

Beginner Agrippa Class Notes  
(for EAOD Dean prize)  
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### **Camillo Agrippa's *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise*, 1553 - Book 1**

Agrippa was an engineer who wanted to write a practical guide specifically for the practice of fencing with a rapier in duels. His treatise is said by the translator, Ken Mondeschein, to be the first printed instruction manual specifically meant for fencing, which differed in that it was printed for the masses rather than hand-copied, it was specifically for the weapon we use most commonly in the SCA, and it was designed to be a full set of instructions, rather than a memory reminder of a previously learned lesson, highlighting key points. It is written in two books.

The book was not meant to be equivalent to a fencing school, but to help someone to live longer in the case that they were faced with the prospect of a duel, given a 40-day maximum for preparation and some prior fencing experience. As it was meant to help a person through a single fight, its principles did not need to be physically achievable for multiple fights, which differentiates it from most SCA scenarios, in which we fight multiple bouts in a short time frame and need to maintain stamina.

There is a lot of modern talk of Agrippa's use of geometry in his work, but I prefer to think of most of his work as logic and logical deductions rather than pure geometry. He often advocates common sense over strict positioning. Agrippa also uses pictorial metaphors in his work, in the form of objects like sticks and eyes (the stick is a tool that with solid construction, reason, and logic can perform the task of drawing well, just as any person of sound body with good understanding of the precepts can perform well with a sword). He has little patience for others who teach more 'fluff,' saying that other guards and movements can be made from the ones he has already shown. He also tends to tell the reader what others would tell the reader to do and why he disagrees, suggesting that another response is simpler and just as effective or more effective. He often comments that positions outside of the main four are not the true and pure principle, rather that they are an occasional thing, to be used as appropriate for a short time.

### **Four Stances**

Four Principal Guards from which all others are derived. These follow the path of pulling a sword from a scabbard. All guards direct the point toward the opponent, with a straight wrist and arms fully extended. The wrist must be kept straight because bending the wrist moves the sword slightly upward, away from the enemy's sword. When the palm is mentioned to be to the left, it should actually be very slightly upwards as well to provide a stronger edge with which to counter pressure. The first three guards are to be more commonly used and the last less often used - usually only as a transition or ward against specific provocation. Taken as from a right-handed person:

- 1) Feet are close together, with weight on forward right foot and left foot toes holding balance behind, turned slightly outward. Left hand holds dagger or nothing at angle towards right at belly button level, palm to the right, and right hand holds sword horizontally just above head height with palm out. Body leans quite a bit forward.

2) Feet are close together, right foot forward, but this time the left foot is flat, just behind front foot, angled outward. Weight is still very much forward and placed on the front foot, while the body leans forward. Right arm is at shoulder height, palm down, blade horizontal. Left arm is the same as in 1.

3) Feet are a step and a half apart, right leg in front and bent, left leg behind and foot angled outward. Left arm does not change in relation to the body but right hand is at the level of the lower ribs, palm to the left. Sword points upward to opponent's body or head. Weight on front foot.

4) Feet are a step and a half apart, right leg in front and bent and left foot angled outward in back, weight on front leg. Body is facing to left side, leaning forward more than in 3. Left arm is bent, elbow at shoulder height and hand above and behind head. Right hand is at level of lower ribs, arm is inside the right knee, palm to left, sword points upward toward opponent's body or head.

### **Stepping and Benefits of Foot Positions**

Through geometrical figures Agrippa shows how the distance stepped and bend of the knee change the distance that the point of the blade can travel in a thrust, pointing out that lowering the body allows for a longer thrust.

Agrippa's shortened stances of the first and second guards had important purpose:

A) The body's pivot point is at the top of the legs. In a wide stance the body's pivot point is far back of the front leg, shortening the reach. If the feet are close together, the reach extends far beyond the front leg, increasing the safety of the guard.

B) Taking a single step forward to thrust from a wide stance only allows the body to move forward a short distance. Taking the same length thrust from a narrow stance provides much greater distance.

C) From a narrow stance, a half step back with the left foot easily shifts the entire body (except for the right leg) out of harm's way. From a wider stance, a small step back with the left leg provides much less benefit, is more disruptive to the body to do because there is more weight on the back foot, and thus takes more time.

### **Philosophies**

Always Threaten:

Agrippa promotes keeping the point of the sword extended toward the opponent at all times to increase the perception of offense to the opponent and protect the fencer.

Parrying/Body Voids:

Agrippa did not believe in parrying. To parry was to waste time and lose the advantage gained by the time an opponent is using in an attack. Instead, Agrippa emphasizes moving the body to avoid the sword, and combining that body void with an attack.

Sword Contact:

Agrippa also focuses on the concept of avoiding sword contact. Sword contact allows the opponent tactile feedback which is faster to respond to than visual feedback. Avoiding sword contact not only

saves time you can lose by having your blade parried before you begin but also slows your opponent's reaction speed.

Extended Arm:

By keeping the arm extended, it is easier to defend yourself with the strong part of the blade because it is closer to the opponent.

Where to Look:

Always look at the sword hand because it is closest and the most dangerous attacks will come from that location.

Ball Metaphor:

Just as a ball cannot be hit hard because it will roll away before too much force is applied, our bodies should naturally move the striking object away from our bodies and roll our bodies away from the striking object. Cede to the greater force.

### **From the First Guard**

Agrippa responds to the concept that one should bend the arm up over and behind the shoulder with the sword pointing forward to make a thrust as incorrect, because the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Also, his first guard does not shift the sword backwards away from the opponent, a position which lengthens time to act. Agrippa's guard does not force the fencer to defend with the weak portion of the blade, while the other position does. He states that the benefit of extra power is negated by these detractions.

If someone tries to beat your sword point to the outside from this position, dip the tip slightly, aim at their right side, rotate your hand, step forwards with the right foot, and extend to hit them. If they try to beat the sword inwards, do the same but aim at their left side.

If you cannot do the above and your sword is knocked outward, step forward and to the right with your right foot and thrust to your opponent's chest. If the opponent tries to beat your point outward with their left hand, take the same step but lower to fourth guard and thrust to their midsection. In both cases, be sure to void your body.

Any of these or the below actions can be taken to provoke your opponent to action.

Other attacks/defenses:

A) If the opponent attacks to your outside right with their palm up, press the opponent's sword outward to your outside with the strong of your blade, and lower your tip to hit their midsection without changing your guard.

B) If your opponent dodges, in one movement turn your right hand palm to the left, take a large step to the right with your right foot, void your body, and hit them.

C) If someone tries to stab you by drawing their hand back first, lower your hand from first to second guard to avoid the tip of their sword and then thrust when they do, against their sword.

D) If someone tries to cut your arm, turn your hand palm to the left and thrust. You can also lower

your body, move your arm backwards, lower the tip of your sword, interrupt their action with the strong of the sword, and cut in return.

E) If your opponent thrusts at your left shoulder in narrow third or fourth guard while you are thrusting in first guard, your opponent is skilled and you need to defend yourself. Raise your left hand and turn your body into fourth guard while stepping to the left with your right leg and thrusting. If your opponent parries in first guard with their point low when you do this, thrust again in second guard.

F) Agrippa assumes other types of attack from this position are common knowledge.

### **From the Second Guard**

Defend yourself when the opponent attacks to the outside just as you did from first guard.

Other attacks/defenses:

A) If the opponent attacks on the inside by pushing your sword to the outside, palm up, stretch forward in third or fourth guard and attack their chest, shoulder, or right knee, then immediately go back to first guard.

B) If your opponent tries to thrust under your hand, step back in fourth guard (lower your arm as well), place your strong against your opponent's tip, and keep the point of your sword extended to let your opponent impale themselves.

C) If your opponent takes a step forward and to the outside with their left foot while trying to beat the tip of your sword upward with their left hand, disengage your tip to the outside, take an identical step with your left foot, and lower your sword to fourth guard to stay defended.

D) If your opponent is too close and you need to move back quickly, extend your foot backwards into fourth guard, and your arm forwards into the same.

### **From the Third Guard**

Attacks/defenses:

A) If your opponent thrusts close to their knee, step forward with your right foot at the same time as they attack, extending your right arm. Recover to first or second guard.

B) If your opponent tries to make a long thrust against you with their right foot, thrust to their knee and recover to first or second guard.

C) If your opponent tries to attack you from first or second guard with a wider stance and right arm bent, when they move their hand you should give them a thrust to the chest without moving your foot. If they move their left foot forward to gain distance, do the same. If they try to grab your sword, lower the tip of your sword or move it backwards so that they have to come forward more. If they come forward, hit them with a thrust from first or second guard.

D) If your opponent messes with your blade in any way or tries to get you to move, pull your arm back, lower the tip of your sword, then counterthrust by extending your arm and body. This may not work if your opponent is much larger than you are.

E) If your opponent tries to beat your blade and then tries to cut you, defend with the strong portion of your blade and then thrust. You can also defend in first guard and then thrust. Vary the height/level of your response depending on where the strong of your opponent's blade is (avoid it).

F) If your sword is against that of your opponent near the middle of the blades and your opponent

tries to push against and attack you from your outside, change to second guard, wait until their blade is past you, then thrust in third or fourth guard. If they instead move their left foot up to their right and push a thrust in against your sword, do the same. If you want to thrust over your opponent's sword, step your left foot forward to their right side, push your opponent's sword outward, and thrust in second or third guard. If you are smaller or weaker than your opponent, don't step but instead aim at their left side or knee. If you are larger and stronger, step back into second guard with your left foot in front and thrust to their chest while protecting yourself from their sword with your left hand.

G) If your opponent tries to attack on your inside by pushing against your blade, step back into second guard and counterattack after their thrust.

H) If your opponent is far away and tries to press down on your sword with his strong, pull your hand back to second height but with your arm extended out to the side and sword pointed at your opponent.

I) If your opponent is standing in a narrow third or fourth guard and your swords touch each other, thrust, finishing the thrust in first guard, and beat your opponent's point down with your left hand as you step forward. Finish in fourth guard and then move back to second guard.

### **From the Fourth Guard**

Agrippa suggests not using fourth guard at all if your opponent is skilled. Nevertheless he discusses its use as a means of provoking your opponent to action or getting closer to an opponent.

A) If you are smaller than your opponent, feint to your opponent's right shoulder or knee. When they defend, avoid your opponent's sword by lowering tip and give a small tip cut, then move to second guard. Then repeat the feint and move your left foot forward. Beat your opponent's sword tip with your left hand. If they try to defend, disengage by dropping your tip and thrust forwards with another step.

B) If you are larger and stronger than your opponent, feign letting your guard down. If it brings on an attack, step your front foot and hand back to second guard and thrust. If you don't want to let your guard down, beat down the tip of your opponent's sword then bring your left foot forward to second guard, raising your hand to second as well. Thrust with your hand moving into fourth guard, but don't move your feet.

C) If you are too far from your opponent, step your left forward to your left. Beat your opponent's sword and then move your right hand to second guard. If your opponent defends, push your strong against your opponent's weak and grapple. If your opponent doesn't retreat, thrust in second or fourth guard.

D) If your opponent is in a narrow stance, provoke them by stretching forward your right foot, body, and arm, aiming for your opponent's chest, as a feint. To cancel out your opponent's response, move to second guard then raise your hand to second guard while ducking down, twisting your body to the left, and stepping to your left with your right foot. Guard your face and body by moving your left hand across your body to the right at shoulder height. If your opponent doesn't thrust, step your left foot forward to narrow third guard and hold your sword hand palm down at the outside of your right knee to draw your opponent in.

### **Other Transitions and Movements**

#### Third Guard with a Narrow Stance:

If you step back to second guard, you may feint a thrust while moving your left foot forward to your right foot. If the opponent tries to beat your sword with their left hand, disengage at the same time and step forward with the right foot to thrust from second guard. Recover in third guard, pulling your right hand back toward your knee. Feint a thrust, move your left foot forward, and settle in third guard with a narrow stance.

#### Second Guard with a Wide Stance:

If you are in this guard and your opponent is in a wide third stance, lower your hand and pull it back towards you slightly before making a feint at your opponent's right arm. At the same time, move your left foot up behind your right. When your opponent moves their arm back to avoid your feint, step forward with your right foot and turn your hand into fourth guard to thrust. If your opponent is in narrow third guard and their hand is far away, finish the above feint with an edge beat on your opponent's sword and thrust in fourth guard.

#### First Guard with Left Foot in Front and Right Arm Straight Up:

Sword is horizontal. Agrippa says this guard is acceptable under certain circumstances.

A) One acceptable circumstance is if your opponent is in first guard with their left foot in front. First take the above-mentioned guard and then move forward to narrow third. If your opponent has not moved before you get to this guard, thrust under your opponent's dagger in second guard. When your opponent tries to parry your sword outward with their left hand, planning to step sideways and in, they will be easy to hit.

B) If you need to defend from this position, turn your left shoulder forward to evade the thrust and push outward against your opponent's sword as you thrust. If they jump back, follow them back with a wide overhand thrust in fourth guard.

#### Third Guard with Left Foot in Front and Right Arm Close to Body:

If your opponent takes this guard, move your back foot forward to meet them in narrow third guard with the point of your sword close to the ground out of reach of your opponent. Thrust the tip of your sword over your opponent's left hand or dagger to tempt them to parry upwards, step in, and thrust. Instead, evade and lower your sword tip before your opponent can parry, take a step forwards and to your right with your right foot, and thrust in fourth guard. If you can't hit your opponent and they take a step, beat their sword upward and outward with your left hand.

If you and your opponent both take a narrow stance and your opponent thrusts while pushing against the inside of your sword, raise your hand to second while ducking down, twisting your body to the left, and stepping to your left with your right foot. Guard your face and body by moving your left hand across your body to the right at shoulder height.

If your opponent is larger than you are, take a narrow third guard. If you cannot avoid beats and parry, nor void your body, keep your blade low to the ground so that it can't be reached by your opponent. Wait until your opponent makes a movement, then instantly thrust in fourth guard, unless your opponent is in fourth guard themselves.