

The Schola Saint George And Fiore dei Liberi's *Arte d'Armizare*

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At present, our school of chivalric martial arts is built upon an evolving interpretation of the late fourteenth / early fifteenth century *Arte d'Armizare* of Fiore dei Liberi. Surviving in at least five treatises, the SSG is involved in the interpretation, reconstruction and teaching of this art in order to re-establish it within the community of martial arts practiced in the modern world.

As expressed in the surviving texts, the *Fior di Battaglia* (Flower of Battle) and the *Flos Duellatorum*, I interpret Fiore's **Arte** as presenting principles of combat through the example of technical "plays" (*zoghi*). We do not teach the art through kata, but rather each play represents a general martial principle which we hope to instill within the student's (*scolaro*) "toolbox" of technical and tactical options. Not surprisingly, the martial arts of Europe reflect the cultural and martial traditions of Western society; therefore, it comes as no surprise that the arts emphasize individual expression within a framework of principles more than following the rigid expressions that more characterize many (though not all) Asian arts. Knowing one's place seems to have been far less important in Western societies, where one's place could be determined, and fortunes won or lost, through martial expression on the battlefield or within the tournament lists. For these reasons, these arts hold exceptional promise for those living within European-based cultures, especially in the United States, where the ideals of individual freedom and advancement based on personal achievement remain vibrant aspects of the culture.

Fiore's *Arte d'Armizare* consists of grappling and weapon arts as practiced at the end of the fourteenth century and into the fifteenth. The essence of Fiore's tactics are designed to control the opponent's main weapon and then to execute one or more of the *cinque cose*, the "five things": striking, disarming, breaking, binding, or throwing. Many times the techniques presented are a combination. In order to control the weapon, aggressive contact is sought (*incrosa* with a distance weapon such as a sword, spear or poleaxe; weapon to arm in the case of short weapons or an unarmed encounter). Asymmetrical encounters are emphasized in much of the text. The *Arte d'Armizare* includes grappling, extensive work with and against a dagger or knife, baton, the sword in one hand and in two, spear, and poleaxe, in and out of armour, on foot and on horseback.

The *Arte* is demonstrated within the treatise through a series of *magistri* or "masters," whose scholars demonstrate techniques flowing from the key positions. Counters and counters to counters are often included, although these can generally be discovered by simple application of the core principles. Movement is defined through guards, or *poste* (literally positions), which provide an analytical framework for reducing the response time needed in a combat action because they fit the immensely complex possible actions into a readily grasped framework. Historically, predecessors of these arts seem to have been encoded in mnemonic verse that was likely hundreds of years old when Fiore wrote his *Fior di Battaglia*.

The medieval martial arts, unlike their Renaissance progeny, assume that power will be necessary to defeat the opponent's clothing or armour. As such, the biokinesthetic requirements resemble more Karate or Tae Kwon Do, in that the larger muscle groups are harnessed to throw the blow while the relatively smaller muscles in the arms merely direct the blow to the target. However, the position of the respective weapons is very important; one can strike behind the opponent's attack to engage it--resulting in a more blended or Akido-like action or directly into it, over-powering it, much more like in Karate. Regardless, it

is of paramount importance that the weapon be supported by the body and that the stability of the body be harnessed to the weapon. There are no dramatic lunges, castings, crossings of the feet or arms, or gathering of the feet because stability is crucial given that power is needed and that grappling could occur at any point.

Grappling techniques (*abrazare*, literally, "to the arms") emphasize remaining standing, which makes sense in a combat environment where going to the ground would expose the combatant to the potentially unkind attentions of the opponent's fellows. Joint locks to the wrist and elbow are strongly emphasized, expressed through the *tre ligadure* that resonate throughout the system, and are found with the dagger, sword, and even the poleaxe. These "key" locks are designed to quickly immobilize the opponent and to reduce their spectrum of combat options as quickly as possible. As such, they are a favorite tactic.

Similarly, sending the opponent to the ground (*mettere in terra*) is likewise a favorite tactic and there are three main families of methods of accomplishing the task. Key locks may be extended into throws (or they may "ruin" the arm); the leg may be lifted and combined with pressure on the upper body to make a counter-balancing takedown that drives the head into the ground; or a leveraged throw may be made over the leg or hip, much as is done in Judo. As with the key locks, the throws are integrated smoothly into each weapon form and are an option whenever the distance is appropriate. It is a key tactic whenever both of the opponent's hands are brought together.

The dagger section forms the greatest part of the art, probably because the dagger would have been the most commonly faced weapon in most self-defense situations. Expressed through a series of remedy-masters, nine masters control the dagger techniques and from them more than eighty plays are shown, many of which depict unarmed versus knife encounters and most of which employ *ligadure* or joint locks. We have distilled this mass of material down into key elements woven into our sword curriculum and Colin Hatcher, the first non-founder *Magistro* candidate within the School, has crafted a parallel curriculum that conveys the same principles as our more venerable sword curriculum and which will see unveiling at our June Symposium this year (2009). Many of Fiore's close-quarters principles are expressed in the dagger section, although they may be found throughout the system.

Our school's main curriculum revolves around the sword in two hands. Fiore does address the sword in one hand, but the two-handed sections are far more extensive and seem to represent a pan-European medieval tradition that lauds the sword in two hands as a complex but artful weapon that expresses the full potentials of the system because it can play close (*zogho stretto*) or far (*zogho largo*). While grappling is a key part of the *zogho stretto* or close play, it is only incidental to the long play (*zogho largo*). Hence, the sword in two hands curriculum is an ideal entre into the *Arte d'Armizare* and it is at present the route through which the vast majority of Schola students follow.

Like the grappling and dagger, the sword in two hands work flows from a series of guards or *poste*, in this case twelve in number. The core tactic is to select an advantageous *guardia* and strike the opponent while still under cover (no "spray and pray"). The essence of this "First Master of Battle" is to strike "safely", that is to say, so that it would be difficult for the opponent to strike simultaneously with the potential flawed result of a double or a *doppio*. In sparring conditions we do not refight these but rather count them as a double fail, to better emphasize the importance of striking without being struck in return.

The Schola's first module concentrates on foundational work. It is drawn from the *guardia* section, but seeks to build a solid fighting platform. Footwork, the unarmed fighting positions, the twelve *poste*, throwing key blows (which follow a strikingly similar pattern to Escrima or Kali), striking under cover, and six core plays (*zoghi*) or plays teach the student key principles. After approximately six months, students may test for their **compagno** grade, which entitles them to wear a yellow belt.

The second module concentrates on Fiore's *zogho largo* (long play) plays, which encode the tactics. Using three basic turns (the *tre volte*) and placing the actions in the context of three times (the *tre tempi*), combatants learn how to enter a fight and how to handle the likely crossing of the sword by feeling pressure and recognizing key positional placement for the weapons relative to one another. This module takes from four to twelve months, depending upon the student and the availability of instruction. As many of our students study independently or with a small study group, progress time is widely variable. Students test for this material through an hour-long test that focuses on the tactical algorithm, demonstrating the eight plays as they attempt to explain their understanding of how the plays integrate into a system. Successful testing results in the grading to **scolaro minore** (junior scholar) and is recognized by the wearing of a blue belt.

The third module is focused on integrating the first two. As such, it is much more sparring and proto-sparring intensive. Students do a large number of entry drills designed to create confidence in their technique and in their tactical framework by working from a key position and establishing reliable responses before moving on. Four "masters of the entry" frame this study and enable the students to begin to find their own strengths and to use them to advantage. Testing for this level includes focused and open sparring, and "holding the field" in a tournament setting to test the response under a more stressful environment. Students are also expected to choose an additional breadth weapon, and to demonstrate how the principles of the first two modules express through the unique dynamics of that weapon. Students have chosen the dagger, spear, sword in one hand, sword and shield, and even non-medieval weapons such as defense versus firearm. Additionally, there are reading requirements at this level and the students are required to write an essay on the integration of the historical readings and their *Arte d'Armizare*. Successful candidates results in grading to **scolaro** (scholar) and is recognized by the wearing of a green belt. We certainly realize that this "blue-green" flip is the opposite of many other martial arts, but since this level blends the first two, we see the green belt as more a more appropriate token as green is the blend of yellow and blue. This is a difficult module. Inexperienced combatants must work through the difficulties of combat, of hitting at speed, of split-second decision making. Experienced combatants must strive to stay within the framework and not let their previous experience bleed over too much into either their tactics or into their technique. While blended expressions are fine once the system has been internalized, the system's efficiency cannot be realized if the student constantly refers to alien techniques.

The fourth module then focuses on the *zogho stretto* or close play. We have broken the plays in the manuscript down into fifteen key techniques which group smoothly into seven sets building on the core principle of *cover/presa/remedio*, which is the same model we use for the dagger and grappling work. The *remedii* are in this case the "five things," striking, disarming, breaking, binding or throwing. Students of the sword must therefore study the ligature and the throws, although most groups integrate this core training into their weekly practice from the very start, along with basic techniques of falling and rolling. Close quarters work focuses on "driving through" the opponent rather than going around or to the sword, as in previous "long play" work. Stability becomes more important, as does determination. This is a difficult and intensive module that has generally taken a year to complete, although it can be done in as little as six months. Successful testing grades the combatant to **Scolaro Maggiore** (senior scholar) and is recognized by the wearing of a purple belt.

The fifth module represents the final structured module within the sword in two hands curriculum. Students seek to integrate not only the close quarters work into their swordplay through intensive entry drilling, but also to refine their overall tactical approach and their technical execution of the plays. A second, longer essay is required and students demonstrate their achievement both through the drills, with a tournament holding the field, and in breadth weapons chosen by the examining masters at the time of the testing. Progress to this point moves the student from intermediate to advanced; successful testing results in recognition as a **Primo Scolaro** (first scholar) and is recognized by the wearing of a red belt.

Following this module, the student goes through two more levels on a more academic graduate student model, guided by two **magistri**, one for their "major" and one for their "minor." The first of these two levels is designed to set the study direction for the student's advanced work; but the student can focus on any weapon within the *Arte d'Armizare* or on other weapons that fit within the Schola's direction. Students might choose, for example, German dagger or Burgundian poleaxe, or they could go on to continue to develop their sword in two hands work. As a **primo scolaro**, students are frequently called upon to teach and must decide on their course of study in terms of emphasis. They can emphasize research, teaching or performance; although every *scolaro* is expected to do all three. Additionally, the student will be expected to continue to develop their practical skills, demonstrating continued integration and improvement in the core elements. The governing *magistri* decide when and how testing should be done, and at least three *magistri* must be present to test a student at this level. Successful testing results in a grading to **Scolaro Libero** (free scholar), and is recognized by the wearing of a brown belt. We expect this level to take from one to two years for most students who make it this far.

The final level of directed training focuses on the production of a masterwork. This masterwork will depend upon the path chosen by the student and their directing masters. For those focusing on research, the masterwork is a publication-quality research paper akin to a thesis. For those focusing on teaching, the masterwork is a polished curriculum useful by other Schola groups, also akin to a kind of thesis. Additionally, the teacher should have established a reputation for being a "go to" authority on the subject at hand, earning their renown both in classes and on the field. Finally, the most difficult route is via performance, where a combatant is expected to have high-quality reproduction armour and accoutrement, and to be the person on the field who best exemplifies the goals of the system. They must also be renown for being a strong fight, being willing and able to teach something of what they know, and be familiar with the historical literature surrounding their office. Graduating to *Magistro* requires the unanimous concord of all masters present, with a minimum of three (to expand to five when were large enough) and is recognized by the wearing of a black or white belt--at the master's choice. New *magistri* join the Council of Masters and help to determine the Schola's future curriculum direction. This is really the *beginning*, rather than a culminating point and the expectation is that *magistri* will continue to develop the school's arts as we continue our growth and deepen our understanding.

In all cases, technical and tactical prowess is insufficient to guarantee advancement. Students are expected to internalize not only the physical and mental aspects of the art, but philosophical aspects as well. The development of character-strength and willpower are the core of the Schola's true objectives. Students are expected to be exemplars of chivalric conduct, which in the modern world translates into solid citizens who boldly defend their beliefs in what is right.

All of these ideals are tested in occasional tournaments and in sparring. We judge the effectiveness of our interpretations and our pedagogical instruction by how well our students account for themselves in tournaments both within the Schola and with other groups. Cross-training in other arts is also encouraged, but not required. Study of other medieval arts *is* required, however, and to advance students must take classes with non-Schola instructors for breadth.

Beyond the sword curriculum, Fiore's *Arte d'Armizare* includes work with the spear, poleaxe and sword in one hand. Students may study these as breadth weapons or as **primo scolari** and **scolari liberi** may develop curricula around them. Work in full armour is also a popular option, although the main curriculum is unarmoured because most students cannot afford quality harness. Students are also encouraged to develop interest in allied arts, such as sword and buckler (RA MS I.33 treatise), or in surviving German, English, Spanish or Burgundian treatises. Some students are focused on applying the historical principles to modern self-defense, and some want to integrate firearms training. All of these fit

under the school's stated purpose and may see development over time. But the core of the School's curriculum will remain Fiore's *Arte d'Armizare*, literally the "Arte of the Use of Arms."

Presently the Schola is preparing to acknowledge our first Magistro who is not a founder. This individual has been with the Schola for nine years, since 2000, and has excelled not only at studying the curriculum, but extending it and has produced his grappling / dagger route through the system as his Masterwork. It is a fine example for the advanced students to follow. Over time, we hope to recognize many other *magistri*, and that these *magistri* will continue to the work of deepening our understanding of the *Arte* and helping to integrate it into the community of modern martial arts.

From an SCA perspective, the *Arte d'Armizare* gives combatants a solid, authentic and effective framework through which they can better understand their own martial art. While the grappling components are largely not transferable, the foundation of the system rests rather in principles of combat that apply directly regardless of the rules-set in use. Fiore's system was an integrated exploration of unarmed combat, or with weapons using the dagger, sword, spear or poleweapon, in or out of armour, on foot or on horseback.

Contact the Schola through our website

<http://www.scholasaintgeorge.org>