

Playing By The Rules: How "Martial" were Medieval Martial Arts?

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*"I beg you, tell me.
since fighting is no longer in fashion
what good for is the art of fence?"¹*

Few philosophically inclined modern fencers escape pondering this **question** at least once or twice during their active fencing careers

Of course, our friends from the historical fencing community will **inform us** that there was little room for such soul-searching back in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The sword arts and their related auxiliaries of wrestling and grappling were "lethally efficient killing arts", practiced by warriors with the single-minded intent to dispatch as many opponents as quickly and resoundingly as humanly possible.

It may come as somewhat of a surprise to find that the rhetorical question above is taken from the Fechtspruch of Hans Sachs, the famous German shoemaker and Meistersinger whose lyrical and dramatic work inspired Wagner's opera.

Sachs was born November 5, 1494 in Nurnberg, one of the centers of German fighting guild activity. He was a contemporary of **Emperor** Maximilian I (whose love for the European **combatives** is as well documented as his visits to Nurnberg) and a fellow citizen of Albrecht Durer who himself tried his hand at editing the Codex Wallerstein in 1512. Sachs died January 19, 1576 also in Nurnbeg.

Sachs's literary activity extended from 1514 to 1569. By 1567, **he had** written 4, 275 master-songs, 208 dramas, 1, 558 comic stories, histories, comparisons, allegories, visions, lamentations, street and tavern songs, as well as dialogues. One of them is this Fechtspruch, whose initial question above is answered with an equal lack of martial concern:

"Even if fencing is a leisure-time activity, the art is quite honorable and fine, noble, just as jousting and playing at tournaments, as playing string instruments, singing, and riding at the quintain before ladies, knights and servants, where a merry performance of "mirror fencing" is ornated by many a skillful jump. "

Hands Across Europe

You might argue that fighting with swords... especially fighting among the sword-bearing classes using matched weapons of similar weight, shape, and configuration... called for more mutual consent to precede the encounter that a true antagonistic scenario would afford.

But how about the empty-hand techniques of the day ... those that would give the person trained in their use

an edge in unpleasant situations that called for martial defense of life and limb?

Wrestling master Johann Georg Paschen for one introduces his fighting compendium with the words:

"It is well known from the Histories that wrestling was a useful exercise, and how our forebears used it not just for fun, but also in earnest. "²

That insight must have been new (if not news) to his readers in 1659. That, by the way, was a mere 11 years after the Peace of Augsburg had put an end to the Thirty Years War, the bloodiest and longest-lasting conflict in early modern history. Paschen's war-scarred contemporaries, it might appear, don't seem to have made ail-too frequent use of that lethally efficient Kampfringen.



Fig. 1: Don't try this at home: Austerswald (1539) shows an un-sociable technique!

It would take another nine years until the novelist Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen would present his Marxbruder-trained hero Simplicius applying his rigorous wrestling skills in an antagonistic fight scenario.³

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Rules.

Five-Ancestor Fist

But how about those "forebears" Paschen mentions?

One of them is the shrewdly smiling Saxon nobleman Fabian von Auerswald, who learned the 85 "pieces" he presents his 1539 Ringer kunst⁴ (woodcuts carved in the shop of Lucas Cranach the Elder) from those "widely famous wrestling masters who back then were at the court of your Electorate grace, and taught the youths. " Among those youthful athletes were the sons of the Saxon Elector, and other princes, counts, lords and those of the local gentry.

Auerswald's declared intent is to bring to light the right way and art of wrestling for "the use, honor, and benefit of the many honest and good people for many earnest and knight-suitable things."⁵

Polite and Sociable

The last segment of his work (8 woodcuts) illustrates what must have been somewhat of a nostalgic retrospective even back in 1539:

"Here begins: how people in days of yore wrestled in the Gryblein.⁶ He who stands in the pit / is not allowed to

Als denn greiff ich mit meinem linken Arm vnter seinen rechten Ellenbogen / vnd ziehe in zu mir / so beginet er zu biegen / wenn er beuget / so las ich meine lincke Hand gleiten inn sein rechte Hand / Draus gehet ein schertzlich Armrecken / welches fast wehe thut / Das gehöret für grobe Leute / Gefelliglich.



Fig 2: Wurm's moral imperative, A. D. 1500: Do this and you might break his arm. Which is verboten in friendly competition.

leave it with his leg / and his opponent must limp on one leg / There much arts go into it / and it is funny to behold. "

But even those "pieces" not devoted to the Grublein are not exactly illustrating a free for all. None of the techniques and applications departs from the sociable, sportive wrestling practiced without intent to harm the opponent.

In fact, in one case Auerswald points out that the technique illustrated results in a terrible twisting of the arm, which "nearly hurts". That is for rough people, and is not sociable."⁷

Yet another generation before Auerswald, in the Landshuter Ringerbuch⁸ (published by the Landshut

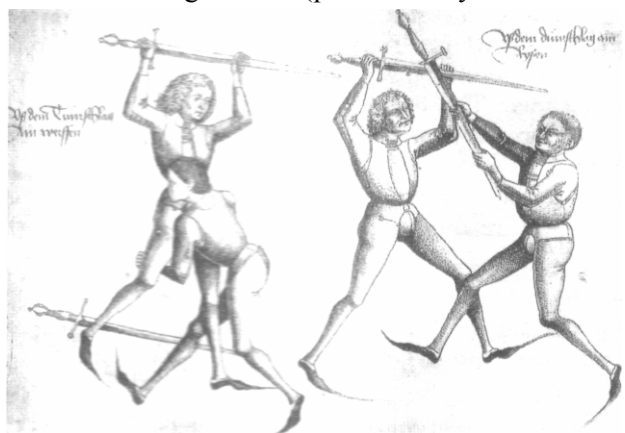


Fig. 3: Talhoffer (1467): It's either The Complete Iron Palm -- or these guys are using blunts!

silk embroiderer Hanns Wurm around 1500), the combative scenarios appear every bit as friendly as a round of judo randori at the Y -- notwithstanding the fact that at least one of the wrestlers has the insignia of a fighting guild emblazoned on his thigh.

The book starts with the invocation of "Sand Jorgin", Saint George. St. George is the patron saint of the Sanct Georgen Bruder ' Brothers of St. George) who are juxtaposed against the Unser Frauen Bruder (Our Lady's Brothers) in Hans Talhoffer's 1443 manuscript.⁹ (Both guilds are forerunners or even early competitors of the Marxbruder and Federfechter.)

Again, the very first plate of the book has the word grueblen or "Grublein" showing... pointing at a rather playful display of skill rather than blood-'n'-guts self defense. Furthermore, both wrestlers are barefoot... an indication that they at least agreed on taking their shoes off, if not on adhering to a set of rules to play by.

One plate (2b) advises: "When he has lifted you up completely and you cannot get a hold of him, use the piece you see here. Then he must let you go or you break his arm, " Interesting that there is no imperative here: "Brich ihm den Arm!" (break his arm) would have been short and concise self-defense solution.

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Rules...

But this is not combat. It's a sport... which even in 1500 requires cautionary notes on the potential consequences of a particularly dangerous action.

The Importance of Being Earnest

Of course, there are many manuals that clearly depict antagonistic combat scenarios. Talhoffer's half-dozen compendia are among them.¹⁰ But even here we see individually recognizable fighters "killed" or maimed in one scenario apparently getting up to dust off their pants, and then demonstrate another technique uninjured a few plates later.

Even Talhoffer's combatants with the two-handed sword seem to handling their great swords oblivious to potential- grabbing and swinging their weapons by the blade without as much as a glove on! Apparently, these men had very calloused hands... or they were using blunt blades.

This is not to say that many of the techniques taught by the masters could not and did not get used for less than wholesome purposes.

Martin Luther recounts such an event in his lectures on the First book of Moses, where a Jewish wrestling master at the court of Emperor Frederick III was killed by a Thuringian "giant" in a wrestling match -- a story that passes through various incarnations for the next three centuries.

And Talhoffer's training of Count von Ksnigsegg for a wager at battle resulted in the killing of his client's opponent. This single event seems to have been so isolated that it is immortalized in several of the Talhoffer manuscripts.

It also would be wrong to assume that constant exercise in wrestling, fencing, and other knightly pursuits did not have the beneficial side effects of making the practitioner fast, flexible, competent and "courageous" in life-and-death situations as well as in serious athletic competition.

Especially since the "scoring" mechanism for public competitions was quite sanguine: Victory in public and private competition was achieved by inflicting on your opponent an "palpable" hit that caused a bleeding head wound. This *Rote Plume* ("red flower") was to survive as the German students' "Anschiss" and the European duelists' First Blood far into the modern period and is the direct equivalent of the English Old Gamesters' "broken head" at singlestick.

Red Flowers

In the 15th-18th centuries, the Red Flower was blossoming all over the country, mostly terminating bouts in the Fechtschulen. the public competitions for accreditation and prize money organized by the fighting guilds. (In practice, however, it was "verboten" to draw blood from someone who "had just started to fence".¹²)

According to the sources blood must have flown freely on these occasions: To withstand nine or even twelve bouts without injury was a feat celebrated in Fechtschulrhymes by both Marxbruder and Federfechter¹³. (Passing three bouts against a Master was a prerequisite for accreditation with a fighting guild.)

But deadly accidents happened: A Rhyme made by Wolfgang Ferber in 1615 memorialized a "Lackey" -- a gentleman's servant, who received a thrust into the eye while playing at single rapier during a Fechtschule at Dresden on September 27, 1614, and died a short time later of his injuries.

In 1615, another fencer, Hanns Zapf, was killed by a Jacob Petermann at the Heilbronnerhof in Nurnberg while playing at rapier and dagger.

While death was an integral part of Renaissance life, fatalities were not necessarily tolerated. After all, the Fechtschulen had to be approved by the magistrate of the respective community. Severe penalties and fines awaited those who caused death carelessly... and even those who just allowed themselves to be drawn into brawls. (Talhoffer himself did hard time at Zurich jail for getting involved in a fight...)

That's why the rules of engagement were announced in ritual phrases by the Hauptmann of the hosting guild:

"Everyone must know what shall be prohibited at the this Fechtschule, such as Ort¹⁴, Knopff (pommel). Spitz (point), Einlauff (entering), the breaking of arms, GemSchstoss (push into the family jewels), Augengrieff (grip into the eyes), throwing of rocks and all dishonest tricks, as many a man knows how to apply, which I cannot enumerate all, and have not learned myself, and nobody hit above or below my staff! (...) Where two contestants meet in envy and hatred they shall not fight it out in this school but wherever it might be legal."¹⁵

Here's a German veteran "martial artist", on whose organization many modern martialist McMeisters have modeled their own associations, telling other masters that half of the stuff depicted in the manuals is prohibited in public competition. In fact, the application of those dishonest (thus "taboo") techniques would result in disgraceful exclusion of the perpetrator, the erasing of his name from the membership scrolls, and the loss of his lucrative teaching privileges.

It is these rules that dominate the majority of "martial arts" practice as early as the late 16th century, and probably much earlier.

Does the fact that most European martial arts were probably practiced in friendly competition rather than in life and death encounters take away from their beauty, athleticism, or integrated functionality? I don't think so.

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Rules...

Were some of the techniques useful in a tavern brawl? Probably. Does that make the systems "brutal, lethally effective combat system" as many modern enthusiasts of the medieval European martial arts like to claim?

Why not, if you insist. But it is the framework of rules understood, observed, and enforced by the combatants that provided both wrestling and fencing systems with the space to develop their wealth of techniques and applications. Overall, even Talhoffer agreed on the proper placement of his skills within the pantheon of the knightly arts:

"Set your life toward righteousness and be mindful of your knightly exercises, rock throwing and rock pushing, dance and jump, fencing and wrestling, thrust and tourney, and the courting of beautiful ladies."¹⁶ %

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Footnotes:

¹ Quoted in Schmied-Kowarzik, Josef and Kufahl, Hans. *Fechbuchlein*, Leipzig: Philipp Reclam, n. d. [1894]; p. 10.

² "Was das Ringen vor ein nutzliches Exercitium, und wie es unsere Vorfahren nicht allein im Schertz / sondern auch in Ernst gebraucht haben / Solches ist auss denen Historien bekannt." in Pashcen [Pascha], Johann Georg Vollstndiges Ring-Buch, Darinnen angewiesen wird Wie man Adversarium recht angreifen / sich loss machen / die Schlage pariren, unterschiedliche Lectiones und die contra-Lectiones darauff machen soil, Hall in Sachsen: Melchior Oelschlegel, 1659. p. A ii. The "Histories" referred to probably include the Graeco-Roman classics like the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*.

³ von Grimmshausen, Hans Jakob Christoffel. *Der Abenteuerliche Simplicissimus Teutsch*. (1668) Munchen: dtv, 1975; p. 348 f. (I have included the narrative of the fight in my book, *The Secret History of the Sword*.)

⁴ Auerswald, Fabian von. *Ringer kunst: funff und achtzig stücke zu Ehren Kurfürstlichen gnaden zu Sachsen*, (Wittemberg: Hand Lufft, 1539) Leipzig: Edition Leipzig, 1987.

⁵ Auerswald; "Vorrede", A ii.

⁶ Auerswald; D; (p. 43)

⁷ Auerswald; p. 20 "Das gehrt fur groe Leute / und ist nicht Geselliglich."

⁸ Bleibrunner, Hans. *Das Landshuter Ringerbuch von Hans Vurm: ein farbiges. Blockbuch aus dem Jahre 1500*, Munchen: Sudduetscher Verlage, 1969.

⁹ Hergsell, Gustav (ed.) *Talhoffers Fechtbuch (Ambraser Codex) aus dem Jahre 1459, gerichtliche und andere ZweikSmpfe farstellend*, Prague: self-published, 1889: p. 7.

¹⁰ The scenarios depicted by Talhoffer, however, belong to such different combative categories that they deserve an entire article all to themselves. I'm working on it!

¹¹ Welle, Rainer. ". . . und wisse das alle hsbischeit kompt von dem ringen": Der ringkampf als adelige Kunst im 15. und 16. jahrhundert, Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus, 1993; p. 260.

¹² Schmied-Kowarzik and Kufahl; p. 139.

¹³ Schmied-Kowarzik and Kufahl; p. 86

¹⁴ Schmied-Kowarzik defines this as the "end of the sword".

¹⁵ Schmied-Kowarzik and Kufahl; p. 145.

¹⁶ Hergsell; p. 40.