A Simplified Method for Teaching Dagger Techniques

Eli Steenput

Introduction

This document describes a system I developed to introduce people to dagger techniques in a simplified and structured way. It has been applied primarily to present techniques of early dagger such as Talhoffer, Dei Liberi, and codex Wallerstein, these being the sources I am most familiar with. The system owes inspiration to Matt Galas' method of German longsword, as well as ideas expressed by various other instructors I had the pleasure of meeting, most notably Pete Kautz and Colin Richards, and exchanges with Rob Lovett and Bob Charron.

Purpose

The system attempts to deal with the overall rather chaotic and disorganized nature of dagger techniques in most manuals, which give the impression of a random collection of "tricks" rather than a coherent approach based on underlying principles. While individual techniques are relatively straightforward to reconstruct, the manuals offer scant information on the setup of the techniques or the basis for selecting the appropriate technique.

Given the nature of the dagger fight, it is my belief that the defender has no time for deliberation but must be able to react instinctively to an attack. The first move of any defense can therefore be assumed to be relatively generic, and variation would develop based on the situation after this initial defense. If we could determine for each technique from which basic response it derives, this would allow us to group related techniques so underlying principles become more apparent, and offer a framework for teaching

Key Points

The basic idea of the system is to classify defenses by which of the 4 openings is attacked. Most manuals specify whether an attack is high or low, but only Fiore makes a clear distinction between forehand and backhand attacks (the first and third master of Fiore's dagger). Based on similarity to Fiore's techniques, we can speculate on whether techniques in other manuals were intended to work against forehand or backhand attacks.

From this exercise I concluded that a majority of dagger techniques can be seen as flowing from a single basic response, that is applied symmetrically depending on which of the for the 4 openings is attacked.

The Importance of Proper Attack

Since the defense will depend on the type of attack, the importance of correctly attacking can hardly be stressed enough. It is hard to practice any defense properly if attacks are poorly delivered. A poor attack

will also give the wrong impression on best defensive movement.

Considering only the simple stabs, there are high and low, left and right attacks, with the dagger in forward or reverse grip, in the left or right hand; this gives a total of 16 basic attacks.

There are several ways of delivering these attacks, but the one I prefer to teach first is to stab while stepping forward with the side holding the dagger.

It should be noted that the dagger fight was somewhat different from modern knife-fighting, particularly in how almost all manuals show a downward stab delivered from high above the shoulder, with the arm almost straight up, even when wearing armour that should make this movement less than easy. The image we get from this is a style of strong, committed attacks rather than quick jabs from a very defensive posture as is more common today. The big attacks do have the advantage of being easier to show proper form with.

One of the most common mistakes seen among beginners is failure to attack with the point properly aligned. The dagger is a thrusting weapon, so to present a threat the tip MUST be directed towards the opponent at all time. This means the dagger thrust should travel on a straight line. For most beginners the thrust follows an arc. The illustration shows the correct way (note also the height of the hand), to compare with the incorrect attack where the victim is never actually threatened on the entire path followed by the dagger, except at the very end (by which time he will be long gone):
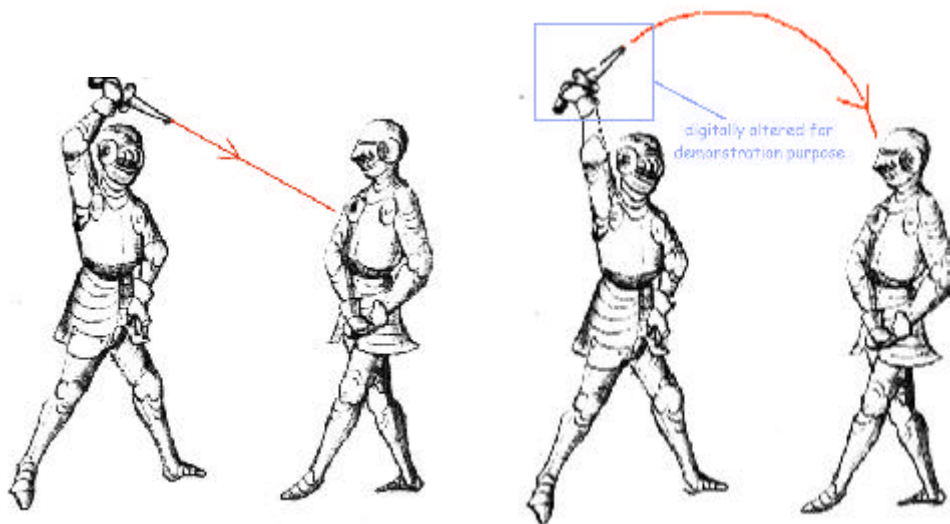
The proper alignment of the dagger can be observed in many sources:
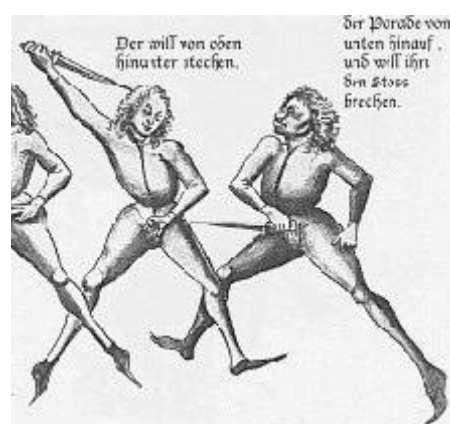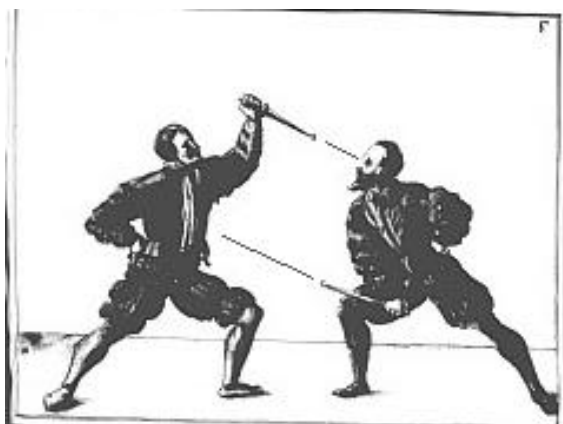

Targets

Not much to say about targets except that the head/face appears to be the target of choice.

Basic Defensive Movement

The basic defensive movement consists of evading towards the side under attack, with the foot on that side forward, and to displace the attack towards that side, with the hand on that side (or with the dagger, or with both hands...)

From there on you can attack the hand, the arm, the body or the legs, passing with the other foot as needed.

For example, if your high left is attacked, you move towards the left with your left foot forward, and use the left hand to displace the attack towards the left.
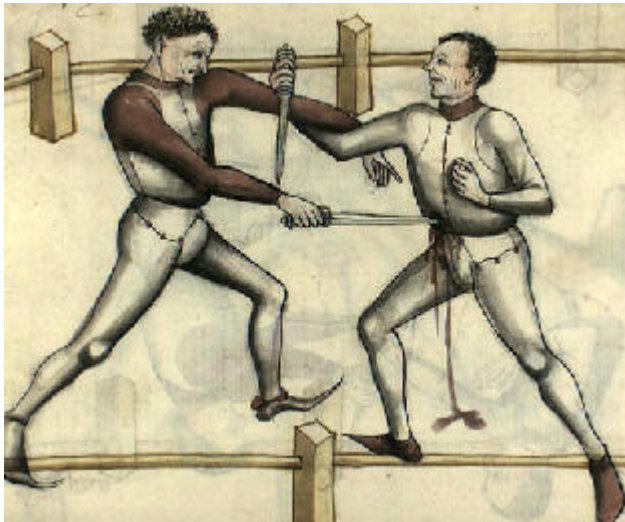
If your high right side is attacked, move towards the right with your right foot forward, and use the right hand to displace the attack towards the right.
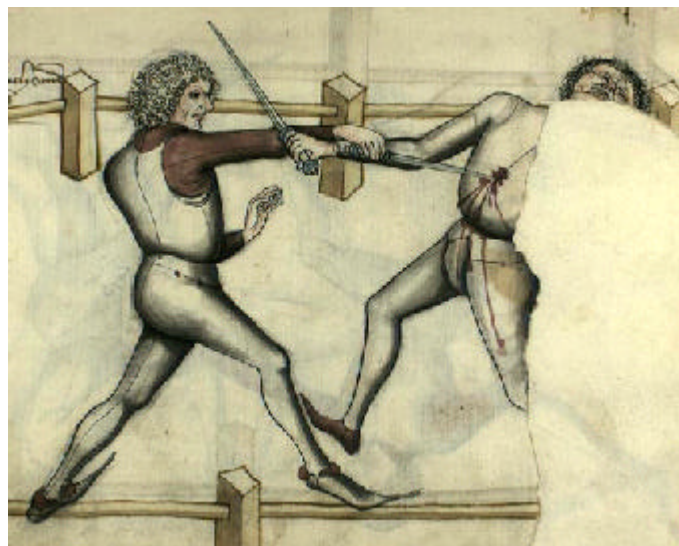
If your low left is attacked, you move towards the left with your left foot forward, and use the left hand to displace the attack towards the left.
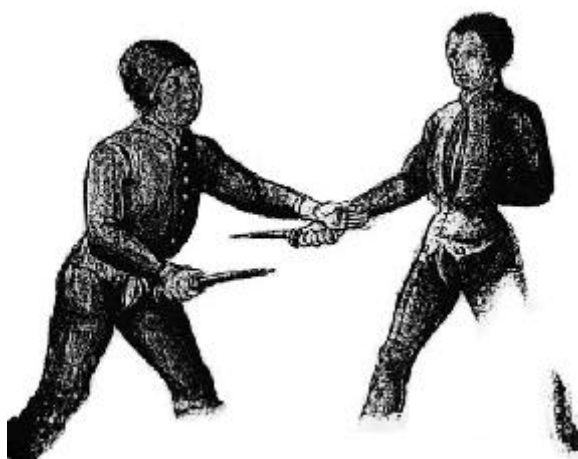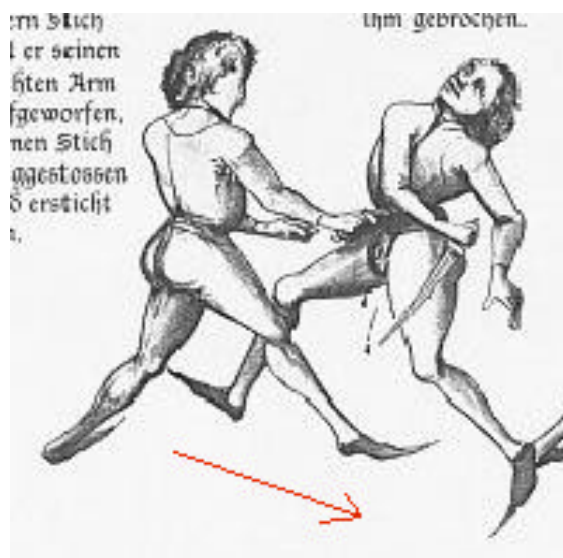

If your low right side is attacked, move towards the right with your right foot forward, and use the right hand to displace the attack towards the right.

Justification of the Basic Defensive Movement

Because most manuals are vague or silent on exact footwork, and what the drawings show is not always consistent and subject to different interpretations, the following lists some arguments for moving towards rather than away from the side under attack:

– evade the attack; in case the intercept misses, the enemy requires a much larger "course correction" to continue the attack when you are behind his dagger

– keep the enemy in front of you where you can attack him easily

– take a superior position, away from his free hand; he can't defend against you on this side since you control his hand

– strong vs. weak; because you changed the angle, your posture is strong and the enemy's weak, therefore you should advance strongly rather than weakly retreat.

Conclusion

Almost all dagger techniques in the manuals mentioned can be developed naturally as a followup to the basic moves described above.

Because of the symmetry, it doesn't really matter which grip or which hand the attacker uses, only the opening under attack determines the initial response. This simplifies the basics considerably. As added bonus, students learn to handle left-handed attacks with the same ease as the normal right-handed ones. Separating the attacks as clearly for forehand and backhand as for high and low reduces student confusion and frustration. By drilling the initial defenses against random attacks, with fencing mask and using for example a rolled-up magazine as weapon, one can develop reflexive responses to dagger attacks.

Afterword

The defensive techniques against dagger attack might, by their number, give the impression that it is somehow relatively easy to survive a dagger attack. Because of the need for safety during practice, training is rarely at full speed and intensity, which may also reinforce this impression. Please keep in mind that a real dagger fight is very dangerous, and going unarmed against a dagger is a fairly sure way to get killed quickly.