

Art and Science of Combat

By Henry Fox

Introduction

The following discussion is intended to show that there is much more than just fighting, or even fighting with skill, much more than just two people engaging with blades to fencing, more even than two people fencing in a period fashion. Though certainly, I can tell you from personal experience, it is a lot of fun. Within the mix of combat blades move this way and that and from the outside it would seem like chaos, but the individuals who participate in these combats are trained. They learn their skills, and their skills are derived from what is known as the Art and Science of Defence. While there is a lot to discuss even in that statement this discussion focuses on the aspects of the forgotten aspects of art and science found within the treatises.

The Art and Science of Fencing

The Art and Science of fencing is a subject which is difficult to avoid, especially considering the focus of the current discussion. While the discussion may focus on different aspects of the art and science of fencing; more, evidence-based examples, *of* the art and science of fencing. There is an Art and Science of fencing which the true scholar of the blade understands and knows how to differentiate between the two.

A person could fill an entire discussion talking about their similarities and their differences, how different schools may employ more of one than the other. That would detract from the original intent and drag it back to current assumptions. So suffice to say a simple explanation of this subject is all that is required, at least for our current purposes.¹ Simply put, the Science of Fencing is what is found in the treatises; the perfect actions made, perfect examples of theory executed in the examples. The Art of Fencing is what happens when a human being faces another sword in hand; they pit their knowledge of the Science of fencing against one another, and perform the Art. This is often quite a bit different to the Science because the results are not always perfect, due to many different factors.

Within these two aspects, more specifically within the Science of Fencing, we may examine the substance of the treatises, as they demonstrate both Art and Science in their creation. Both these aspects of the treatises can be demonstrated in the simple presentation and creation of the treatises, and the knowledge which is contained within. However, this discussion will go into more depth to bring both the Art and the Science found within the pages to light.

The Science

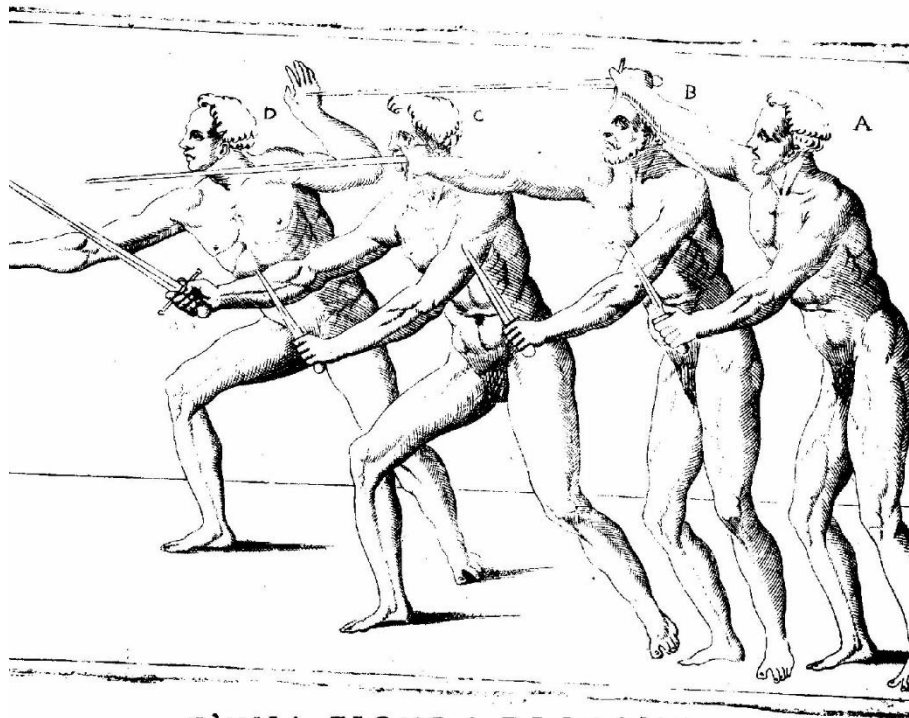
In a sort of reversal of how they are addressed commonly, we will discuss the science before the art, so this connection can be made between the actions which are made on the field and what is written within the pages of manuscripts and treatises. The actions described are intended to

¹ If you want to know more, please, do come and ask me about this aspect of fencing. I am more than willing to discuss it and go as in-depth as you would like.

answer the actions of the opponent, they are intended to answer a puzzle presented by an opponent. These are mathematical and geometrical puzzles.

Camillo Agrippa

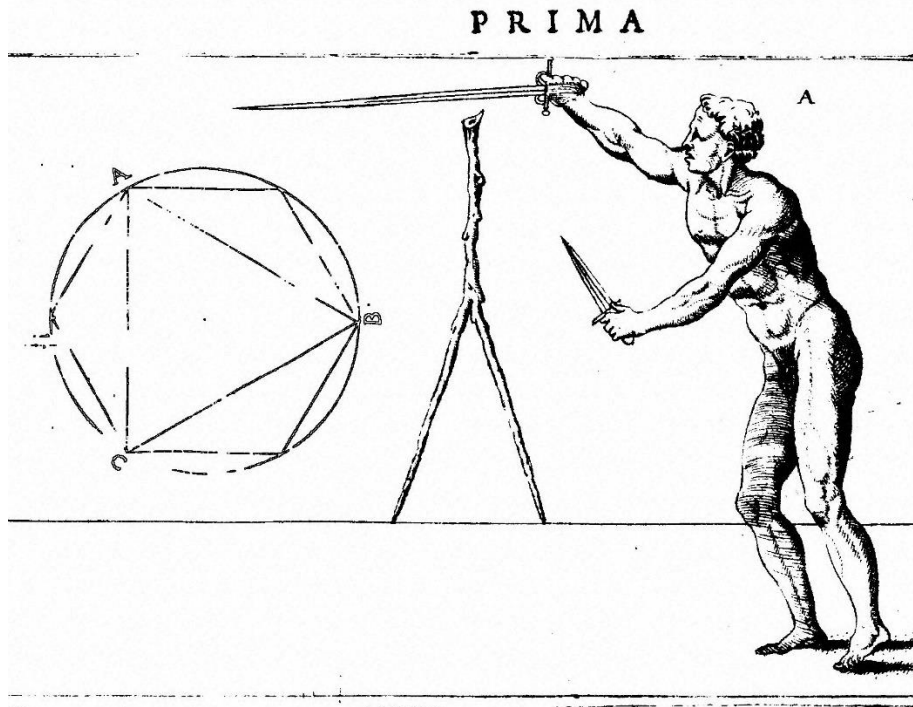
It is little surprise that the mathematician, engineer, architect and fencer, Camillo Agrippa² would base his method on such principles, having found them to be present in the art of the sword. The reader can find Agrippa's geometrical drawings throughout his treatise, *Trattato di Scientia d'Arme, con vn Dialogo di Filosofia* (or, *Treatise on the Science of Arms, with a Dialogue on Philosophy*), published in 1553. Each figure explains how a person should move their body in response to their opponent. Even his notation of the figures in his explanations are more algebraic rather than conversational. He was the first known writer to number the wards, or guards, from one to four, or *Prima, Seconda, Terza, Quarta*, in fencing parlance most suitable for a mathematician, as depicted in the image below; he numbers them A, B, C, D, and uses the same notation throughout his treatise adding letters for further guards. The treatise reads like some kind of algebraic text.



D'VNA FIGVRA DIGEOMETRIA. Cap. II.

Every single one of his images, even those in the background explain some part of his method, or explain some part of his theory. Most people focus on the main pictures and miss the background images, thus missing part of the information which Agrippa is attempting to pass along to the reader. A perfect example being the image for his first ward or guardia, A.

² https://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Camillo_Agrippa



One might be amused by the stick drawn on the image and think it was the artist simply “stretching their artistic legs,” however as explained by Agrippa in his text, it’s use, most interesting and useful for the pursuit of arms. The stick is even more useful if one looks beyond the simple statement of the author.

“The stick is placed alongside the four guards because a piece of wood, taken unfinished from a tree and not having had any work done to it, provided that it is straight and strong enough to be used with a light hand, is quite sufficient to make all sorts of geometrical figures such as circles, squares, triangles, octagons (from which you can similarly make a proportional sphere),”³

Taken from a more allegorical perspective, the stick unfashioned as it is, is the fencer while it may be unfashioned and uneducated it has the potential to be useful. It has the potential to do great things, as things are hidden within its plain exterior. So, Agrippa is alluding to the idea of humanism as well regarding the fencer that they have the potential to grow if only they study what he presents.

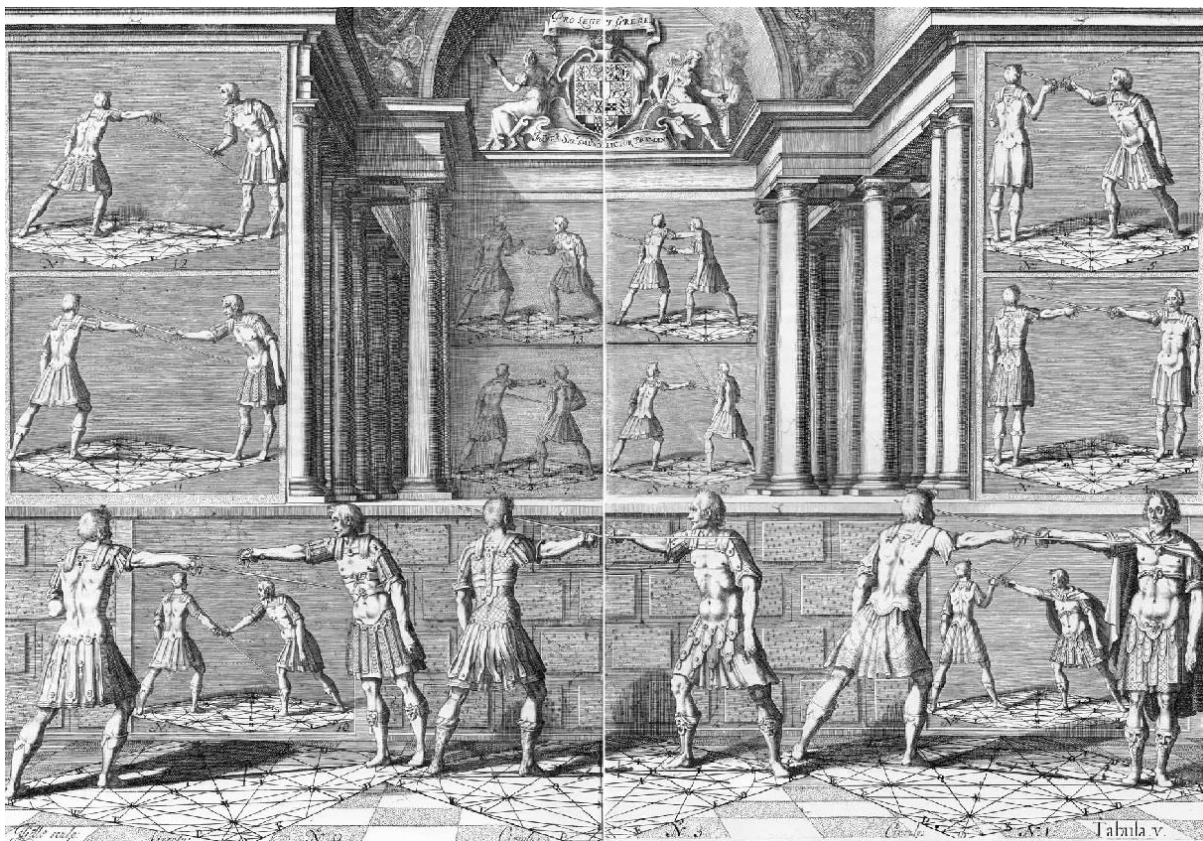
For those who would claim that the Italian Schools of fence do not have any philosophy or science to their approach. I first present Agrippa as an example. Even within those examples which will be presented as art, there will be science found, as the art and the science become one together, this is no better demonstrated than in the next example of art that is presented.

³ Agrippa, C. *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise by Camillo Agrippa*, Translated by Ken Mondschein, New York, Italica Press, 2009, p.14

Gérard Thibault d'Anvers

The treatise of Gérard Thibault d'Anvers⁴ is gloriously illustrated, and thus it could appear below with its own entry in the section on art. Thibault represents an interpretation on a system known as La Verdadera Destreza, or the true art and skill, which has its origins in the Iberian continent. Performed correctly, it is the definition of “death by geometry.”

Each page in his treatise, *Academie de l'Espée*, published in 1630, presents his geometrical circle upon the ground, upon which the fencers walk. A circle which would be imagined in an actual combat. The fencers engage at certain angles at a certain Times, using a certain amount of pressure upon their blades against the opponent's blade. Thibault's method is succinct, methodical, and comprehensive in its explanation. His method demonstrates what could be seen as the Iberian method brought to its pinnacle, however it is considered an off-shoot of the school. The application is the same pure geometry applied to man weapon and approach to the individual.



The above is pages 92 and 93 which form a single spread indicating the diagrams which are used for “Chapter Five: On Attacks at the First Instance, and Feints.”⁵ The geometric pattern is clearly seen on the floor at the fencer's feet, long with the lines created by their weapons. The individuals step according to the patterns which are laid out on Thibault's circle to come by his

⁴ https://wiktenauer.com/wiki/G%C3%A9rard_Thibault_d%27Anvers

⁵ Thibault d'Anvers, G. *The Academy of the Sword: Wherein is demonstrated by mathematical rules on the foundation of a mysterious circle the theory and practice of the true and heretofore unknown secrets of handling arms on foot and horseback: 1628*, Translated by John Michael Greer, London, Aeon Books, 2017, pp91-93

conclusions. This page is merely one example of the scientific approach that Thibault has taken to the use of the sword, reducing it down to the application of geometry, distance, and time.

Regarding its periodicity, a treatise was written at the end of a person's life, rather than toward the beginning and especially in the case of fencing treatises, with a certain level of experience. One could easily expect that Thibault would have been teaching, and possibly using, this method for quite some time before it was published, especially considering it was published a year after his death. The system it is based upon has its origins, documented to at least the sixteenth century, if not before.

These two have demonstrated some of the science within the treatises which are read by those who are interested in swordplay, however there are many more. Some are more explicit in their explanations than some. However, each describes their method, giving their theory about how the sword is to be applied against an opponent. Each is bound by the same principles of Time and Distance, the sword use may be a little different from one another, but they are all bound by these principles, as every scientist is bound by scientific principles such as gravity, as the fencer.



The Art

Often when art is considered, people forget the time and effort that went into producing a book in the Medieval and Renaissance period. These days it is a *relatively* simple process, we have a lot of technology which enables this to happen. The older books had to be produced by hand, written out by hand, the images produced by hand. Even when the printing press arrived, the original plates that were produced to print the book still had to be produced by hand. If a person were to merely consider these, this would be sufficient to recognise the art within period treatises on the art of swordplay. However, we will go a little deeper. In my book, you will find an image from Fiore dei Liberi's⁶ treatise, which will

⁶ https://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Fiore_de%27i_Liberi

appeal to the calligraphers and illuminators.

I believe that this piece of from Fiore's work will have sufficient calligraphy and illumination to keep any person interested in the art of the pen quite satisfied that there is art to be found within these pages. However, there is much more that can be presented.

For the discussion of "art" three treatises will be discussed: Tower Armouries MS I.33, Vadi's *Arte Gladiatoria*, and we should examine Thibault's treatise from the perspective as a work of art. While Thibault's book was sent to the printing presses for publication, it took 20 engravers to produce the plates for the images, one of them being Albrecht Dürer. The level of precision in regard to the art found in this book is amazing. Modern reproductions do not do this book justice as it was much larger than it is now produced, but even now there is amazing detail present.

MS I.33: The Walpurgis Fechtbuch



Moving to the Tower Armouries MS I.33, also known as the Walpurgis Fechtbuch⁷ or *Liber de Arte Dimicatoria*, and before we start: MS, stands for manuscript; I is a shelf number; and 33 is the location on that shelf. So, it is correctly referred to as MS "one-three-three," though actually its location has changed recently, and is now catalogued as Fecht 1. This is an early fourteenth-century fechtbuch, or fight-book, on the use of sword and buckler. It is often called the Walpurgis Fechtbuch for the depiction of Walpurgis where she appears in the last two plates of the treatise, one of which is presented here.

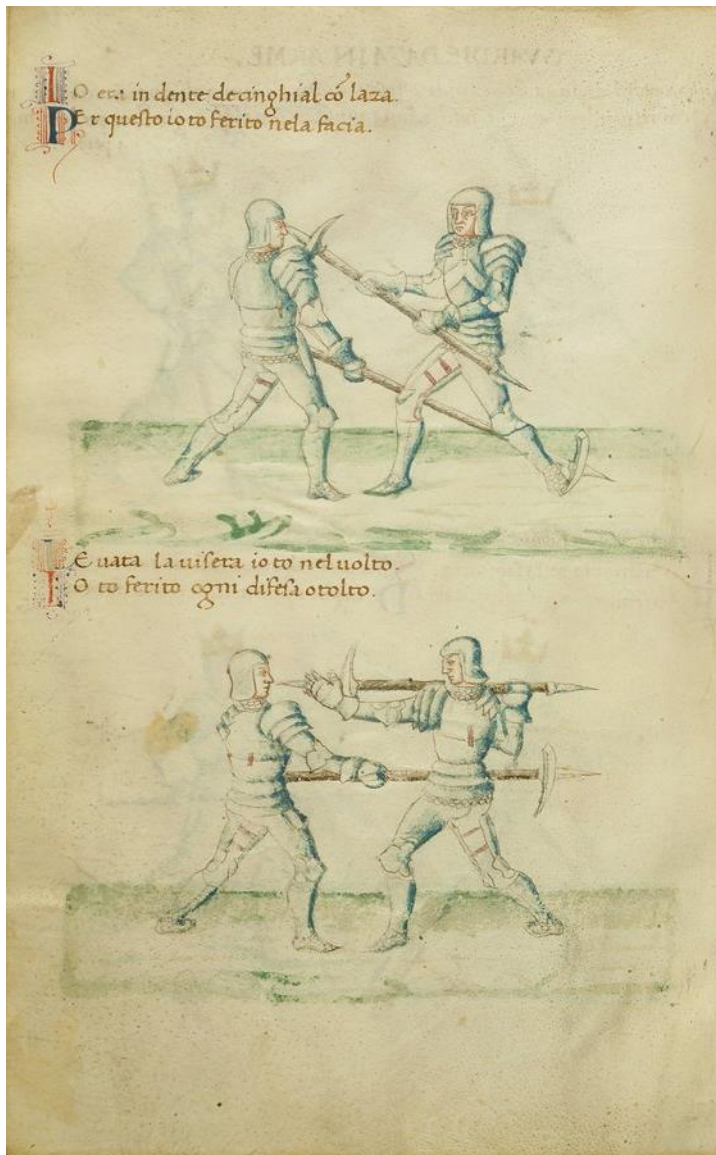
The treatise is written in Latin, as would be expected from a book produced and depicting monks contesting with sword and buckler,

according to the Wiktenauer it was produced by three scribes and as many as 17 illustrators. One only look through the pages of the manuscript to see the detail in the calligraphy and the images

⁷ [https://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Walpurgis_Fechtbuch_\(MS_I.33\)](https://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Walpurgis_Fechtbuch_(MS_I.33))

which have been produced. This is the earliest, to date, fencing manuscript which has been discovered.

Phillipo Vadi



Phillipo Vadi's⁸ *De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi* is the third treatise that will be examined, and was produced in the fifteenth-century. It shows examples of armoured and unarmoured combat throughout, an almost full collection of single-combat martial arts of the period. Some have claimed that this is a copy of Fiore dei Liberi's work, however there are differences between the two, and not just in the order of the combats. There is always some discussion, some disagreement that scholars would like to make about their treatises. Often to prove that one is better than the other, a most amusing discussion considering they are all one art.

Like the previous MS I.33, there is artistry found in the production of the calligraphy and found in the production of the figures present in this treatise. The image presented is 24v depicting two armoured combatants contesting with polearms. When examining these documents, we must remember, these documents were used, and are used

for the reproduction of the art which is contained within. Primarily in period they would have been reminders for students how the actions worked so they could practise accurately. This means the body positions had to be accurate, and weapons placed where they are supposed to be. Even beyond this there is beauty in the work. There is much that can be learned from the weapons, the armour, and the costume as it is depicted in these works, but this is not the only thing that is often missed.

⁸ https://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Philippo_di_Vadi

What About the Language?

When examining the language found within these treatises a person can get lost within the language as it flows. Many of the treatises are written as poems for easy memory, especially the medieval treatises. Others simply have language which captures the imagination. Such language was picked up by other individuals and reproduced. Evidence for this can be found in the connection between the treatise of Vincentio Saviolo and William Shakespeare, a subject which I have discussed, in my blog,⁹ and been prodded to discuss on camera.¹⁰

The pair had a mutual friend in John Florio, who was friends with several other playwrights, including Ben Jonson, so there would have been no doubt that the pair at least knew of one another.



Yet there are some stark similarities between what is found in the treatise of Saviolo and that which is found within the plays of Shakespeare. In "As You Like It" the reasons for a quarrel almost line up perfectly with those given in Saviolo's Second Book "Of Honor and Honorable Quarrels". There is a small pictogram within the treatise indicating "worm's meat" something Mercutio accuses Romeo of making him in "Romeo and Juliet," which is presented here, this is found in his First Book, at the end of the Second Day's "Discourse on the Rapier and Dagger". In the original folio, the weapons for the duel between Laertes and Hamlet was supposed to be rapier and gauntlet, rapier alone, or rapier and dagger, the

three weapons which Saviolo teaches in his treatise. The connections just keep mounting up. The connections between art and fencing are present.

The fencer who reads the treatises does not only learn how to fence, but they also learn a lot more. They learn art, science, and language. These are options open to anyone who is willing to pick up a blade, open a book, or even better do both and gain all the benefits.

⁹ <https://oldewordes.blogspot.com/2014/11/the-saviolo-shakespeare-connection.html>

¹⁰ <https://youtu.be/52NN4BHexc4>