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Sword and Buckler

A Guide to Fencing with a One-Handed Sword and Buckler

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Introduction

There was a general doctrine for fencing during the late Middle Ages (see Leiske 2018) and one can safely assume the existence of a general idea how a sword had to be handled. The author of the manuscript 1.33 was pointing out how someone uninitiated into the art of fencing would carry out the basic poses for the sword. Furthermore, there is repeated mention on how a common ('gemeiner') fencer would carry out the strikes.(see 1.33)

The fencing manuscript carrying the inventory number manuscript 1.33, Royal Library Museum, British Museum No. 14 E iii, No. 20, D. vi. depicts a certain way of fencing with sword and buckler. The manuscript describes the 'Huten' followed by individual fencing actions, called 'Spiele'. The author does not mention footwork, 'Mensur' or timing. Basic strikes, and how to offset them, are not mentioned as well.

The manuscript '1.33' is probably targeted at experienced fencers to stress the peculiarities of fencing with sword and buckler through this particular manuscript.

The manuscript is a unique example for the art of fencing with sword and buckler. Currently dated at around 1300, it is the only known manuscript from that time period covering fencing with sword and buckler. How widespread knowledge of fencing was is still uncertain, as is whether or not there were different fencing styles. However, it is certainly admissible to assume other fencing styles or variations existing besides the one depicted.

The manuscript covers through examples certain techniques which are depicted in fencing actions. The author uses the term 'Spiel', which suggests the depiction of fencing principles through practice situations. Taking a look at modern German multiple terms containing 'Spiel' can be found e.g. 'Spielraum' (room for manoeuvre), 'ausspielen' (finishing something), 'abspielen' (something taking place) or 'Kirchspiel' (parish). Neither of these terms carries the usual connotation of fun and pleasure which 'Spiel' usually has. The exact meaning of 'Spiel' in the manuscript remains unclear.

The techniques depicted during the actions are: 'Anbinden', 'Absetz', 'Winden', 'Zucken', 'Umschlagen', 'Durchwechseln', 'Duplieren', 'Nucken', 'Überbinden' and 'Einlaufen'.

These techniques were used in similar fashion later on with all fencing weapons (longsword, long knife and rapier). The use of the buckler is unique to this manuscript. Using a buckler allows both hands to act independently from one another. This gives an opportunity for particular binding attacks, counters and feints.

Although 'I.33' does not mention 'Vor-Nach-Indes', the techniques shown are performed during these time frames, which can also be found in the later tradition of Liechtenauer.

An opponent's free-flowing blade presents an unpredictable threat. The 'Mensur' is very short at the time of a potential hit, because of the short blade. The sword has to be moved very quickly during a strike or thrust. The buckler does not lend itself as a defensive shield due to its size. Therefore it is easily bypassed by the opponent's blade. This makes

evident that simple actions consisting of parry and riposte are often pointless or downright impossible.

At this point manuscript '1.33' comes into play, showing through fencing actions as examples the system behind different binding techniques. By employing these techniques the opponent's sword is bound by the fencer's buckler to reduce the sword's threat. This opens up a time frame to execute one's own fencing actions safely (see [chapters 5 and 7](#)).

This treatise contains an introduction into the general doctrine of fencing to increase the layperson's understanding of fencing with sword and buckler. There are numerous treatises available which interpret manuscript '1.33'. An interpretation of the manuscript by me would provide no additional information and is therefore omitted. References to the manuscript are to be seen as reference points. Additionally they serve as sources for my statements on principles and basics.

Looking at the historic fencing scene in the beginning of the 21st century you can encounter bizarre executions of handling sword and buckler. Many aspiring historic fencers lack the basics and basic knowledge. Even some experienced fencers acquired some mistakes as the consequence of autodidactic practice without knowing the basics. Many teachers also lack knowledge of the basics to answer their students' questions.

This small book is meant to make a contribution to improving the historic fencing with sword and buckler. It is by no means solely directed at beginners, some seasoned fencers might still pick up some hints on how to complement their basics.

Even though I've written this book myself, credit does not belong solely to me. I learned fencing from different teachers with different weapons namely 'Fechtmeister' (ADFD) Bette Raveling from Emden (sabre), 'Fechtmeister' (ADFD) Christian Bott from Edingen (longsword) and 'Fechtmeister' (VdF) Kurt Betz from Marburg (academic fencing). My sincerest thanks to these three people. Transferring the knowledge gained from my teachers to fencing with sword and buckler is my own work.

Furthermore, I want to thank Nicolai Heise from the advertising agency 'Küstenwerbung' for creating these wonderful depictions and, of course, my dear Annika who was available on so many occasions as my training partner and photo model.

Remember:

1. Respect your opponent, your opponent is your partner as well.
2. Arm before leg; Any attack starts with the arm and ends simultaneous with the leg.
3. Strike with your whole body; Use small movements and utilise your body's entire energy.
4. Do not be greedy, control your opponents blade.
5. Be swift on your feet and nimble when moving, make small steps and keep your centre of gravity in your body's centre. Do not fall after you strike.
6. Disrupt your opponent to stifle attacks before they start.
7. Be present and control the field.
8. Control the centre, but do not fence from the centre.
9. Bind the opponent's blade, but avoid the opponent binding yours.
10. Keep the 'Mensur'.
11. Do not get tempted.
12. Have a clear intention, do not try to improvise.

13. Be happy for your opponent if your opponent is making hits.

I Source analysis and external interpretation

The fencing manual 'I.33' is a unique document of the late 13th century¹ and depicts two fencers in a teaching situation. The following treatise is about the interpretation of 64 pages of depictions. The pages were available as coloured computer scans, accessed via the internet. Available at this address: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Royal_Armouries_Ms._I.33.

Therefore no statements can be made about the original and its condition.

Today the original is located in the Royal Armouries in Leeds. In 1579 Heinrich Gunterrodt from Wittenberg copied the original manuscript. This copy is nowadays in the Saxon State and University Library Dresden in Dresden.

The manuscript 'MS 1.33' was written in Latin and intended for practical use.² The text describes the depicted fencing actions. To aid the student in remembering the fencing techniques some verses in Leonine verse were added, this technique was also used by later fencing masters. The Latin text contains German specialised terminology (e.g. 'Langort').

The High Gothic writing was written in brown ink on mapped out lines. The initials, Lombardic capitals, are classed. In general their height is double or triple the usual row height. A cross symbol marks the beginning of a new section. (see Bodemer 2008)

The plates depict fencers with a one-handed sword with a straight cross-guard and a round, domed buckler, which has a 'spike' in its centre.

Based on the literature known to us, it is safe to say that the art of fencing was somewhat known during the late 13th century. Fencing instructors/ 'Fechtmeister' (fencing masters) passed their knowledge on to their students. The guild system had not been established and fencing societies (Marxbrüder, Federfechter) had not been founded. Whether there was a coherent fencing tradition, as was the case with the later tradition after Liechtenauer, can not be conclusively answered.

Weapons of this age were sophisticated. The swords depicted in manuscript 'I.33' might be of type XII of the Oakeshott typology, the most commonly used sword of the late 13th century, even though type XII swords were usually fitted with a curved cross-guard. If the swords are of type XII their blade would be between approximately 80 to 85 cm long, broad in the forte and getting narrower towards the point and with a fuller for about 2/3 of its length. The point is slightly rounded. The pommel being an iron disc pommel. However, the swords depicted might also be of type XIV. In this case the blade would be about 70 cm long, broader in the forte and getting more narrow towards the point.

Round shields with a protruding boss can be seen on the plates (see plate 1v).



(fig. 1 : Tower manuscript)

The shield grip is across the entire diameter of the shield reaching from edge to edge while being narrower in the middle (see plate 4r). The grip is on the inside of the buckler, thus the hand holding the shield is enclosed by the buckler. The buckler's centre of gravity is in the front. The buckler can be easily rotated around the hand of its carrier while also being stable in the hand.

It is not clear if the plates display techniques for war or practice. The techniques displayed are definite and often directed at causing harm to the opponent. However, the plates show no penetration of the skin or any actual injury.

¹ Some experts estimate the manuscript was created between 1320 and 1350.

² During their source analysis the members of the 'Fechtfabrik' came to the same conclusion because of the doodles on some pages (maybe scribbled by a

child) <http://www.marxbrueder.com/i-33-ein-fraenkischesfechtbuch-fuer-schwert-und-buckler/>

1. Depictions of persons in general

The fencing manual was probably a commissioned work.³ A cleric commissioned monks in a monastery to write and paint it. Whether or not the scribes had any knowledge of fencing is unclear. The following colours were used: red, blue, brown, black. The figures were painted in colour. Only on plates 1r to 2v both fencers were painted in green. Afterwards one fencer was always painted in a brown hood, a blue habit and brown trousers. While the other fencer was always painted in a blue hood, a brown habit and blue trousers.



(fig. 2: Tower manuscript)

The colours of the persons change from plate to plate, it is therefore clear that this was an intentional decision. It appears as if the offensive fencer was painted in a blue habit while the defensive fencer was painted in a brown habit.

Which fencer is on the offensive is changing, accordingly changing is which fencer is depicted in blue or brown. This makes it easier for the viewer to match the techniques with a fencer and to understand the techniques. This is especially important if the perspective is changing to