

Master Johannes Liechtenauer's Knightly Art of the Longsword

Christian Henry Tobler – June 2008

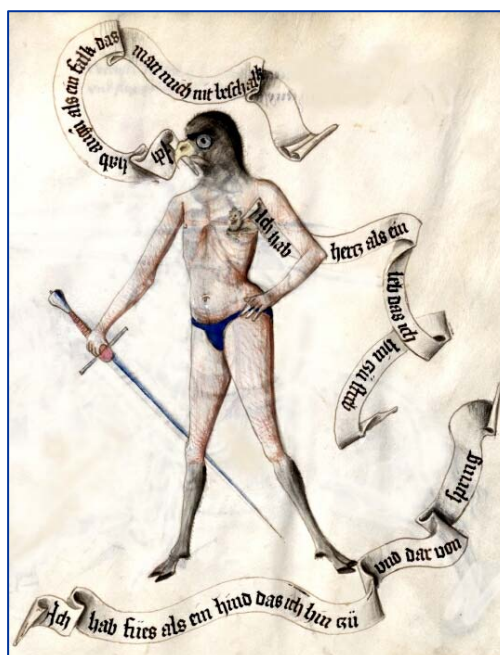
“Here begins the Art that Liechtenauer and his society created and used for all knightly weapons” – Master Paulus Kal’s prologue



The medieval German fighting tradition originating with Master Johannes Liechtenauer stressed above all the importance of understanding and controlling the initiative in an encounter, and his art comprises techniques for seizing control of the fight and regaining it should it be lost. While Liechtenauer himself exposed the principles of the art through his exemplar weapon, the longsword, the concepts apply to all weapons and in all situations. This six-class track will explore some of these principles as they apply to the longsword, the poleaxe, dagger, buckler, and unarmed combat.

Liechtenauer lived in the 14th Century, traveled parts of Europe, and synthesized his own system of fighting, but little is known of him. He recorded his teachings in cryptic, mnemonic verses (*Merkverse*), ensuring his tradition’s secrecy. These teachings address three types of fighting, primarily with the longsword: *Bloßfechten* (fighting without armour), *Harnischfechten* (fighting on foot in armour), and *Rosßfechten* (mounted combat).

Later masters ‘decode’ his verses for their patrons in manuscripts containing the *Merkverse* and glosses. We will draw from the works of Masters Sigmund Ringeck, Peter von Danzig, Hans Talhoffer, Peter Falkner, and Andres Lignitzer. Another, Paulus Kal, a master in the service of Duke Ludwig the Rich of Bavaria in the 2nd half of the 15th century, created the allegorical figure at right depicting three virtues of fighting. The scrolls read, from top to bottom, “I have eyes like a falcon so I will not be fooled”, “I have a heart like a lion so I strive forth”, and “I have feet like a hind so I spring towards and away.” These encapsulate the virtues of judgment, courage, and nimbleness – all necessary qualities for a good swordsman.



Class I - The Longsword, Part 1

Footwork, Distance, and Timing

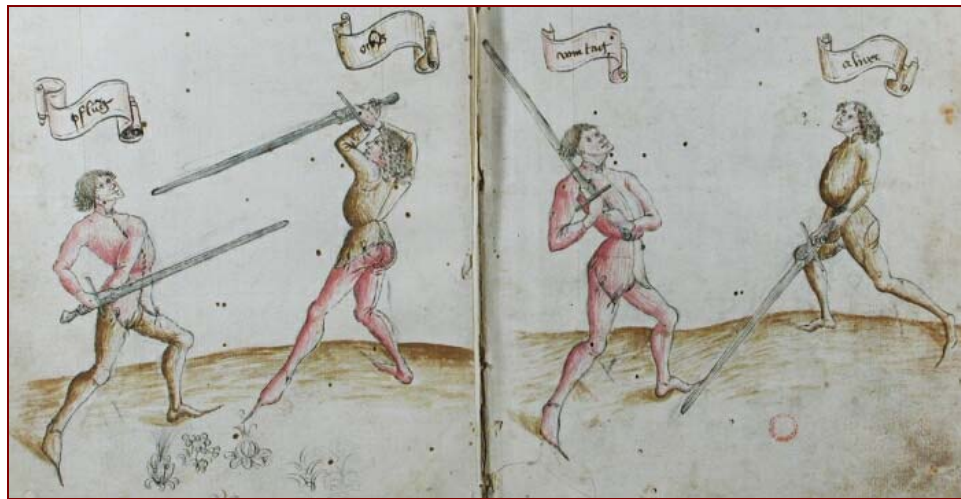
- You must maintain a balanced stance with your feet angled approximately 45 degrees to each other. The stance may favor more weight on either the leading or trailing foot.
- Passing steps allow you to close quickly with an opponent. The Sloping Pass is most important because it takes you offline and away from harm and allows you to angle your weapon in defense against him.
- The Gathering Step is used to advance or withdraw without changing which foot leads.
- The Compass Step is used to re-angle the body without changing the foot that leads.
- There are two distances: the *Zufechten*, or approach, where you must take a step to hit your opponent, and the *Krieg*, or close combat, where you can hit your opponent without stepping.
- A fencing time is one beat - the interval wherein a discrete action is accomplished. Some techniques require only a single time, while others require two. Some actions use a *Single Imperfect Time*, where one beat is used, but the action changes direction during it.

Initiative

The Before is the offensive principle; the After is the defensive or responsive principle. Liechtenauer says: "*Before and After, these two things, are to all skill a well-spring.*" Seek the Before by attacking, but be prepared to continue your onslaught if he parries. This can be done by striking or thrusting as he chambers an attack of his own. If you must respond in the After, you should do so such that you immediately (*Indes*) can come back on the offensive again. Defend in a way that creates threat, rather than using a purely defensive action, i.e., a 'bad' parry. Good parries apply either a thrust in opposition (an *Absetzen*) or striking into an attack.

Vier Leger - Four Guards

- There are 4 primary guards: *Ochs* (Ox), *Pflug* (Plow), *Alber* (Fool), and *vom Tag* (from the Roof).
- *Ochs* and *Pflug* are thrusting guards, from above and below, respectively. They are also binding guards and may be held on either side of the body.
- *Alber* is a low guard that 'invites' attack.
- *Vom Tag* is held at the right shoulder or above the head and is the primary guard from which to strike blows.



The Vier Leger, or Four Guards

Secondary Guards

- *Langenort* (Long Point) is a guard wherein power is focused in striking from above. It is also a guard of provocation.
- *Schranckhut* (Barrier Guard) is a low guard with some cutting potential, which also invites attack.
- *Nebenhut* (Near Guard) is another low guard held with the sword near the body and the point facing back – a ‘tail guard’.
- *Kron* (Crown) is a transitional position used to defend against high attacks. It is held with the hilt before the face, the point facing upward.

Zornhau – The Stroke of Wrath



- “Whoever strikes at you from above, the Stroke of Wrath threatens him with the point.”
- The *Zornhau* is an instinctive diagonal downward strike from the right shoulder – it intercepts strikes from above (*Oberhau*).
- If you bind, and he is soft at the sword, then thrust along his blade to his face
- If he is hard in the bind, and pushes your sword aside, either slide out of the bind by ‘Changing Through’ (*Durchwechseln*) if he binds toward your point, or ‘Pull’ (*Zucken*) out of the bind if he

is further down on your blade. You can change through with the pommel and strike him with it in the face. If your opponent binds your sword down, you can pull out by ‘snapping’ your blade from the bind.

- If he is hard in the bind, but his point stands before you, then *wind* into the left *Ochs* against his blade so that the strong of your blade comes against the weak of his; from there, thrust to his face or chest.

Class II - The Longsword, Part 2

Krumphau - The Crooked Stroke



- “Strike crooked with nimbleness, throw the point to the hands.”
- Use the *Krumphau* against an *Oberhau* (strike from above) or an *Unterhau* (strike from below), or to break the guard *Ochs*.
- Strike as if striking a *Zornhau*, but cut across your body to hit his hands so that your hands are crossed.

Zwerchhau - The Thwart Stroke

- “The Thwart Stroke takes whatever comes from the roof.”
- Use the *Zwerchhau* to counter a strike from above or to break the guard vom Tag by moving your blade horizontally so that you strike your man with your short edge and intercept his strike on the strong of your blade or hilt.
- If he binds strongly, hook his blade aside with your hilt and step left to strike with the *Zwerchhau* with the long edge to his other side. You can use the *Zwerchhau* to attack the Four Openings successively.

Schielhau - The Squinting Stroke

- “The Squinter breaks, what a Buffalo strikes or thrusts.”
- Use the *Schielhau* against fencers who pull back far to deliver brute force blows or to break the guard *Pflug*.
- Strike as if you mean to perform an ordinary *Oberhau*, but turn the blow over so that you simultaneously hit his incoming strike with the strong of the blade and hit his right shoulder with the short edge. If your man ‘changes through’ by sliding his blade past your *Schielhau*, thrust long against him.



Scheitelhau - The Scalp Stroke

- “The Scalp Stroke is a danger to the face, with its turn, very dangerous to the breast.”
- Use the *Scheitelhau* to counter low strikes and to break the guard *Alber* by overreaching (*Überlaufen*). Counter the *Scheitelhau* with a parry called the Crown (*Kron*). From the Crown, one can close to wrestle. You can break the Crown by winding over the parry, or by cutting his arms.