

Body Techniques of Combat: The Depiction of a Personal Fighting System in the Fight Books of Hans Talhofer (1443-1467 CE)

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If we turn to “bodies in battle” in the Middle Ages, the question how fighters of the past actually used their bodies in combat is a quite obvious one. Unfortunately, it is difficult to answer. Only very few medieval sources document movements in a way that would allow a detailed reconstruction. Additionally, the interpretation of these sources greatly involves the interpreter’s own perception of her body and movement, a knowledge that is usually subconscious and difficult to communicate to a (reading) scientific community. From the point of view of cultural history, this hermeneutic framework and the resulting communicational gap is crucial to any scientific approach towards medieval “techniques of the body”.¹

The most promising historical documents concerning body techniques of combat are the late medieval and early modern fight books.² In this contribution, I shall focus on a series of five 15th century manuscripts ascribed to the fencing master Hans Talhofer. These treatises will serve as a case study to discuss the communication strategies of medieval fight books and the connection between the

1 MAUSS, 1979; MALLINCKRODT, 2008; SPATZ, 2015.

2 LENG, 2008; BOFFA, 2014.

integrated didactic images and the embodied knowledge of their makers.³

Apart from the hermeneutic set up, there is yet another factor that renders a study on body techniques of combat rather difficult. Interpersonal physical violence is a human practice that is documented throughout the history of mankind. Yet, the violent action itself is volatile and only its material traces can be subject to a historical inquiry. At the same time, violence is one of the most powerful symbols in human culture. Both the act of converting imagined or experienced violence in textual, pictorial or other representations *and* the act of interpreting these representations therefore highly depend on the respective contemporary discourses.

While the discursive structures of the Middle Ages are the primary concern of modern historians, their own society's discourses and their subjective attitudes towards violence in combat are not as commonly reflected upon.⁴ Modern narratives on how violence is and was conducted are nevertheless omnipresent in today's media and exert a distinct influence on historians. They can be found in the news, in books, movies, plays, TV documentaries, video games and so forth. The way in which violence is depicted and narrated here is an object of study on its own. Not having conducted detailed research on this matter yet, I shall only try to highlight one aspect that seems rather obvious, yet nevertheless important for our historical perspective. It concerns the distinction between real and fictional violence on the one hand and the emotional impact of just and unjust violence on the other.

Highly simplified, most of today's narratives tend to distinguish between the just act of violence conducted by the active protagonist and cruel acts of unjust violence against innocent victims.⁵ The first scheme dominates most of today's fictional narratives and is perhaps best impersonated by the hero of an action movie. The second is omnipresent in the news and other reports on real violence such as war atrocities or murder. Their main difference is the audience's degree of identification with the violent protagonists and with the harmed victims.

3 The contribution is largely based on a German paper on Hans Talhofer. For more detailed information on each of the manuscripts see BURKART, 2014.

4 GROEBNER, 2007.

5 Wolfgang Sofsky distinguishes between the active (and violent) "Körper" and the passive "Leib" that is harmed. See SOFSKY, 2005, p. 31.

To keep the desired ethnographic perspective, historians have to be highly aware of these modern, yet timeless narrative schemes. To tell (hi)stories you will mostly need protagonists. However, if these protagonists are medieval knights or fencing masters, some modern authors seem to adopt a rather admiring perspective. The narrative scheme of fictional, heroic violence in combination with romanticist images of knights in shining armour or Shakespearean villains thus affects the way in which modern models of the past are constructed. As the present contribution is also dealing with fencing masters and their knightly clients, it has to be made clear that these are not the heroes of our story. They simply were premodern violence professionals which have left interesting treatises documenting their physical skills as well as their style of self-fashioning. In contrast, the real protagonists of this paper are the fight books themselves. They emerged in a social context where academics or other people highly skilled in the use of media cooperated with these violence professionals. The central question of this contribution therefore is: how did these people try to represent a complex fighting system using texts and depictions?

To answer this question I shall first introduce the five surviving manuscripts. Subsequently, the terms “fight book” and “fighting system” will be discussed to address the process of transition from a subjective embodied knowledge to the written and depicted documentation of a didactic system. I hereby rely on the works of Michael Polanyi⁶ and a series of three articles written by Jan-Dirk Müller, who first treated the medial transition from practical fighting to speech and from speech to writing in a series of articles in the 1990s.⁷ I shall combine these observations with Polanyi’s concept of “tacit knowing” and finally suggest possible situations of reception, for which the fight books of Hans Talhofer once were created.

6 POLANYI, 1958; POLANYI, 1966.

7 MÜLLER, 1992a; MÜLLER, 1992b; MÜLLER, 1994.

The Fight Books of Hans Talhofer

Between 1443 and 1467 CE, five extensive illuminated manuscripts were composed which depict a broad spectrum of armed and unarmed fighting techniques in large-sized drawings.⁸ The treatises explicitly link these techniques to the fencing master Hans Talhofer. Four of them contain pictorial representations of Talhofer, who is displayed as author of the described fighting system (see fig. 1).

Yet the biography of the historic Hans Talhofer (also: Talhoffer, Dalhofer) remains a desideratum and further research is urgently needed. He is traceable in the sources between 1433 and 1482 and seems to have been a member of the German fencing fraternity “brotherhood of our dear lady and pure Virgin Mary and the Holy and warlike heavenly prince Saint Mark”, also referred to as the “Marx brothers”. This guild-like organisation was the first of its kind to receive an imperial privilege by Frederick III in 1487, granting it the exclusive right of promoting a fighter to the rank of “master of the long sword”. For this purpose, the fraternity members met once a year in Frankfurt to elect their captain and to examine the candidates in various styles of fighting.⁹

As many facts about Talhofer’s biography are still unknown, previous researchers tried to deduce several features of his personality from the manuscripts. Especially Hans-Peter Hils, one of the few early

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- 8 The five surviving 15th century manuscripts that were probably created during Talhofer’s lifetime will below be denoted by abbreviations referring to the city of the holding institution: TG – Gotha, Universitäts- und Forschungsbibliothek Erfurt/Gotha, Chart. A 558; TK – Königssegwald, Gräfliches Schloss, Hs. XIX, 17-3; TB – Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett der Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 78 A 15; TKø – København, Kongelige Bibliotek, Thott 290 2°; TM – München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. icon. 394a. Cf. LENG, 2008, pp. 35–62. TG and TK have been published as facsimile-editions: HERGSELL, 1889; KÖNIGSEGG-AULENDORF/SCHULZE 2010. The scans of TKø and TM are available online: TKø (http://www.kb.dk/erez4/fsi4/fsi.swf?pages_server=http://www.kb.dk/erez4&pages_dir=online_master_arkiv_5/non-archival/Manus/VMANUS/2009/maj/thott-2_290_05.03.2016); TM (http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00020451-7_05.03.2016).
- 9 On Hans Talhofer and his manuscripts see HILS, 1983; HILS, 1985c, pp. 161-183; HILS, 1985a; HILS, 1986; HILS, 1995; KEIL, 1995; STANGIER, 2009; JAQUET, 2013, vol. I, pp. 196-207.

researchers on fight books who published a doctoral thesis on the subject in 1985, identified several figures in the treatises (in addition to those explicitly denominated) as self-representations of the fencing master. In manuscript TK, he also saw a retrospective documentation of an actual judicial combat¹⁰ fought between the addressee of the treatise and his anonymous enemy. I have argued for a more sceptical reading of these manuscripts.¹¹ The figures in question are not marked as representations of the author and fencing master, contrary to those figures in the same treatises that are explicitly denominated by a caption or identified by Talhofer's coat of arms. The fight books are furthermore not naturalistic depictions of real fights, but highly normative documents that present an ideal way of fighting according to a didactic system.

To understand the content of Talhofer's treatises, it is important to first introduce fight books as a genre of specialised technical literature that originated around the beginning of the 14th century. According to Daniel Jaquet's definition, I designate any written account on theory and practice of armed and unarmed combat with or without depictions as a fight book.¹² However, the contemporary late medieval term "fechtbuch" should not hide the fact that the early 14th and 15th century fight books in particular form a very heterogeneous corpus of sources with distinct addressees and communication strategies. The larger part has to be attributed to a pragmatic context of use, yet there are some surviving copies that were designed for princely courts and their demand for prestigious objects. Mere text manuscripts without any depictions exist, but they are an exception. The usually included drawings are often of inferior quality, which supports the assumption of a pragmatic context of use for a large part of these manuscripts.¹³

Thus, the situations of reception of the fight books have to be conceptualised in a very broad and open manner, leaving it to a detailed dissection of the concrete evidence to determine its intended purpose(s).

10 NEUMANN, 2010; NEUMANN, 2012. See also the contribution of Daniel Jaquet in this volume.

11 I tried to correct some persisting errors regarding the number of pictorial self-representations of Talhofer and the deduced conclusions on his personality in my abovementioned article BURKART, 2014.

12 JAQUET, 2013, vol. I, pp. 18–20.

13 LENG, 2008, pp. 1–5.

The spectrum encompasses combinations of a pragmatic recording of concrete body techniques for practitioners¹⁴ to the documentation of princely status by showing affinity to martial culture and the display of splendour through prestigious illuminations.

The five 15th century manuscripts linked to Hans Talhofer fit very well into this spectrum of possible purposes. All manuscripts have in common that they depict a large number of fighting techniques for various situations. The curriculum comprises judicial combat in armour with spear, long sword and dagger, judicial combat with large shields and clubs or swords, judicial combat of a woman against a man, armoured fighting with staff weapons, unarmoured combat with sword and small shield (*Buckler*), techniques with single handed and single edged blades (*langes Messer*, long knife), unarmed combat, fighting with daggers, mounted techniques with various weapons and spontaneous situations of self-defence.

Talhofer's fight books can be grouped in different ways, depending on the applied criteria. Two of them, TG (ca. 1443/1448) and TKø (1459), were probably personal manuscripts owned by Talhofer himself to serve as compendia and as archetypes for the other manuscripts.¹⁵ They are the only treatises to contain versified teachings of Talhofer's influential predecessor, the martial arts teacher Johannes Liechtenauer, whose fighting system is traceable in fight books from the late 14th to the 17th century.¹⁶ TG and TKø also collect other useful information apart from fighting techniques, such as texts on divination or depictions of military and other technical equipment from the Bellifortis tradition.

Two other manuscripts are so congruent in their overall structure and most of the drawings that one might think of some sort of serial production. TK and TB (ca. 1451) also depict various sets of techniques, but they especially focus on the preparation of noblemen for a judicial combat in full armour.¹⁷ The addressees of the manuscripts are furthermore represented as combatants in the drawings and are identified by their coat of arms and their denomination in the captions. These personalised treatises seem to document the martial education of

14 A good example ist the manuscript 3227a from the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg. See BURKART, 2016.

15 BURKART, 2014, pp. 276-279, 286-292.

16 WIERSCHIN, 1965; HILS, 1985b; HILS, 1985c; LENG, 2008, pp. 5-22.

17 BURKART, 2014, pp. 279-286.

a certain Luthold von Königsegg (TK) and the brothers David and Buppelin vom Stain (TB), who are depicted as disciples alongside master Talhofer.

The latest manuscript TM (before 1467) shares common and distinct features with these two groups.¹⁸ The quality of the drawings and the broad spectrum of depicted techniques are similar to Talhofer's personal treatise TKØ. Yet, TM is the only manuscript executed in vellum and contains neither varia nor text paragraphs. Apart from a representation of Talhofer on the last folio, no figures are specified by denomination. However, the coat of arms of the first possessor Eberhard im Bart (1445-1496), count and later duke of Württemberg, was inserted after the completion of the manuscript in 1467. Although TM does not illustrate the process of martial formation of a depicted addressee, it certainly belongs to the group of fight books in the possession of one of Talhofer's disciples. Another indication strengthening this reading is an entry in the accounts of Eberhard im Bart. In the account book for the years 1467-1469, the undated payment of a certain sum to a "Talhofer" is mentioned, who is listed among the simple servants ("lön der einspendig knecht").¹⁹

Another important aspect of fight books is the situational context for which the described fighting techniques were suitable. Interpersonal violence as human practice is always governed (yet not determined) by social norms.²⁰ If we thus look at the depicted techniques and try to deduce the situations for which they seem suitable and which (explicit and implicit) norms of fighting seem to be in force, we obtain further information on the social context of the respective fighting system. Talhofer's system, as it is depicted in the five manuscripts, was not

18 BURKART, 2014, pp. 293-297.

19 Stuttgart, Hauptstaatsarchiv, A 602 Nr 286 = WR 286, fol. 21r. Online: <http://www.landesarchiv-bw.de/plink/?f=1-22511>, (03.04.2016). I would like to thank Jens-Peter Kleinau (Frankfurt a.M.) for pointing me at this entry.

20 From the perspective of social constructivism, norms are closely related to identities. See CANCIAN, 1975, pp. 135–159. A survey on the connection between norms of fighting and the related identities of social groups thus seems promising. For this perspective see several contributions in the proceedings of the international conference "Agon und Distinktion. Soziale Räume des Zweikampfes zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit": ISRAEL/JASER, 2015.

designed for a playful or sport-like context of use. It seems to aim at serious fights and situations of extreme and life threatening violence. The manuscripts especially focus on the situational context of the violent, but explicitly regulated judicial combat (see fig. 2) and also cover spontaneous situations of self defence against better armed assailants.²¹

Terms and Concepts: Fighting Systems and Communication Strategies for Tacit Knowledge

If we now return to the initial question of how fighters of the past used their bodies in battle, we first have to look at the type of information actually documented in the fight books. Hans Peter Hils stated that TK was the retrospective documentation of an actual judicial combat fought between Luthold von Königsegg and his unknown adversary.²² The comparison of TK with the other manuscripts, especially with TB, makes this assumption highly questionable.²³

Fight books neither document real events nor a past fighting practice. On the contrary, I would argue that they contain descriptions of didactic systems designed for the documentation and transmission of fighting skills. These systems are usually authorised by the evocation of a master such as Hans Talhofer or Johannes Liechtenauer, who is presented as their founder.²⁴ In the fight books, the practical knowledge and skill attributed to such authoritative figures works as a mean to certify the described system itself and to prove its effectiveness in combat. This context also explains the striking attempts of self-fashioning in many fight books and the fact that some of them also contain means to cope with the contingent outcome of actual fights (such as the short divinatory manuals inserted in TG and TKø).

21 See especially TKø, fols. 76v, 77r and TM fol. 121v.

22 HILS, 1983, pp. 102, 116.

23 BURKART, 2014, p. 283.

24 BAUER, 2014.

To address the relationship between past fighting practices and the content of the fight books, I would like to propose the following terms: Firstly, we have to distinguish between

- actual *fighting practice* in contingent confrontations between two or more opponents
- *body techniques of combat* as ideal-types of movements in combat that are often denominated to facilitate communication and
- *fighting systems* as didactic selections and combinations of certain sets of favoured body techniques.

These three items can be understood as elements of what I would like to call a *culture of fighting*. Based on a knowledge-oriented definition of culture²⁵, the term culture of fighting also comprises the contemporary symbolic orders that organise the subjective realities of the fighters and thus enable and restrict their action. A fighting system is therefore a very complex phenomenon, both on a technical as well as on a social level.²⁶ On a technical level, it is a selection of techniques that enables its practitioners to prevail in a situation of interpersonal violence. Yet, the concrete structure of a specific system is based on multiple factors: What is the anticipated situation of combat (sportive competition, military confrontation, ritualised duel, spontaneous self-defence, etc.)? What likely threats are identified (unarmed attackers, fights with bladed weapons, with guns/projectile weapons, against multiple opponents)?

25 RECKWITZ, 2012, pp. 84-90.

26 Scientific research on cultures of fighting has recently become more and more popular within academia. In 2011 the interdisciplinary *Commission for Martial Arts & Combat Sports* (Kommission Kampfkunst & Kampfsport) was founded within the *German Association for Sports Science* (Deutsche Vereinigung für Sportwissenschaft – dvs). Two years later, the independent academic journal *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* (APD) published its first volume dedicated to Historical European Martial Arts studies. Then, in 2015, the interdisciplinary journal *Martial Arts Studies* was founded by Paul Bowman and Benjamin Judkins. The scientific approach towards martial arts – in this article I prefer to use the wider term cultures of fighting – has much benefitted from the stimuli of cultural studies (BOWMAN, 2015), religious studies (BERG/PROHL, 2014; BERG, 2015), cultural history/Kulturwissenschaft (WETZLER, 2014; WETZLER, 2015) and anthropology (FARRER/WHALEN-BRIDGE, 2011) to mention just a few publications.

How are the physical and mental prerequisites of the practitioners conceptualised? What equipment is required to use the system? How much time is available for the formation of practitioners? Based on these and other settings in combination with strategic and tactical considerations, a specific system is intentionally designed, evolves naturally or is adapted within a given historical culture of fighting.²⁷ But, being a cultural phenomenon, these selections of techniques and strategies are based on a specific mind-set that symbolically organises the world of the practitioners and establishes distinct patterns of meaning. The main frame of a fighting system is therefore a set of assumptions on the nature of combat itself. It is a model for reality, reduced in complexity and formulated in the terms of a struggle between success and defeat, or – life and death. That is why studies on fighting systems from a historical, transdisciplinary and transcultural perspective promise very interesting insights in the specific cultures in which they emerged.

Fight books as medial attempts to codify fighting systems are yet facing a twofold paradox. First of all, fights are contingent situations. At least two individuals are struggling for physical superiority and the conservation of their particular corporal integrity. As the reactions of an opponent are ultimately unpredictable, a fighting system cannot guarantee what its practitioners are usually longing for – a strategy that secures the personal superiority and integrity in all possible situations. The specific system can therefore only be a codification of ideal-type solutions to ideal-type threats. It serves as a didactic tool to reduce complexity and to facilitate communication. By the use of a system, the contingent situation of combat thus becomes describable and manageable for the practitioners.

The second paradox is related to the communication of subjective skill in contrast to objective knowledge. Following the works of Michael Polanyi, the fighting skills of competent instructors such as Hans Talhofer represent a form of “tacit knowing” that is bound to

27 See the contribution of Daniel Jaquet in this volume. His description of judicial combat illustrates, how a specific fighting system was created just for these occasions and how it was promoted by late medieval fencing masters.

personal experience and cannot be fully verbalised.²⁸ Thus, it should not be possible to satisfactorily describe the art of fighting with written or spoken words as Polanyi states:

“Rules of an art can be useful, but they do not determine the practice of an art; they are maxims, which can serve as a guide to an art only if they can be integrated into practical knowledge of the art. They cannot replace this knowledge. [...] An art which cannot be specified in detail cannot be transmitted by prescription, since no prescription for it exists. It can be passed on only by example from master to apprentice. This restricts the range of diffusion to that of personal contacts.”²⁹

Fighting techniques as techniques of the body³⁰ are socially transmitted and acquired through complex processes of implicit and explicit learning. At a basic level, fighters of the past were socialised into certain ways of using their bodies in combat. For this type of learning, descriptions and depictions were irrelevant. The only thing that mattered was skill and personal contact with other skilled fighters to allow learning by imitation. However, if we look at the fight books, we are confronted with a specialised technical language and elaborated medial attempts to codify technical skills. We are thus looking at the remaining traces of explicit learning. Experienced fighters or professional instructors condensed their skills into certain concepts of how techniques of the body worked and made attempts to describe this knowledge within the fight books.

28 An example given by Polanyi is the skill to ride a bicycle. The capability to keep one's balance when starting represents a body technique that can only partially be explained by description or demonstration. First of all it has to be experienced with one's own body. Only through this experience the technique becomes a form of personal knowledge that is bound to the individual experience of body movement and that cannot be described by just explaining the physical mechanisms at work (as a form of explicit knowledge). POLANYI, 1958, pp. 49f. Nearly all aspects of martial formation face the same difficulties.

29 POLANYI, 1958, pp. 50, 53.

30 In his article first published in 1935, Marcel Mauss defines the term as “the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies” (MAUSS, 1979, p. 70).

The communication structures of these treatises were first analysed by Jan-Dirk Müller in the above mentioned series of articles.³¹ He identifies three key elements used in medieval fight books: shortened and encrypted mnemonic verses, descriptions in prose and drawn depictions. According to Müller, the didactic tradition seems to have had its origin in orally transmitted verses used by fencing masters to structure the formation of their students. These verses were meanwhile or afterwards secured by writing them down as *zedel* (note, derived from Latin *schedula*). They mainly consisted of specialised technical terms and were intentionally shortened and encrypted to ensure that only initiates could understand them.³² The central part, i.e. the actual information about fighting techniques and strategies, therefore had to be present outside of the verses in the person of an already skilled practitioner or teacher. The verses only served as mnemonic anchors that helped to memorise and organise practical knowledge.³³

In the medieval sources, the verses mainly survived in combination with an interpreting glossation.³⁴ In the text, the glosses fulfil the function a competent teacher would have fulfilled in a face-to-face

31 See note 7.

32 A good example is the presumably oldest version of those verses in a late 14th century commonplace book: “Das ist der text in deme her nennet dy fuenff hewe (...). Das ist von deme Czornhaw: Der dir oberhawet / czornhaw ort deme drewet. Wirt her is gewar / nym is oben ab ane vaer.” (This is the text in which he [Liechtenauer] mentions the five strikes [...]. This is about the wrath-strike: An opponent who attacks you with a strike from above / he will be threatened by the point of your wrath-strike. Does he realize it / take it up above without any danger.) Nürnberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Hs. 3227a, fol. 23r.

33 Talhofer’s personal fight books for example contain copies of the verses of Johannes Liechtenauer (TG, fol. 18r-20v; TKø, fol. 2r-7v). But TKø and the manuscript for Luthold von Königsegg also present Talhofer’s own short verses mimicking the style of the Liechtenauerian system (TKø, fol. 1rv; TK, fol. 1v).

34 See again the commonplace book from Nuremberg: “Glosa: Hie merke und wisse das lichtenawer eyn oberhaw slecht von der achsel heisset den czornhaw. Wen eym itzlichem in syme grymme und czorne zo ist im keyn haw als bereit als der selbe.” (Glosa: Here you should note and know that Lichtenauer calls a simple strike from above coming directly from the shoulder a wrath-strike. As anyone in his grim and wrath uses this strike instinctively.) Nürnberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Hs. 3227a, fol. 23v.

situation. Like the fencing master, the glosses interpret the encrypted verses and translate them into a concrete description of body movements in prose. While the verses only work as a reference to knowledge of movements, knowledge they do not contain themselves, the glosses do include more detailed information about the referenced techniques. Just as a written fixation of the didactic verses in form of a *zedel* could have preserved the text and relieved the memory of teachers and students alike, the written glossation also relieves the memory of a practitioner by linking the mnemonic anchors in the verses with textual descriptions of movements and techniques.

Another possibility to represent fighting techniques is the use of didactic images. Like the glossation, the images contain a lot more information on the referenced techniques than the verses. Some fight books, such as one copy of the system of long knife fighting attributed to Hans Lecküchner³⁵, combine images, verses and descriptions in prose. In the case of Talhofer's manuscripts, the images are only accompanied by short captions. They usually denominate the depicted action but seldom add further information on the execution of the technique. Only very few images are serial and depict stages of one motion or a sequence of motions. The main part of the drawings shows a crucial moment in the execution of an action. The single picture therefore works as a symbol for a complex fighting technique (see fig. 3).

I therefore argue that, in comparison with the mere textual tradition of Johannes Liechtenauer, the images in Talhofer's treatises combine the mnemonic function of the verses with the explanatory function of the glosses. The copies of Liechtenauer's verses in the personal manuscripts TG and TKø show that the system of Talhofer was closely connected to or even originated in the teachings of Johannes Liechtenauer. However, a glossation of the mnemonic verses is missing entirely in all of Talhofer's manuscripts. Instead, the image takes up the task to transmit the actual information on the movements.³⁶

Especially the high-quality drawings of the latest manuscript TM activate their reader's motor imagery (see fig. 4). However, compared to the Liechtenauerian glosses, the almost uncommented images are not

35 LENG, 2008, pp. 73-77.

36 MÜLLER, 1992a, p. 271.

capable of transmitting tactical information and of linking complex motion sequences.³⁷ With the quite exact depiction of bodily postures, the image has more to offer than the text. Yet, like the intentionally encrypted mnemonic verses of Liechtenauer, the images of Talhofer require the possession of prior specialised knowledge (i.e. the interpreter is already a skilled fighter who knows Talhofer's system) to be understood as representations of complex fighting techniques. Another option would be the presence of an expert who is able to provide the necessary explanations and demonstrate and correct the movements. Like the verses of Liechtenauer, the images of Talhofer should therefore be primarily understood as mnemonic references for a (tacit) knowledge of motor skills that the contemporary interpreters already possessed.

The key to understand Talhofer's fight books is therefore the conceptualisation of the situation of reception for which they once were created. My point is that they were not designated for a communication *through* the book between absentees, but that they should serve as a medium for a communication *about* the book between attendees. The pictorial representations of the addressees in TK and TB as well as the entry in the accounts of Eberhard im Bart suggest that these young nobles were personally trained by Hans Talhofer. If this is correct, the transmission of skills would have taken place in a face-to-face situation of practical instruction. Consequently, the surviving fight books merely played an auxiliary role. They served – just as Liechtenauer's encrypted verses for the initiates of his system – as mnemonic anchors to recapitulate the already learned lessons. Instead of resorting to verses for the organisation of practical knowledge, Talhofer uses the more evident image. The acquired fighting skills of his students thus become "(re)presentable". The illuminated fight books document that their addressees must be reckoned as competent fighters and disciples of the fencing master Talhofer. The book therefore also serves as an objectivation of the symbolic capital of master and apprentice alike.

37 MÜLLER, 1994, pp. 371-374.

Conclusion: What Fight Books tell us about Bodies in Battle

Interpreting the late medieval fight books of Hans Talhofer as representations of moving bodies in battle has proven quite challenging, if not impossible. The images – as well as the encrypted verses in the Liechtenauerian tradition – only refer to embodied knowledge which they themselves do not (or only partially) transmit. A successful understanding and an adequate reconstruction of the depicted techniques would therefore require the explanations of a skilled contemporary expert.

Following the works of Michael Polanyi, we can furthermore conclude that media referring to fighting systems are always incomplete. They have to be, because the implicit knowledge or tacit knowing to which they refer cannot be fully verbalised or depicted. So, despite the late medieval tendencies to theorise and document fighting systems, the communicational gap between the skilled practitioner and its audience persists. This is perhaps best illustrated by a citation from one of the first glossators of the Liechtenauerian verses written around the year 1389:

“Also note this and know that one cannot truly and meaningfully speak or write about fighting. Yet you can show and demonstrate it with the hand. Therefore open up your senses and consider it even more. And practise it the more in training, so the easier you will remember it in serious fights. As practice is better than art, because practice might prove useful without art, but art will not prove useful without practice.”³⁸

38 “Auch merke das / und wisse das man nicht gar eygentlich und bedewtlich von dem fechten mag sagen und schreiben ader aus legen / als man is wol mag czeigen und weisen mit der hant. Dorumme tu of dyne synnen und betrachte is deste bas. Und ube dich dorynne deste mer yn schimpfe / zo gedenkestu ir deste bas in ernste. Wen ubunge ist besser wenne kunst / denne ubunge tawg wol ane kunst aber kunst tawg nicht wol ane ubunge.” Nürnberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Hs. 3227a, fol. 15r.

If we take this one step further, we see that what is documented in the fight books is neither skill nor a volatile fighting practice. The fight books primarily contain auxiliary means of communication that enable practitioners to talk about *their* subjective skills. Fight books can therefore – no matter whether they use mnemonic verses, a textual description of body movements in prose or drawings – only refer to practical know-how that they do not contain themselves. With regard to bodies in battle, they remain tacit. However, they tell us a lot about the ways in which people imagined battle and tried to prepare for it by organising their embodied knowledge.

Illustrations



Fig. 1: Hans Talhofer, Fechtbuch, 1467. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Cod.icon. 394 a, fol. 136v, urn:nbn:de:byv:12-bsb00020451-7

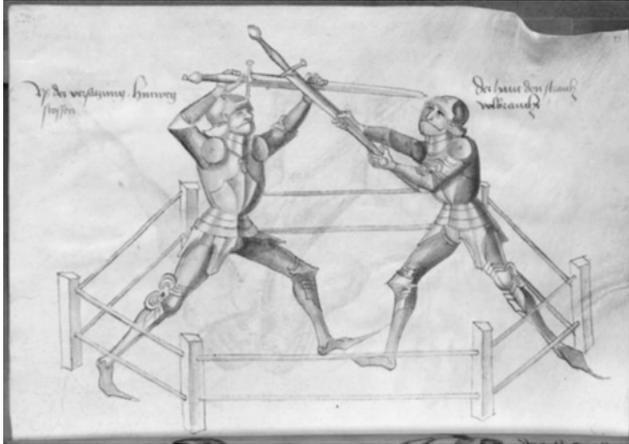


Fig. 2: Hans Talhofer, *Fechtbuch*, 1467. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Cod.icon. 394 a, fol. 38r, urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00020451-7

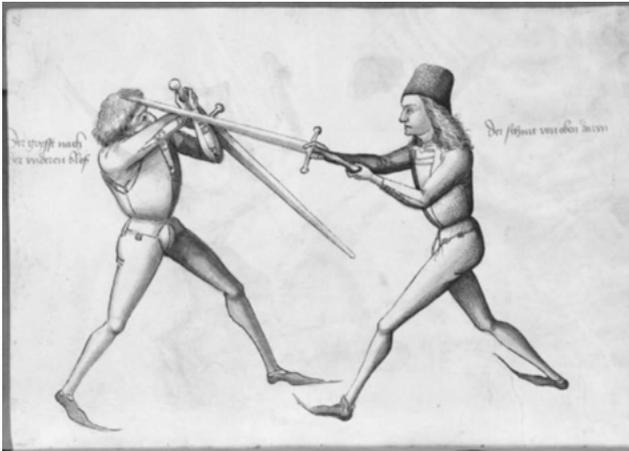


Fig. 3: Hans Talhofer, *Fechtbuch*, 1467. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Cod.icon. 394 a, fol. 12r, urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00020451-7



Fig. 4: Hans Talhofer, *Fechtbuch*, 1467. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Cod.icon. 394 a, fol. 7v, urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00020451-7

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