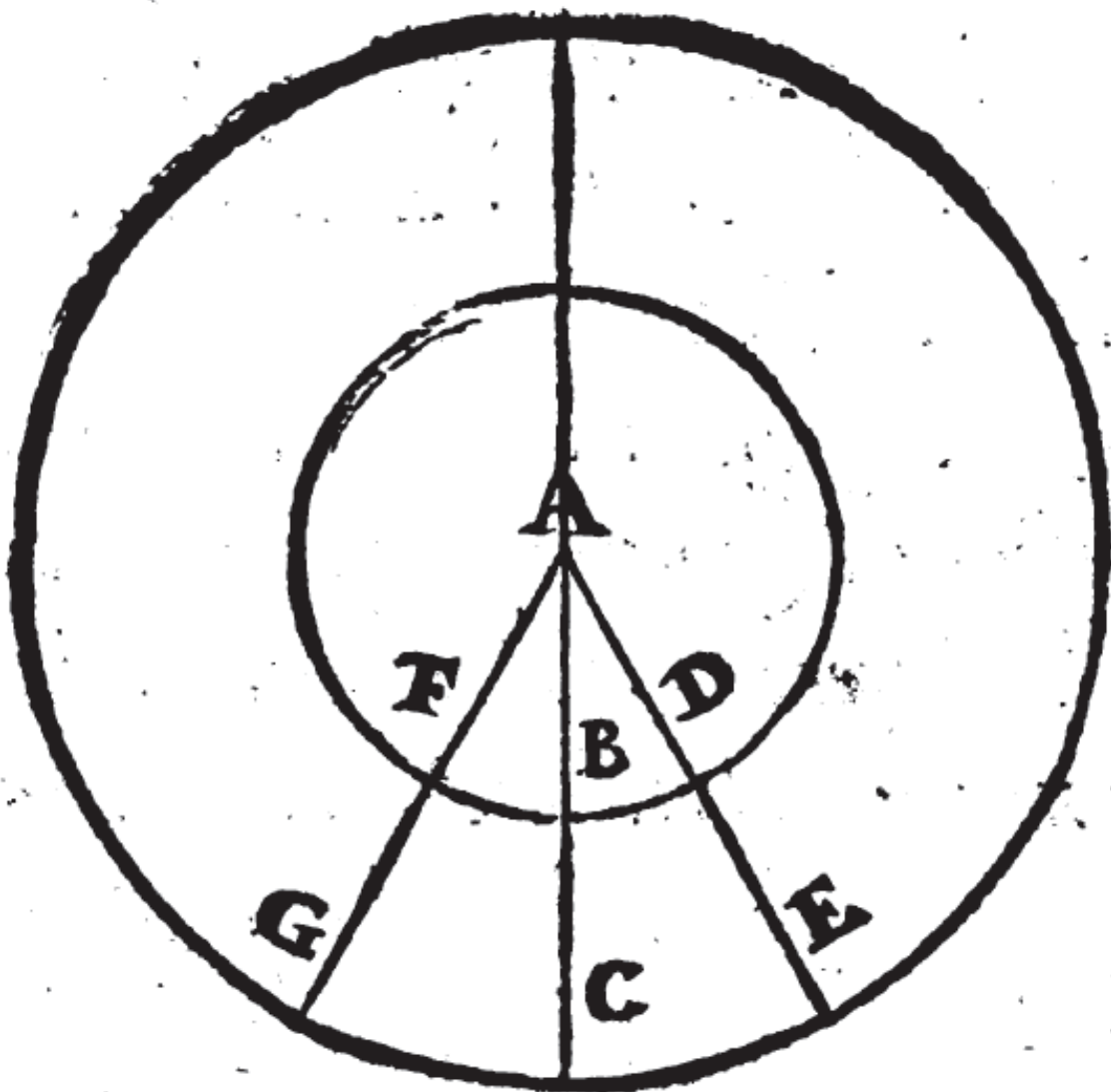
Docciolini appears to develop and rationalize Altoni's guards. Docciolini's high and low guards correspond respectively to Altoni's high and medium guards, while Altoni's low guard is dropped. Docciolini defines Altoni's "left" and "right" guards as counterguards, and renames Altoni's *guardia d'unicorno* as the *imbroccata*. Docciolini also excludes the left-foot forward *assalti* (except with companion weapons) and the three minor guards cited by Altoni.

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<sup>5</sup> This treatise exists in two manuscript versions, one held in the Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati in Siena (MS L.V.23), the other in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence (MS II.III.315).

## Docciolini's Figure

The diagram below is the only figure to be included in Docciolini's treatise, and used to help explain the footwork required by his system. The basic starting position is with the right foot at B pointing forward and the left foot at point C, turned 180 degrees in respect to the right. The feet are to be one third of the fencer's height apart with the heel of the fencer's right foot intersecting the middle of the left foot along the line B to C.



# Francesco di Sandro Altoni - Monomachia (c.1540)

## Book Two - Capitolo IV

Translated by Piermarco Terminiello

Since you can equip your body, arms and hands beyond what I have proposed thus far, I will turn to these matters, and the ways in which a sword can be used. It is reasonable to accompany the single sword with a rotella, targa, buckler or cape. But having discussed the single sword I think it best, before commencing with other topics, to discuss wielding two full-length swords without other arms, two incomplete swords, and the sword and dagger.

Starting with two full-length swords, we must suppose that up till now that the *traversi*<sup>6</sup> have been useful (from here, with these sort of arms, the *traversi* will be essential). They should be taken with as large a step as possible, given the size and ability of the individual; except upon entering the field, when you will be eager to move directly towards your opponent, gaining as much territory as possible until you come into measure. At this point begin with wide, well-balanced *traversi*. The reason the *traversi* must be wide is to counterbalance your body, which supports both hands and the twin defence of your person.

In my view, the method of approaching the enemy should be similar to the form assumed when attacking but looser and not so extended, walking more easily (of which we will speak below in the discussion on entries).<sup>7</sup> As you approach your opponent however, the correct and proper position with these weapons is to put yourself with your right hand in *guardia di ferro di mezzo*<sup>8</sup>, your fist level with your pelvis or your right flank, extending your sword and arm as much as possible, and placing the point under your opponent's shoulder.

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6 Oblique steps to the side (Altoni's uses the term *traversi* both for steps leading with the front foot and for passing footwork). The singular form is *traverso*.

7 The first of these entries Altoni begins as follows:

“As soon as you hear it [the sound of the trumpet] you will bring your right foot towards the left, moving the weapon and left thigh together. Advancing resolutely in this manner, stepping with the left foot and gathering the right, you will walk towards the centre of the field towards your adversary, as fast as you can so that you cover more than half of the field. This because it is more gallant, and you should set off to win. But when you move, move rather easily and languidly, intensifying as you reach your enemy. You are not tired or fatigued, and he will see that the closer you approach the more you grow in spirit and ability, in your strengths, in all virtues and courage, and that nothing is beyond you.”

8 Elsewhere referred to simply as *guardia di mezzo mezzano* (“middle middle guard”, with the palm to the inside, analogous to a *terza* in later systems, with the arm extended at around stomach height).

Your left hand should be held in *assalto alto di mezzo*<sup>9</sup> which is held even more like the *unicorno*<sup>10</sup> than usual, with your arm extended and your point directed towards the enemy, close enough to your right point, so your enemy cannot enter without facing certain danger. However when he holds his swords apart, you can also separate your points. But when he puts his together, you should close yours, crouching and keeping distance in response to his movements.

This much regards your arms and your swords. In terms of the body, since this stance is composed of both a simple *guardia* and a simple *assalto*,<sup>11</sup> it differs somewhat from a standard *guardia di mezzo*, namely in that the whole body must lean forward, as if it accompanied the sword in front of it. Your head should incline towards the right arm, following it as if they were attached, or it wished to rest on top of it.

Your shoulders should lean forward in profile, the left above the right, in as much as the left sword (the attacking sword) allows. Your right foot should face forward, straight towards your enemy, the knee bent half way over the foot, in line with your head. Your left foot should be placed crosswise, with the leg completely extended, so it very firmly supports your entire body. Ensure that it stays well apart from your front foot, because as I said, it acts as a support to your whole body, and it should not prevent the point of your left sword reaching forward as much as possible, so that it is nearly joined with your other point.

This is the stance and the posture to assume when your right foot is forward. If you wish to lead with your left foot forward, guarding with your left sword and attacking with the other, you must invert the entire order, on each side employing the position previously held by the other.

For this ferocious *assalto*, described above, your opponent might stand with his right hand forward, and you your left; or with his left forward, and you with your right; or both of you with the same hand forward, left or right. It is not possible to find another well-ordered position, because if your opponent

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9 That is with the palm to the inside, the hand in a position analogous to *terza*, between chest and neck height. In this case the exact position of the hand may be debatable, since Altoni describes it as "even more like the *unicorno*" (see below).

10 *Guardia d'unicorno*, the "unicorn" analogous to a *prima*, or the *lincorno/alicorno* guard of the Bolognese school (Marozzo's *becha possa/becha cesa*).

11 In Altoni's general terminology an *assalto* ("assault") is any guard where the left foot is forward, since he views these positions as particularly advantageous when attacking. In his discussion of two swords however he uses *assalto* to refer to the sword which is held high and on the same side as the back foot, as opposed to a *guardia*, ("guard") which here refers the sword is held low on the same side as the front foot.

were to put both hands forward, with his body square and not profiled, he would lose the benefit of one of his swords and of the *assalto*, forming two *guardie*, or if he raised both swords two *assalti*. In either case he exposes his body to the efficacy of your stance.

Therefore with his two points joined together, you should defend yourself by opposing the nearest of his swords with one of yours, passing obliquely to the opposite side, and thrusting your other sword either to his face, or under the arm closest to you, never leaving the protection of the sword opposing his.

If he comes at you resolutely with both swords, and he keeps them wide so there is space to enter between them; and if due to his impetus, or perhaps your unreadiness, you do not have time to for the *traverso*, you should put both your swords inside his. Push his swords to the outside, turning your points towards his flank and thigh, one aimed high and one aimed low. They should be inside his swords, and directed towards his body, so if he tries force himself towards you, he cannot without great risk and harm to himself.

From here, on the side that comes more naturally and is most expedient, you should either take his left sword with your left or his right sword with your right, use the *traverso*, and thrust your other sword to his chest or face. Afterwards recover into guard, into the right posture for these sort of arms, described earlier in this chapter.

Returning to the positions described previously, in the first variation your opponent had his right hand forward, and you your left hand forward. One of your opponent's swords protects him and the other threatens you, while you are positioned in the same way facing him. One of you must attack the other with your *guardia*, with a *rovescio*, *mandritto* or thrust, or else attack with your *assalto*.

If he attacks you with his *guardia* (right), you should oppose his sword with your *assalto* (right). Turn your *assalto* into a *guardia*, and stepping onto the *traverso*, keeping your left foot forward,<sup>12</sup> gathering if necessary. Then return your left sword (which will have been raised into a high or low *assalto*) into a *guardia*, and reset your right sword into an *assalto*.

If however your enemy attacks with his *assalto* (the sword in his left hand), you should oppose it with your left sword (your *guardia*), passing with your

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<sup>12</sup> In other words the right foot steps obliquely, without passing ahead of the left foot.

right foot onto the *traverso*, thrusting your right sword into his body, and turning your left sword from a *guardia* into an *assalto*. You will take the position your opponent previously held, and therefore he will assume the stance you were in. This ends the description of the the first variation.

The second variation is where your opponent has his left sword in a *guardia* and his right sword in an *assalto*, with you in the opposite position, that is with your right sword in a *guardia* and your left sword in an *assalto*. In this instance if he wounds with his *guardia* (left), you must parry with your *assalto* (left), step forward with your right foot well onto the *traverso*, and thrust your right sword into his body or his face, whichever is easier, before ending in the position your opponent was in. If however he moves to attack with his right hand, you must parry with your right, passing to the left, striking with your left sword, and assuming the position your opponent began in, that is with a left *guardia* and a right *assalto*.

The final variation is where both of you find yourself in the same position, with the same foot forward. In this case the perpetual rule is to parry your enemy and his sword to your outside, moving to one side so you remain safe and defended. For example if you both have your right foot forward and he moves to attack with his right sword, you should displace it to the outside with a *rovescio* and move onto the left *traverso*, wounding him with your left sword. If however he attacks with his *assalto*, you must find a way to displace it with your left, stepping to the right and wounding him with your right hand.

These various examples, detailed and described above, instruct on how to defend yourself, step and attack. For this last aspect, attacking, it is worth giving some further advice. If you wish to offend your enemy, the most appropriate method is to assume the same stance as him, displace his sword with your *guardia*, and move towards his shoulder with your *assalto*.

Conversely, for a secure defence, you should not adopt the same stance as him, but the opposite one, for example if his left foot is forward, you should put your right forward. If instead you choose the same posture as him, you are in a good position to attack, but so is he. In this case the advantage depends on tempo, judgement, agility, speed, and on good fortune, which plays a large part in this exercise, as it does in almost every human activity.

In this play you must pay more attention to thrusts than to cuts, and keep your limbs well coordinated and extended, to deny your enemy any



openings whatsoever on either flank. This would be easier for him, if the length of the swords is in any way reduced, especially from the *guardia*.

This therefore is the correct method for wielding two full-length swords, meaning swords that are proportionate, and do not lack any of the dimensions or properties of a sword. That is to say they are one-handed arms which wound from a distance, with the edge and the point. A sword which is smaller and does not wound at a distance would be a knife or a dagger, rather than a sword, as it lacks the sword's characteristics of wounding at distance.

If however the weapon lacks a point, but has all the other properties of a sword, or else lacks an edge (either true and false) like a *costoliere*,<sup>13</sup> it is still a sword although not whole and complete. In this case, since it has the length and other characteristics of a sword, you should use it as described.

However if it has no point you should always wound with cuts, and if it has no edge you should always wound with the point, observing the instructions above in all other respects.

To discuss certain particulars, if you have a sword without a point, and you find it in a *guardia*, you should displace your enemy's weapon, without wasting time by thrusting at your opponent's body, since you have no point.

Finding it in an *assalto* you should pass with a high, medium or low *mandritto*. Always keeping the edge turned towards your enemy or his weapon, thrusting him with your other sword, unless an opportunity arises to cut his knee, or something similar. The intention is to distribute cuts and thrusts between your two swords depending on their individual qualities, neither sword supplanting the properties of the other. Finally swords that lack a third or two of length are no longer swords, but some other type of arm, and are used for defence, either at distance or close in, as follows.<sup>14</sup>

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13 A *costoliere* is a single-edged sword.

14 The following chapter is on the sword and dagger.

# Marco Docciolini - Trattato di Scherma (1601)

## Chapter 14 - On two swords

Translated by Steven Reich and Piermarco Terminiello

Having sufficiently discussed the sword alone, we will move on to examine the sword with companion weapons. First we will consider two swords together.

Having therefore two swords in hand, one in the right and one in the left, you should observe this precept: one should always be kept high, the other low. Note that although one is high and one is low, their points must be together, because the closer they are together, the less likely you are to be struck.

In this manner you should advance towards your opponent, and I want you to walk fiercely, but without running. When you arrive close to your opponent, you should consider his posture, specifically whether his right or left leg is forward.

Let us suppose you find him with his right leg forward. I want you to stop with your left foot forward, keeping your front sword low and your rear sword high as I described.

When you are close enough to reach with your right sword, you should move to catch your opponent's right sword, and beat it towards your right side, at the same time thrusting with your left sword towards his right shoulder, and stepping forward with your left foot.

It is not important whether the sword you must displace is high or low. If it is high you should raise the point of your sword, keeping it there, and if it is low you should lower your sword towards the ground. In any case, you should beat it out of presence, which you must do so that both of your opponent's swords are away from your body and cannot harm you.

To ensure you always have the advantage of an extra sword, with both of your opponent's swords out of presence, in the same tempo remember to move to the opposite *traverso*, the *traversi* being more important in this combination of weapons than in any other.

This is because with the sword alone, I had you bring your left leg back to be more secure, however with two swords I do not want you to recover

backwards. Instead I want your right leg (or left, whichever is forward) to continue going forward, and when your front foot stops I want your rear foot to stop too. This is so the sword which displaces your opponent's keeps his weapon bound, leaving your other sword free to strike. However by recovering backwards, you would free his sword from yours, losing the advantage you had obtained. Without ample use of the *traversi*, this action distances you from your opponent, but while you have the advantage, I want you to continue to attack.

If however you note your opponent has his left foot forward, I want you to put your right foot forward, so that you are always standing the opposite way to him. You should then perform the same action described above, there being no difference between standing with your right or left side forward, except that the sword which displaces your opponent's depends on which foot he has forward. Your right sword should displace his right sword, or else your left sword should displace his left sword, while your other sword attacks in the manner described.

In either case, rather than aiming a thrust to his shoulders, you can if you wish cut a *mandiritto* to the leg, or a *rovescio*, although I deem the thrust to be better.

If his left side is forward and he attacks with an *imbroccata* to your shoulder or face, you should catch it with your left sword and drive it to your left side. You will wound him quite easily with a thrust to his left side, always remembering the *traverso*.

You can respond in the same way if he attempts a high or low thrust. If he aims high, you should raise your point in moving to displace it. If he aims low, you should lower your point, turning his sword to the opposite side to where you wish to attack.

If he aims a thrust between your weapons, you should perform the same action, observing as a firm rule that the hand you use to displace your opponent's sword is the same as the one he uses to attack. For example, if he attacks with his left hand, you should displace it with your left and attack with your right. If he attacks with his right, your right should displace it and your left should attack, as stated above.

If however he comes at you with both points, take note of which is further forward. This is the sword you must displace, as described above. If both are

equally forward, it does not matter. You should catch the sword on the side you are best positioned for with your feet, driving it aside with one sword, and stepping to deliver an attack with the other from the *traverso* (as I have said many times).

If your opponent attacks with a cut, it is of little concern. You should let it pass, ensuring that your sword follows his, to help displace it more quickly. You should then immediately respond with a thrust or a cut, as I have already said.

If he attacks with a cut and you do not wish to let it pass, you should parry it in the following manner. Let us suppose he delivers a *mandiritto* with his right sword. I want you to parry it with your right sword, while thrusting to his face.

You should hit him easily, but if not parry. Having resisted the cut, I want you to raise your right hand somewhat, using your hilt to send your opponent's sword to your right side. During this action, in the same tempo, you should pass forward with your left leg and deliver a thrust under your opponent's right arm, ensuring you make good use of the *traverso*. If your opponent delivers a *mandiritto* to your temple with his left sword, you should act similarly.

If he attacks with a *mandiritto* to your legs, supposing he delivers it with his right sword, then you should parry it with your right sword. If he attacks with his left sword, then you should parry with your left sword. Having resisted the *mandiritto*, whichever direction it came from, you should lift your sword from the parry, and in the same tempo direct it towards his body. As he raises his sword, you should catch it, turn it and pass forward with your rear foot while delivering a thrust. This action should be performed in exactly the same manner on either side.

If however you both find yourselves with your right foot forward, or both with your left foot forward, it is of little concern because the action you must perform is the same. Finding yourselves both with your right foot forward, I want you to catch his sword with yours, and drive it to your right, before passing with your left foot to his right side and thrusting towards his right shoulder.

Note that if your opponent's sword is low, you should lower the point of the sword you use to beat it. If your opponent's sword is high, you should raise

yours. You should act similarly if you both find yourselves with your left foot forward. There is no difference to the action performed with your right foot forward.

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