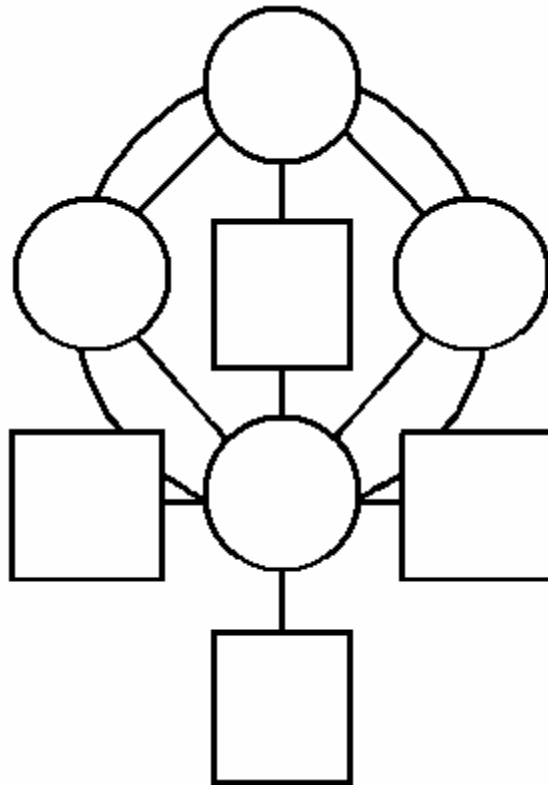


El Círculo y la Cruz

The Circle and the Cross



A method for practicing and teaching Spanish footwork – Part I

By Puck and Mary Curtis

June 1, 2005

This is the first in a series of articles providing a beginner's guide to the practice of Spanish swordplay

The following is a work containing both translation and interpretation of primary sources and reflects the authors' current understanding. The authors welcome critical commentary and peer review.

In the 16th Century, a new system of fencing appeared in Spain called *La Verdadera Destreza* or The True Art. The teachers of this style became famous throughout Europe and its principles survived for 300 years. Sadly, the art was mostly lost in the 1800s when French literature, fashions, and influence entered Spain. A student that wishes to study the techniques is often at a loss as to how to train or even where to begin.

The purpose of this paper is to familiarize a student with the basic footwork of Spanish fencing and from a simple beginning, introduce concepts that will allow the student to both practice the footwork and tie it directly to the source texts.

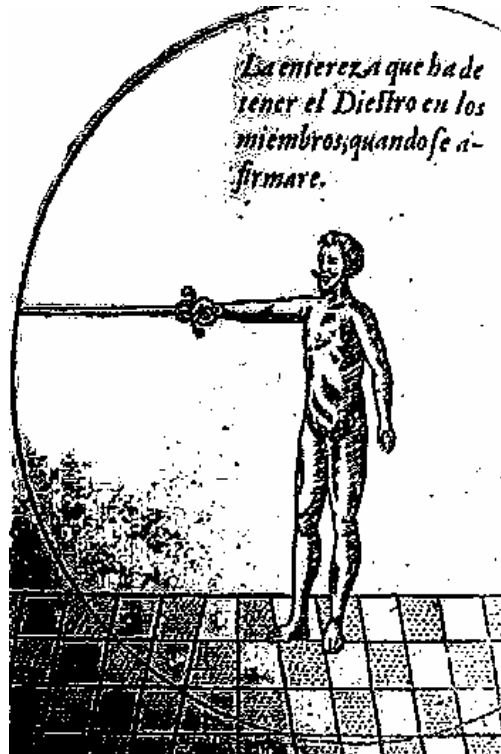
To aid in understanding the steps, I have created a simple pattern that can be used to train. The cross I am presenting is my modern creation to assist in teaching Spanish footwork to students and can be used as a bridge to understanding some of the notation used by don Jerónimo Sánchez de Carranza and don Luis Pacheco de Narváez in their texts.

Like most fencing systems the foundation of the art is the footwork and it serves as a beginning.

The Stance

We will start with a look at the Spanish stance. In Pacheco's The Book of the Greatness of the Sword, he presents the following plate showing the correct posture:

Pacheco's Stance



Transcription: “La entereza que ha de tener el Diestro en los miembros, cuando se afirmare.”

Translation: “The soundness that the Diestro¹ should have in his limbs when he assumes his stance.”

In the Spanish stance the weight is centered, the body is upright, and the fencer may step in any direction. The weapon arm is extended at shoulder height but not locked. The weight may shift to the balls of the feet or the heels as necessary.

¹ *Diestro* literally means right-handed, but the word also denotes skill. In the context of *La Verdadera Destreza*, it refers to a swordsman who has skill and practices the True Art of Defense

The feet are no further than shoulder width apart. The toe of the front foot is pointed at the opponent and the rear foot is placed at a right angle to the front foot so that the heels line up. These footprints represent the proper orientation for a right-handed fencer.

Footprints of a fencer in stance



A left-handed fencer will need to reverse this stance with the toes of the left foot pointing towards the opponent.

Note: When walking through the footwork, do not cross your feet. This is a general rule of Spanish footwork and like most rules can only be broken with good reason. Beginners should not attempt crossing steps until they understand the exceptions to the rule.

Spanish footwork can be distinguished by the narrow steps it uses that seem to resemble dancing. In 1598 George Silver states in his book, Paradoxes of Defense:

They stand as brave as they can with their bodies straight upright, narrow spaced, with their feet continually moving, as if they were in a dance, holding forth their arms and rapiers very straight against the face or bodies of their enemies, and this is the only lying [stance] to accomplish that kind of fight.

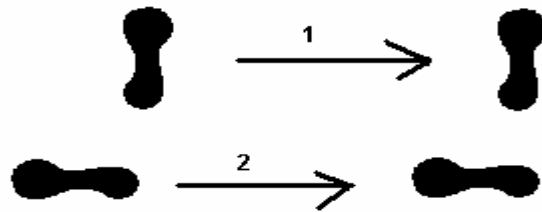
With that in mind, we can use a simple dance count to help us learn the footwork.

Notation of the steps

We represent the positions of the feet with a series of footprints and use them to demonstrate a step to the right. Stepping from right to left use a 2 count to measure the beats of the movement.

1. Right foot steps right.
2. Left foot steps right.

A single step to the right side



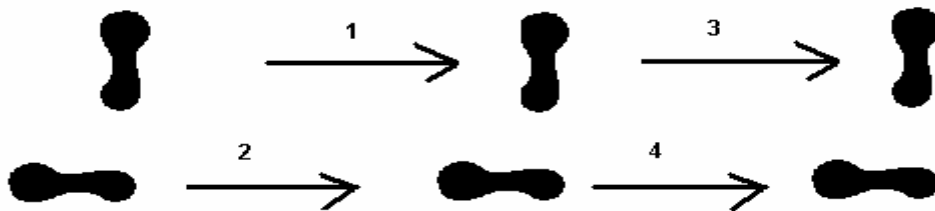
This pair of steps comprises one discrete piece of footwork. The fencer takes two steps and has immediately returned to stance.

Note: In the vocabulary of Spanish footwork a step away from the centerline of engagement is called a *Compas of Trepidation*².

Stepping right twice can produce a 4 count.

1. Right foot steps right.
2. Left foot steps right.
3. Right foot steps right.
4. Left foot steps right.

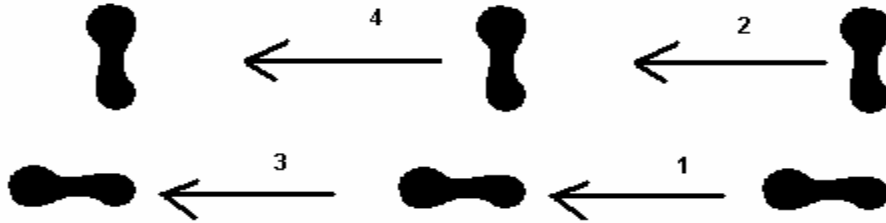
A double step to the right side



² *Compas de Trepidacion* is defined in the Academia Autoridades (volume C), 1729 – “Sideways compass, or to the side. In fencing it is that which one makes along the infinite line, to whichever of the sides.”

Stepping left twice produces the same 4 count pattern.

A double step to the left side



Whenever you step in any direction, step with the foot that will prevent you from crossing your feet. With your feet crossed, you will briefly lose mobility and are vulnerable to an attack. When you move right, step with the right foot first and when you move left, step with the left foot first to avoid crossing your feet.

This is a good start on Spanish footwork and I recommend working on these two sets of steps until they feel comfortable. Be sure that you never overstep with one foot, which can lead to bad position and crossed legs.

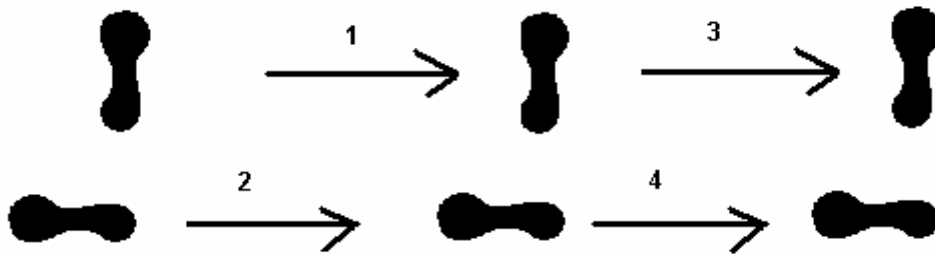
When working with students, count out loud as you take the steps. You may also play some music and count with the beat it provides. Vary the tempo of the count to challenge yourself. When you feel that you are getting better, try pairing up with a partner using mirrored footwork to move back and forth. When working with a partner, help them notice if they accidentally cross their feet by stepping with the wrong foot.

In every case, if things aren't working try going a bit slower until the steps feel natural.

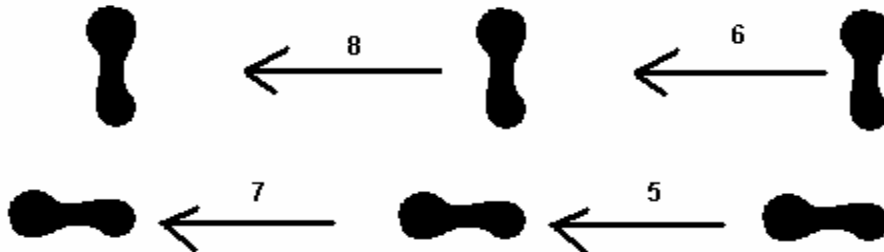
Now we take these two examples to create an 8 count beat by stepping right twice and then left twice.

1. Right foot steps right.
2. Left foot steps right.
3. Right foot steps right.
4. Left foot steps right.
5. Left foot steps left.
6. Right foot steps left.
7. Left foot steps left.
8. Right foot steps left.

Steps 1-4 (Right)



Steps 5-8 (Left)

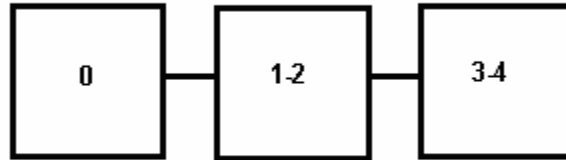


Try stepping back and forth to the longer 8 count beat. Focus on changing direction from left to right and varying the tempo of the footwork. Using this drill will provide much stronger footwork in a very short amount of time.

Once you have become proficient with this drill, try leading with your opposite leg and doing the drill backwards. You should notice that the drill suddenly feels very awkward. This is because your body has gotten used to stepping right with the front foot and left with the rear foot, and that's exactly what we want. Congratulate yourself on good muscle memory. Return to your normal stance and try the drill again. Compared to an off-hand lead, it should feel very natural.

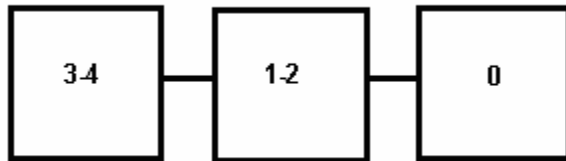
It's time to update our notation to get us closer to the actual Spanish method of describing footwork. We can redraw our footprints so that each stopping point is represented by a square. In that case, our steps to the right side would look like this:

Steps to the Right Side



Stepping from right to left would look like this:

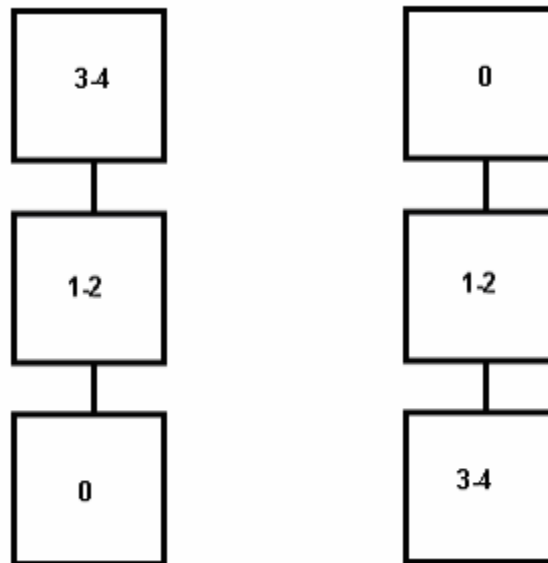
Steps to the Left Side



Note: The zero in each figure represents the starting position.

We use the same notation to describe stepping forward and backwards as well, always being careful to step with the lead foot first when advancing and the rear foot first when retreating. Try to avoid getting your feet too close together. If your feet are too close to each other, you can easily fall over.

Steps Forward and Steps Backward



Now is a good time to try the same 8 count drill that we did before, but this time we'll step forwards and backwards. Try to spend as much time here as you did with the previous drill.

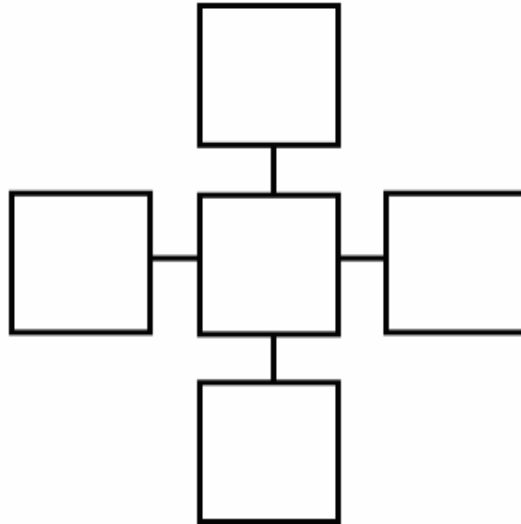
Note: In the vocabulary of Spanish footwork any step forward is called a *Forward Compass*³ and any step backwards is called a *Backward Compass*⁴.

³ *Compas Recto* is defined in the Academia Autoridades (volume C), 1729 – “Straight compass. In fencing it is that which one makes toward the front by the line of the diameter.”

⁴ *Compas Estraño* is defined in the Academia Autoridades (volume C), 1729 – “Backward compass. In fencing it is that which one makes straight backward.”

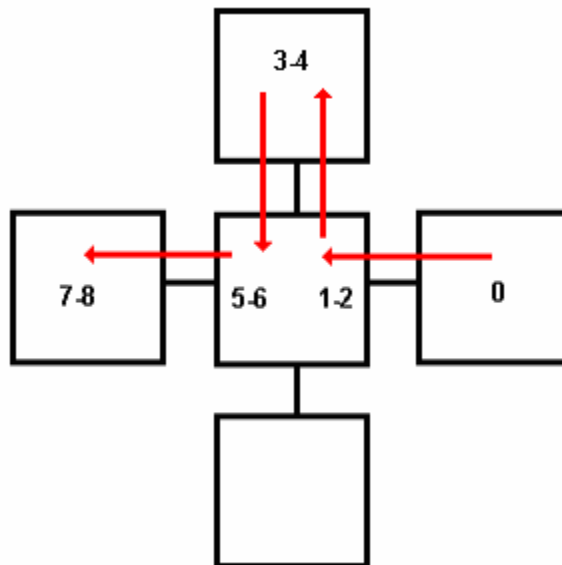
If we lay these two footwork diagrams on top of each other, we get the cross shape that can be used to practice more complicated Spanish footwork. Each box represents a starting or stopping point for any step.

The Footwork Cross



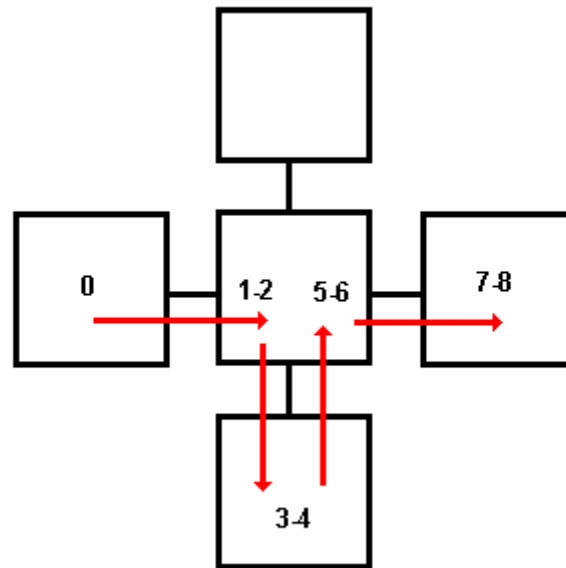
Here it becomes possible to use an 8 count to practice footwork that incorporates multiple changes in direction, for example, stepping left, forward, backward, and left as shown in the image below.

Moving to the Left on the Cross



Return to the starting point by mirroring the footwork.

Moving to the Right on the Cross



Try combining these slowly using two 8 counts to hit every square in the cross. Be careful not to cross your feet or bring them too close together when the footwork begins to get more complicated. Once you've gotten comfortable with this, try increasing the tempo.

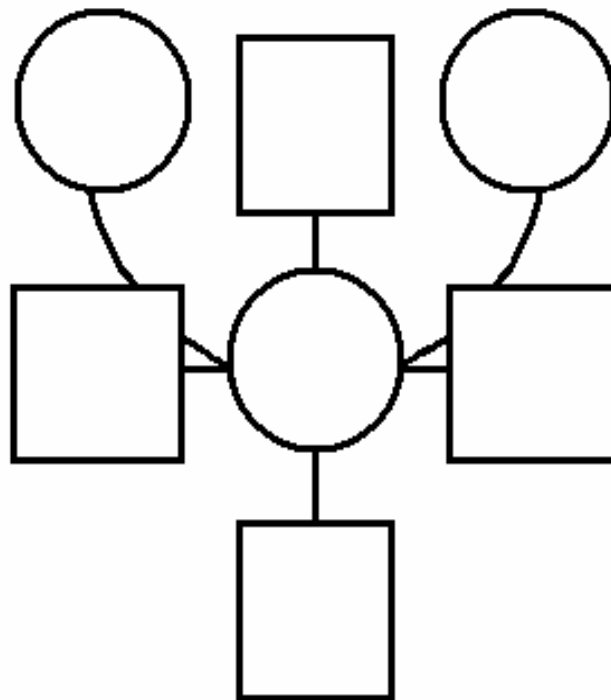
This is a good time to start trying different patterns like the ones shown above. Vary the patterns to practice quick changes in direction.

To include the circular footwork that is the trademark of the Spanish system, circles are added to the cross. The center square has been replaced with a circle as well.

Anytime the fencer steps into a space indicated by a circle, he is walking along the circumference of the Spanish Circle. A circular step is called a *Curved Compass*⁵. (We will provide more details on the Circle later.)

To take a circular step to the right, step with the right foot first and then the left. To take a circular step to the left, step with the left foot first and then the right.

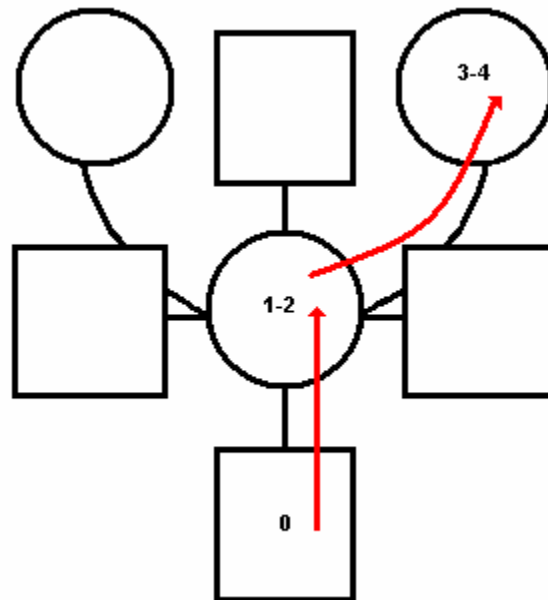
The Cross with Circles added



⁵ *Compas Curvo* is defined in the Academia Autoridades (volume C), 1729 – “Curved compass. In fencing it is that which one makes by whichever of the sides of the circumference of the circle.”

In this example, the student advances with a *Forward Compass* and then takes a *Curved Compass* to the right.

Example of Circular and Linear footwork together



When drilling with this model, I recommend that you practice the desired footwork while counting the eight beats out loud. This is the time to be sure that you are not crossing your feet and that each step ends with the balance correctly centered.

Note: It is tempting when doing upright footwork to move quickly to the next step without properly regaining and centering your balance. I have noticed this tendency when students step right and then immediately left, which is why I prefer an 8 count with two steps left and two steps right. Try to think of each step as discrete, rather than merely a bridge to some future place you want to go. If you attempt to predict the next step, you may be unable to easily change direction when needed.

As the students become comfortable with the drill, you can increase the tempo of the count slowly until the actions are performed at speed. Try different variations of the drill to help students learn to change direction quickly. The footwork and the quick changes of direction that resemble dancing are an integral part of the Spanish system.

Once the students have some experience with this kind of drill, you can pair them up and have them mirror each other using proper footwork. Make sure that partners help each other watch for feet that cross or get too close together.

Obviously, many variations on this theme are possible and a student is encouraged to include as many as possible when practicing the footwork. In the previous examples the cross was used as a guide to direct the footwork drills.

The challenge to the students is to realize that they stand perpetually in the center of an imaginary cross and that they can step in any direction necessary. As they step, the cross and the possible steps illustrated move with them. When the student uses this more advanced model, they can use the same patterns of footwork, but now they should understand that they can change direction at any time during a fight. Standing in the center of the cross is just one way of illustrating that concept.

Now we transition from our footwork cross to the Spanish Circle. Imagine that you are standing in the center of the imaginary cross. The center square of the cross rests on the edge of the Circle. If you were to face an opponent, you could draw a line from your front toe to your enemy's front toe. That line forms the Diameter of The Circle. The Spanish circle is an imaginary circle that both opponents share and it defines proper engagement distance.

The imaginary Spanish Circle shared by the two opponents

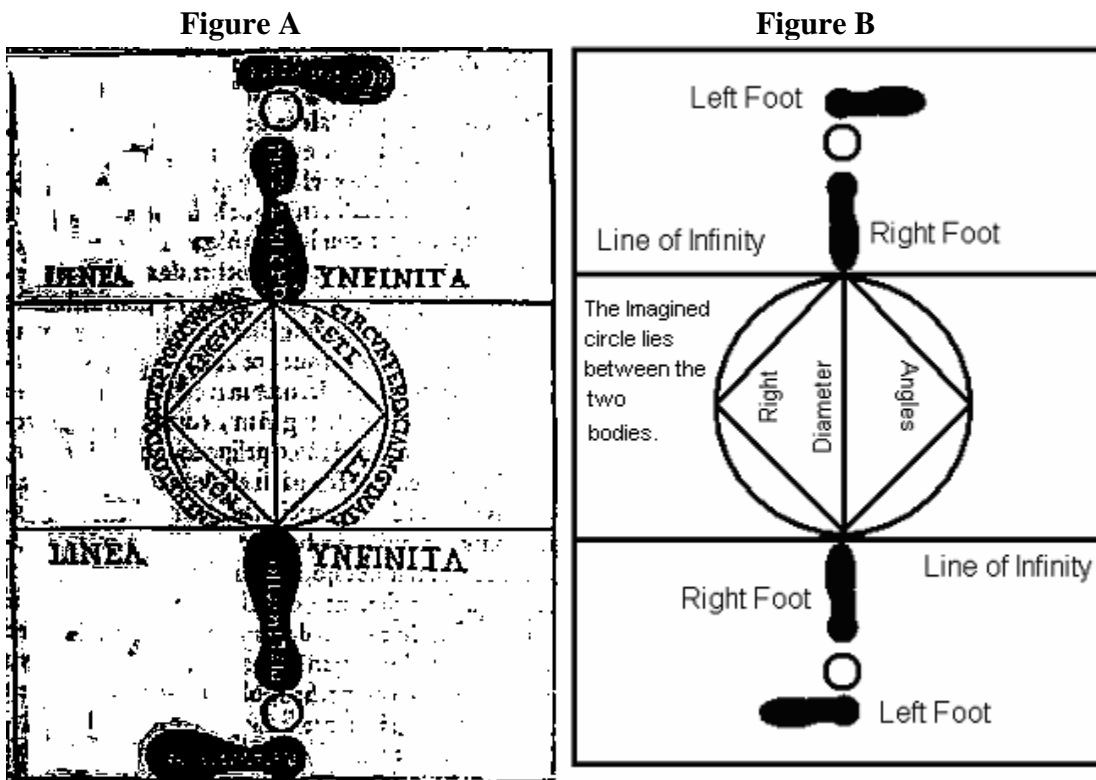
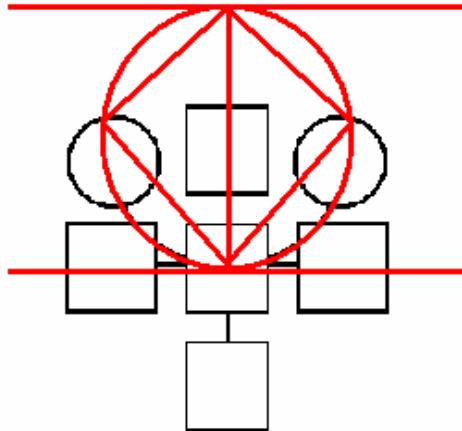


Figure A: The Circle from Pacheco's The Book of the Greatness of the Sword
 Figure B: Graphic reconstruction of the Circle with translated text

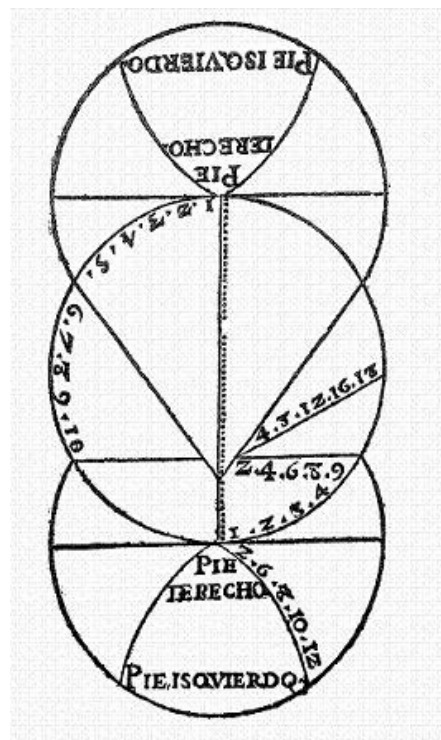
The Spanish Circle moves with the duelists during the fight, as does the more advanced footwork cross we mentioned earlier. Here you can see the same Circle laid on top of the cross to demonstrate the relationship between the two.

The Circle and The Cross



Here is a similar image from Carranza's Philosophy of Arms describing the Circle and some of the related steps. The center circle, called the Greater, or Major Circle, is the circle between the right feet of the opponents when in proper fighting distance. The smaller circle, or Minor Circle, is defined by the distance between the left and right foot of the fencer. **Note:** This image is not drawn to scale.

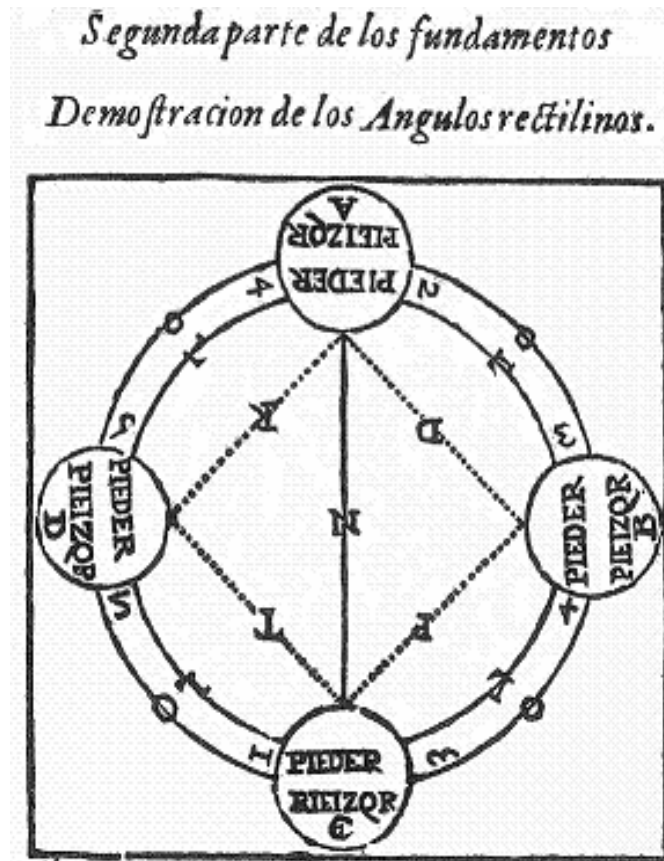
Carranza's Circles



The greater Circle is the space between the opponent's right foot and mine, and the lesser is that which extends from the right foot of each one to the left,...
 ~Carranza

In this image from Pacheco's The Book of the Greatness of the Sword we can see the Major Circle again featuring circular footwork positions very similar to the ones we defined on the footwork cross.

Another Version of Pacheco's Circle



Second part of the fundamentals
Demonstration of the rectilinear Angles.

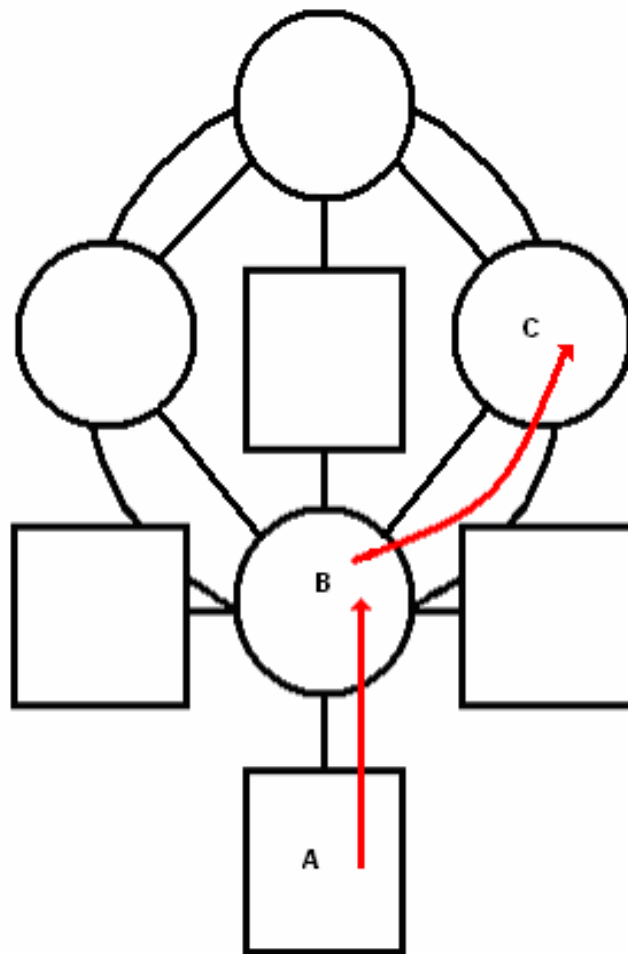
Note: The abbreviated text in each circle reads “right foot” and “left foot” with the right foot being closer to the center than the left foot.

Drills using this type of notation can help the student understand the diagrams presented by don Luis Pacheco de Narváez in his texts.

We update our diagram to include more of the features from the Major Circle. It is now possible to use the same series of 8 counts to practice walking completely around the circle. Be careful when making *Curved Compasses* that you change your orientation to keep your lead foot pointed at your opponent.

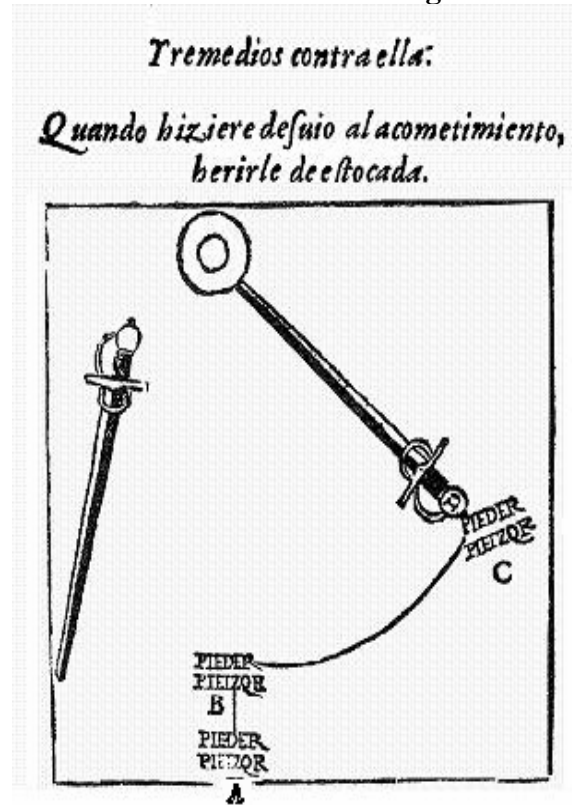
Here is the updated image of the cross that includes the complete Major Circle. In this example, we demonstrate the footwork used earlier with the expanded version of our diagram. I have replaced the numbers with letters, but each letter represents two steps. (One with the right foot and one with the left foot)

The Completed Circle over the Cross



The updated diagram describes the same action shown in this plate from Pacheco's The Book of the Greatness of the Sword.

Pacheco's Footwork Diagram



And the remedies against it:

When the deflection is done to the attack to strike him with a thrust

In Pacheco's plate, the footwork has been labeled **A**, **B**, and **C** in discrete pairs of steps like the ones we have used in our cross diagram. The opponent's body is represented by the double circle being pierced by the sword.

It should be understood that a learning tool like the cross is only a model and the possible combinations of steps are infinite. The student can use the simpler cross to practice footwork and work towards the more complicated one to better understand the circle itself.

Using this progressive step-by-step method one can go from simple dance-type steps with an 8 count beat into the deeper theory of footwork, distance, and angles that are the key to the Spanish system.

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Translator’s Note

All translations within this article are the work of Mary Dill Curtis from facsimiles of the original Spanish source texts.