

# The Secrets of the Single Sword

Henri de Saint Didier, 1573

Translated by [Chris Slee](#)<sup>1</sup>, 2012

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<sup>1</sup> [chris@sleech.info](mailto:chris@sleech.info)

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# INTRODUCTION

## Preface

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This is a translation of the essay at the front of Saint Didier's book of exercises for sword alone. I've not translated the epistolary verses or any more of the text at this stage. This is a task for someone with more time available than I currently have.

Please direct any comments and questions on either the translation or the fencing techniques described to me on the email address above or at my blog<sup>2</sup>.

## The Text

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There are a number of copies of the text but only two are publicly available. The first is the copy in the Bibliotheque Nationale de France (BNF) available through [Google Books](#)<sup>3</sup>. The second is located in the Library of the city of Blois and is available through the [Bibliotheque Virtuelles Humanistes](#)<sup>4</sup> (BVH).

The translation is based on the [transcription of the BVH copy](#)<sup>5</sup> made in 2010 by Olivier Depuis for [l'Association pour la Recherche et le Développement des Arts Martiaux Historiques Européens](#)<sup>6</sup>. All amendments to the text made in the transcription have been assumed and are not noted here.

## The Translation

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I must say first off that I am not a professional translator. I could not be considered fluent in French but I'm told by native speakers that I do read it and write it quite well. I have a DELF B1 certification and a passion for Renaissance literature. I say this only so that the reader will not be lured into thinking that my translation is any anyway authoritative. However, it is, I believe, the best English translation of this portion of Saint Didier's book available at the present time.

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2 <http://sleech.info>

3 <http://books.google.com.au/books?id=mh0WAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Henry+de+Saint+Didier>

4 <http://www.bvh.univ-tours.fr/Consult/index.asp?numfiche=259>

5 [http://ardamhe.free.fr/biblio/Saint\\_Didier\\_Transcription\\_1.1.pdf](http://ardamhe.free.fr/biblio/Saint_Didier_Transcription_1.1.pdf)

6 <http://ardamhe.free.fr/>

I am also an historical fencer specializing in the sidesword techniques of the late sixteenth century, the very weapon used in Saint Didier's text. I believe that this practical experience has given me insights onto the text that would not be available to other translators.

As for the text itself, Saint Didier's prose has all the signs of a man trying to emulate those better educated than him. This is not an improbable interpretation since he claims himself to be both minor gentry and a professional soldier of 25 years' service. His phrasing is often impossible to figure out because he tends to nest subordinate clauses many levels deep to the extent that it become difficult to determine which subject a particular verb refers to. Unfortunately, the worse offending passages are the same ones in which he seems to be stating his main points. Because of this, the translation is in some place not as strict as I would have liked and some juggling of word order has been called for.

His use of the terms *arme* and *armes*, I have translated variously as weapon, sword, swordsmanship or swordplay as suits the context of the sentence. I have translated *offencer* as attack, strike, etc as required. *Jeu de paulme*, I have translated as handball as tennis I cannot determine when rackets were introduced to the game.

The only significant alteration I have made is dropping in translation the profusion of "said," "above-mentioned," "here-above said", etc, from the text. They are intrusive and add nothing to either the meaning of the text or to show Saint Didier's writing style.

# THE SECRETS OF THE SINGLE SWORD

## A Tract Containing ...

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A tract containing the secrets of the first book on the sword alone, mother of all weapons, which are the sword and dagger, cape, targe, buckler, rondelle, two-handed sword, two swords, with figures having the weapons drawn<sup>7</sup> in order to defend and attack at the same time the strikes that one can throw, both attacking and defending, very useful and profitable for guiding the nobility and the followers of Mars: according to art, order and practice.

Composed by Henri de Saint Didier, Provençal gentleman

Dedicated to the majesty of the very Christian king, Charles IX

At Paris,

Printed by Jean Mettayer and Matthurin Challenge, and sold in Jean Dalier's shop on the Bridge of St Michael at the sign of the White Rose, 1573.

With Royal Privilege

## Letter to the King

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Sire, I will not entertain myself describing to you how many there are for hire who work (as it is said) to help to truly perfect Nature, who have resolved confusion into order and those things which, on the face of them seeming harsh, difficult and unattainable, have been rendered by them simple, approachable and easy to begin, wanting especially (the only difficulty coming from confusion and the disorder of things) among other things those which are proper to making gentlemen sufficiently praiseworthy. Wherefore I will also turn my pen to demonstrate to you that in order to rally a regiment<sup>8</sup> which is in rout, and put them again in pristine order, a leader is needed having two very instinctive<sup>9</sup> habits. To have<sup>10</sup> judgment, in order to win the time and place, where and when it is necessary to stop the broken ranks and by a feigned collapse distract<sup>11</sup> the enemy, during which the rest of the troops re-assemble and regroup. This judgment cannot be bought. Truly the sense of this cannot be

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7 (lit.) the weapons in the fist

8 (lit) the part of the army between the advance guard and the rear guard

9 (lit) familiar, natural

10 (lit) know, learn

11 (lit) entertain, amuse

understood<sup>12</sup> without the second point that I say is very necessary in the leader, which is the trial of experience<sup>13</sup> from which judgment is born.

Sire, for anyone who wants to put an art or doctrine into order or draw it from confusion for fear that otherwise it will be corrupted, it is required that he is provided with judgment, born of experience gained in the exercise of the art. I say this not without cause, for having served by deeds of arms, as often your forefathers as your Majesty, during the space of 25 years in Piedmont and elsewhere, I can justly claim to have used my life in the use<sup>14</sup> of the these weapons, such that long experience has developed in me some perfection in the art and practice of them. So that, seeing how confused and with such poor organisation they have been and are demonstrated and practiced today by all the world, I have in my head developed some forms or ideas, of which the following is an example. I venture that the arrangement of my ideas will not only be good for them but also the art which consists of them will be fully restored and will come much closer to perfection, which I have, by long days both because of my helplessness and extreme poverty (the enemy of good spirits) as well as being prevented by your service, held hidden and buried among my papers in my office, where, after military service, the Muses have kept me and I hope will keep me company. But now the desire I have of doing you humble and satisfying service, joined to the ardent affection which all my life I have had for weapons, for those who love them, and those who make their living with them, having only allowed this time<sup>15</sup> (when Mars gives us some respite), I am not bold enough to present to your majesty something not dignified for so grand a monarch but very proper for the practice of a common father to know, as much in war<sup>16</sup> as in peacetime, a tract on the single sword, mother of all arms, that I have composed according to my humble opinion, in which is contained six points, hereafter declared, in a sequence never before used and the proofs thereof, both by theory and by the outcome achieved in the end.

Behold, Sire, that which will contain at present these little efforts, which is a summary or anthology of the first book that I still have before me. Wherefore if your Majesty finds favour in<sup>17</sup> this, God giving me the grace to live, I hope by the means of your word Majesty to hereafter illuminate others. Therefore, to this (which is first and foremost for guiding the nobility) I thought appropriate for you who is the protector and sustainer of the weapons which it deals with, begging you most

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12 (lit) believed

13 (lit) the experience / testing of things

14 (lit) experience / proving

15 (lit) having little permitted only this time for it

16 (lit) as much in arms as in peace

17 (lit) takes some taste at

humbly, now or when you may deem it to pleasing to you<sup>18</sup> to take my ardent affection, which for a long time has been dedicated to offering to you very humble and satisfying service, in reward employing me to some task related here-to, and I remain ever happy with never-ending readiness and desire, ever-ready<sup>19</sup> to request the sovereign ruler of the universe to give you long and happy life and to the extremity of your empire, the encompassing Ocean.<sup>20</sup>

Your very humble and obedient servant, Henri de Saint Didier, Provencal gentleman

## General Essay on the Single Sword

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*Here follows the secrets of the single sword and of all the other arms which depend upon it, which to understand, and above all better execute, six points are required.*

The first is how many stances there are in all the art of arms, and to select the best and give the explanation for it.

The second, how many guards and positions there are with the arms and how to select the best and for what reason.

The third, with how many strikes can the enemy aggressor attack the defender and give the explanation for it.

The fourth, on how many targets<sup>21</sup> on the person can the strikes be applied, both in attack and defense.

The fifth, to know how - in all those who make or will make hereafter a living of demonstrating swordplay - to defend oneself or to attack in a single tempo whatever strike or strikes one can throw. Thus, if they do not know, how they can show them to their pupils?

In the sixth point, which is the last, one will see a great secret, which is to determine the strikes that the attacker may make on the defender and explain why<sup>22</sup>.

Regarding the first point, about knowing how many stances there are, I answer that there are only two, because we have only two feet.

Some people hold themselves on the right foot, others on the left foot. However, to give a very brief explanation, either one stands on one foot or on the other. But in

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18 Changed from a very formal passive construction into an active tense for sense.

19 This is a guess. (lit) "more than big to request"

20 In the Greek sense of Oceanus which runs encircles the world

21 (lit) appropriate places

22 (lit) and give the reason for it

order to be assured when one needs to draw a sword<sup>23</sup>, it is necessary to know which of the two feet is the best and the most certain and superlative and on which of them, as stated, it is necessary to stand to execute the art.

According to me, I support with experience and evidence that the stance which is done standing on the left foot at first, in drawing the sword, is the most certain and best, for both the attacker and the defender. How little our ancient practitioners stood like this<sup>24</sup>, and so standing, whether on the one or on the other, gave very little explanation for it. To this end, I conclude that there are only two stances in all the art, to start therewith.

And in order to follow closely the educated and to imitate them, it is necessary to choose the best of two good choices, and of two bad choices to avoid both, if one can do it, and if not, to avoid the worst. In doing so, I advise all followers to take the better of the two stances, which is that which one is maintained on the left foot, at first in drawing the sword, performing one of the three draws<sup>25</sup>.

*Here follows the declaration and explanation of the six points.*

The reason for the first point is that there are only two stances, one being done on the right foot and the other on the left foot.

As for me, I say that holding oneself on the left foot is the best because, being there, one has the liberty of taking more time and greater scope for action<sup>26</sup> than on the stance of the right foot and, consequently, of attacking well and defending oneself much better, as will be shown hereafter in the sequence of the strikes. Thus the reason why the stance that one performs on the left foot is better than that on the right foot.

The second is to know how many guards and positions there are in swordplay. I say that there are three guards and three principal positions.

- The first is the low guard, situating the point at the breeches
- The second is the middle guard, situating the point of the sword directly at the left eye.
- The third is the high guard, situating the point of the sword at the face, coming down from above.

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23 (lit) put the sword in the fist

24 (lit) held themselves here

25 Saint Didier spends an inordinate amount of text in the main body of the book on how to draw the sword. This refers.

26 (lit) the great race, elsewhere seen as “course precititee”

Other demonstrators, when they define the guards, start at the high guard. As for me, I start at the low guard, because all things begin at the foundations. For example, learned people do not begin to demonstrate the sciences from the top down. Nor do the masons when they begin to build a house start with roof-tiles but at the foundations. And for this reason, I start with the low guard.

It is very true about this low guard that it can give rise to two other low guards, one on the right side, the other on the left side.

That which is performed<sup>27</sup> on the right side, inherits the nature and properties of its parent and is associated<sup>28</sup> with the right side.

That which makes itself on the left side, also inherits the nature and being of its parent and is associated with the left side.

These two guards are generated from the low guard. They are often made in order to draw out a strike from the ignorant, which will be a *maindroit* or a high thrust, because one cannot do any other strike, and which one can easily parry and counter-attack<sup>29</sup> the attacking enemy who will be confused and will not consider the hazards which can happen, being in these two disguised guards. However, the low guard, their parent, is the most certain. As such, there are three guards, as has been said.

The third point is that it is necessary to know with how many strikes the attacking enemy can attack the defendant.

As for me, I say that the attacker and defender can only attack with three strikes. These are:

- *Maindroit* (the right-hand strike)
- *Renvers* (the reverse strike)
- Thrust

While it is very true that they can be multiplied by the six targets<sup>30</sup> on the human body, which it is necessary to guard well, as with any good handball player, it is necessary that he guard well the spirit<sup>31</sup>, that the ball of the opposing party does not touch it. So, it is necessary that a good swordsman<sup>32</sup> guard well that one of the three

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27 (lit) makes itself

28 Participer = tenir de la nature de quelque chose (<http://artflx.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/dicos/pubdico1look.pl?strippedhw=participer>)

29 (lit) touch

30 (lit) places. Saint Didier is trying to say that a high thrust is effectively the same as a low thrust in terms of attack and defence.

31 Not really sure of the meaning here.

32 (lit) thrower of arms

strikes does not touch any of the six targets, to which it can be applied, as has been said, as will be seen hereafter.

It is necessary to note that swordplay and handball are first cousins and he who knows well to play handball will easily and quickly understand swordplay.

The fourth point is that the attacker and the defender can only attack with one of these three strikes. While it is true that they can be multiplied and applied, as we have promised above, to the six targets on the person, either in attacking or in defending, and he who knows how to defend himself and attack at the same time with, as he may, the three strikes, which are defined above and hereafter, being so multiplied, he will know hundreds of them.<sup>33</sup>

Here follows the names of the six targets, where one should and can throw the above mentioned three strikes, namely,

- *Maindroit* (the right-hand strike)
- *Revers* (the reverse strike)
- Thrust

The first cut and target is a low *maindroit* to the left knee<sup>34</sup> of the defendant.

The second strike and target is a low *renvers* to the right knee of the defender, if he has the right foot forward and, if he has the left foot forward, it will be to the left knee.

The third target, the *maindroit* is repeated<sup>35</sup> from above on the left side of the defendant.

The fourth target is a high *renvers* on the right shoulder of the defendant, being repeated.

The fifth target is the left nipple to which the attacking Lieutenant will throw a thrust at the Provost, which is the third strike.

The sixth and last target is the right nipple of the Provost, to which the Lieutenant will throw a thrust, which is the third strike, being repeated like the *maindroit* and *renvers*.

Here ends the six targets which is the end of the fourth point.

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33 This torturous piece of text can be boiled down to "by splitting hairs you can define a hundred different strikes but there are really only three."

34 The term *jarret* is confusing. The *Dictionnaire du Moyen Francais* lists it as "partie postérieure du genou," or the back of the knee. Does this mean it is a hamstring attack? I'll translate it as knee.

35 "Multipliez une fois" is best translated in context as duplicated or repeated

The fifth is that it is necessary to know how to defend oneself and attack at the same time with the three strikes, to adapt and throw them to the above mentioned targets, both in attacking as in defending, observing well the tempo which is required. Of which all will be shown and declared at length here-after in the instruction of this single sword.

The sixth and last point is one of the goals,<sup>36</sup> which it is required to know, of the entire art, which is, to determine which strikes that one can throw, both in attacking and in defending, because, in determining the strike easily, one finds its counter, otherwise<sup>37</sup>, one does not. And in order to do this, it is necessary to watch the point of the sword and never lose it from view, and in doing this, one will easily determine the strike, and by determining it, one will find the means of defending oneself and attacking at the same time, as I have promised.

The theory behind determining the strike is that the exterior (which is the point of the sword) is guided and managed by the interior (which is the will) and it does not recognize the point of the sword (which is the exterior) to be usefully observed and, by consequence, observation determines the strike and gains the tempo. Observation and the gained tempo can come from and precede the exterior, which is the strike that the Lieutenant can throw on the defending Provost, and by that, he can find the strike's counter<sup>38</sup>.

*Here is the end and declaration of the sixth and last point which is necessary to know by all, in order to understand these arms and of all others which are part of the same subject.*

Following the above-mentioned six points, one named Fabrice and Jules came one time to see me, with several others of their country, because they wanted to speak with me, someone having told them that I had composed a book on swordplay and that I had dedicated it to the king. They, greedy and desiring to know yet more of the above weapons, of which they know nothing, begged me to show them the book and I refused them (until your majesty had seen it). Then, seeing their true intentions, that they had not come to me to talk but to try to see the contents of the book, it prompted me to discuss with them some points pertaining to swordplay, and I asked them some questions, as one can see hereafter with their responses, by which one can easily judge, who comes closer<sup>39</sup> the goal of the true definition and demonstration of swordplay.

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36 In the Aristolean sense of a "good"

37 ie: in not determining easily the strikes which can be thrown from a position

38 This torturous block of text basically says "keep your eyes on the point of the sword as it betrays the opponent's intention."

39 (lit) touches / reaches better towards

And then I attacked firstly the Fabrice and said to him, “Mr Fabrice, before bouting with you now, with any of the said weapons, I want to know with how many strikes the attacking enemy can attack the defendant.” Then, begging your grace, he told me.

And then Fabrice responded and named<sup>40</sup> several strikes, Neapolitan strikes, that is as much to say French strikes. And yet the author understood the response proffered by Fabrice to be “unlimited and unknowable.”<sup>41</sup>

Fabrice answering again saying, “Sir, why say you that my response is irrelevant?”<sup>42</sup>

Saint Didier answered and said that any response of “unlimited” has no certainty. To this end, the answer by which Fabrice has responded of “many strikes” is irrelevant.

And then Fabrice, seeing that I removed the head<sup>43</sup>, signifying that he had not responded to me adequately.

Fabrice gathered his thoughts a little and made another response saying that with five strikes the attacking enemy can attack the defendant. Then I said to him, “Define them,” and this time he said of them:

- *Mandritto*<sup>44</sup>
- *Riverso*
- *Fendente*
- *Stoccata*
- *Imbroccata*.

And hearing this response proffered by Fabrice, when he named the five strikes above.

Then the author with very little pause responded to him and said “Such answers contain two items with which you have answered badly because there is one response which is plural and another which is single<sup>45</sup>. The plural is worthless; the explanation is given below. The singular, which was when he mentioned above the five strikes, is relevant enough. The explanation is because there are too many of them and thus it is necessary to remove some.

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40 (lit) The text says “said” but “named” makes his meaning clear

41 There appears to be a section of dialogue missing here

42 There appears to be a section of dialogue missing.

43 The context suggests this means “nullified his argument” or similar

44 These are the equivalent Italian fencing terms.

45 Plural (la plurielle) refers to the answer “many strikes”; singular (la singuliere) refers to the list of five strikes. To me, Saint Didier is trying very hard to sound educated.

Fabrice, seeing that I said it is necessary to remove several blows from the strikes, replied to me in order to know of me the true definition and secret: "Tell me, Mr Saint Didier, why you say<sup>46</sup> that the responses I gave before, 'many' and 'five strikes', are not well answered by me?"

Answering again the author said "Truly such answers are worth nothing, at least the plural is, as has been defined above and will be shown hereafter by example."

"If one could talk to and question a camp master and ask him by how many entrances the enemy could come into the camp and if he answers by several, I say that such an answer will be uncertain and by consequence not useful<sup>47</sup>, because when one asks this question to a camp master or to another, one must be certain of the answers. Otherwise they are not worthy to act as either the governor of a camp or of a republic, because it is necessary to be certain by how many entrances the enemy could come into the camp, so that one might put on them sufficient sentinels for the preservation and guarding of those within."

"And in order to answer and conclude that which is discussed above, we have equal need to know by how many strikes the enemy can attack us in order to know how to counter them and to defend our body and honour, as does a camp master who has a camp of 100 or 50,000 men - because it is in our particular interest. As for me, I say, along with the learned, that those who can make do with little are better than those who manage a lot.

To this end, I will remove two from the five strikes held by Fabrice because I say they are superfluous. These are the *fendente* and *imbroccata*, and there will remain only three which are defined by me above and hereafter.

*Here follows the declaration and justification here-after why the author removes the fendente against the opinion of Fabrice and Jules and several others, nevertheless putting the strikes in order<sup>48</sup> for all time.*

The reason why I remove the *fendente* is because it cannot be done properly because, with all *fendente* which are properly done, it is necessary to hold to and not leave the summit and centreline of the thing that one wants to split.

Yet it is that I know no man, such as may be practiced in all the sciences or arts, that having a cutting sword in hand,<sup>49</sup> or other weapon appropriate for cleaving, any cuts that he could do tend to one side or the other, leaving the centreline. And so such a

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46 (lit) have

47 (lit) relevant

48 Needless repetition "have put them and is putting them in order"

49 (lit) having a sword in the fist, of the cutting type

strike tending to the right side is not a *fendente* but a *maindroit* and if it tends more to the left side, it is also not a *fendente* but will be a *renvers*.

Thus, the explanation why the *fendente* is removed by the author from the number of the five strikes held by Fabrice. There remains only four.

*Hereafter is also declared why the author removes the imbroccata from the number of the five strikes.*

The reason: because *verjus verd*, & *verd verjus*<sup>50</sup> is only one thing, the *stoccata* and *imbroccata* are also one. Because in performing<sup>51</sup> one or the other, it will never be performed the same way twice<sup>52</sup>. Also the *stoccata* and the *imbroccata* are the same thing because it is always the point which does the deed<sup>53</sup>. And by thus removing, as has been said, the *fendente* and the *imbroccata*, there remain only the three strikes which are declared above in the third point.

*Here ends all that which is required and necessary to know and to understand by everyone who wants to be skillful in swordplay.*

In order to understand well the weapons and discourse on the art, order and practice of them, it is necessary to imagine three people. The first is the author, the second is the Lieutenant, and the third is the Provost.

By the author will be described here after all the commands in the art of the single sword which the Lieutenant and Provost must obey,<sup>54</sup> which follows hereafter and begins therein.

*The End*

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50 Given as an expression meaning "six of one, half a dozen of the other"

51 (lit) requesting

52 (lit) one will no longer ever carry to you the same

53 (lit) sentinel or guard duty. Makes sense in context but not in translation.

54 (lit) hold to