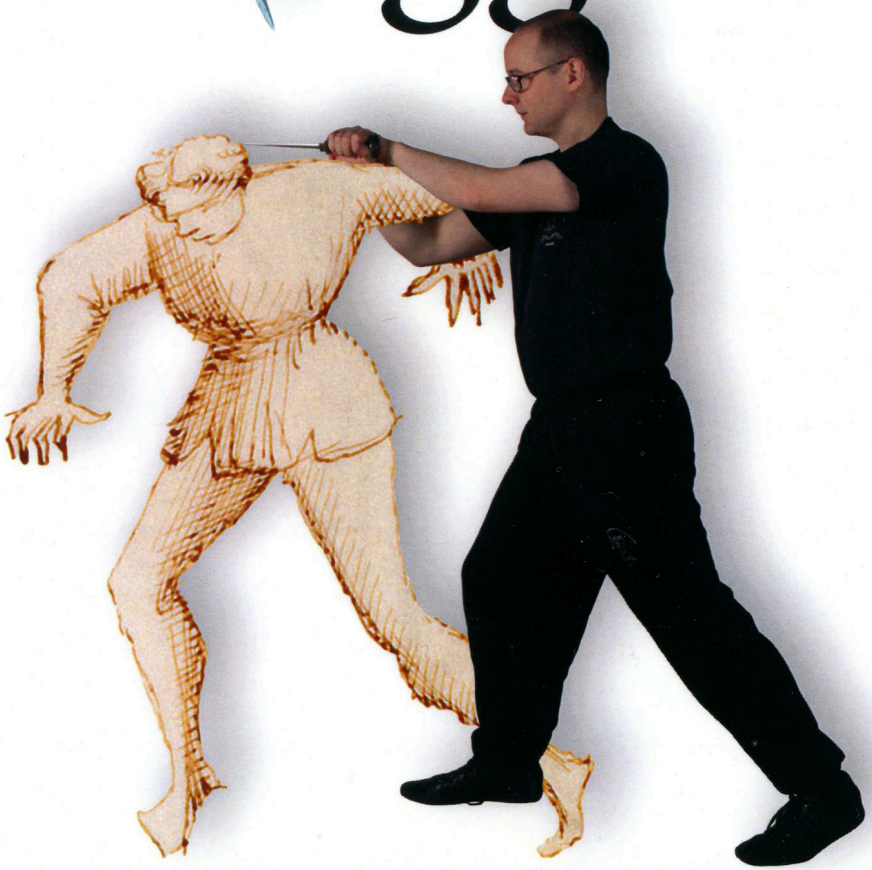
MASTERING THE ART OF ARMS

VOLUME ONE

The Medieval Dagger



Guy Windsor

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Volume 1

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For
Lenard Voelker
Gentleman, Scholar, and an inspirational Martial Artist.

The Dagger

The dagger am I, a noble arm,
Knowing my malice, knowing my art,
Playing close to do you harm.
None can stand if I take part.

I make my noble feats of arms:
Who can hold against me?
No armour made resists my charms,
No arm either, you will see.

Cover, thrust, and grapple too,
I take your dagger, break and bind.
Strike me? I will make you rue
The day, as you will find.

The cruel fight I'll finish faster:
Of the art of arms, I am master.

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Introduction to the *Mastering the Art of Arms* Series

In late 2009 I set out to write a longsword training manual to replace my first book, *The Swordsman's Companion*, which was finished in 2003 and published in 2004. Around that time, I moved away from training and teaching Fiore dei Liberi's longsword material in isolation from the rest of the system, and have routinely incorporated the dagger material into my "longsword" classes ever since. So of course I wanted to put a chapter on falling and dagger basics into my new book. It was ready in its first draft by mid-2011, but it was clearly getting too big for a single volume. So I cut out the one longish chapter on the dagger, and some of the footwork and falling material, and played around with the idea of making a separate dagger book. This was clearly a good idea, as the book was written a week later. About the same time it became apparent that the longsword book was still too big, so I calved off another volume, separating out the more advanced techniques.

While writing this dagger book, I wanted to point out that Fiore's original treatise was written in verse, and so took a small chunk of his text and laid it out as such: the rhyming scheme became immediately apparent. So I took the English translation and worked it into a sonnet; this spawned yet another volume, my *Armizare Vade Mecum* collection of mnemonic rhymes, published in November 2011.

So, what started as one book is now four, and this, the dagger, is the natural starting place in that series for introducing martial artists and scholars of the sword to the glories of Fiore dei Liberi's Art of Arms.

Introduction to Volume 1: *The Medieval Dagger*

About six hundred years ago a man called Fiore dei Liberi produced one of the best martial arts book ever written. He called it *Il Fior di Battaglia* ("The Flower of Battle"), and in it he set out the fundamental concepts and actions for the entire range of knightly combat on foot, on horseback, in armour and without, unarmed and armed, with dagger, sword, spear or axe. He called this art *Armizare*, which translates literally as "Weaponing," but is known to practitioners today as "the Art of Arms." Over the last two decades, a dedicated circle of researchers and practitioners have been recreating *Armizare* from the words and pictures Fiore has left us. I make my living teaching *Armizare* (and other European swordsmanship styles), and have written this book to help students get to grips with the dagger combat section of Fiore's book.

There are four existing versions of *Il Fior di Battaglia*; all are hand-written, all are different. These are named according to where they are kept today: the Getty MS (MS = manuscript) in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles; the Morgan MS in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, the Pisani-Dossi MS in private hands in Italy, and the BnF MS in the Bibliotheque Nationale Francaise in Paris. I am using the Getty MS as my core focus, with additional material from the Pisani-Dossi where necessary.

Fiore dei Liberi (whose name means "Flower of the Free") was born around 1350 and died sometime after 1410. He was an expert in the Art of Arms, and claimed many famous knights as his students.

We don't really know much about him outside of his own autobiographical comments in the introduction to his book, but the main street in his home town (Premariacco, Italy) is still named after him, so it's likely that he was as good as he says. Fiore's art is huge and wide-ranging, and the dagger material he gives us represents the largest single section of his work. Its 76 plays come after 20 plays of wrestling, and before the defenses of the sword in one hand. Between wrestling and dagger there are four plays using a short stick (*bastoncello*) which serve as a segue between unarmed and armed with the dagger, and between dagger and sword come a further nine plays of the dagger against the sword (which I include here, as they are far too cool to leave out).

So what is a "play"? The way Fiore presents his information is vital to understanding it. Every technique is shown as a response to a particular attack, or a particular situation. Each section begins with a Remedy Master, wearing a crown, who executes some kind of defense, and some kind of counter (for example, blocking an attack and taking the dagger). His scholars wear a garter, and continue the action from the master's defense (blocking the attack and throwing the attacker to the ground). These remedies may be countered by the attacker, and this is shown by "Counter-Remedy Masters" wearing a crown and a garter. All of these are illustrated four to a page, with images of the attacker and defender doing things to each other. Each of these images (with two people in physical contact) is called a "play" (*zogho* in Fiore's original Italian). A single technique, such as the block and throw, might spread across two or more plays: the initial defense, then the throw. If we did a sequence of techniques in which an attack is blocked, the defender tries to take the dagger, but the attacker does a counter, that might well take up three or four plays.

Fiore organizes the plays by the initial defensive action, executed by a crowned Remedy Master. These serve as a kind of chapter-heading; and for memory's sake he confines the main chapters of the dagger plays to nine. The chapters will have one or more additional plays in them: the First Master is followed by a further 20 plays, making 21

in all. So when Fioreists are discussing the techniques, we will say something like "in the Getty, if the third play of the Sixth Master is done like so…" and we can all flick through the book and find the right image quickly (or just dredge it up from memory). Sometimes the first technique will be done by the master, sometimes it will spread over into the second play. I will provide the manuscript and play number(s) for every technique I describe in this book, so you can easily find it and check my interpretation against the original.

In this book I will start with footwork and basic guard positions, mostly as a way of defining my terms; then talk about the dagger and how to hold it; then cover the four basic strikes; then the five "things you must know" to defend yourself. We can then apply those five things against all four strikes, and come up with a core set of critical skills. As we do them you will notice yourself using one or other of the nine masters. We will then survey the ones that have not come up yet.

Once these are clear, we will look at the changing circumstances of the fight that will lead you to use one or other of the "five things." There is nothing wrong with memorizing a gigantic list of techniques, for academic purposes. But it is completely useless in practice. Instead, we need a simple goal, to be reached in whatever way will work given the exact circumstances you are in. This goal may be summarized like so:

Control the weapon, break the man

which means, gain control of the dagger (or keep control of it if you are attacking), and disrupt your opponent by whatever means are to hand. Fighting with or against a dagger is politically incorrect anyway, so I assume that for pithiness' sake "man" can stand in for "person of whichever gender you happen to be engaged in combat with."

You may find it challenging to get a clear idea of the flow of these techniques from static pictures. To help with this, I have created a wiki for my School's syllabus, in which all the drills and actions we do are (or are to be) recorded with video. This is a huge undertaking,

so I don't guarantee that we'll be done by the time you get this book, but check the website for the available (completely free) clips: http://www.swordschool.com/wiki/index.php/Fiore_basic_syllabus

Modern Self-Defense

I should point out here that while many of Fiore's techniques and principles will work just fine against a modern attacker with a modern knife, I in no way expect this work to be considered a primer for modern self-defense. This is for several reasons:

I am not the least bit interested in modern "street" self-defense: it is mostly concerned with avoiding trouble, training awareness, de-escalation techniques, and if you are attacked, having one or two solutions deeply ingrained. I find it technically boring (my ideal of combat is a duel, between equally trained and equipped experts, because that is where the really cool stuff happens), and frankly, living in one of the safest parts of this planet, learning self-defense is a waste of time. The streets I live on offer almost zero likelihood of a knife attack (one of the many good reasons to live here!).

To teach modern self-defense is to enter a legal and moral jungle. One has to have answers to questions like "what constitutes a threat?" "what level of force is appropriate?" "should I stay and explain to the cops or dump the knife in a lake and run?" and, frankly, I don't have those answers. In recreating medieval combat it's not a problem: if someone tries to stab you, you can disarm, maim or kill him as you like, as by owning a book you are clearly educated, and therefore rich and well connected, and therefore unlikely to get in any trouble for it.

I have no experience in actual self-defense: I've been mugged once, by a group of kids in St Petersburg who used no weapons, did me no harm, and got nothing for their trouble. That is not nearly enough to be an expert on the subject, and I have no desire at all to gain the necessary additional experience.

That said, I have had several students over the years come and tell me how the training they got in the school worked to get them out of a sticky situation. Not least, they were fit enough to run away really fast!

Conventions Used in This Book

The drills in this book have been carefully spelled out in separate steps. This can create a stop-start-stop-start effect when you are putting them into practice. Once you know the steps, try to make every action smoothly. When these techniques are done right, all their separate components come together in a seamless, smooth and fast whole. Each drill starts with an attack and a defense. I have worded the instructions such that the initial defender is always "you" and the initial attacker is always "him." When it is the attacker's turn to counter the defense, the convention stays the same: the attacker is "him," the defender, "you." This takes sequences like

1. "The defender blocks with the edge of his left wrist, stepping a little left with his left foot, and grabs the attacker's elbow from below with his right hand. The attacker pulls his arm back, defender passes in behind with his right foot, pushing the elbow and hooking the attacker's right wrist with the crook of his left elbow and finds the attacker's right elbow with his left hand"

and turns it into:

1. "Block with the edge of your left wrist, stepping a little left with your left foot, and grab the attacker's elbow from below with your right hand. The attacker pulls his arm back, you pass in behind with your right foot, pushing his elbow and hooking his right wrist with the crook of your left elbow and find the attacker's right elbow with your left hand"

which I hope you'll agree is a lot easier to follow. And when the sequence is broken up into steps like so, it's even clearer:

1. Block with the edge of your left wrist, stepping a little left with your left foot
2. And grab the attacker's elbow from below with your right hand
3. The attacker pulls his arm back; you pass in behind with your right foot, pushing his elbow and hooking his right wrist with the crook of your left elbow
4. And find the attacker's right elbow with your left hand.

Each sequence is illustrated with photographs of each step, with captions telling you who is doing what.

It is my intention that any reasonably committed reader, with a mask, a dagger, and a similarly committed friend, can get a firm grounding in the basics of this system from this book alone. Read through the whole book first, then slowly and carefully work through each chapter in turn. I'd suggest becoming comfortable with one chapter before moving on to the next, as the actions tend to get more sophisticated as the book progresses. There are principles covered in depth in the first of the pair drills chapter which will not be discussed later on, but upon which the later techniques absolutely depend.

So, read carefully, and if you get stuck, you'll probably find the solution either earlier in the book, or on the wiki.

Chapter One

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

Remember our goal:

Control the weapon, break the man

To find out why you may not be reaching your goal of controlling the weapon or breaking the man, it helps to have a set of principles to examine technique by. The four key elements of any action are:

- Time
- Measure
- Structure
- Flow

Time

Every action has a beginning and an end—we measure the action by the time it takes to get from one to the other. Any counter to the action must occur at the correct point along that timeline. For example, my opponent tries to stab me in the head. I want to intercept his blow and hit him. If I cover before he strikes, my action fails. If I try to cover after he strikes, forget it, he's already hit me. If I cover during his strike, it may work. We can in theory divide his strike into an infinite number of tiny units of time, but in practice, we can act against his blow at the following times: