

Deua de l'arte la cossa sinestra. De legature mi ritrouo destra.



Italian Longsword Guards

Comparing
Vadi's guards
with Fiore and
Marozzo

Con mortal posta de denu cinghiare. Non posta lunga con la spada citta.
Chi cerca briga alla glinposso dare. Et he con l'ingegno mio ier...



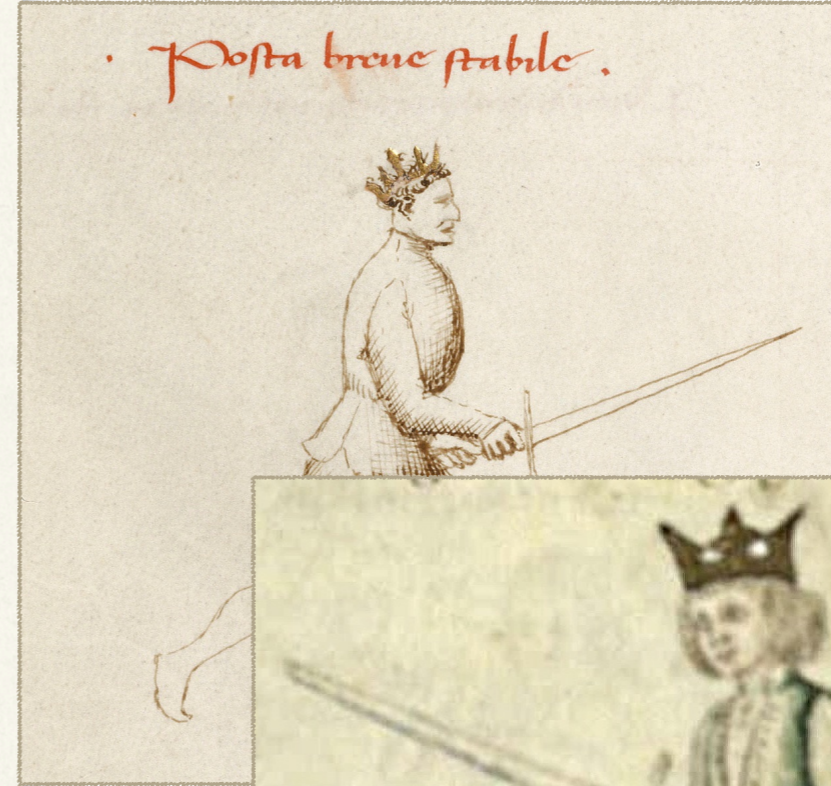
GUY WINDSOR

The Guards of the Longsword

Was Vadi midwife to the Bolognese?

Filippo Vadi presents us with twelve illustrated guards of the longsword. These form a fascinating link between the earlier system of Fiore dei Liberi, and the later Bolognese system as represented by Achille Marozzo. In this article I will briefly introduce the guards of Marozzo and Fiore, on the off-chance that the reader is unfamiliar with them, then go through Vadi's guards one by one and compare them to their cognates in the other two systems. Where necessary I will draw in further information from the Liechtenauer system.

The images on the facing page show Fiore's *posta breve* (short guard), Vadi's *posta lunga con la spada curta* (long guard with the sword withdrawn) and Marozzo's *guardia di fianche* (guard of the flank). All similar positions, but held differently. Perhaps the most interesting points are where one of Fiore's guards is lost, or where Vadi creates a new one that we see repeated in the later Marozzo. We may speculate endlessly on why these guards changed and were adopted or discarded, but I will pay most attention to Vadi's apparent role as a link between the two other systems.



Marozzo's Guards

ACHILLE MAROZZO, OPERA NOVA, 1540



Marozzo illustrates 18 guards of the sword. We can usefully group them according to their names: the porta di ferro guards, the coda longa guards, and the descriptively named guards.

The six porta di ferro guards are either stretta (with the sword point in line), larga (with the point down and wide) or alta (with the point high). With the left foot forwards they are “cinghiara” (wild boar), with the right foot forwards they take no extra qualifier.

The four coda longa guards are also stretta, larga or alta, with an additional “distesa” (extended backwards). Stretta and larga are held right foot forwards, alta and distesa left foot forwards.

The eight descriptively named guards are alta (high), di croce (of the cross), di testa (of the head), di faccia (of the face), becha cesa (right foot forwards) and becha possa (left foot forwards), di intrare in largo passo (entering, left foot forwards) and non in largo passo (entering, right foot forwards).

The ordering doesn't at first glance appear to convey any additional meaning. The order Marozzo uses is:

1. Guardia di porta di ferro stretta
2. Cinghiara porta di ferro larga
3. Coda longa e alta
4. Cinghiara porta di ferro alta
5. Coda longa e stretta
6. Porta di ferro stretta
7. Coda longa e distesa
8. Coda longa e larga
9. Porta di ferro stretta
10. Porta di ferro larga
11. Guardia di Fianchi
12. Guardia di croce
13. Guardia di testa
14. Guardia di becha cesa
15. Guardia di intrare non in largo passo
16. Guardia di becha possa
17. Guardia di intrare in largo passo
18. Guardia di faccia

Gallery 1.1 Marozzo's guards, in order



← 1 of 18 →

Novati or Pisani Dossi

Getty

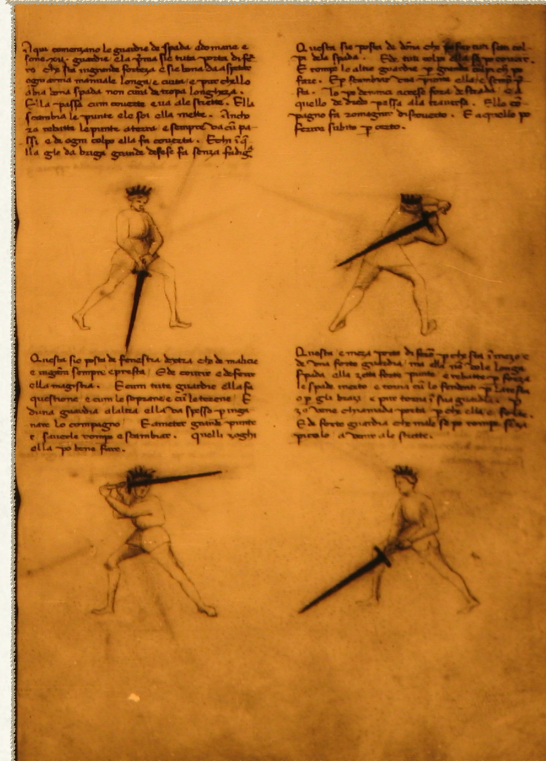
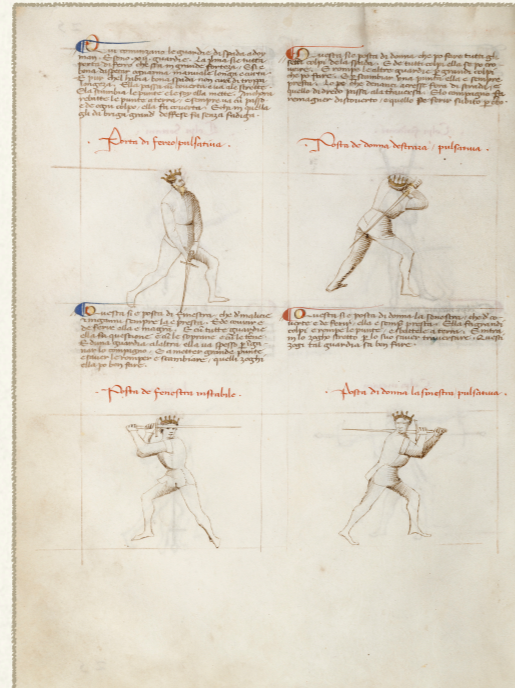
Fiore's Guards

As you can see, there are at least four extant versions of Fiore's manuscript. These sources do not entirely agree on which guards should be included, and in what order, so for your convenience I've put together a reference table, on the next page.

It is interesting to note that the Getty is the outlier here- the other three manuscripts present the same guards in the same order, with the exception of the tenth guard, which though the images are very, very similar, the position that is called *posta di fenestra* in the Pisani Dossi and the BnF, is called *posta di donna* in the Morgan.

It is important to note that across the different manuscripts there are many variations in the exact forms of the guards, especially in the apparent position of the weight. The names are also presented differently, which I have not preserved in the table.

It is clearly important to have the twelve guards: all four manuscripts show variations that apparently serve to bring up the total to the correct number (*zenghiaro la mezana* for instance).



Morgan

BNF

	GETTY	NOVATI	MORGAN	BNF
1	Tutta porta di ferro	Tutta porta di ferro	Tutta porta di ferro	Tutta porta di ferro
2	Posta di donna destra	Posta di donna destra	Posta di donna destra	Posta di donna destra
3	Posta di fenestra	Posta di fenestra	Posta di fenestra	Posta di fenestra
4	Posta di donna la sinistra	Mezana porta di ferro	Mezana porta di ferro	Mezana porta di ferro
5	Posta longa	Posta longa	Posta longa	Posta longa
6	Mezana porta di ferro	Posta frontale	Posta frontale	Posta frontale
7	Posta breve	Posta di donna destra	Posta di donna destra	Posta di donna destra
8	Dente di zenghiaro	Dente di zenghiaro	Dente di zenghiaro	Dente di zenghiaro
9	Coda longa	Posta breve	Posta breve	Posta breve
10	Bicorno	Finestra sinistra	Donna la sinistra	Donna la sinistra
11	Posta frontale	Coda longa	Coda longa	Coda longa
12	Zenghiaro la mezana	Bicorno	Bicorno	Bicorno

Gallery 1.2 Longsword guards from the Novati. Note I have reproduced the exact names with the original spelling.



Tuta porta de fero



1 of 12



Vadi's Guards

The guards of the sword appear after a portrait of the author holding a sword by hilt and blade. Oddly, the image appears under the text:

Voi seti guardie con linomi vostre.

Ciascun di vvii lato si dimostre.

Here are the guards with their names,
Each of your sides is shown.

Then under the portrait is the name:

Philippo di vadi pisano.

The first line is pretty clear, but the second is problematic. The problem stems from the word *uuii*, which Porzio and Mele appear to think is a variant on “*voi*”, you (plural). They have it as “Each of you is shown side by side”, which I cannot twist the text to fit. *Ciascun* is clear, *si dimostre* is clear, but *di uuii lato* is not. *Lato* means side, but might be *l'atto*, the action. “Each of your actions” would demand a plural here: *latti*. Likewise “each of your sides” would have *lati*. Shown from one side would come out as *de un'lato*, or similar.



Fortunately, I don't think this line is critical for getting a practical handle on these guards, so let us move on.

Vadi gives us twelve guards, as one would expect.

What is odd or unusual is that in many cases they are like Fiore's, but with the position of the feet reversed.

The first guard, *porta di ferro mezana*, is one example; the twelfth, *dente di cinghiano difora* is another). And many of them are apparently the same position, shown with either a change of lead leg but keeping their name (such as the *porta di ferro* and *dente di cinghiano* guards), or a change of side with a change of name (such as *posta breve di spada lungheza*, held on the left, and *posta sagitaria*, held on the right). You can scan through them in the gallery here, to get a sense of the order.

Gallery 1.3 Vadi's Guards



Mezana porta di ferro



1 of 12





MEZANA PORTA DI FERRO

Son mezana porta di ferro forte.

Per dare con punte e fendente la morte

I am the strong middle iron gate

Dealing death with thrust and fendente.

MIDDLE IRON DOOR

In this guard the right foot is forwards and the sword handle is resting on the right thigh, with the blade pointing down to the right. It is similar to Fiore's tutta porta di ferro, but there the sword is in about same place relative to the body while the left foot is forwards.



Interestingly, while Vadi only mentions striking from here, Fiore expands at some length on the defensive possibilities of this position. I don't think this is due only to the change of lead; it could well be simply a change of emphasis. Comparison of the text in the Novati is interesting:

Tuta porta di fero son la piana terena

Che tagli e punte sempre si refrena

I am the whole iron gate, the flat ground,
That always impedes cuts and thrusts.

This is of course almost identical to the text Vadi uses for his third guard:

Son porta di ferro piana terena

Che tagliae et punte sempre si rafrena

I am the flat ground iron door,
That always impedes cuts and thrusts.

It may be reasonable to conclude then that holding the guard left foot forwards makes it more defensive, while holding it right foot forwards makes it more offensive.

We have to go to Marozzo's guard *coda longa e larga* to find a similar set-up though, with the sword held lying across the lead leg: Fiore, and the Liechtenauer school sources would agree that if the sword is on the right, you want your left foot forwards.



THE GUARD OF THE WOMAN

This guard has no real cognate in the other systems, though it is perhaps similar to the Liechtenauer guard Vom Tag, shown here from the 1452 Von Danzig treatise.



POSTA DI DONNA

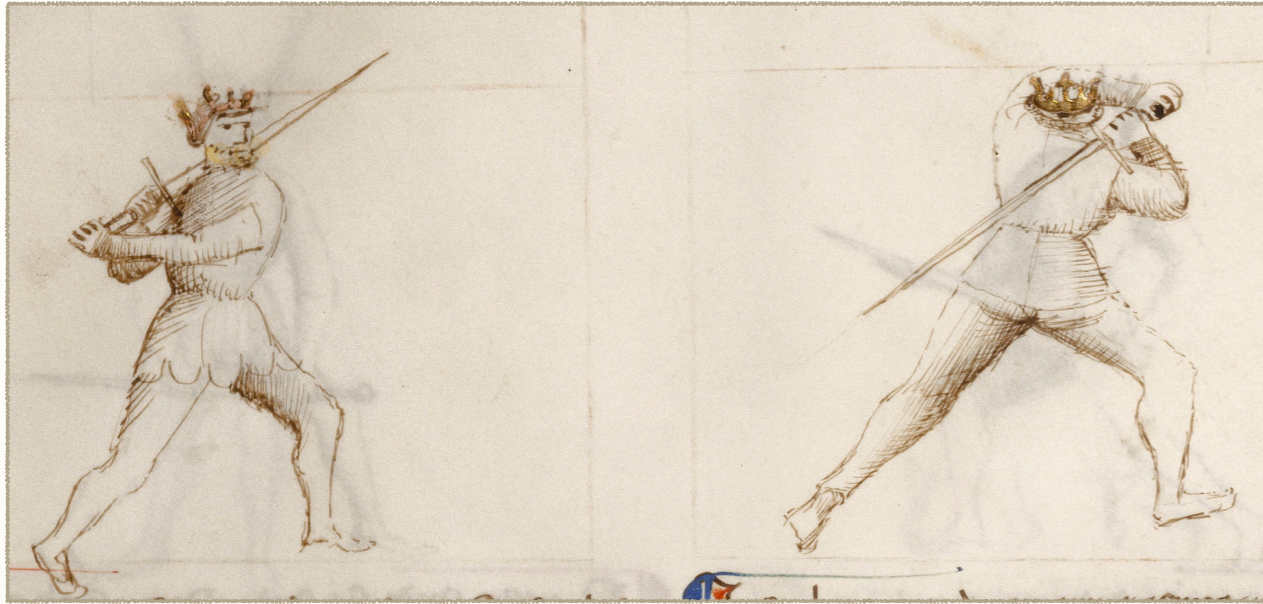
*Io son posta di donna e non son vana
Che lunghezza di spada spesso inghana.*

I am the guard of the woman, and I am not vain,
I conceal the length of the sword.



Vadi's statement that it hides the length of the sword is interesting, as it apparently shows the sword clearly. But he is relying on an unfortunate aspect of the human visual system that makes it very hard to translate vertical measures into horizontal ones. It is actually hard to see how far your opponent can reach in this position.

Fiore's *posta di donna* is held more clearly on the shoulder, with the weight either forward or back, like so:



While it clearly shares a name, it appears to have little else in common. It even has the other leg forward: the sword is chambered on the right, and the right leg is leading. There is no guard in Marozzo that corresponds directly.



PORTA DI FERRO PIANA TERRENA

Son porta di ferro piana terrena

Che tagliae et punte sempre si rafrena

I am the flat ground iron door,

Always impeding cuts and thrusts.

THE IRON DOOR

This, for all intents and purposes, is the first guard, *mezana porta di ferro*, held with the other foot forwards, and as such is identical to Fiore's *tutta porta di ferro*.



Vadi's statement that it impedes cuts and thrusts is an echo of Fiore, who mentions that it is good for waiting in, and details various defences done from here, including the break, the exchange, and passing with the cover and coming to the close plays.



POSTA DI FALCON

*Son posta di falcon suprana e altera
Per far difesa a ciascuna maniera*

I am the guard of the falcon, high up above,
To make defences in all sorts of ways.

FALCON GUARD

This guard is excellent for parrying from, beating down any attacks. Its closest cognate is Marozzo's *guardia di testa*, shown below. Note that the sword has been rotated 90 degrees across the flats, and of course Vadi has the feet very close together. This quite similar to some variants on *Vom Tag*.

Note that Vadi does not suggest attacking from here; the guard appears to be purely defensive.





POSTA BREVE DI SPADA LUNGHEZA

*Son posta breve di spada longeza
Spesso ferisco con lei torno infreza*

I am the short guard of the extended sword,
I often strike with the turn back.

THE SHORT GUARD OF THE EXTENDED SWORD

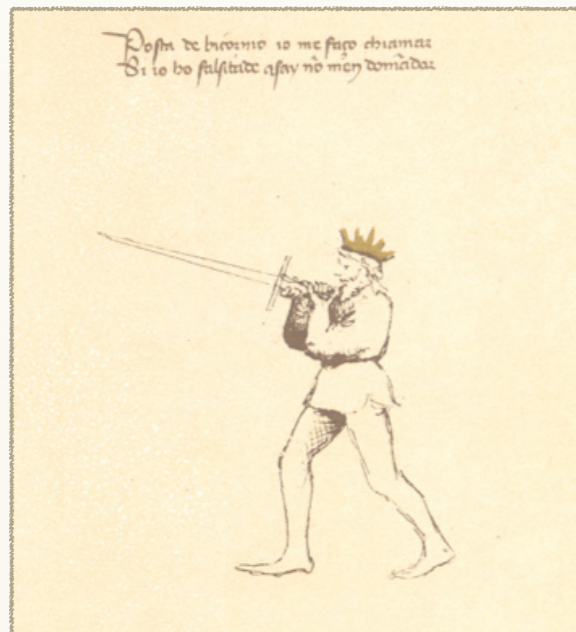
This guard is analogous to Fiore's *posta di fenestra la sinistra* the window guard on the left, which is mentioned in several places but not illustrated anywhere except in this misnamed image from the Morgan: the guard shown is clearly *posta di donna* as the sword is behind the head. I suspect though that the illustrator made a deliberate or accidental decision to show the face at the expense of accuracy.



The only place we see fenestra on the left is in the pollax section of the Getty MS: Note though that the alignment of the weapon is quite different.



Bicorno is also a possible cognate, as the height of the sword is similar:



Marozzo though has two similar guards, *guardia di intrare non in largo passo*, and *guardia di faccia*. Neither of these seem to follow Vadi's suggested usage though, in which he specifies passing back from the guard to strike, which I assume is done as a counterattack.





POSTA SAGITARIA

*Son posta sagitaria por ingiegno
Uso mlitia assai nel mio regno*

I am the archer's guard, to deceive
I use malice very much in my reign.

THE ARCHER'S GUARD

Vadi's text is not desperately helpful, though it does echo something Fiore says about fenestra, to which it bears some resemblance: *che d'malicie i inganni sempre la e presta* (and she is always quick with malice and deceit). Note that this forms a right-side version of the previous guard *posta breve di spada longa*. This guard is almost identical to Marozzo's *guardia di croce*; the obvious difference being the spacing of the feet.



Note that Vadi does give us a specific play to do from here:
we can find it in Chapter XV:

Piglia questo che untracto di stadera.

Se stara el compagno in porta di ferro.

Fa che tu sia in posta sagitaria.

Guarda che la punta tua non suaria

Che del compagno copra la sua spada

Va un poco for de strada

Drizzando spada et mano con punta.

Quando tua spada ala croce sia giunta.

Alor fa la terza decima stretta.

Como tapare schietta.

Di pinta al nostro libro a sette carte.

Grasp this, that is a steelyard's trace,

That if the companion is in the iron door guard,

You should be in the archer's guard,

Watch out that your point does not waver,

That of the companion covers his sword;

Go a little out of the way

Straightening the sword and the hand with the point.

When your sword is joined at the crossing,

Then do the thirteenth constrained action,

As is you can plainly see

Pictured in our book of seven leaves.

We can work this out as a proper drill (this interpretation was arrived at in class by Janne Hurskainen and Johanna Laurikainen):

1. Start in *sagitaria* (archer's guard): feet close together, left foot forwards, sword horizontal, pointing forwards, about shoulder height.
2. Opponent is in one of the *porta di ferro* (iron door) guards, e.g. *Porta di ferro la mezana*: right foot forwards, sword resting on the right thigh, pointing down and to the right.
3. Opponent strikes a *rota*, aimed at your exposed left flank or head.
4. Step a little right with your right foot, uncrossing your arms and parrying with a *fendente*. Your left leg sweeps behind you.
5. Opponent enters with a *pommel* strike.
6. Parry with your right elbow against the inside of his right wrist
7. Catch his right elbow with your left hand,
8. Get your right leg behind his right leg
9. And throw him to the ground by cranking his arm.

Note that to arrive at the picture (bottom illustration on folio 20r, shown right) we presuppose at least two actions on the opponent's part: the *rota* attack (implied in the title of the chapter) and the entry to the pommel strike, which the 13th play is clearly defending against. The text reads:

Per sto voltar de mella che tu hai fatto

Romperoti el brazo al primo tratto.

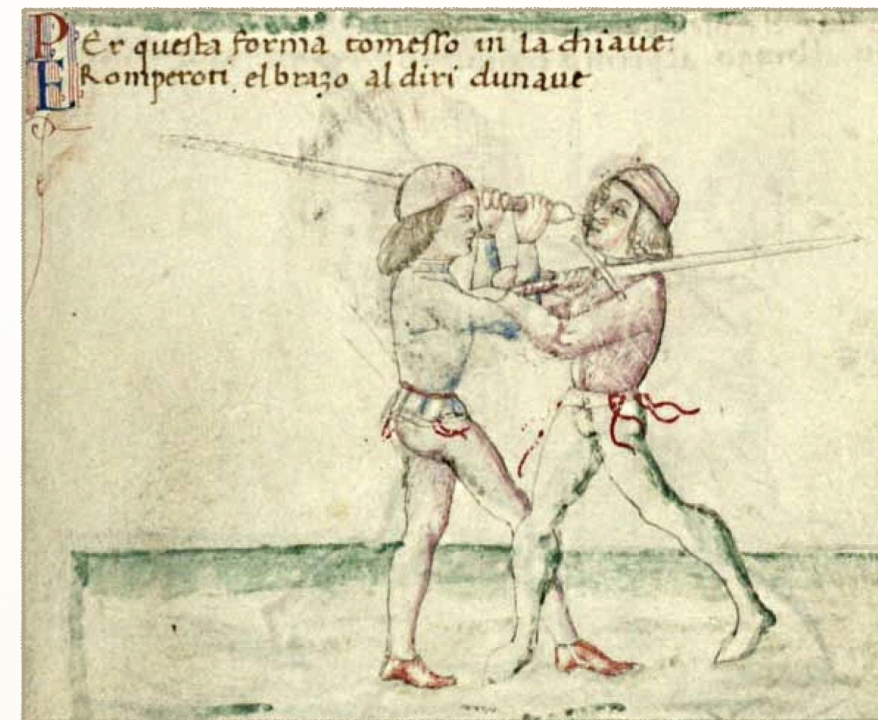
By this turn of the blade that you have done,

I will break your arm at the first attempt.

We are also assuming that the thirteenth constrained play here refers to the thirteenth illustrated play in the manuscript, which it may not, though I can't think of anything else it may be.

Vadi does not divide up his plays into *stretto* (constrained) and *largo* (wide) the way Fiore does, but at this stage in the writing he may have intended to.

[For video of this play, see here:](#)





POSTA DI VERA FINESTRA

Io son la posta divera finestra

Leva de larte la cossa sinistra

I am the guard of the true window

I raise from the art the thing from the left.

THE GUARD OF THE TRUE WINDOW

This guard of course shares a name with Fiore's *fenestra*, and perhaps most interestingly includes the qualification "*vera*", true. This echoes the Novati text, where the full name of the guard is *posta reale di vera finestra*, the royal guard of the true window. In certain key respects Vadi shows his version differently: the sword is held pointing up, not horizontally, and again the feet are together. He will later show a left-side version and call it *posta frontal*. There is no clear parallel in Marozzo, though if you go through his *assalti* you will find yourself passing through positions like these two many times.

Note that Porzio and Mele translate the second line of the verse as "bringing the left thigh out of the art", which would imply that the left thigh has been withdrawn, as indeed it appears to be in the image. I don't at this stage have a working theory for what "the thing from the left" may be, but I conjecture it has to do with striking an upwards blow from the left which would create this position.



CORONA

Io son corona eson fatta maestra

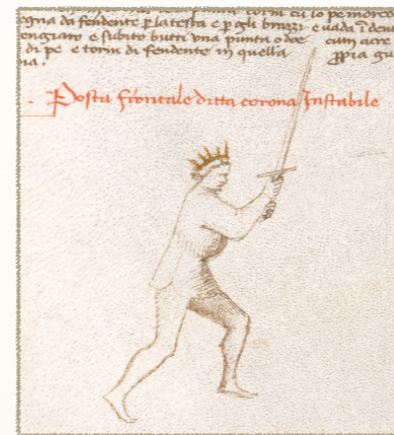
De legature mi ritrovo destra

I am the crown and I am made master

Of binds I am found to be adept.

THE CROWN

This guard is clearly a version of Fiore's *posta frontale*, frontal guard. Fiore states that it is also called "*corona*", and as we can see from the images, it is held in much the same way. Vadi shows the guard right foot forwards; Fiore shows it the same way in the Novati, and left foot forwards in the Getty.



Fiore's text is also useful here: he specifies that *frontale* is good for crossing swords with (*e per incrosar ella e bona*), which is similar to Vadi's statement that this is good for *legature*. Every bind is by definition a crossing, but not every crossing is a bind, and it is useful to remember that *frontale* is most commonly used in the moment of a parry from the right. Marozzo does not define this position as a guard, though of course you will find yourself passing through something like it many times when executing his plays.



POSTA DI DENTE DI CINGHIARE

*Con mortal posta de denti cinghiare
Chi cerca briga assa glinposso dare*

With the deadly guard of the boar's tooth
Anyone looking for trouble, I'll give them plenty.

THE GUARD OF THE WILD BOAR'S TOOTH

This guard is closer to Fiore's *mezana porta di ferro*, held with the sword on the centre line of the body, than it is his *dente di zenghiaro*, which is on the left side:



Vadi's text is the usual trash-talk: effectively "this is a good guard". It is clear though from previous references how the guard should be used. In Chapter X, for instance, it appears to be offensive:

<i>Fa che tu sie in guardia decenghiaro.</i>	Place yourself in the guard of the boar,
<i>Quando tu entre con la punta aluixo.</i>	When you enter with the thrust at the face
<i>Non star punta divixo.</i>	Do not leave your point in the face,
<i>Voltando presto el riverso fendente.</i>	Turn quickly a roverso fendente.
<i>Etira el deritto et fa te sia amente.</i>	And draw a mandritto, and keep this in mind.

And in Chapter XIII, defensive:

Ancor poi andar in dente de cinghiare.

Et se lui col rotare.

E tu scharpando pur de sotto in su.

To clear your mind of illusions,

You can also go into boar's tooth guard,

And if he with the turning,

And you escaping from below up.

Of course in Marozzo, the “Cinghiara” guards are the *porta di ferro* variants (*alta*, *stretta*, and *larga*) held with the left foot forwards.



You might at this stage be wondering what's the difference between *porta di ferro larga*, and *cinghiara porta di ferro larga*, shown here side by side:



The answer is, of course, nothing. The second illustration is identical, and indicates an error on the part of the publisher. *Porta di ferro stretta* is shown here with sword and buckler here with the right foot forwards:





POSTA LUNGA CON LA SPADA CURTA

*Son posta lunga con la spada curta
Che con l'ingegno mio i colpi urta*

I am the long guard with the short(ened) sword,
That with my cunning defeats the blows.

THE LONG GUARD WITH THE SHORT(ENED) SWORD

This guard is held similarly to Fiore's *posta breve*, but unlike that guard which is held on the centreline of the body, this is held to the side, much like the German *Pflug*.



Getty MS (above), Von Danzig (on right).



Fiore's usage is interesting: he states that this guard is always moving, looking for an opportunity to thrust, and is best used in armour. The coiled position of the body in Vadi's image, turning to the left over the left leg, suggests to me a deflection leaving the point in line.

In Marozzo's guards, it is probably most similar to the Flank guards, *guardia di fianchi*, though that has the right foot forwards and is therefore not coiled.

Cinghiara porta di ferro stretta is also similar, with the sword on the left and the left foot forwards, though it is held in front, away from the body:





POSTA FRONTAL

Son posta frontal tanto sicura.

De tagli e punte mainon faro cura.

I am the frontal guard, so secure

Of cuts and thrusts I have the solution.

THE FRONTAL GUARD

Vadi's suggestion here is that this guard defends well against cuts and thrusts, which is exactly how Fiore tells us to use it. But the position itself is very different: this guard is closer to fenestra than in is to Fiore's *frontale*. Compare for yourself these two images from *Il Fior di Battaglia*: frontale and fenestra on the left, with a pollax:



My feeling is that in Fiore's frontale, this is the moment the blades meet; in Vadi's (and indeed in Fiore's fenestra), frontale is a position from which a parry is made. This ties in nicely with the situation on folio 31 of *Il Fior di Battaglia*, where a master in *dente di zenghiaro* waits to defend himself, and the text states he could be in any left side guard, such as donna on the left or fenestra on the left. Why Vadi doesn't call this fenestra on the left I don't know, but that is clearly what, from a practical perspective, it is.

Compare these images side by side to see the relationship:



Though of course his usage is totally different. These guards are extended forwards and used for entering; Vadi's is are held back and used for either striking from or parrying from.

Marozzo's closest cognate would be perhaps the *intrare* guards, *in largo passo* and *non in largo passo*, shown here:





POSTA DI DENTE DI CINGIARO

E SON DIFORA

*Son posta posta di cenghiaro e son difora
Che de ferire mai non faro dimora.*

I am the guard guard of the boar and I am outside,
That of strikes I do not make a home.

THE BOAR'S TOOTH, OUTSIDE.

This guard is, as the name clearly states, a variant on a previously illustrated guard, *posta di dente di cingiaro*. Let's see them side by side:



It is clear that they are basically the same guard, but held with the other leg forwards. We have seen this before in the porta di



It is interesting to note that in the Getty MS, but not in the other three extant, Fiore also ends his twelve guards with a variant on *dente di zenghiaro*, though here the difference between the two is not a change of lead leg, but a *volta stabile* (stable turn) bringing the weight onto the back foot and the sword into the middle of the body. Fiore calls the latter *posta di dente zenghiaro mezana*, and states that the other is *tutta*, or full.



Referring back to our table we can see that in the other three manuscripts it is *posta di donna* that is repeated, by being held on the other side. Vadi's guard is one of those that jumped out at me and yelled "Bolognese" when I first saw it, and a comparison with Marozzo's *Cinghiara porta di ferro* should show you why:

Conclusions

This article was written to allay a vague sense I had of “maybe there’s a story here”: can we trace a development from Fiore through Vadi to Bolognese? This is about a move away from the natural comfort of Fiore’s system mechanics and towards a more weapon-specific style, in which the absence of armour, the increasing length of the weapon, changes in aesthetics, and changes in the context in which the fight may occur, lead to a more flamboyant physical expression, and a set of guards that play variations on the older themes. It seems to me at least that Vadi is borrowing wholesale from Fiore, but I don’t think there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Marozzo and his ilk were aware of Vadi at all. I think there was a broader change in the way swordsmanship was thought of, and swordsmanship systems developed, of which Vadi’s guards show us an early example, and Marozzo’s a later. This process is, to me at least, clear in the illustrations of the guards, and (which has not been touched on in this article) even clearer when we go through the plays of Fiore, Vadi and Marozzo sword in hand.

It is especially interesting to me that Vadi’s statement that he will show you these guards on both sides is borne out; in fact he also shows several guards with either leg leading. His treatment of the low guards for instance includes right foot for-

wards and left foot forwards variants of both *porta di ferro* and *dente di cinghiaro*, and of his high guards, *fenestra* and *frontale*, *sagitaria* and *posta breve di spada lungeza*, are clearly left-right pairs. *Dona*, *falcon*, *posta lunga con la spada curta*, and *corona* appear to be standalone positions. This idea of organising the primary guards as variations on a small set of basic positions is clearly present in Fiore’s work before him and by Marozzo’s after him.

My purpose of course was to present the reader with all the visual data with which to come to their own conclusions, and to separate this idea out from my forthcoming annotated transcription and translation of *De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi*, where it would be a digression from the main purpose of the book, which is to provide longsword scholars and practitioners with a practical resource for recreating his art.

Guy Windsor

Helsinki, August 2012