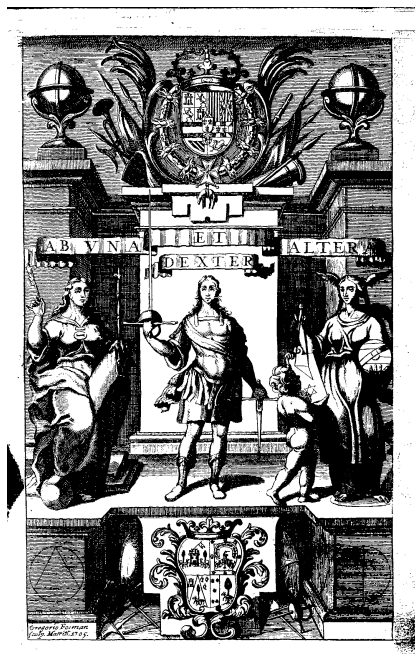


# Introduction to La Verdadera Destreza

Based on Francisco Lorenz de Rada's Nobleza de la Espada



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# 1 Introduction

This article, based on a class imparted during the Barcelona Halbschwert 2015 event, aims to offer a first look at *Destreza Verdadera* according to the treatise “Nobleza de la Espada” by Francisco Lorenz de Rada.

As the class was aimed at sport fencers with some experience, the focus is on providing a wide overview of the system and its peculiarities rather than teaching novice students. As such it’s recommended for fencers with some experience, be it in sport fencing or other rapier systems.

*Destreza* has a very detailed repertoire of technical terms, but for the purpose of the class and this article most of them will be substituted for plain language, so time is invested in the techniques themselves rather than first having to learn the terminology.

## 1.1 Practice

This article includes several practical exercises or drills to practice the described actions, which also serve as a more in depth explanation of the action. As a general rule the one performing the technique discussed will be called student or *diestro* (one who practices *Destreza*), while the one receiving the technique or doing any requisite actions will be the teacher or opponent.

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## 2 The sword

The first thing to consider is the sword used by Rada. While *Destreza* authors claim it's applicable to all weapons, Rada's treatise is very much focused on the cup hilt rapier.

Both the cup and straight quillons play a very important part in defending the fencer, so ideally the weapon used should have a full cup and a one foot cross (as recommended by Rada).

The weapon length was legislated in Spain at the time, and had been for more than a century, to a maximum of five quarts of *vara* from the cross to tip, giving us a maximum blade length of 105 cm or 41.34 inches approximately. Rada also recommends a sword based on the user's height such that the cross is at navel height with the point resting on the ground, though this might go past the aforementioned maximum length for taller people.

It's certainly possible to do *Destreza* with other kinds of swords, but one should keep in mind the effect it will have, such as requiring different distances to wound depending on length, changing how safe binds are depending on the quillons, or how easily one is able to defend with just the cup.

### 3 Grips

There are two recommended ways to grip the sword according to Rada, both with the index and middle finger on the ricasso over the front quillon, with the intermediate phalange of the middle finger pressing against it. In practice there will be several intermediate stages between the two grips, but these emerge more or less naturally as one gets used to switching between them.

The first grip holds the sword with more open fingers, such that the middle finger and thumb meet over the cross and the index finger is extended. The ring and little fingers should grip the handle together with some space between them and the cross.

This grip allows to easily put the blade in line with the arm for thrusts and to move the point downwards without turning the hand. It's used mostly at longer ranges to work with the point.

The second grip holds the sword with a more closed hand, similarly to a fist grip. All fingers should be closed together and the thumb should be extended pressing on the index and middle fingers or the ricasso.

This grip is stronger in the bind and holds the blade at an angle, so it's used to take control of the enemy sword or when throwing cuts.

## 4 The Right Angle

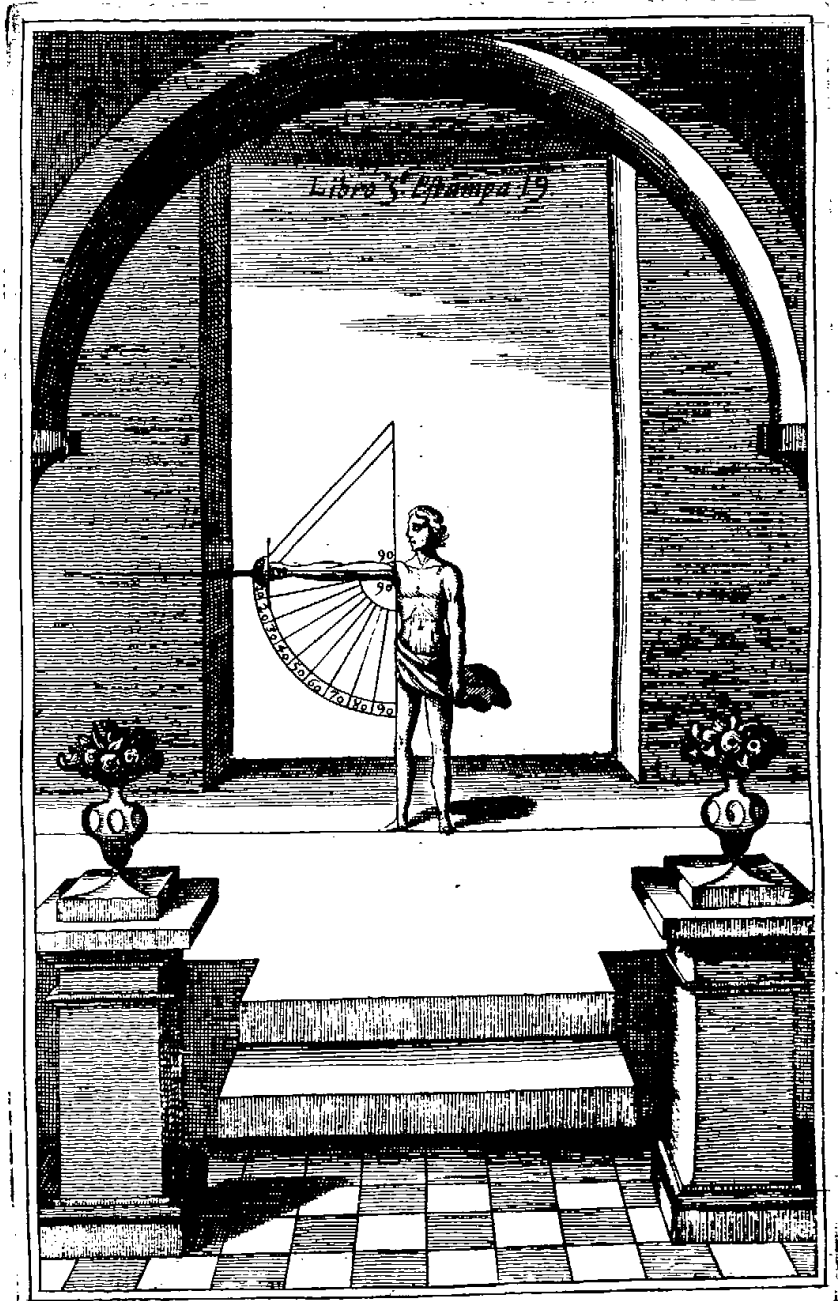
The only stance used by all *Destreza* authors is the right angle, and it's also the first means of defense.

The stance takes its name from the posture of the feet, forming a right angle between them, heels in line, feet separated one foot, and that of the arm and sword, forming a right angle with the body, held straight, with the sword's point towards the opponent and quillons vertical as can be seen in the figure.

While that's the basic description of the stance and it works if both combatants are *Diestros* and on that stance, a better description is a functional one: The stance should ensure the point is aimed at the closest target, the cup is covering the closest target, and the feet are free to walk in any direction.

Thus the stance can't be very wide, or the movement will become too linear, and the body and arm may need to be adjusted against people in lower stances or of different heights.

It's also important to consider the distance at which this stance should be taken, as *Destreza* treatises tell us pretty much nothing about what to do at long ranges. All actions in *Destreza* are taught beginning in the right angle stance at such a distance that, with arms and swords extended, the enemy point is at or slightly past the *Diestro's* quillons.



## 5 The Five Tretas

*Destreza* has five *tretas* or wounding actions. While it's certainly possible to move the sword in other ways, they aren't used and are considered inferior by the masters.

The five *tretas* are as follows:

- Thrust
- *Tajo*
- *Reves*
- *Medio tajo*
- *Medio reves*

Thrusts can be delivered in many ways, which will be explained in the specific techniques. As a general rule, if it's possible they will be delivered while maintaining control of the enemy blade.

The other four *tretas* are cuts. Cuts are done mostly from the wrist, with some help from the forearm as strictly necessary. For all of them except purely vertical cuts extra power should be generated by rotating the body appropriately with help from the footwork.

Since cuts must be done without blade contact, they will only be done with the enemy sword away from the center line as they would offer the enemy a chance to attack otherwise.

*Tajos* are delivered from the right vertically or diagonally with a full circular motion centered on the wrist. The point begins moving down and to the left and describes a full circle passing behind the body and over the head to be delivered on the left side of the opponent's head.

After cutting the point should continue until the arm is again in the right angle position or close to it. It's generally advisable to hold the hilt quite high to more easily avoid hitting the head when passing over it without having to move the sword in a less efficient trajectory, which could also cause poor edge alignment on top of being slower and delivering a less powerful impact.

*Reveses* are done in the same way, but with sides reversed, starting the movement downwards and to the right and being delivered in the opponent's right side of the head.



*Medio tajo* and *reves* (literally half *tajo* and *reves*) are delivered on the same side of the head as their full counterparts but are horizontal or close to it and have roughly half the trajectory, hence their name. They're executed by moving the sword away from the center line and then back in at head or neck height, so a *medio tajo* begins by moving the point to the right, a *medio reves* begins by moving the point to the left, then they are delivered in the opposite direction.

## 5.1 Practice of the four cuts

To practice these four cuts we will use an exercise from the treatise, though adapted to take advantage of modern gear.

In pairs, one will act as teacher, who will provide the opportunity for the cuts, and the other as a student, who will deliver them.

Both starting in the right angle stance, points near the opponent's quillons, the teacher will bind on the inside or outside as he sees fit and push the student's blade away from the center line, also bringing his point off line.

The student will then deliver one of the four cuts to the teacher's mask with a diagonal step with the right foot, turning the body to power the cut as he brings the rear foot close to the front one to end again in the stance.

If the bind is on the inside the student should deliver a *reves* or *medio tajo*, if on the outside a *tajo* or *medio reves*.

After the cut has been delivered the teacher should step back, take the stance again, and the exercise repeats, varying the cuts as they see fit. For more novice students the exercise might be restricted to a single cut, while more experienced students could use all four with the teacher creating situations where they should choose one over the other and correcting mistakes.

After some number of repetitions (or when a wall or other limit is reached) the roles should be switched and the exercise continues, now moving in the opposite direction.

While doing the exercise one should pay attention to a few things:

- Edge alignment should be maintained.
- The cuts should be delivered with the last third of the sword.
- The sword should describe a disc or part of it in the air, not a cone or some other non-flat shape. For half cuts that is only for the returning path.

- The sword should stop at or near the right angle position to provide defense if the cut didn't end the fight. For half cuts this is not strictly possible, but one should quickly recover to right angle and step well away from the enemy blade.
- The sword should provide cover against a possible half cut from the master for the first half of the movement and, in the case of the full cuts, should fall such that it provides cover. As before, since half cuts cannot do this, the defense will come from stepping away while cutting and going back to right angle as soon as possible.
- When doing the more advanced variation, half cuts should be done only when the master's hilt is somewhat low, so it's not easy to bring it up to defend the head with the cup or quillons.

## 6 The First Atajo

To demonstrate the concept of *atajo* we will use the first of Rada's eight *atajos*, which is made binding on the inside and over the enemy blade and stepping to his inside.

Putting *atajo* on the enemy blade aims at creating an opportunity to attack safely by ensuring the enemy requires more and bigger movements to wound than the *diestro*. This is done by taking advantage of several things:

- The stronger position above the enemy blade
- Binding slightly closer to the *diestro*'s strong and the patient's weak
- A turn of the body so that the stronger squared position is opposed to the longer range profiled position or viceversa
- A step away from the original center line
- The cup and quillons covering the body and making it harder to release the blade underneath
- Presenting the threat of the point, so any attack from the patient will offer a chance to attack to the *diestro* unless he takes other actions beforehand

*Atajo* can be used on offense or defense. We will begin with the offensive variety.

### 6.1 Practice of the First Atajo offensively

As *atajo* requires a bind, this exercise must be done in pairs.

Both student and teacher beginning in the posture of the right angle or close to it, the student will slightly lower the hilt and raise the point so that he is stronger in the bind, but with care to not go so far that the point can easily be released. Then the point, not the whole sword, should be moved to the side, binding the teacher's sword and putting both points off line with the student's sword over the teacher's as in the first figure of this section. Care should be taken in the bind that the contact is made with the front edge and not the flat or back edge.

Once this is achieved the student can safely take a step with the left foot and well to his left, bringing him slightly closer to the teacher. This step should roughly bring his left foot parallel to his right, which will then follow the left and turn, ending again in a right angle foot stance but squared to the opponent. While this step is being taken the blade should apply some downwards pressure, with care to not go lower than navel height with the hilt and to keep the point at the height of the top quillon or somewhat higher. The result of this step can be seen in the second figure.

After this has been done, the student can continue with a step with the right foot perpendicular to the first step and ending with the foot aiming at the teacher. While doing this step the blade will continue to apply downwards pressure, with the hilt ending at belt height and close to the body. The left foot will follow the right, but this time end with the point in line with the right instead of the heel, keeping the body farther from the enemy point. The third figure shows the position of the feet, though the blade is prepared for a follow up with *conclusion* instead of the thrust we will be doing here.

After (or while doing) this second step the enemy can be wounded by extending the arm towards any open target, preferably the chest, keeping in mind to maintain blade control while thrusting.

The most common mistakes and things to watch out while practicing are:

- The student should be closer to his strong than the teacher.
- The point of contact between the blades should be roughly the same for the whole exercise.
- The pressure should be mostly downwards and not to the side after the first movement.
- The pressure should be done by lowering the whole sword without changing angle, not by dropping the point.
- The hilt should remain between the bodies so that it provides cover on the side not protected by the blade.
- After the first step finishes the student's point should be in line for the rest of the exercise.

## 6.2 Practice of the First Atajo defensively

To use *atajo* defensively one can take advantage of the opponent's approach to skip the first step.

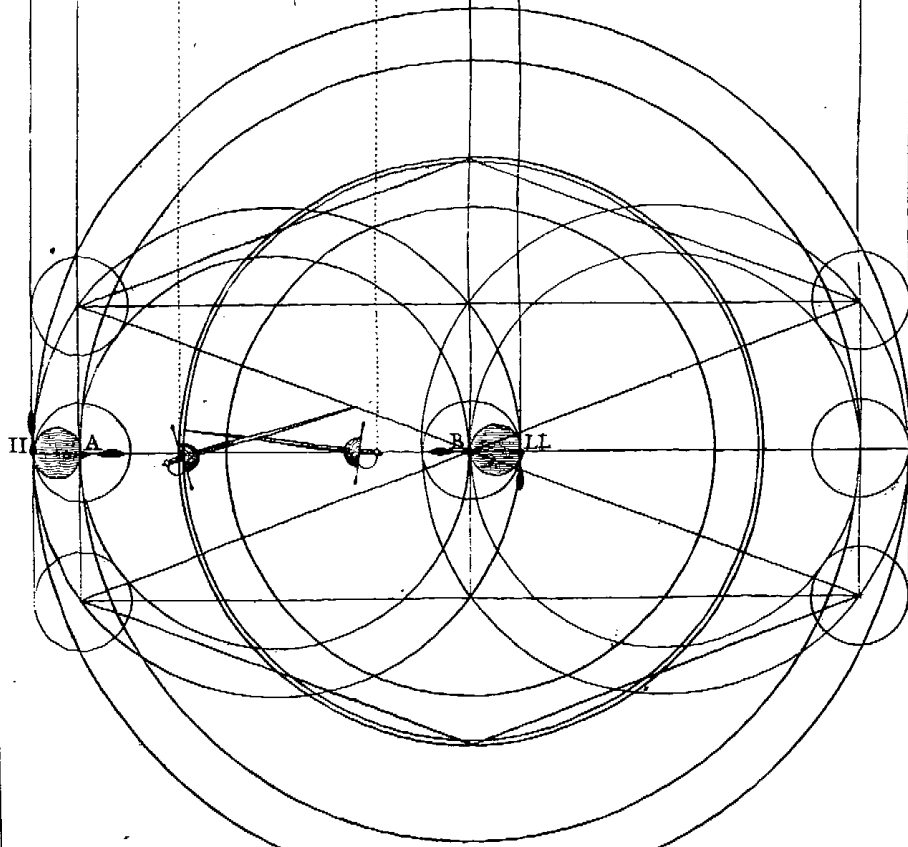
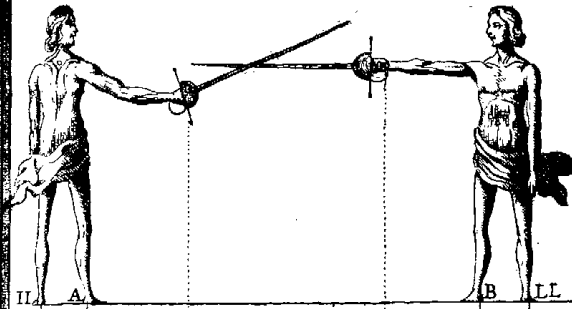
For this exercise, the teacher will begin by throwing a thrust to the student's inside. This thrust can be done by stepping slightly to the student's inside or to the outside with some opposition, though this variant will be harder for the student to put *atajo* on.

The student will receive this thrust by placing *atajo* on it as in the beginning of the offensive *atajo*, then immediately take a diagonal step with the right foot to his inside as he lowers the enemy blade as before. He should bring his left foot to his right, ending up in the same position as in the second step in the offensive *atajo*, and as before he will be able to thrust safely while maintaining blade contact.

This variation presents similar challenges to the first one, with the particular addition of taking care to not step before having the enemy blade properly off line to avoid walking into the point.

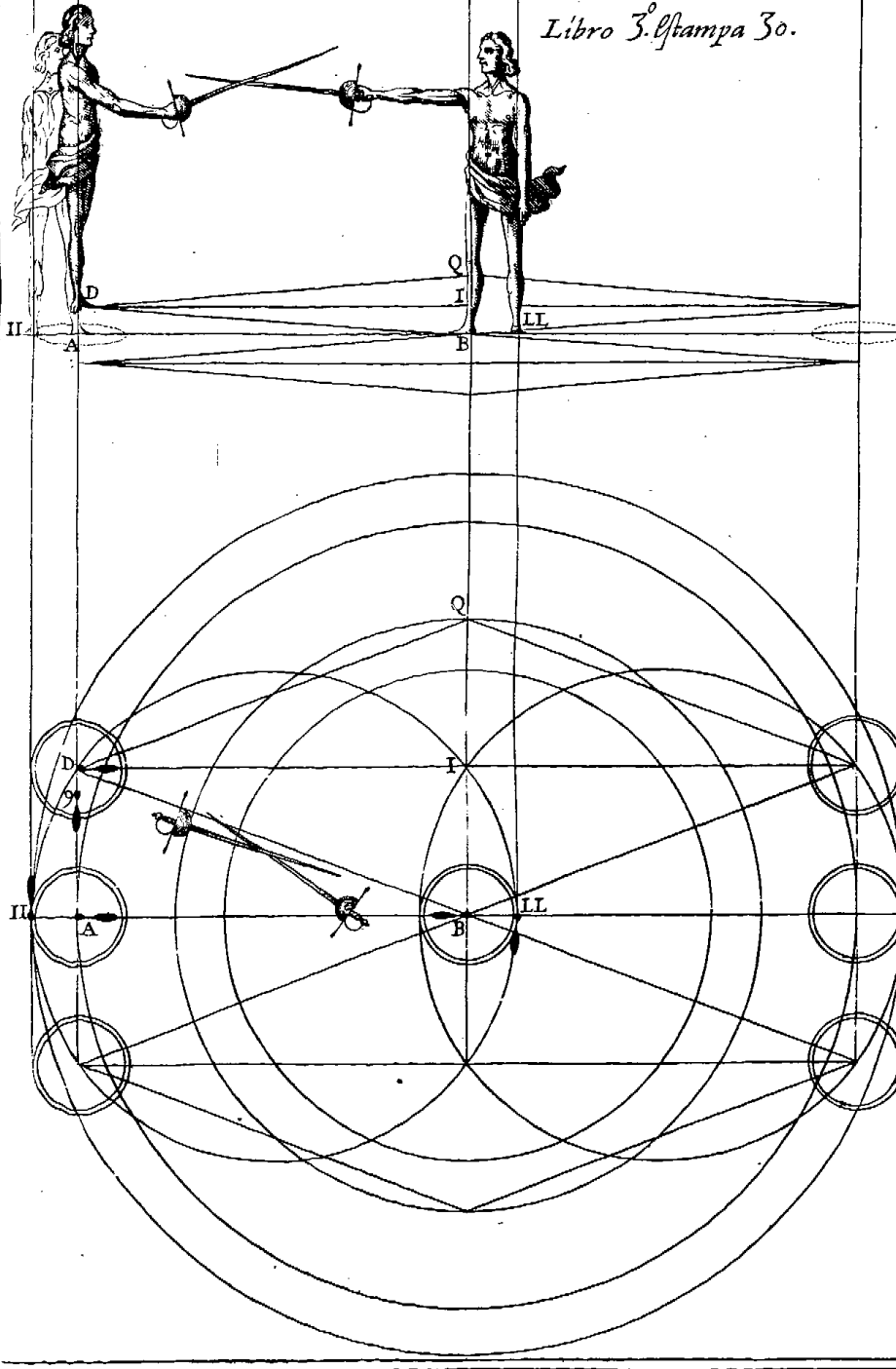
*Para el atajo primero desde el medio de proporción.*

*Libro 3.º stampa 29.*



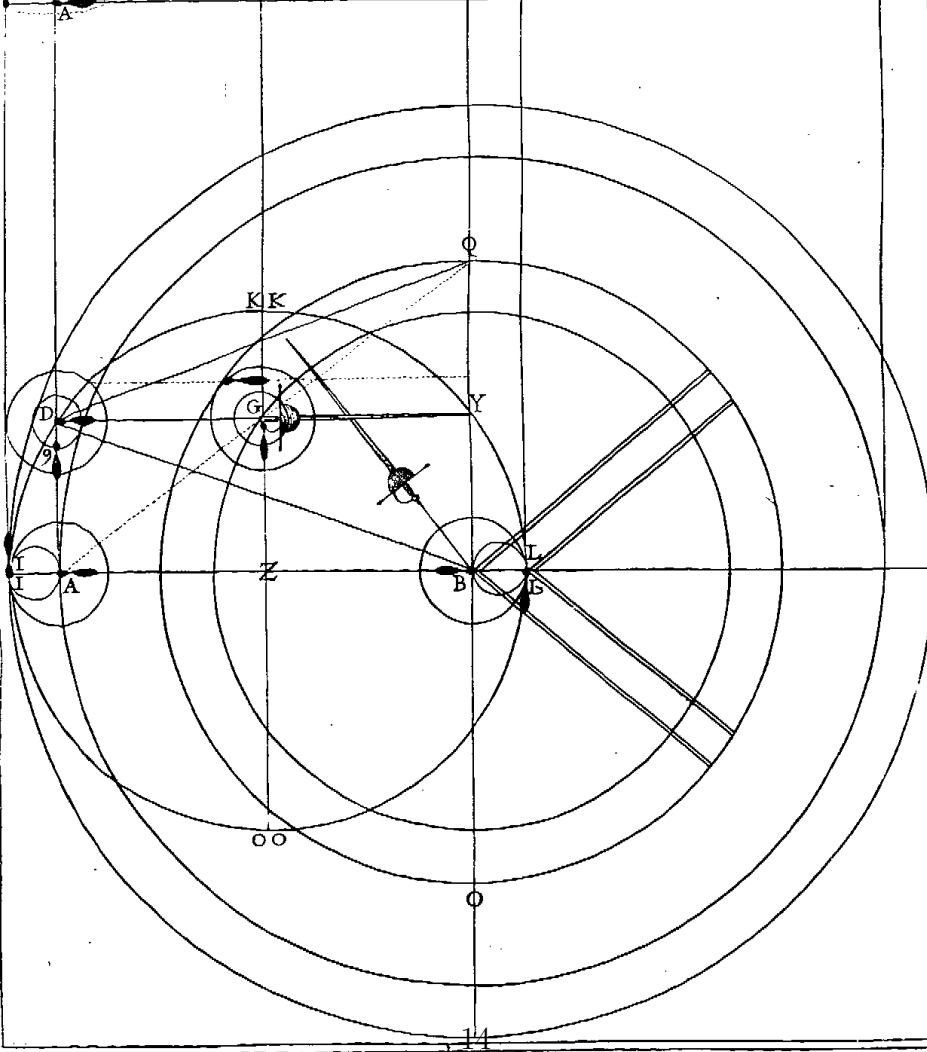
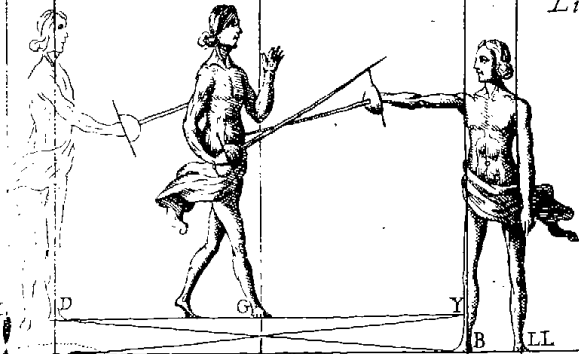
*Para el atajo primero desde el medio proporcional de la postura de la Espada.*

*Libro 3.º Stampa 30.*



*Para el atajo primero pasando desde el medio proporcional ocupar el  
Angulo interior*

*Libro 3.<sup>o</sup> Estampa 31.*





## 7 Diversion

*Diversion* is a defensive movement similar to the beginning of *atajo* but performed from underneath the enemy blade and always as a response to blade pressure.

It can be performed while keeping the back edge in contact at longer ranges, though the most common variation, which will be explained here, is done by turning the hand so the front edge is in contact with the enemy blade.

Similarly, after *diversion* one can continue by taking control of the enemy blade with any appropriate *atajo*, or, for this demonstration, simply use it to maintain cover and prepare a cut.

### 7.1 Practice of Diversion

*Diversion* can be practiced similarly to either variety of *atajo*, though this time the one performing the technique will be the one receiving the *atajo*.

For this exercise the *diversion* should be done during the second step of *atajo*, as the first step would be appropriate for the longer range variety.

When the second step of *atajo* begins, the one receiving it should raise their hilt to face level while turning the hand and moving his point further off line, such that he ends with a stronger blade position with his front edge in contact with the enemy blade and the enemy point is aiming over and possibly to the side of his head. This can be done while turning the body without stepping to use a stronger squared position and facilitate gaining the stronger blade position.

Notice that the more extended the arm, the less the hilt needs to raise and viceversa, but at the same time the more in danger of being grabbed the hilt is, so the arm should be extended as far as can be done safely.

After this has been done he should step to his left, moving away from the enemy point, and throw a *reves* or *medio tajo* as was practiced before, keeping in mind to go back to the right angle position and/or to continue moving away after delivering the cut.

## 8 Conclusion

*Conclusion* is a technique where the enemy hilt is grabbed with the off hand to allow the *diestro* to disarm, force to surrender, wound, or kill his opponent as he sees fit. It's considered the best result for a fight in *Destreza*.

In the most ideal form, the hilt should be grabbed from the palm side, putting the fingers inside the cup, pressing the thumb against the exterior and twisting so the opponent ends up with the palm facing up and the blade pointing at the ground close to vertical. Care should be taken in friendly practice or sparring as this could harm the fingers however.

If that's not possible other grabs can be done, grabbing the quillons, knuckle guard, strong of the blade, wrist, or even performing an arm lock. In any case attempting to twist the enemy weapon into a weak position is advisable.

*Conclusion* can be done from nearly any position provided that the enemy hilt is close enough and the *diestro* can keep his hilt far enough to avoid ending in a messy grapple. For practice we will focus on two specific situations, against a thrust on the outside and from the first *atajo*.

### 8.1 Practice of Conclusion against a thrust on the outside

This exercise will generally be done in pairs, but it can also be done by three people to add speed to it. The student will stand in front of his opponent (in this case it's not really important to be in the right angle as long as he can defend himself) who will proceed to bring his blade to the outside and throw a thrust, which the student will parry, ideally placing *atajo* on it.

As he does this, the student will turn his feet and body to give strength to his parry and bring the left hand forward. Depending on the depth of the thrust and length of the enemy blade he will proceed to grab the hilt, or do it with the next step, which will be to the enemy's outside to get away from his off hand while aiming at his face or chest with the point.

Note that this means crossing the feet in the case of right handed against left handed and enemy actions with the off hand can be an issue. Thus, if the opposite handed opponent has an off hand dagger this action becomes extremely dangerous and should be avoided.

In the case of three people, the student will then have to quickly get back in guard against the other opponent who will proceed as before while the first

one gets ready again. The exercise can continue by alternating opponents.

## 8.2 Practice of Conclusion after the First Atajo

*Conclusion* can be practiced after performing the First *Atajo* as explained before, but instead of delivering a thrust taking full control of the enemy blade, putting the body between both blades so that a thrust isn't possible, and preparing the left hand to grab the hilt, as in the first figure of this section or last of *atajo*.

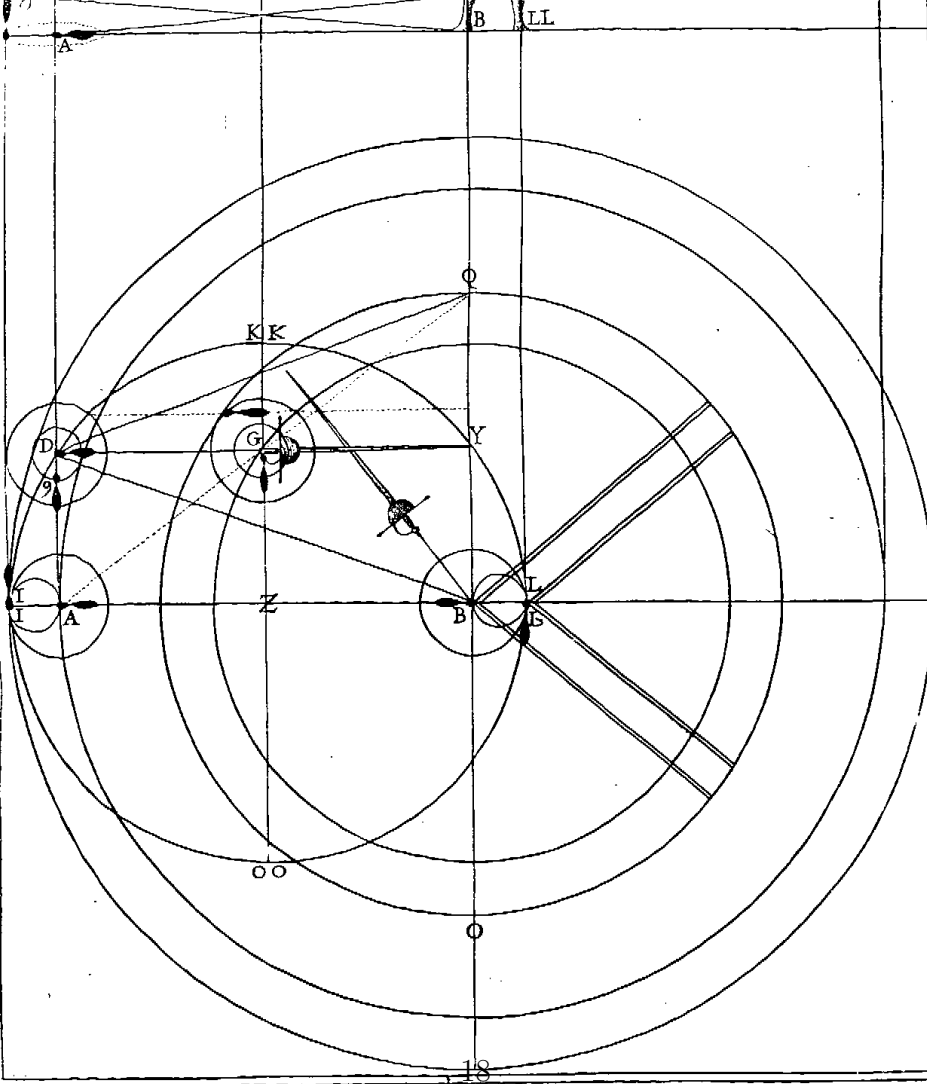
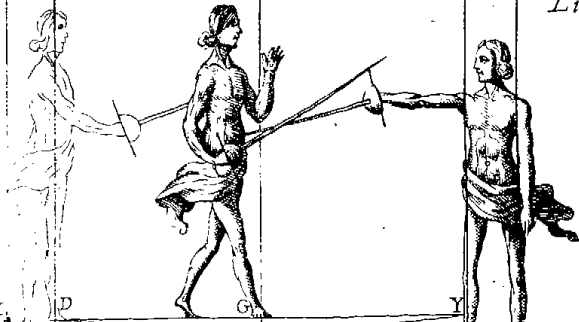
From that position the student shall proceed to grab the enemy hilt by passing the hand under his blade or over his blade, but in that case ensuring the enemy blade ends up with the point close to the ground and well away from his next step while also turning his blade to push it out of the way.

In either case the next step will begin with the left foot, moving as far as possible to the opponent's back, then continue bringing the right foot behind the left to end in a reversed right angle. While doing this the point should be moved to threaten the face or chest as before. The result of this step with the first grab can be seen in the second figure.

As *conclusion* begins with *atajo*, the same details should be watched in particular detail in practice, except in that the point will at certain points be off line, and adding to not leave the bind until the enemy hilt is taken good hold of.

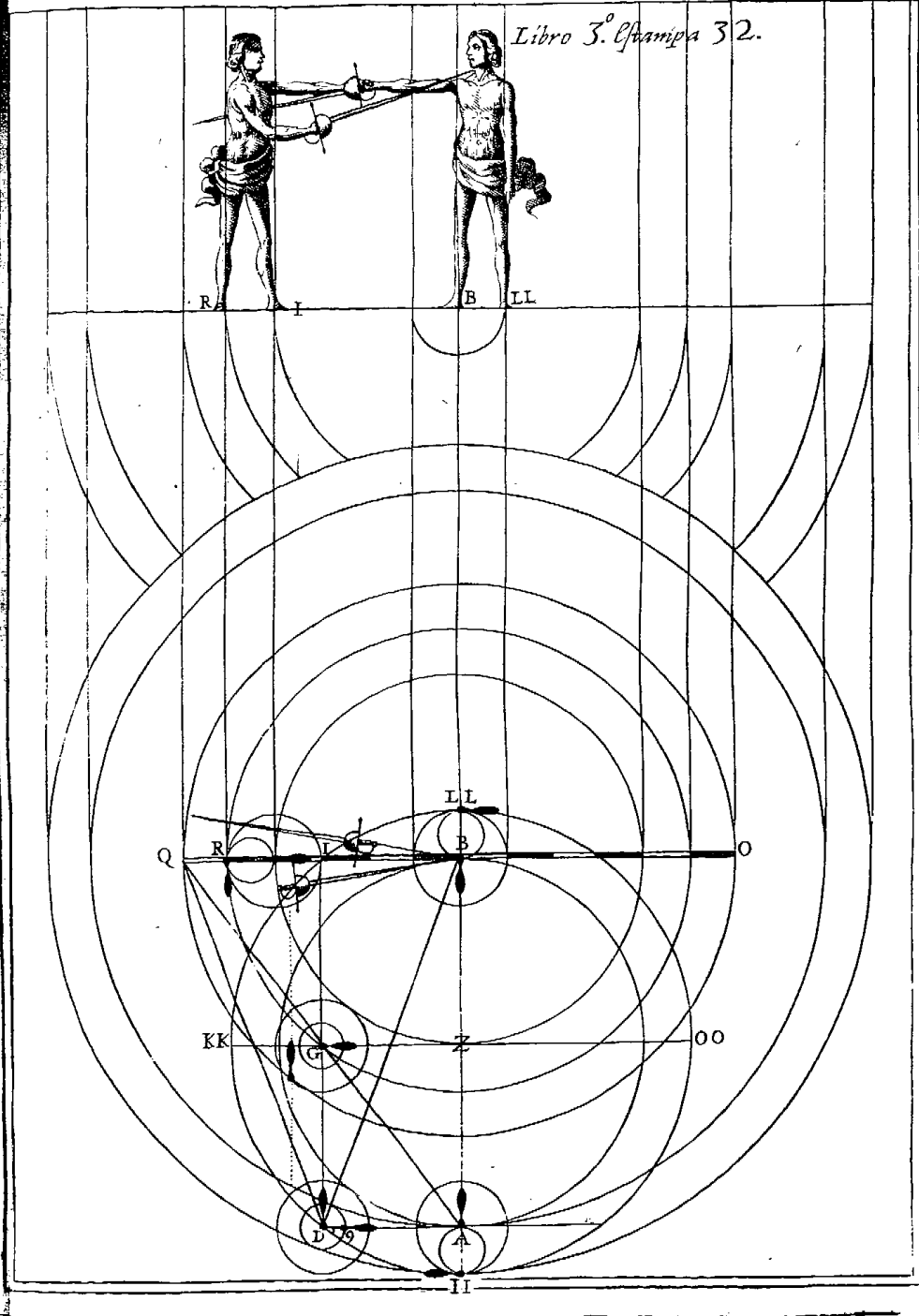
*Para el atajo primero pasando desde el medio proporcional ocupar el Angulo interior*

*Libro 3.<sup>o</sup> Estampa 31.*



Para el atajo primero pasando desde el medio del, almovimiento de conclusion.

Libro 3.<sup>o</sup> Stampa 32.



## 9 Estrechar

*Estrechar* is a technique where the sword circles or spirals in contact with the enemy blade, dragging it to an advantageous position. It's generally done when the enemy holds the sword high with the point down and/or to the left or after placing *atajo* on the inside but feeling no resistance from the enemy blade, including when the opponent attempts to release the blade by passing underneath.

For this action it's important to keep the hilt high and the quillons vertical without turning the hand much so the head is protected from a *medio tajo* to the head, as it places the enemy blade in position to do it.

### 9.1 Practice of Estrechar

As usual this technique will be practiced in pairs and beginning in the right angle stance.

The student will begin as with the first *atajo* used offensively, binding on the enemy blade with greater strength and bringing both points off line, but following it by turning the wrist so his sword circles the enemy's, bringing the swords off line to the opposite side while raising the hilt to protect the head.

Once the swords are off line again he will step with his right foot and to his right with care to turn the foot to end in a profiled position, then bring the left foot back behind the right and deliver a thrust to the chest. It's important that the step be as far to the side as possible, otherwise the approach will be too straight and it's likely the thrust will be easily parried and the point possibly get trapped by the enemy quillons.

If differences in size or swords make it so delivering the thrust in one step is not possible without taking a too straight step this action can still be used as a dispositive action to deliver the thrust with another step, this time only requiring one foot to move.

Again most precepts for *atajo* must be observed here, although the circular motion adds new ones:

- Care must be taken when doing the circular motion so that neither point gets stuck on the opponent's quillons.
- The hilt should be raised to cover the whole head, so the upper quillon should end at the height of the top of the head.

- As this action moves the blades to the outside, more care should be taken to not open the arm more than necessary.

## 10 Flaqueza Debajo de la Fuerza

This technique, which translates to weakness under the strength, involves a circular blade expulsion, ending with the point under the opponent's hilt which then continues with a thrust.

*Flaqueza debajo de la fuerza* also begins from *atajo*, but in this case it's the fourth, which is done binding on the outside and stepping to the outside.

Contrary to most other *Destreza* actions, this technique involves an expulsion, an action where the opposing blade is pushed violently outside without remaining bound, so the expulsion itself shall be done with a sudden and strong but controlled movement so that it's only the opponent's sword that's sent off line.

### 10.1 Practice of Flaqueza Debajo de la Fuerza

This technique shall again be practiced in pairs, starting in the right angle stance.

Contrary to the first *atajo*, the fourth *atajo* and first part of this technique begins by dropping the point and raising the hilt slightly, binding under the enemy blade and then doing a clockwise circle with the point ending in an outside bind with the blades off line as if performing *estrechar* in the opposite direction.

As with any *atajo*, the bind should be on a stronger part of the blade against a weaker part of the opponent's blade without going to any extremes and care should be taken to remain in the same point of contact.

After the bind is properly placed, the student will take a step to his right with his right foot followed by his left, identical to the one used for *estrechar*. Care must again be taken to remain profiled by turning the feet and body as necessary, which will help avoid bringing the swords too far off line.

While taking this step the bind must continue with some pressure as with all *atajos*, ensuring control and feeling of the enemy blade. At the same time the point should gradually come in line, while the enemy sword will remain off line.

At this point the fourth *atajo* could be finished with a thrust from the student, but for this technique the teacher will release his blade stepping to the right for a thrust instead.

The student will react by doing a quick clockwise turn with his point as soon as he feels no resistance on his blade, hitting the enemy blade and



bringing his to cover his left side, ending with his point under the enemy hilt.

At the same time he will begin another step to his right, similar to previous, and as soon as the previous blade action has ended he will extend the arm to thrust at the opponent's chest hitting as he brings the left foot behind his right and keeping the hilt somewhat to the left covering the most direct line of attack.

While most previous techniques were delivered from the bind and were thus relatively safe to remain in, this one isn't and thus stepping out of distance with a diagonal backwards step to the right while bringing back the blade to put *atajo* on any incoming attack is recommended.

For this exercise one should again keep in mind the same issues as with the first *atajo*, with the following additions:

- Passing the blade underneath should be done with care to not offer any exploitable openings, maintaining good cover from the hilt and doing as small a circle as possible.
- This technique requires paying good attention to the feeling of the blade, as it's not recommended against opponents binding strongly.
- The thrust is delivered without a bind, so care must be taken to create good cover with the hilt while maintaining as much range as possible.

## 11 Conclusions

These few techniques, while not the complete system, should provide a general idea of how *Destreza* approaches a fight and how it compares to other systems.

The main stance and the five ways to wound have been explained, as well as several ways to take control of the enemy weapon, most often in a temporary fashion with *atajo*, *diversion* and the related techniques, but also permanently with *conclusion*.

*Estrechar* has served as a nice example of circles or spirals on the enemy blade as another way to retain control besides the more common *atajo*.

Finally *flaqueza debajo de la fuerza* has served to illustrate expulsions using the previous circles and a possible response to a blade release.

### 11.1 Further practice

The complete system is too extense and in depth for this document, but by remembering the main principles behind the actions and combining them more exercises can be designed, including all *atajos*, being on the inside and outside, with steps to the inside and outside, then the same four with a circle to pass from over the blade to under the blade. The eight *atajos* and their numbers are as follows:

1. Binding on the inside, stepping to the opponent's outside.
2. Binding on the outside, stepping to the opponent's outside.
3. Binding on the inside, stepping to the opponent's inside.
4. Binding on the outside, stepping to the opponent's inside.
5. From the first turn to bind underneath and on the outside.
6. From the second turn to bind underneath and on the inside.
7. From the third turn to bind underneath and on the outside.
8. From the fourth turn to bind underneath and on the inside.

It should be noted that in the atajos moving away from the enemy blade keeping the point in line might not be possible and they'll require the opponent to put some strength in the bind to work.

*Cconclusion* can also be extended performing it from other *atajos*, but will only work well when stepping to the opponent's outside.

Similarly *estrechar* and *flaqueza debajo de la fuerza* can be done with the opposite spiral and stepping to the opposite side, although with more difficulty, and *flaqueza sobre la fuerza* (weakness over the strong) can be added, beginning with *estrechar* as usual but finishing with an expulsion and thrust in place of the normal thrust.