

Wide vs. Narrow Measure

Several Italian fencing sources have concepts of “wide” and “narrow” measure

- [Fiore de'i Liberi](#) (early 15th century) distinguishes between the *zogho largo* (wide game) and *zogho stretto* (narrow game)
 - Unfortunately, Fiore does not explicitly define the difference between these terms
 - The way I interpret Fiore, the *zogho largo* and *zogho stretto* are situations that, while **related** to measure, are **not exclusively** defined by the distance between the fencers
- [Salvator Fabris](#) (early 17th century) distinguishes between *misura larga* (wide measure) and *misura stretta* (narrow measure) and defines these explicitly:
 - **Wide measure:** “You are within wide distance when by advancing the rear foot to the front you can make a hit.”
 - Salvator Fabris, “The Science of Arms” Book 1 Chapter 5; English translation by A. F. Johnson
 - **Narrow measure:** “In [close distance] you can reach with the sword merely by bending the body, without moving the feet and the adversary is forced to retire to get out of such danger.”
 - Salvator Fabris, “The Science of Arms” Book 1 Chapter 5; English translation by A. F. Johnson

I will use the definition from Fabris in this presentation

Wide vs. Narrow Measure

Why is the distinction important?

- If your opponent is in their **wide measure**, they need to step to hit you
 - A step forward is a relatively large commitment and thus presents the opponent a good opportunity
 - A step (according to Fabris) always lasts longer than one *tempo*, therefore **an opponent in wide measure cannot hit you in the next *tempo*** unless you give them one
 - Because you need more than one *tempo* to hit an opponent in wide measure, you need some sort of preparatory action on your part (or a freely given *tempo* from your opponent) to attack securely in wide measure
- If your opponent is in your **narrow measure**, you do not need to step to hit them
 - If **your** direct line of attack is open, **you can hit in one *tempo***
 - If **their** direct line of attack is closed, **they need more than one *tempo* to hit you**
 - If your direct line of attack is open **and** their direct line is closed, **you can attack directly securely** because they cannot hit you before your attack is completed
 - Your opponent may still be able to **defend** against your attack, but the important thing is that a counterattack on *tempo* is not a viable option for them
 - If your opponent tries to free their sword and counterattack, your attack will complete during their freeing action, and you can use your next *tempo* to defend against their attack
 - This is a huge advantage if you can obtain it safely



The danger of advancing to narrow measure

“If you are within wide distance and wish to advance within close distance, the danger is greater when the adversary stands steady on his guard, because if you raise your foot to advance it, you give him an opportunity to hit and retire, so that at the end of the movement you would be at the same distance, that is wide distance, and would have obtained nothing. All this is due to the fact that you cannot move your foot in less than two times, the one in lifting it and the other in putting it to the ground. For this reason, some push the foot forward by scraping it along the ground, which is well enough in the hall, but in the street is likely to lead to a fall because of the many unevennesses. It is better then to lift it to make sure of not stumbling.”

– Salvator Fabris, “The Science of Arms” Book 1 Chapter 5;
English translation by A. F. Johnson



One solution to this danger:

Commit only the forward foot first and bring the body forward as late as possible

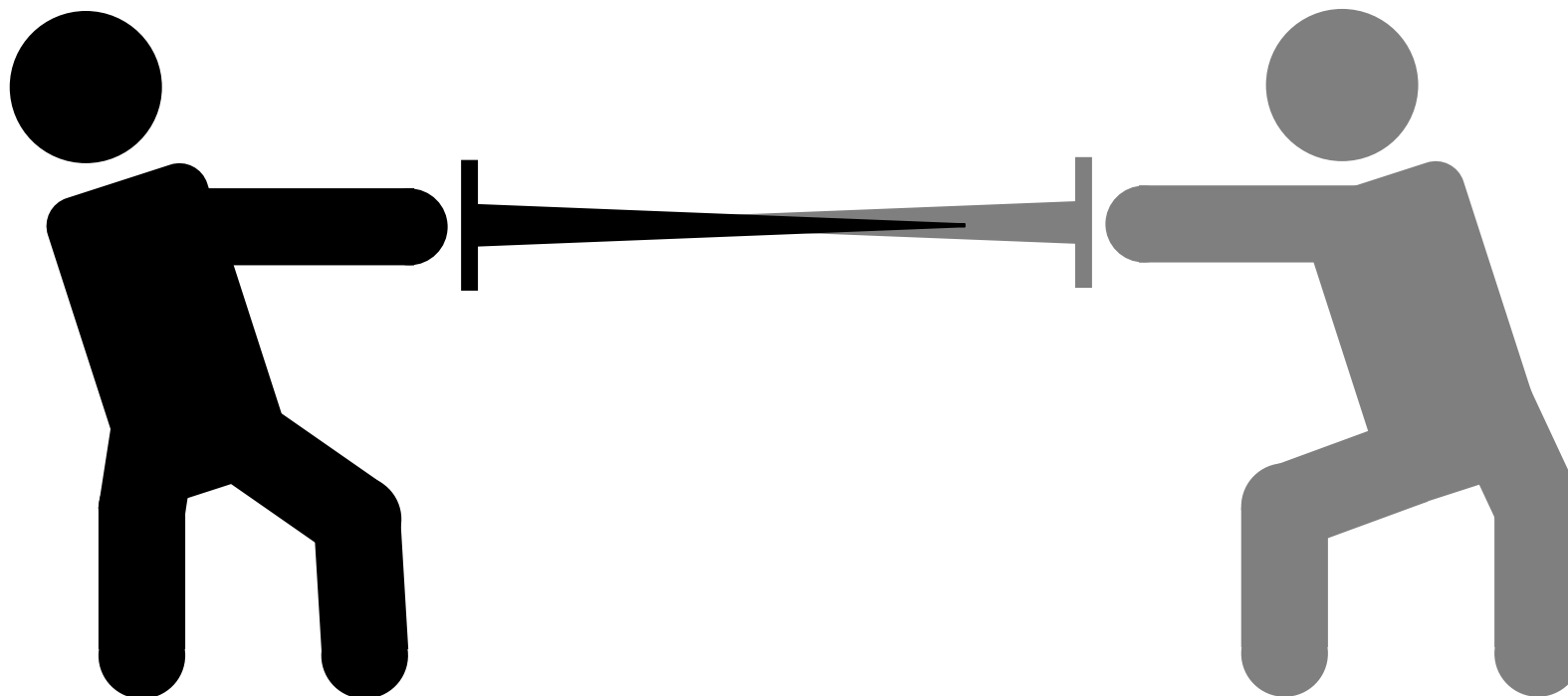
“Therefore in carrying the foot within close distance you must first form a good counter-position, and then lean all the weight of the body on the rear foot as you lift the forward foot, so that if in that moment your adversary should thrust you would be able to parry and to hit by bringing your foot to the ground, or even extend that movement which you had already begun beyond your first design, in order to reach more certainly in case your adversary broke ground in making his hit. If the adversary has not moved, the pupil must after raising the foot carry it within close distance in such a way that the weight of the body rests on the rear foot and is no nearer than when within wide distance. After putting your foot to the ground, you could then by merely bending the body hit on the slightest movement of the adversary in the line exposed nearest to your point.”

– Salvator Fabris, “The Science of Arms” Book 1 Chapter 5; English translation by A. F. Johnson

1

Misura Larga (Wide Measure):

Both fencers need at least one step to hit the other



Agent:

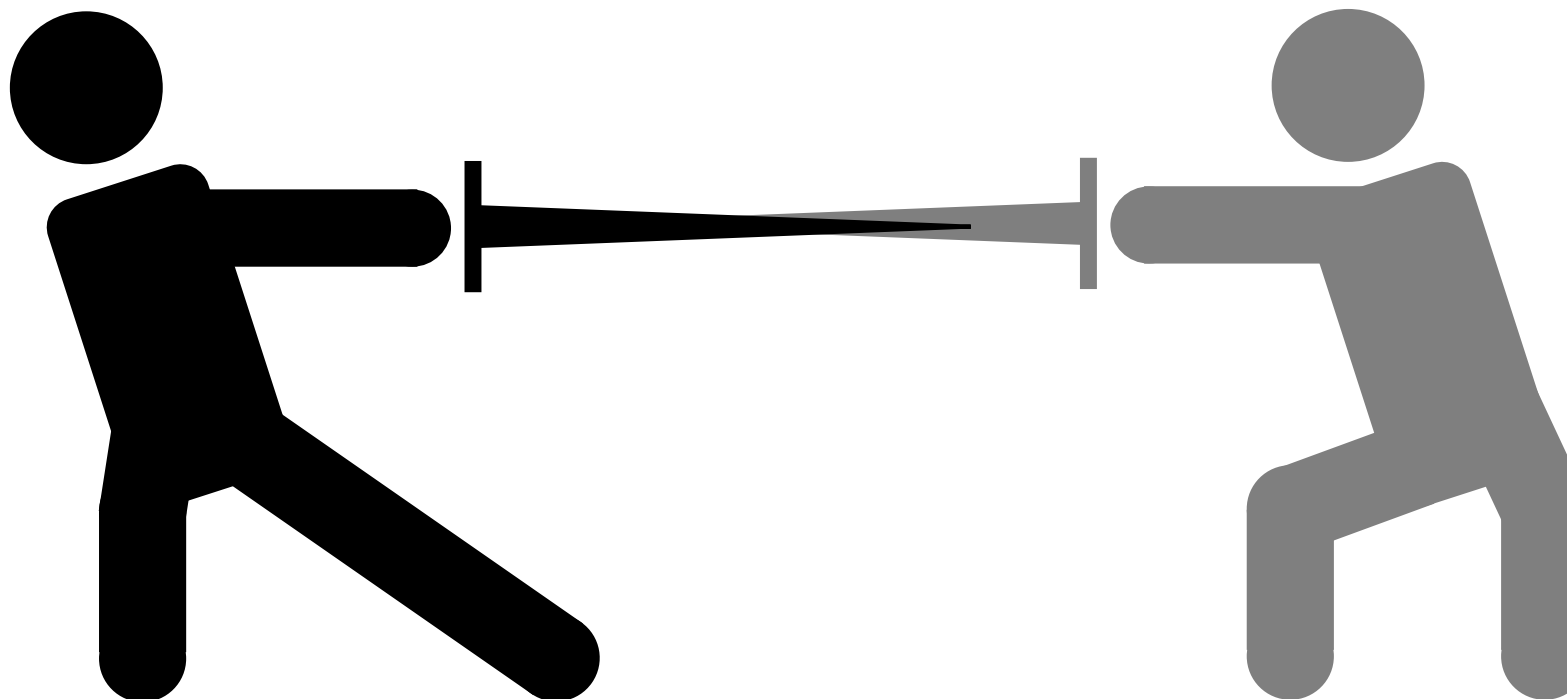
- Back-weighted posture
- Backwards lean (not strictly necessary)
- Opponent needs to step to hit any target

Patient

2

Entering *Misura Stretta* (Narrow Measure):

Agent places the front foot a step forward, keeping weight on back foot and body in wide measure



Agent:

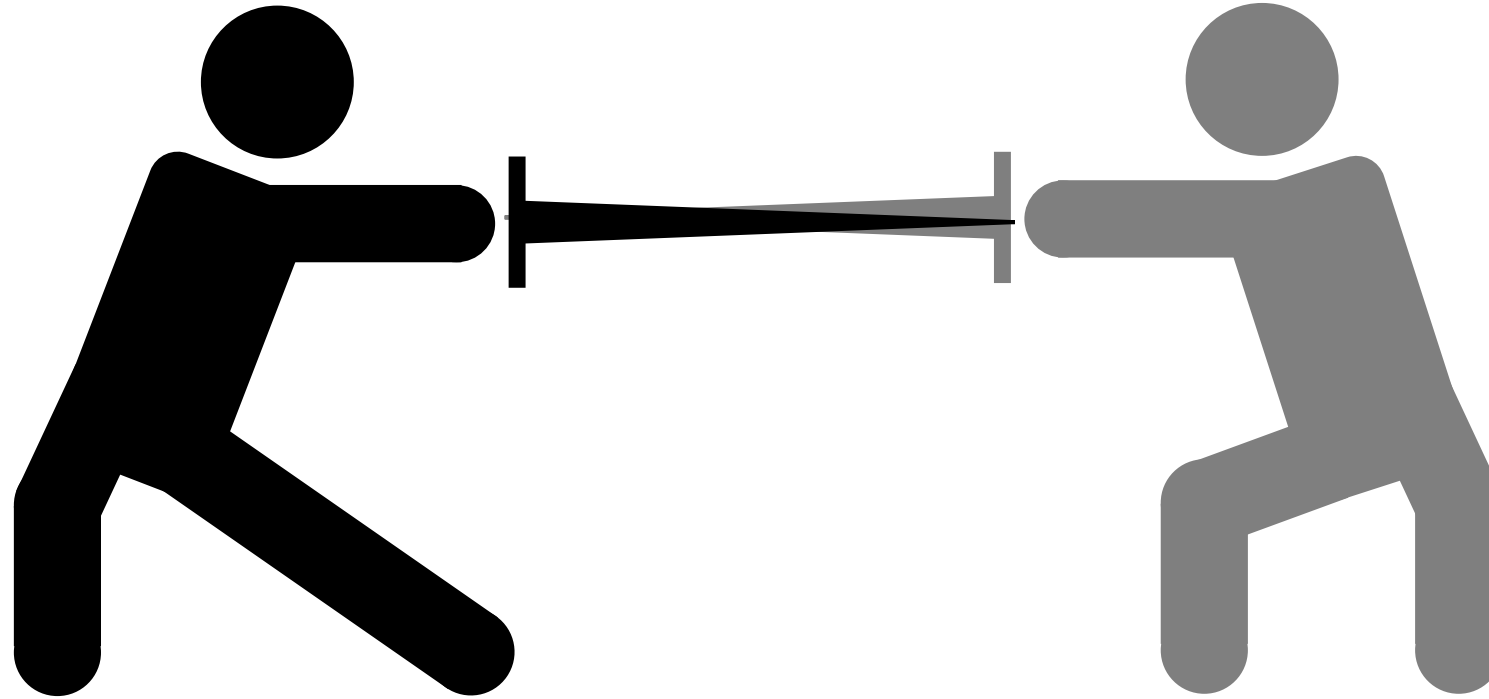
- Back-weighted posture
- Backwards lean
- Opponent can (potentially) hit the leg with a small step or no step
- All other targets remain clearly in wide measure

Patient

3

Initiating attack at *Misura Stretta* (Narrow Measure):

Once the front foot is placed, the agent is now in range to hit without stepping



Agent:

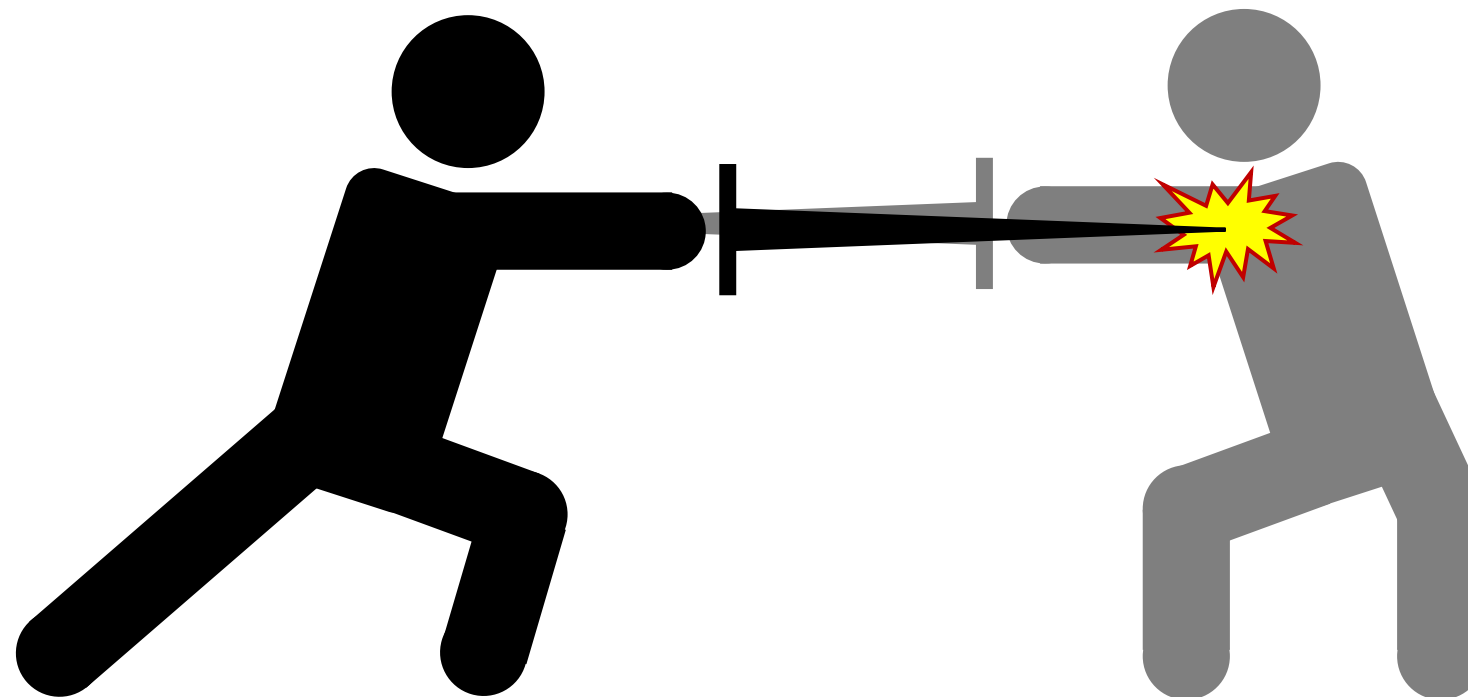
- Back-weighted posture
- Firm-footed attack begins with hip hinge
- Opponent's direct line of attack should be closed
- Little weight on front leg: agent can withdraw it if patient does something unexpected

Patient

4

Completed attack at *Misura Stretta* (Narrow Measure):

Once the front foot is placed, the agent is now in range to hit without stepping



Agent:

- The firm-footed attack ends in a front-weighted lunge position
- No step was taken during the attack; only a weight- and posture-shift

Patient

One Speculative Hypothesis:

What if the back-weighted positions seen in various longsword treatises were also used this way?

Postures from "Gründtliche Beschreibung der Kunst des Fechtens" by Joachim Meyer 1570



"Posta di Vera Finestra" from "De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi" (MS Vitt.Em.1324) by Philippo di Vadi ca. 1482-1487



Postures "Pflug" and "Ochs" from the Starhemberg Fechtbuch (Cod.44.A.8) 1452

Qui comencano le guardie de spada adomana e sono xii. Guardie. La prima se tutta porta di sotto che sia in grande forza e se bona da affetto ogni arma manuale longa e corta e pur chello che sia bona spada non cusi de troppa longhezza. Ella passa cum couete eua ale strette. Ella scambria le punte ele soi ella mette. Ancho za robutte le punte atena e sempre vacii passi e de ogni colpo alla sia conezta. Et chi e qlla gile da braga grande desese fa senza fadig.



Questa sic posta de dona che po far tuti fetti colpi dela spada. Et tuti colpi ella se po couare. E rompi le altre guardie po grande colpi ch po fare. Et scambria con puna ella e semp po fia. Lo po denota accese fora de strada e a quello de dudo passa ala traversa. Ello co pugno fa romagnu di soueto. E a quello po fezza subito po ozato.



Questa sic posti de finestra destra che de malice e ingan sempre e presta. Et de coure e de feare ella magistra. E cum tute guardie ella fa questione e cum le spozane cu letzene. E dina guardia alataz ella da spesso pmagnare lo compagno. E ameter grande punte e fauecle rompa e scambiar. Quelli roghi ella po bene fare.



Questa e meza posta di feso po che sia i mezo e de una forte guardia ma ella no vale longa spada alla zeta forte punte e robutte po forza le spade meate e torna cu lo fendenti po litte fia op gli braci e pur torna i sui guarda. Po zane chramida porta po che ella e forte. Et de forte guardia che male se po rompe sezi picolo a denu ale strette.



Various postures from the Morgan manuscript (MS M.383) by Fiore de'i Liberi ca. 1400-1410

One Speculative Hypothesis:

What if the back-weighted positions seen in various longsword treatises were also used this way?

1

Front leg withdrawn in wide measure



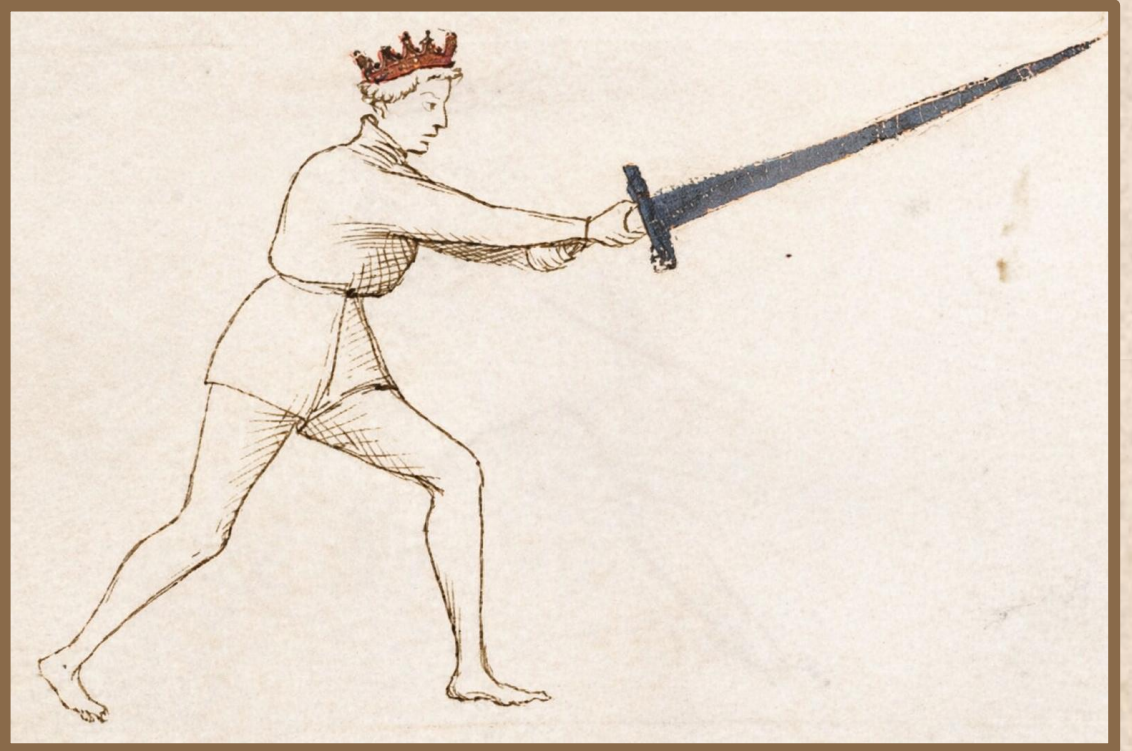
2

Place front leg so that you can hit without stepping, weight still on back leg
→ front leg can easily be withdrawn again



3

Shift weight and rotate hips while extending into a cut or thrust to hit without stepping



Speculative AI-generated image of what Fiore might have meant by a "narrow stance" (see description of the *Colpo di Villano* play in the Getty or Morgan)

AI-generated image based on Fiore's "*Posta di Finestra*" as depicted in the Morgan manuscript (MS M.383)

AI-generated image based on Fiore's "*Posta Longa*" as depicted in the Morgan manuscript (MS M.383)

Philippo di Vadi's "*Posta di Vera Finestra*" (see previous slide) is a historically attested guard that looks similar

One Speculative Hypothesis:

What if the back-weighted positions seen in various longsword treatises were also used this way?

- **Why do I call this hypothesis “speculative”?**
 - To my knowledge, no historical longsword source explicitly describes this kind of preparatory footwork
 - Just because certain 17th century Italian fencing masters used “wide” and “narrow” in this way, that does **not** mean we can retroject this concept on earlier fencing sources
- **Why is the speculative hypothesis worth examining anyway?**
 - Virtually every historical fencing source discusses the importance of understanding distances
 - The dangers and opportunities associated with wide and narrow measure as Fabris defines them exist regardless of whether one has a name for these situations or not
 - Therefore, experienced fencers from any time would presumably have an intuition for these opportunities and dangers and the need to address them
 - Back-weighted postures are clearly represented in several historical longsword traditions
 - Therefore, they were probably useful for some purpose
- **More motivating questions for the interpretation of Fiore, specifically:**
 - The two masters of *largo* are shown in a crossing with the left leg forward – why the non-dominant leg?
 - Fiore portrays *Posta Longa* with the left leg forward – is there a reason why?
 - Most modern longsword fencers prefer to stand with the right leg forward in a point-forward guard because this facilitates thrusting actions with more granular footwork (akin to modern fencing footwork)
 - Granular footwork (i.e. small steps) is another approach to solving the problem Fabris discusses
 - Left-leg forward makes sense if it is the end point of a cut made from a right-sided guard without stepping

Alternative Hypotheses

What other reasons might explain the use of back-weighted postures in longsword?

- **The posture telegraphs an obvious threat which can draw out a predictable reaction from the opponent**
 - This is certainly true
- **A back-weighted posture like “Zornhut” or “Posta di Donna” lends itself to charging a very powerful blow**
 - This is true, but the blow does not become more powerful with a step; a cut from this posture without stepping would be just as powerful, if not more so
 - To make a passing step from a back-weighted posture, the fencer must first remove the weight from the back leg and thus the back-weighted posture exaggerates the problem Fabris discusses: instead of the step requiring two *tempi*, the passing step now requires three!
 1. Shift weight off back leg
 2. Lift back foot
 3. Place lifted foot on the ground
- **The back-weighted posture makes moving the front leg easier which facilitates ...**
 - **... slipping the front leg if it is attacked**
 - Notice that the back-weighted postures usually have the sword high, thus the low line is easier to defend with a slip than with bladework
 - **... attacking with an increase of the front foot (i.e. a lunge)**
- **You can shift between a forward-weighted and a back-weighted posture to slip some blows without stepping**
 - This is also true

There does not have to be a single answer! There can be multiple valid uses for a posture!

Sources of Inspiration

Links to some modern material that contributed to my thoughts on this subject

- **“Meyer, Time”** by Robert Rutherford: <https://youtu.be/NqWC1VuhkPI?si=GUtRIYjbVUdMXWwa>
- **“Ein Schritt, zwei Tempi | On Timing in Fencing”** by Cornelius Berthold: https://youtu.be/4xlyfGNm3ek?si=g_vUx_MvoBQuEQMs
- **“How to do Fencing Footwork”** by Woody & Bibs: <https://youtu.be/LZQZyPeg5OE?si=LmPlc6iorpi5sG3b>
 - Additionally, further discussion about preparatory footwork for longsword on their Patreon
- **“A little Larga and Stretta”** by Woody & Bibs: https://youtu.be/LjsVqzq--2I?si=c_idUtudyVt0Lhaj
- **“Is there a POWER Attack that works with swords?”** by Sellsword Arts: https://youtu.be/i_z-FDb78QI?si=lhlx4FA-dzU9E4f7
 - Sellsword Arts also has a lot of other content critically examining the notion of a “power attack” in fencing