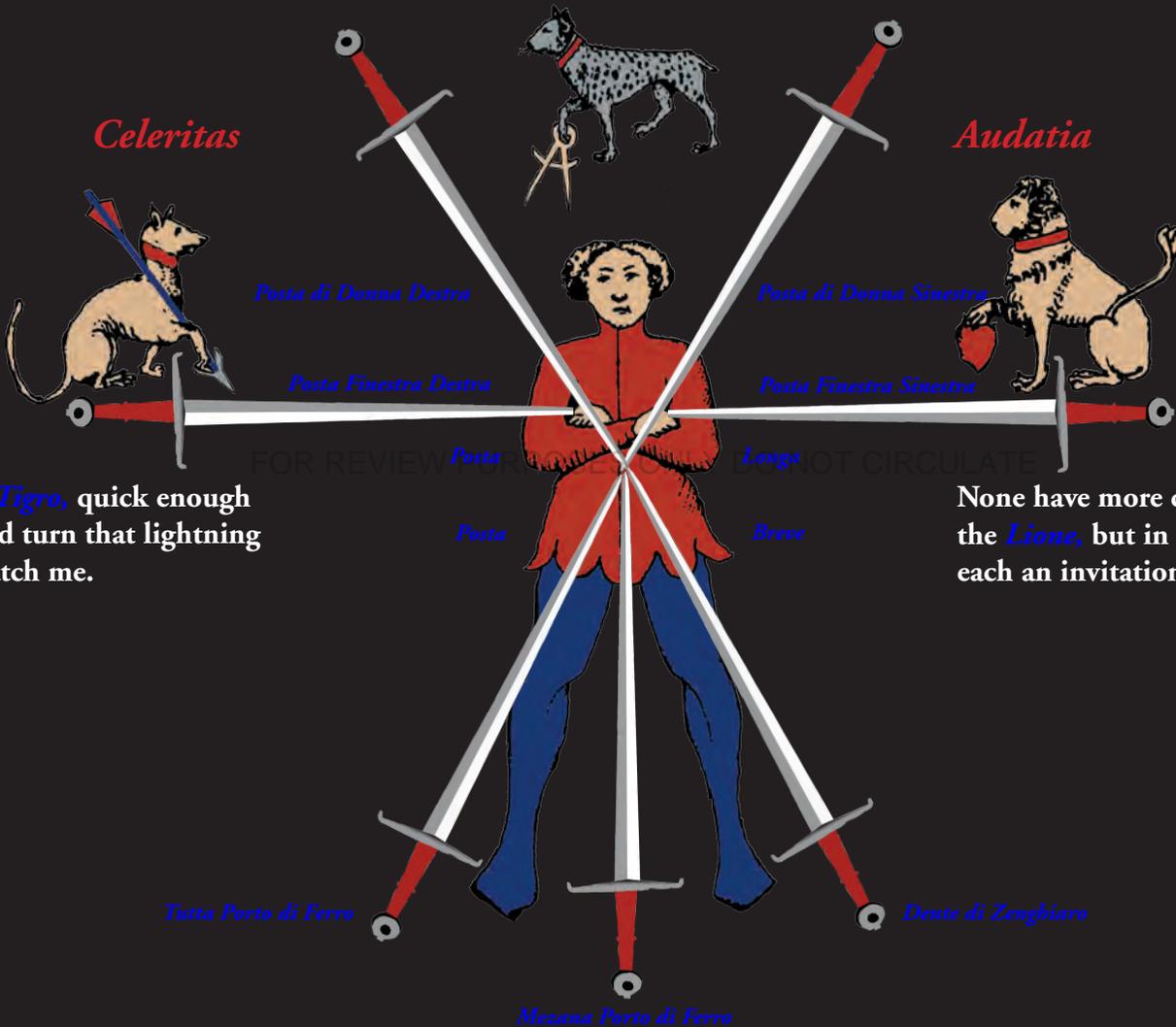


# SEGNO

*We are the four animals of such contemplation;  
Who the combatant want to make a part;  
And our virtues must he have in good measure.  
Thus armed will a man have honor in the Art.*

## *Prudentia*

Better than the *Cervino's* (lynx's) eyes does no creature see, with which I always make with a compass and measure.



## *Celeritas*

I am the *Tigro*, quick enough to run and turn that lightning cannot catch me.

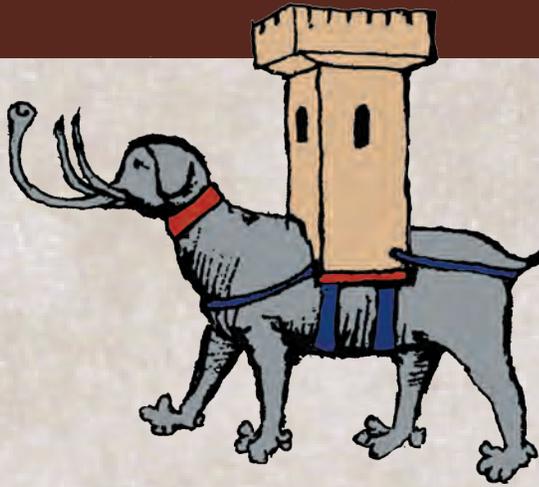
## *Audatia*

None have more courage than I, the *Lione*, but in battle I make each an invitation.

## *Fortudio*



I am the *Ellefante*, and a castle I am burdened by.  
I do not kneel, nor do I lose my way.



## FORTITUDO – ELLEFANTE [GETTY–FORTEZA]

“Ellefante son e uno castello ho per cargho,  
“E non me inçenochio ni perdo uargho.” [Getty]

“Ellefante son e un castello porta per cargho.  
E non mi inzinocchio nè perdo vargo.” [PD]

“I am the Elephant, and a castle I am burdened by.  
And I do not kneel,<sup>29</sup> nor lose my way.”

**F**iore’s elephant stands at the foot of the diagram, positioned upon a small, flat base-plate. It forms the base upon which the rest of the art rests, the art’s foundation. The elephant represents stability, strength, and an ownership of the combatant’s ground.

In a medieval context, according to the Aberdeen Bestiary, the Elephant was one of the greatest of beasts. It was a common belief that the elephant did not rise if he fell. This parallels Fiore’s lack of ground-fighting, and his strong preference to put the opponent onto the ground, without being taken to the ground himself.

The elephant may have carried other great symbolism for Fiore’s audience. The Aberdeen Bestiary adds that the Elephant represents innocent goodness (for he represented Adam), a creature who cared for the wounded, who knew nothing of adultery, and who defended his mate. The Bestiary also records the Great Elephant as a symbol for the civilizing law that stands as a bulwark against sin. They were (and are) thought to be of a very high intelligence.<sup>30</sup>

Fiore associates the Elephant with *Fortudio* and *Forteza*, or strength. His steadfast nature supports a citadel upon his back, and combined it is a potent fighting platform, known to the Italians of the day as a weapon employed by the Persians and Indians.

In practical terms, a man’s body supports his fighting efforts, and indeed the image of the elephant carrying the tower should be strongly internalized. The combatant’s weight should be carried low, but not too low. The back—like the tower—should be straight (I have often instructed students who have a tendency to lean to imagine wearing a coronet behind which miniature archers are poised: they must take care that these small soldiers aren’t spilled out of a “leaning tower.”).

When an elephant moves, it cannot afford to misstep. When modern humans walk, we tend to step towards the heel in what is essentially a semi-controlled fall. But when elephants step, they first distribute their weight evenly between the three other feet, then move the front foot with surprising grace and gentleness—but also with confidence, placing it upon the ground. Occasionally, having tested the ground, he wishes to change his mind, but as he has his weight still on three other legs, moving the leg is no problem. In the same way, a combatant is well-served to keep his

weight upon his back foot while he moves the front foot, in case he has to reevaluate owing to combat conditions. As Fiore says of the *Ellefante*, he strives to keep himself from the ground and does not kneel.

For a combatant, it is important to maintain the elephant while pursuing other martial tasks. He must maintain his balance, his connection with the ground, his fighting platform. It is common for beginning students to lean, to leap, to slide, or to cast their balance to the wind in an effort to gain a small momentary advantage. But these temporary advantages are usually low-probability gambles that risk the critical stability that supports all of the combatant’s efforts and should be avoided or trained out.

We call the first course of the Schola class the Elephant module, because the focus is on building fundamentals appropriate to further study. As such, we build balance, focus, awareness, and core movements that comprise the system. The combatant will seek the first and most advantageous First Master of Battle, securing victory through superior position such that the opponent cannot easily remedy his attack. He is then ready to apply this martial intelligence to more complex situations, the inevitable case where the opponent makes cover.



*Elephant from a Bestiary. Bodleian Library, Univ. of Oxford. MS Bodl. 764, fol. 12r*





## CELERITAS – TIGRO [GETTY–PRESTEZA]

“Yo tigro tanto son presto a corer e uoltare,  
Che la sagita del cello non me pò.”

“Io tigro tanto son presto a correr e voltare che la  
sagitta del cielo non mi poria avanzare.”

“I am the tiger quick enough to run and turn that  
arrow from the sky (lightning)<sup>31</sup> cannot catch me.”



Fiore’s tiger may not be Giotto-like in its realism,<sup>32</sup> but the tiger’s association with lightning stands for initiative, physical and mental speed, the benefits of natural speed and/or training. The *tigro* clutches an arrow in his paw, the *sagitta del cello* or “arrow of the sky,” a metaphor for lightning.

Medieval and early Renaissance writers had little direct experience with tigers, often confusing them with other big cats, such as panthers or cheetahs. But the idea of the tiger seems well represented within the most famous medieval Bestiary, the Aberdeen:

“The tiger is named after its swift flight: the Persians, Greeks and Medes call it, ‘the arrow.’ It is a beast with colorful spots, of extraordinary qualities and swiftness, after which the River Tigris is named because it is the swiftest of all rivers.”<sup>33</sup>

In addition to speed, medieval legend held that tigresses could be captured through the use of a mirror or reflective sphere by taking advantage of their extraordinary devotion to their cubs—their fidelity. Real tigers stalk their prey and then ambush them in a lightning attack. They are silent, deadly killers.

Combatants must leverage speed through the development of highly efficient motor control programming. Some are fortunate and are gifted with natural speed, but all combatants can develop speed through training. The purpose of drills and plays is to establish patterns of movement based on sound principles that can be manipulated under the quickly changing environment of movement in a fight.

Fiore’s tiger rests near the right hand, the hand that controls the sword. Like the *sagitta del cello*, the sword can strike like lightning—fast, unpredictably, and with unerring precision.



*Tiger from the Aberdeen Bestiary.*  
Permission courtesy the University of Aberdeen.

More basically, combatants must immediately seize upon their opportunities in order to capture or hold the initiative. When the time is right, a lightning-quick decision and movement are necessary for success—or else the opponent may well have time to act.

*Tigro from the Getty, Fol. 32*



## AUDATIA – LIONE [GETTY-ARDIMENTO]

“Più de mi lionne non porta cor ardito,  
Però de batalia faço a zaschaduno invito.”

“Più de mi leone non porta core ardito, però di  
bataglia fazo a zaschun invito.”

“None have more courage than I, the Lion, but in  
battle I make each one an invitation.”



**A**udacious courage is symbolized by the lion, who, at the left side, holds a heart in his paw, the symbol for strength and character. As he says, none have more courage than the lion, but in battle the lion invites each to combat. He does not rush in head over heels, but he tempers his audacity with wisdom. He invites, and then pounces in a frontal assault. He is the king of beasts, full of pride, but noble and merciful.

In medieval lore the lion emerges much as he is now. He was believed to eshew the killing of women, children and the ill. It was believed that they ate in moderation. That his commanding roar dominated all other beasts, and that he could be killed through deception and falsehood (such as a snake's bite or a scorpion's sting).

For the combatant, the lion symbolizes martial courage, the fine place between rushing into an entry and seizing the initiative. I remind combatants to move with the boldness and courage of the lion, seizing ground with a calm surety borne of both *ellefante* and *lione*. But the combatant must take command of the fight, not hang back and negotiate the outcome. The boldness, tempered by nobility, will drive him strongly forward and with audacity at the right moment to seize the quickest and most efficient outcome appropriate to the encounter.

Many beginning students will hang back at *misura larga*—wide distance—in their encounters, subconsciously fearful of entering the fray. While this can be a tactic of good judgment, it is frequently accompanied with overcautiousness, or what in the school we think of as insufficient lion in the attack. At the other end of the spectrum, other combatants will rush to the fray, seemingly without caution, certainly without adequate judgement. We can think of this approach as the lion's pride—or vainglory—but it can also be a symptom of fear—the combatant subconsciously hopes that by rushing in he can drive past both his fear and the opponent's guard. Both are costly mistakes.



*Lions from a Bestiary. Bodleian Library, Univ. of Oxford.  
MS Bodl. 764, fol. 2v*

# PRUDENTIA

PRUDENTIA – CERUINO (LYNX)  
[GETTY–AVISAMENTO]

“Meio de mi louo ceruino non uede creatura;  
E aquello meto sempre a sesto e misura.” [Getty]

“Meglio de mi lovo<sup>34</sup> cervino non vede creatura.  
E aquello mette sempre a sesto<sup>35</sup> e a misura.” [PD]

“Better than my lynx’s eyes no creature does see,  
And with which I always make with a compass  
and a measure.”



The medieval lynx, *cervino*, was associated with alertness, keen eyesight and hearing. Unlike the domestic lynx, the Eurasian Lynx is a big cat, with bold eyes and a beautiful spotted coat, like Fiore’s depiction. In his paws he holds a set of dividers—a measuring tool. The *Cervino* or Lynx stands for measure, insight, knowledge, and that most important quality, judgment.

In the Middle Ages the lynx was associated with sharp vision, but there was also a sense that it was not a big cat but a member of the wolf family,<sup>36</sup> and as such it was sometimes associated with envy. But more commonly, it became an image for the all-seeing nature of Christ, who knew the wicked thoughts of his listeners (Matthew 22:8), and as we find in Paul: “there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account (Heb 4:13).” It is far more likely that this all-seeing nature was what Fiore intended.

Within its paws the *cervino* grasps the compass or divider, a measuring instrument familiar to masons and artisans of all kinds. Using a divider, distance could be measured. The sextant, derived from the *sesto*, was used by navigators to locate their position with precise measurements of the stars in celestial navigation.<sup>37</sup> The lynx thus measures not only physical distance, but the whole nature of the fight, arriving at a sound judgment through which he may govern the other animals.<sup>38</sup>

The combatant must temper the other qualities with sound judgment, and he must accurately measure both the physical aspects of the fight—time and distance—and the qualitative measures such as his belief about the opponent’s plans and intentions. In a broad sense this is expressed by the phrase *sentimento di ferro*, or “feel of the steel,” the feel of the opponent’s blade when the weapons are crossed, but it is much more than that. In the German, this is



Lynx from the Bodley Bestiary, MS 764, fol. 11r.  
Photo courtesy Bodleian Library, Univ. of Oxford  
expressed as *föhlen*—feeling.

First the combatant must use his senses to accurately measure time and distance, and he must then arrive with good judgment at a solution within the tactics taught within the system. I believe this is the most important of the four virtues, if there is one, because all of the other animals ought to be held in balance, in equal measure, the quality governed by the *cervino*. A keen eye and a keen brain are crucial to this or to any combat system. Being able to “see” through the Fog of War has driven military theorists for hundreds of generations—the ability to notice the small details upon which a martial encounter can turn. The obvious things are usually (but not always) traps, so there is a substantial benefit to “seeing” and “measuring” what is important and what is dangerous.



*Cervino* or Lynx  
from the Getty, Fol. 32



### THE MAN HIMSELF

**A**t the center of the *segno* is the combatant himself. Medieval beasts were thought to be ruled by their wills, free to be led wherever their instincts willed them to go. But man is different than beasts because he is ruled by reason, and through both reason and enlightenment he can become moral, and through morality he is fit to rule.

Each of Fiore's beasts wears a collar, symbolizing that the creature is captured, harnessed, controlled by the man in the center. It is the man himself who must tame or harness the beasts, directing them to do his will. As the first part of the *segno* says, he must have a part of each. Stepping further from the written text, they must be in balance and brought to bear with judgement. A strong combatant must possess each animal with appropriate measure.



### FOR INTERMEDIATE COMBATANTS

#### *What's Your Animal?*

Gathering the students, the teacher asks which animal the student fights from as a position of strength, and which is his weakness. Allow the discussion to run around the group in order to deepen their knowledge of the animals. Alternatively, have each of the students evaluate each of the other students, assessing what they perceive to be their strengths and weaknesses. One trick is to have each student write down what he thinks his are before the circuit begins, then compare during the analysis.

Another technique is to ask the combatants following a fight what animal he and his opponent's fought with in primacy, and ask them to talk about how the two interacted.



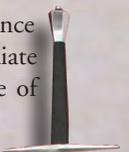
European Lynx.  
Photo © Tatiana Morozova

### APPLYING THE SEGNO

**T**he *segno* is much more than an abstract teaching tool. Even for a modern student, it can be a potent reminder of the core martial qualities or virtues. For example, a combatant working through fundamentals of the system or intermediate plays may find himself off-balance—physically or mentally—and in need of tending to his *ellefante*. Or he may be rushing into the fight, or holding back, too much or too little *lione*. Or he may be missing his opportunities to attack with undeveloped attacks or slowness as he tries to recognize a situation for which he is not yet trained or experienced, an understrength *tigro*. Or he may make poor judgement, or mis-time a movement, failing with the *cervino*. Or his opponent may provide an opportunity based on these common errors.

Fiore's *segno* provides an easy-to-remember presentation of core combat qualities. Internalizing the *segno* and the characteristics of the beasts shown will offer the combatant an advantage in that it simplifies the complex variance of skills, mistakes and opportunities that arise during a fight. It is a fine, well-wrought model.

But the *segno* is also like an onion. The more experience a combatant brings, the more he will see. Intermediate combatants may notice that their opponents have one of



the animals as their totem, fighting from the Elephant, Lynx, Tiger or Lion. But they are also weak in one—and that weakness suggests lines of attack. As Colin Hatcher has ably noted, individual plays may be done emphasizing any of the four, with different results. Certain plays rely more on one animal than the others, and if this animal is a place of strength for the combatant, then he should be able to take exceptional advantage of the technique and hopefully it's underlying principle.

## MOVEMENT: THREE CATS, AND AN ELEPHANT

One of the common ways the *segno* assists in general is in its suggestions about movement. The three figures above are all big cats. Just as big cats move with graceful power, picking their way with calculated precision as they stalk their prey, so too should combatants move like cats, but with the elephant's precision and calculated balance.

Seen from above, the "seven swords" can be thought of as a footwork diagram, showing a preference for *passi a la traversa*. Yet other combatants, especially Paul MacDonald, have peered deeper into the *segno* to find connections with other groups of four: the elemental natures of Air, Earth, Fire and Water; the Christian symbolism of Father, Son and Holy Ghost in the form of a cross, and a dizzying number of other permutations. Other researchers have striven to find connections with Kabalistic secrets, Masonic iconography or esoteric elements, but I'll leave those potential connections for others to write about. Whether or not these things are actually in Fiore, it is astounding that all of this can be fit to such a simple, elegant diagram. But the very simplicity of the diagram is in itself a mirror of the whole system: a simple, efficient model easily adapted to circumstance.



**EXERCISE**



### ANIMALS AT PLAY

*Brian R. Price & Colin Hatcher*

Once the students have worked with all six plays presented in chapter 11, have them analyze which animal seems to govern each play. This should yield insights about how and why the principle works.

Next, have them attempt to execute the play emphasizing each of the four animals to see how differently the play can be made. Not all of the attempts will be successful, but in the process the students should begin to see how the qualities govern a fighting context.




*Status of an Ellefante from Northern Italy, depicting classical events.*

