

A BRIEF COMPARATIVE  
ANALYSIS OF THE TREATISE OF  
**HENRI DE SAINT DIDIER**

TO OTHER CONTEMPORARY FENCING TREATISES,  
which are French, German, Belgian, English, Italian,  
and Spanish, with references to said works cited  
at the end, very useful and beneficial to  
enlighten the followers of  
swordsmanship.

by Tim Rivera

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## Summary

The treatise was published in Paris in 1573, though Saint-Didier refers to himself as a Provençal gentleman.<sup>1</sup> It is an unusual treatise in that it does not depict two combatants, but a teacher (Lieutenant) and a student (Provost). As such, it's not written as a series of lessons to the reader on how to defeat an opponent, as most fencing texts are, but as a third-person view of the Lieutenant training the Provost.

Saint-Didier claims to have achieved some perfection in the use of weapons over the course of his 25 years of military service to the crown of France.<sup>2</sup> This treatise covers only the sword alone, which he calls the mother of all weapons. His style can be generally described by the six points he outlines in his general essay before the lessons.<sup>3</sup> The first is that there are two stances: either left foot forward or right foot forward. The second is that there are three guards: low (hilt at hip-level), middle (shoulder-level), and high (just above shoulder-level), all with the point at the opponent. The third is that there are three strikes: forehand cut (*maindroict*), backhand cut (*renvers*), and thrust (*estoc*). The fourth is that there are six targets: cut to the back of each knee, cut to each shoulder, and thrust to each nipple. The fifth is that one must defend oneself and attack at the same time with one of the three attacks. The sixth is that one must be able to recognize the attacks and defenses that the opponent gives, in order to counter them.

## Comparisons

### French

Of the known treatises, Saint-Didier was the first author to write in French on the use of the sword.<sup>4</sup> The treatise nearest in time to this was a manuscript written by J. de La Haye (likely between 1600 and 1609)<sup>5</sup> and attributed to a Captain Peloquin.<sup>6</sup> A direct comparison is difficult, as it only deals with the sword and dagger. However, Saint-Didier describes specific placement of the left hand as a secondary method of deflecting the opponent's thrusts, and Peloquin uses the dagger as the primary defense, so there is some basis for comparison. The two differ in guards, tactics, and terminology. Peloquin has four guards arranged in a cross pattern, with the first two having the point of the sword at the ground or the sky, respectively, rather than at the opponent. He also frequently advises beats, while Saint-Didier does not. Some of the basic vocabulary in Saint-Didier (*maindroict*, *desrober*) is also missing or named differently in Peloquin. Likewise, some of the vocabulary in Peloquin is derived from Italian terms (*riposte*, *caver*, *estramaçon*) and is not found in Saint-Didier.

Slightly later French treatises (des Bordes, Dancie, and de Heredia,)<sup>7</sup> show notable Italian characteristics, with des Bordes (1610) and Dancie (1623) explicit about their Italian roots, both mentioning Agrippa. De Heredia (early 17<sup>th</sup> c.) contains a few peculiarities; it follows Agrippa's guards and the typical Italian terminology and tactics of the time, although it divides thrusts into two types (*estocade* and *brocade*), which are described as fingernails-up (*ongles en haut*) and fingernails-down (*ongles en bas*). This same description of fingernails up or down is used in Saint-Didier, who calls them both just *estoc*, specifically rejecting the Italian division of thrusts into two types.<sup>8</sup>

## German, Belgian, and English

The guards and strikes in the German tradition, as seen in the treatises of Mair (mid 16<sup>th</sup> c.) and Meyer (1570),<sup>9</sup> are different and more numerous than those of Saint-Didier. In addition, the tactics differ, and the use of the “short” edge by the Germans is not done by Saint-Didier. A comparison with Belgian methods is difficult, due to the scarcity of Belgian treatises. The short work by Bailly (c. 1602 - 1608)<sup>10</sup> is fairly tightly focused on counters and re-counters to a thrust in the high outside line, but shows a variety of positions and attacks that Saint-Didier does not. Regarding the English systems, the guards and tactics of Silver (early 17<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>11</sup> do not match what is found in Saint-Didier's treatise. The same applies to Swetnam (1617),<sup>12</sup> who also divides thrusts into types which Saint-Didier rejects.

## Italian

Although Saint-Didier keeps his point forward in his guards, they differ from those of Agrippa (1553)<sup>13</sup> and later authors who follow, such as Fabris (1606) and Capoferro (1610),<sup>14</sup> as well as the French authors that use his system of guards and hand positions. Both DiGrassi (1570) and Saviolo (1595)<sup>15</sup> have three guards, which would appear to align with Saint-Didier's at a casual glance. On closer examination, the height and hand position of these guards does not match to Saint-Didier's, and their primary defenses also differ. Likewise with the Bolognese authors like Dall'Agochie (1572) and Viggiani (1575),<sup>16</sup> who use numerous guards and actions that are not found in Saint-Didier's treatise.

One big difference from the Italian styles is the classifications of strikes. In Saint-Didier's general essay, he recounts a story of some Italians coming to see his book, wherein he asked them how many strikes there are. A young man named “Fabrice” responded that there are five: *mandritto*, *roverso*, *fendente*, *stocatta*, and *imbrocatta*. Saint-Didier rejects the classification, claiming that there is no true *fendente*, and that *stocatta* and *imbrocatta* are both just thrusts, which reduces down to his three strikes.<sup>17</sup>

The treatise of Lovino (late 16<sup>th</sup> c.),<sup>18</sup> a Milanese author, contains some similarities. Both begin by teaching sword drawing, with Lovino's draw matching the first of Saint-Didier's, ending with the palm down, which Lovino calls the outside guard. Lovino's other guard is called the inside guard, with the palm up. These two guards match the defensive positions shown by Saint-Didier. The similarity quickly ends, as Lovino immediately describes using the “false” edge to beat the opponent's sword, which is not done by Saint-Didier.

## Spanish

Saint-Didier shows no similarity to the *verdadera destreza* that began with Carranza (1582).<sup>19</sup> It does bear a remarkable similarity in many respects to the older style of Spanish fencing. The only complete Spanish treatise found that describes it was written by Godinho (1599).<sup>20</sup> He begins with a sword draw that is the same as Saint-Didier's first draw. Godinho's footwork is simple, having either the left or the right in front, stepping forward or back like walking, and occasionally moving offline to defend or attack. Iberian fencing classifies strikes into three types: forehand cut (*tajo* or *manderecho*), backhand cut (*reves*), and thrust (*punta* or *estocada*). Godinho's basic defense against an attack is to defend and attack with a thrust at the same time. All thrusts are given either fingernails-up (*uñas arriba*) or fingernails-down (*uñas abajo*), as nearly all of Saint-Didier's are. The hand positions described as nails-up/down is a hallmark of old Iberian fencing.<sup>21</sup> Godinho specifies that the cross must be perfectly horizontal, not at an angle,<sup>22</sup> while Saint-Didier says that the blade must be level, such that a die can be balanced on it.<sup>23</sup>

Although all of the counters shown by Saint-Didier are found in Godinho's treatise, his disarms are not; Godinho does not describe any disarms. In addition, Godinho has no explicit guards, although he often describes one opponent having his sword lower. There are also many defenses described by Godinho which are not in Saint-Didier's treatise. However, the counters Saint-Didier teaches are the core of Godinho's art, described in the first few chapters.

## **Conclusions**

Saint-Didier never mentions where he learned his swordsmanship, but it shows clear technical similarities to old Spanish fencing. Along with the similarity to the Milanese style of Lovino, this gives the possibility that the style represented in Saint-Didier's treatise shows a native Provençal style, which would naturally have commonalities with its neighbors. He credits the experience of his military service with developing his perfection in the art and practice. However, it's also possible that he picked up the style during his long military career.

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- 2 *Ibid.* f.2v
- 3 *Ibid.* f.4r-5v
- 4 Note that *La noble science des joueurs d'espee* was published in Antwerp in 1538, which is a translation into Walloon of the German treatise of Andre Paurñfeyndt entitled *Ergründung Ritterlicher Kunst der Fechterey*.
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