



Medieval Poleaxe Play

by Andrea Morini • Sala d'Arme Achille Marozzo - Rome

The pollaxe (in Italian *azza* or *mazzapicchio*) is a type of polearm used from the second half of the XIV century as an answer to the rise in usage of complete suits of steel armor, against which the conventional hand weapons of the era were increasingly less and less effective.

It is made of a wooden haft, of circular or square section, whose length could vary from 5 fts to 7 fts. On top of the haft was mounted a steel head with three distinctive functions:

- a point continuing in the direction of the haft, to be used for piercing attacks, like a spear.

- an hammer head, often dented, to maximize the force of impact and damage against metal.

- another spike (opposite to the hammer) slightly bent downwards, called beak, used to hook the opponent or pierce his armor; in a second time one of the two sides (usually the second one) was replaced with a small blade like an axe or halberd.

In *Le Jeu de la Hache* (not considered in this brief essay) this part is called "the cross".

The head of the pollaxe was fixed to the haft with two metal stripes, of varying length (collar), that had the additional advantages of both increasing the weight of the weapon (thus increasing the force of impact) and protect the wooden haft from impacts with hard surfaces and blades.

The end of the haft, called pedal or buttstock, often bore a metal spike.

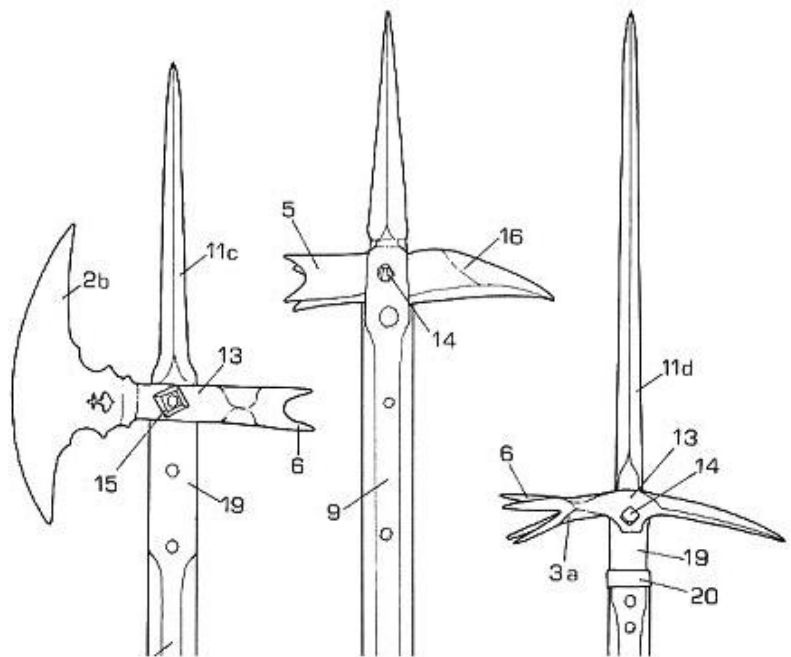
There are two main ways of wielding it: with both hands close to the first third of the staff, for powerful blows, or with one hand at about one third of length and the second one at about two thirds, for quick rotations of the weapon. In this second case, the hands can be both with knuckles up, or the hand toward the head can hold the staff with knuckles facing down, like a spear. It doesn't matter if the forward hand (holding hand) is the right or left one, but we will call right guard the first case and left guard the second case.

The second wielding method, with hands placed at a distance, benefits of a more effective double play and in addition allows very effective blocks even against powerful blows, using the portion of haft between the hands.

To quickly change wielding method, one must simply let the forward hand slide back toward the rear hand; when one goes back in position the forward hand goes back into its original position. This way the reach of the weapon is increased and the strikes are more powerful.

The design of this weapon leaves no doubts on its use: to pierce, buckle and break the metal plated armors of the contemporary centuries, from XIV to XVI.

Clearly, to get the maximum effect one must strike with charged blows, mainly striking downwards (*fendenti*), but also with horizontal (*mezzani*) and upwards (*sottani*) blows.





Guards

Of all the treatises studied, only the *Flos Duellatorum* and the *De Gladiatoria Dimicandi* mention pollaxe posts or guards:

POSTA BREVE LA SERPENTINA



A guard used often, as the following one. The pollaxe is wielded like a spear, the hands a few spans across one from the other, the head pointed toward the opponent.

POSTA DE VERA CROSE



In this waiting guard, the pollaxe is wielded similarly to the previous guard, but with more distance between the hands, to strengthen the parry. Additionally, while Fiore de' Liberi holds the poleaxe pointed towards his back, as an invitation to his right side, Filippo Vadi keeps a more frontal stance, ready to raise the staff to parry a blow.

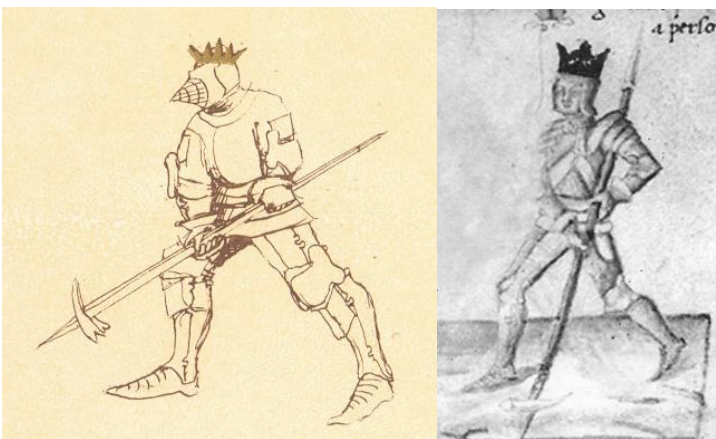


POSTA DI DONNA



A typical guard described by the Italian masters, not found on German ones. The weapon loaded on a shoulder and the hands kept close to each other denote an offensive guard, suited for extremely powerful blows.

DENT DE ZENCHIAR / PORTA DI FERRO MEZZANA



The arms are kept close, the head of the pollaxe points to the ground and to the left of the wielder. These two guards, while differently named, are actually very similar. Like the homonym two handed sword guards, these are typical defensive guards, whose aim is to catch and deviate the opponent's blow with an ascending trajectory, like a parry with the false edge.

CODA LONGA



POSTA DI FINESTRA SINISTRA



Guards found only in the Getty Code, they derive without substantial variations from the analogous two handed sword guards. Both are loaded posts for powerful strikes or parries, the first one from below, the second one from above.



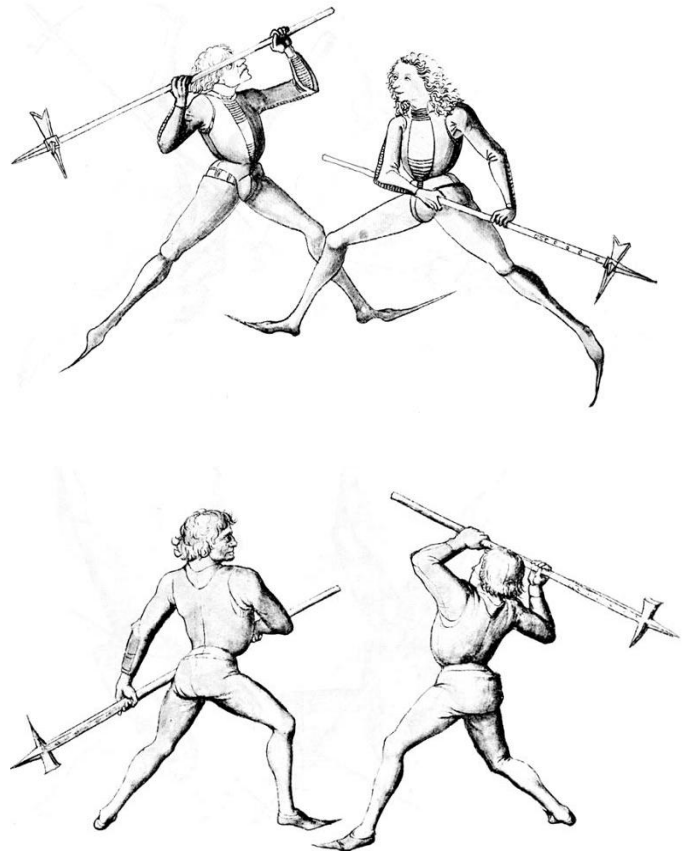
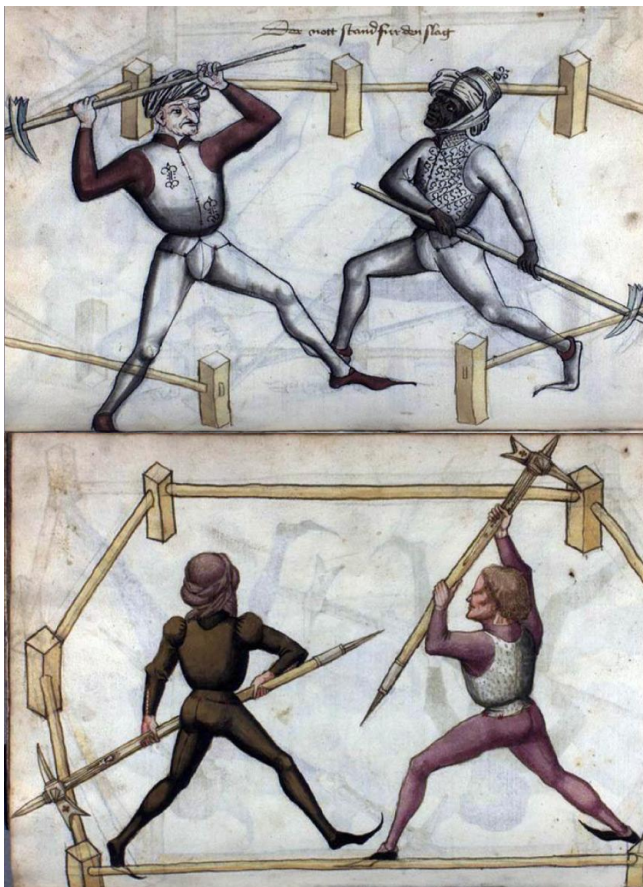
SALA D'ARME ACHILLE MAROZZO

[PK/HT]

All the treaties that have been studied show the typical opposition between high guard vs. low guard. Mostly in the German treaties, that often describe the initial position from where the action begins, it is possible to find guards analogous to the *Posta di Vera Croce*, loaded in a manner similar to the *Posta di Donna* (or the opposite one of *Finestra Sinistra*), to strike from above, or to the *Coda Longa*, to strike from below.

What varies a lot from one technique to the other is the position of the forward hand, that holds the pollaxe with the thumb pointing to the rear hand or in the opposite direction. In the first case, the parry (crossing the other weapon) would be easier and more stable, in the second case the kinetic chain will be used at its best to strike with more powerful blows.

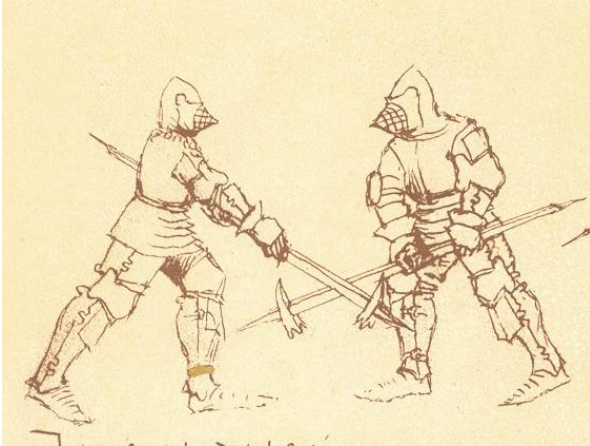
[cf. V Play of *Gioco Largo*]





Parries

As anticipated, a pollaxe strike, usually delivered at full force, with no or little control, can be parried or deflected with one's weapon.



◀ [FL]

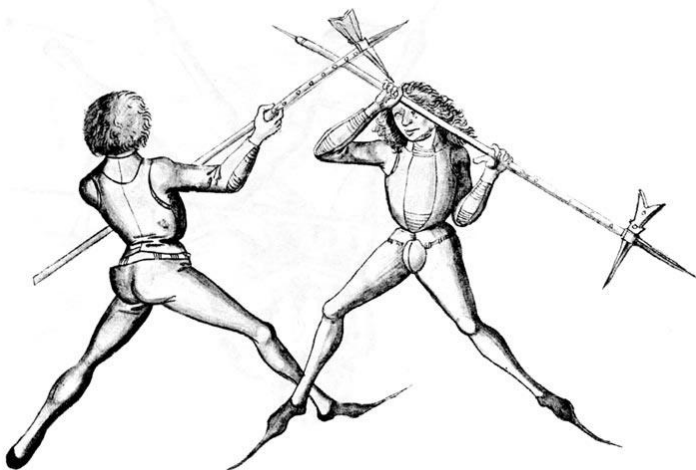
Maybe thrusts are easier to deflect: Fiore de' Liberi parries them by pushing to the ground the opponent's weapon, towards his right side.



[HT] ▶

In order to block an high attack, instead, it's better to cross the opponent's trajectory, opposing to his strike an analogous blow.

The same action can be performed equally well with either end of the pollaxe. [HT/PK] ▼



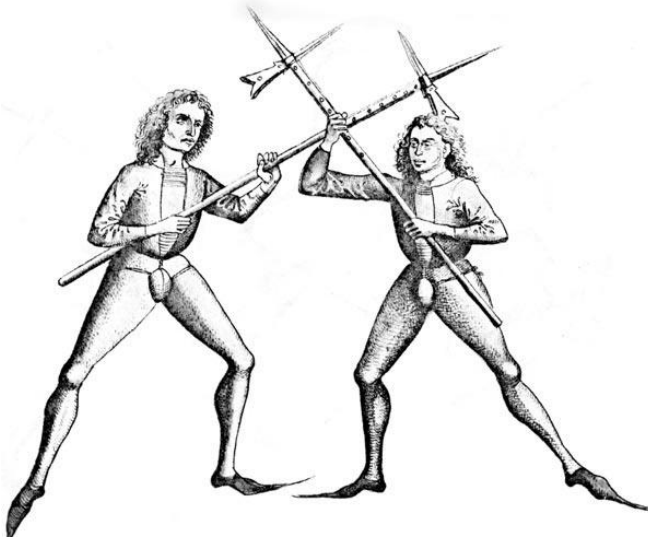


SALA D'ARME ACHILLE MAROZZO

[HT] ►

In case of low blows or attempts of leg hooking, the defense method is the same: blocking the opponent's pollaxe with the end of one's own pollaxe that is closer to the attacked part, crossing the weapons.

[cf. V Play of Gioco Largo]



◄ [HT]

Especially in case of high thrusts or rather vertical strikes, instead of cross parrying it's possible to deflect the opponent's weapon. Instead of a block, there's an interception with an action similar to the false edge parry: a raising blow going towards one's right.

[HT] ►

In German treaties is quite frequent the case of parries done by blocking the trajectory of a blow (even quite powerful) by using the part of the staff between the hands.

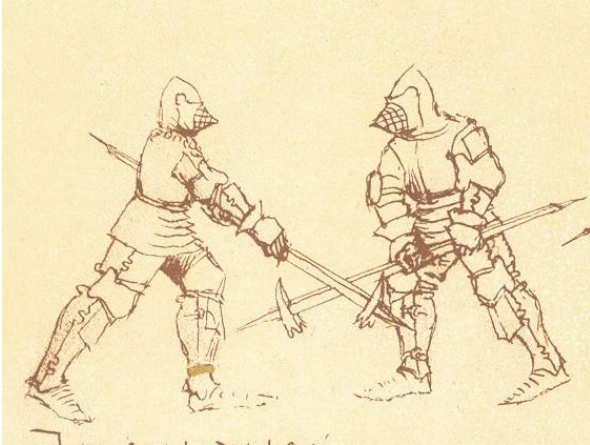
The block is followed by a rotation of the pollaxe to the right or to the left for a response, like the hooking here depicted.





Gioco Largo

1 Play



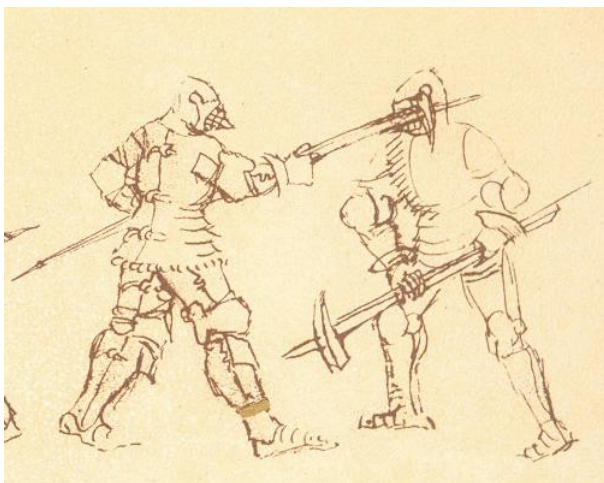
◀ [FL]

Right strikes with a thrust or a *fendente*.
Left from left to right, pushing the opponent's pollaxe to the ground.



[FL] ▶

He comes forward, putting his foot (the right one) over the end of the opponent's pollaxe, to block it on the ground. Then disengages his pollaxe and strikes the opponent's face with a thrust, or...



◀ [FL]

...after the parry, he strikes upwards (even not blocking the opponent's pollaxe with his own foot) to the opponent's face, or...



[FV] ▶

...he dodges to the left the blow or parries it with his false edge and immediately strikes back with a *fendente* or thrust to the opponent's face.



SALA D'ARME ACHILLE MAROZZO

II Play



◀ [HT]

Left strikes with a right hand *fendente*.
Right, from *Posta de Vera Crose*, strikes at the same time, dodging to the right, parrying the blow and striking back with a thrust to the chest.

[HT] ▶

Eventual counter move (although working better against a thrust coming from below instead of descending from above): **Left**, wounded by the thrust, strikes back with a downward thrust from above using only the right arm.



III Play



◀ [HT]

Right delivers a thrust towards the opponent's lower parts.

Left, from *Posta de Vera Crose*, parries and strikes back with a thrust to the opponent's hip or forward leg (left).



LU Play



◀ [HT]

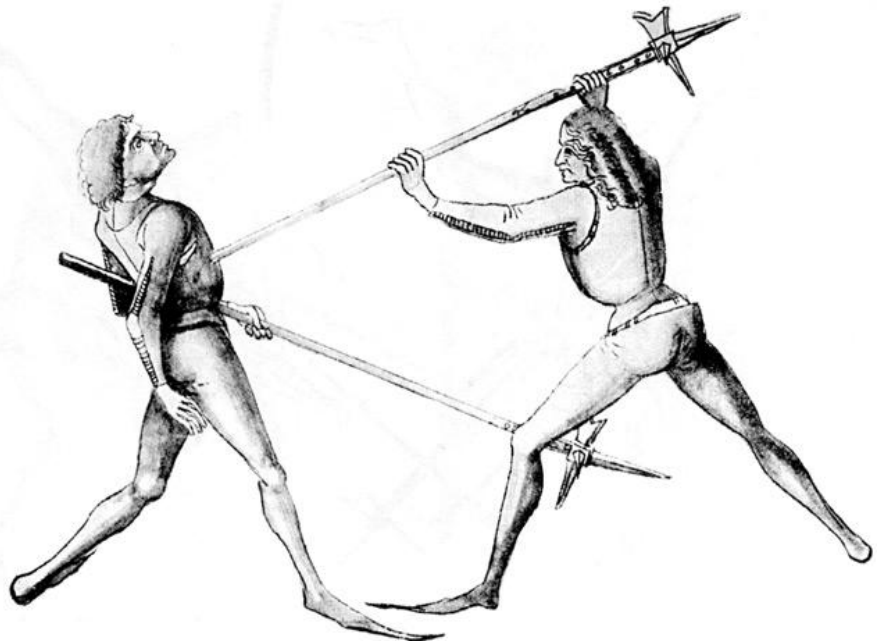
Both from Posta de Vera Crose.

Left strikes.

Right parries.

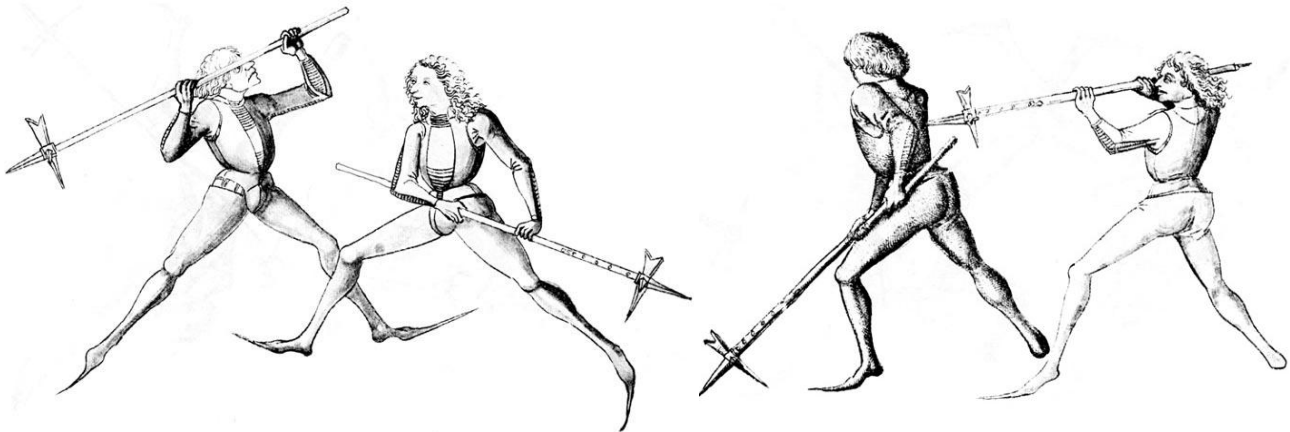
[HT] ▶

Then he set aside the opponent's pollaxe, probably by rotating his own pollaxe clockwise and striking with the pedal the head of the opponent's one, disarming him. Finally, he strikes with a thrust with the pedal's spike.





U Play

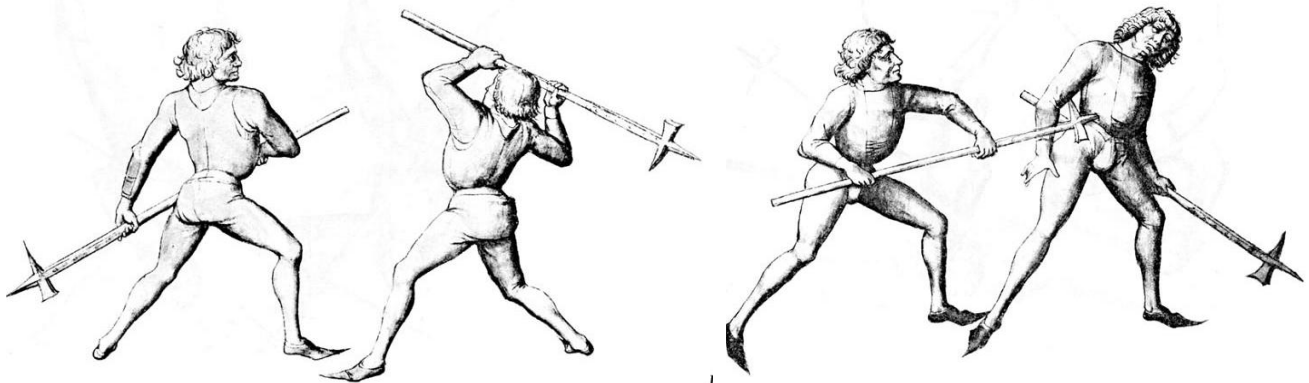


▲ [HT] **Left** loads a *fendente*.

Right opposes from a low guard (looks like a Vera Crose, held back like a Coda Longa).

▲ [HT] **Right** deflects **Left's** blow to his right and **Left** is forced by inertia to expose his back. Then **Right** strikes to him with a thrust.

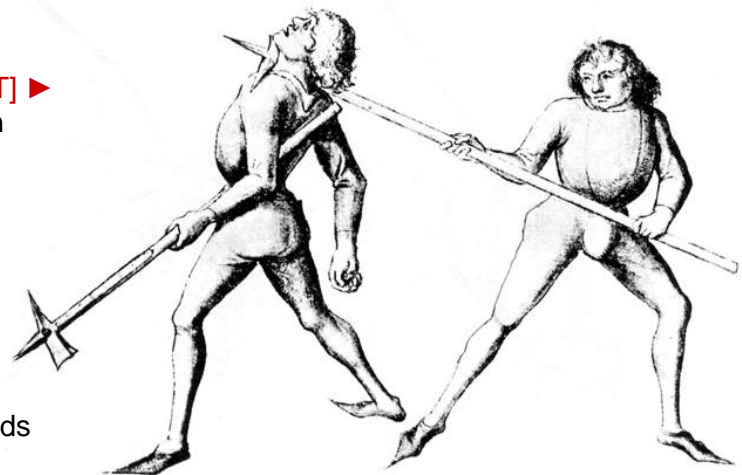
The action is shown again below, basically in the same way, seen from the reverse point of view.



[HT] ►

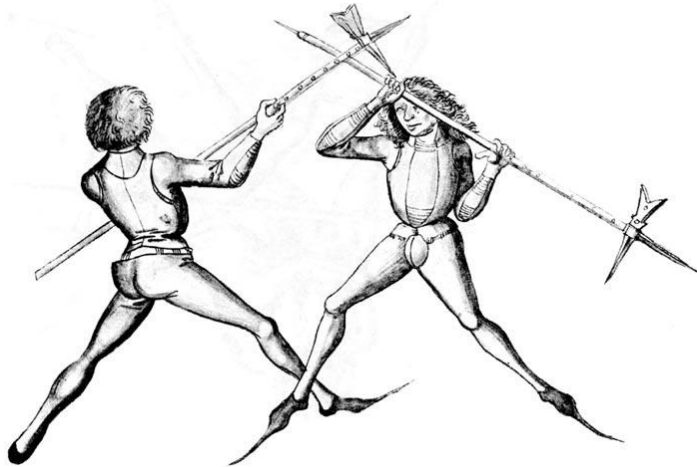
For completeness we'll see the conclusion of this play, the hooking technique, that will be analyzed thoroughly in the chapter dedicated to hooks.

If **Left** tries to avoid the point going backwards, **Right** extends to the maximum the reach of the weapon letting the left hand go and thrusting out the right arm, effectively changing hands (the right hand becomes the forward one). By doing this he can hook the neck of the opponent with the beak of his pollaxe and, pulling, can make him fall down to the ground.





Ul Play

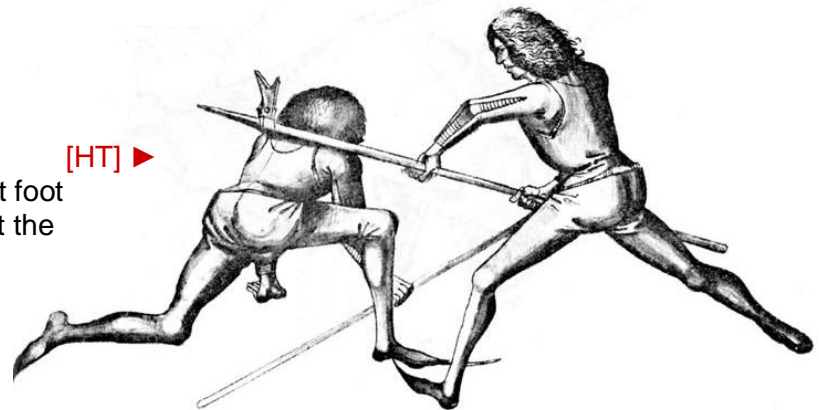


◀ [HT]

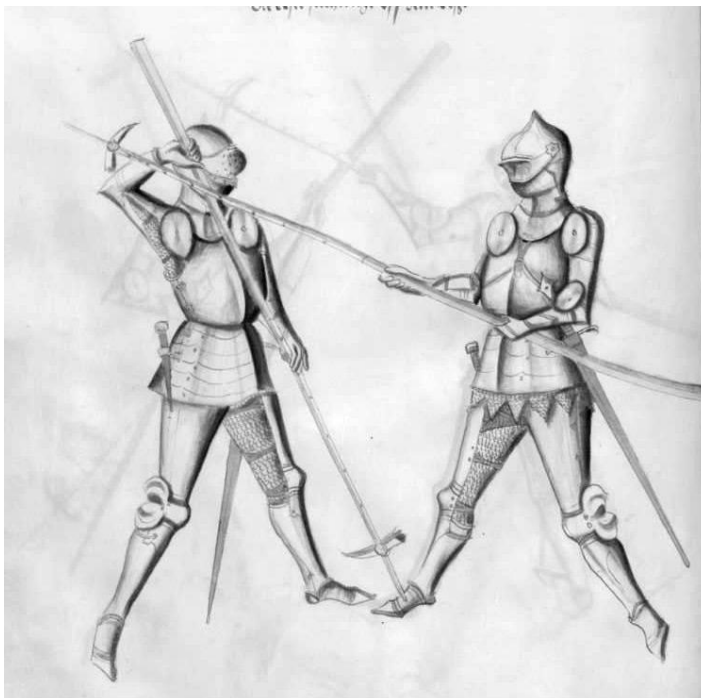
Left strikes downwards from above. **Right** parries with the pedal of his pollaxe, to have the counter strike ready and loaded.

Then **Right** steps forward with his left foot and strikes from above downwards at the neck or head.

[HT] ▶



Ull Play



◀ [PK]

Right strikes with a thrust or a reverse sottano.

Left parries with the pedal or the central part of his pollaxe. He may hit with a thrust the opponent's forward foot (the right one).



Ull Play

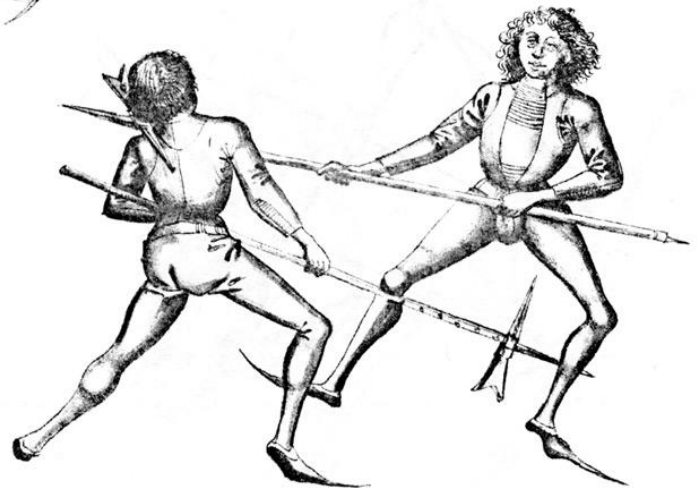


◀ [HT]

Both from Posta Breve.

Left tries to hit or hook **Right**'s left foot, who deflects the blow with his pollaxe's pedal (doing an oblique step to the right or subtracting the left leg if needed) in order to have the strike ready.

[HT] ▶
Right ends his action hitting **Left** with a *fendente* at his head or neck, possibly hooking the neck of the opponent with his pollaxe's hook to pull him down.





hooking

I Play



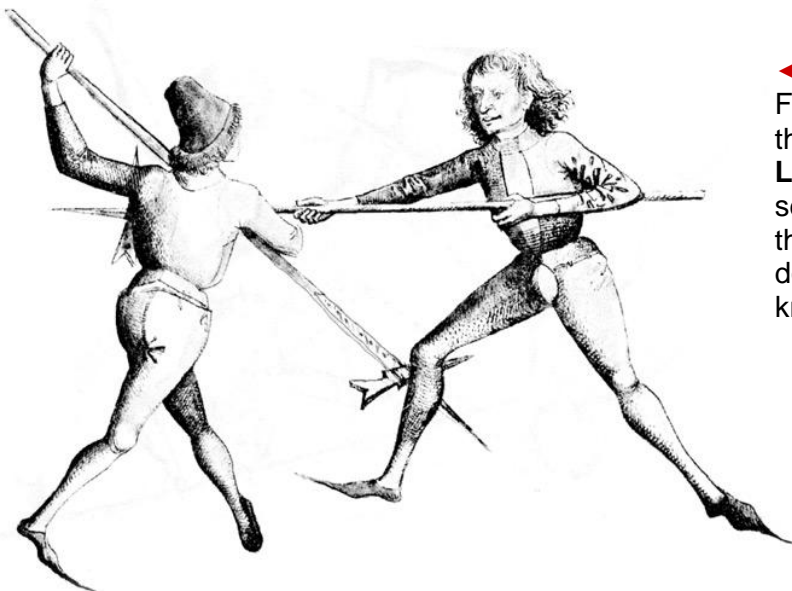
◀ [HT]

Left strikes **Right**

Right deflects/sets aside the blow, then puts his pollaxe between **Left**'s weapon and right leg, then with his own pollaxe's hook he hooks up the rear of **Left**'s knee.

We may suppose also that **Right** is the attacker: he strikes **Left**'s pollaxe to push it away in order to have room enough to go on with the hooking technique seen above.

II Play



◀ [HT]

From Posta Breve, **Right** delivers a thrust.

Left deflects the blow with his haft, setting it aside to his left. Then, with the end of his pollaxe, already turned downwards, hooks the rear of **Right**'s knee..



III Play

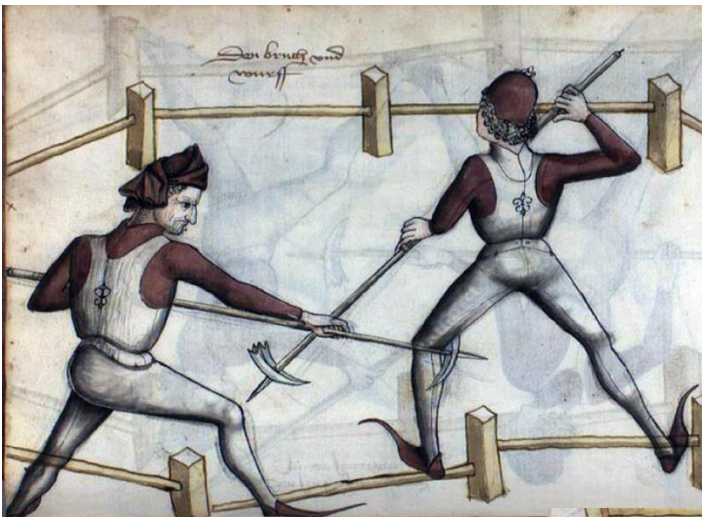


◀ [PK]

Very similar to the last play:

Left parries a *sottano* or a thrust, towards his right, and immediately hooks the rear of **Right's** left knee.

IV Play



◀ [HT]

Left, after parrying a blow, and probably having strongly deflected it, hooks with the pollaxe **Right's** forward knee (the left one)...

...or his ankle or his shin.

[HT] ▶





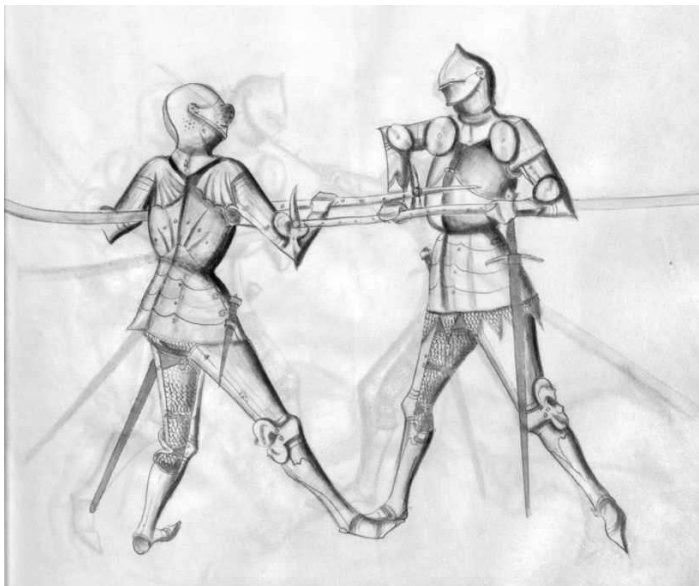
SALA D'ARME ACHILLE MAROZZO

[PK] ►

Even if this image describes this same action, it's interesting to evaluate the picture to gain an interesting insight: **Left** can avoid having his knee hooked by blocking or setting aside **Right's** pollaxe, using the pedal of his own.



U Play



◄ [PK]

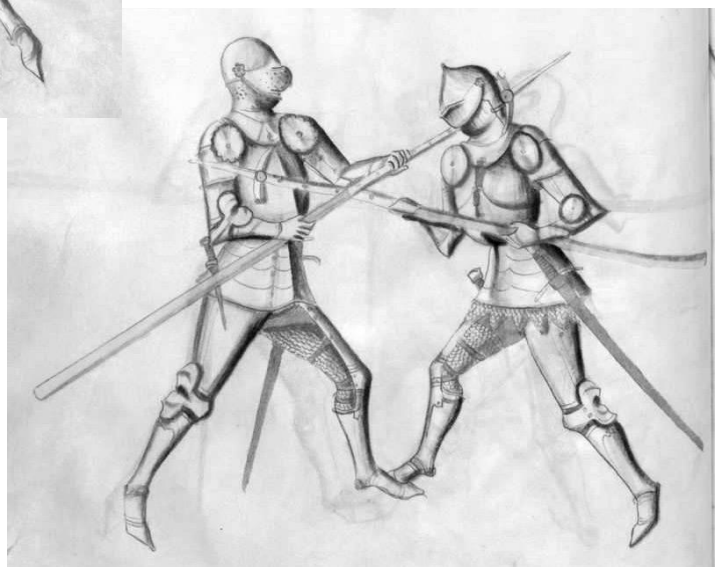
Right hooks **Left's** forward forearm with his pollaxe, probably because he wants to pull him, like in a disarming action. Then, when **Left** will try to resist the pull, **Right** will come forward in a thrusting attack.

[PK] ►

To free himself from the hook, **Left** will give up (*cede*), rotating his pollaxe clockwise and:

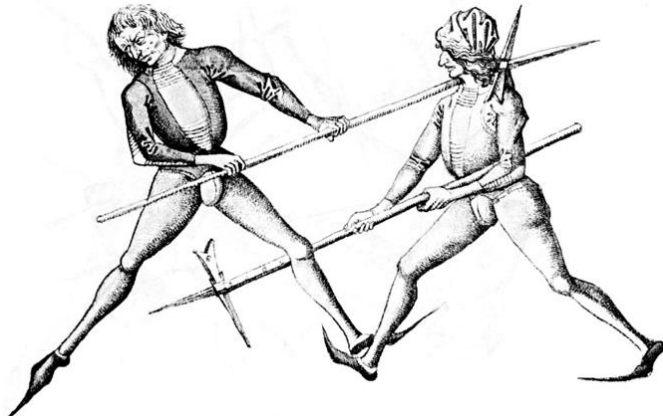
- hooks **Right** behind his neck, else...
- if he is wielding his weapon as in the previous image, (with the point facing the opponent), strikes **Right** on the head with his pedal, or he may step forward with the left foot and bring the haft to the opponent's chest to throw him off balance.

[cf. IV Play of *Gioco Stretto*].





Ul Play



◀ [HT]

Right attacks with a thrust.

Left parries, maybe using his pollaxe's pedal, then strikes back with a blow from above to the opponent's neck, if possible hooking his neck with his own pollaxe, to knock off him to the ground.

Ull Play



◀ [HT]

Right attacks with a *fendente*.

Left, probably from the *Posta de Vera Crose*, comes forward with an oblique step to the left and parries with the part of the staff between his hands. Then pushes his pollaxe to the left of the opponent's neck and hooks him to pull him to the ground.

[PK] ▶

Left ends the action by knocking the opponent's down and hitting him with a thrust to the neck.





Gioco Stretto

I Play



◀ [FL]

This action is not crystal clear.

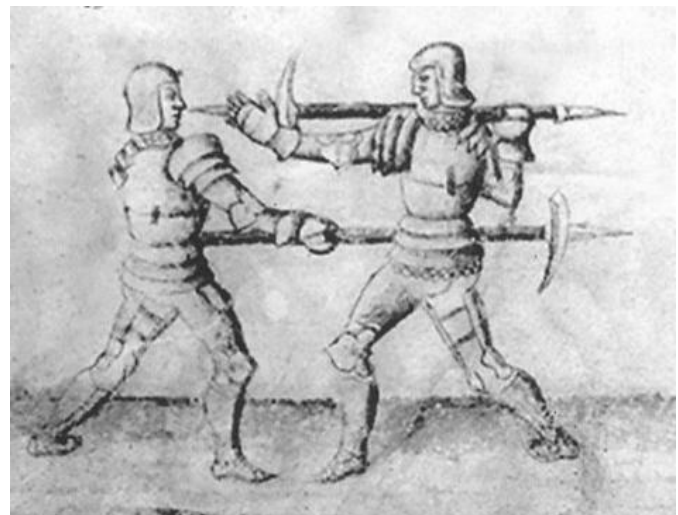
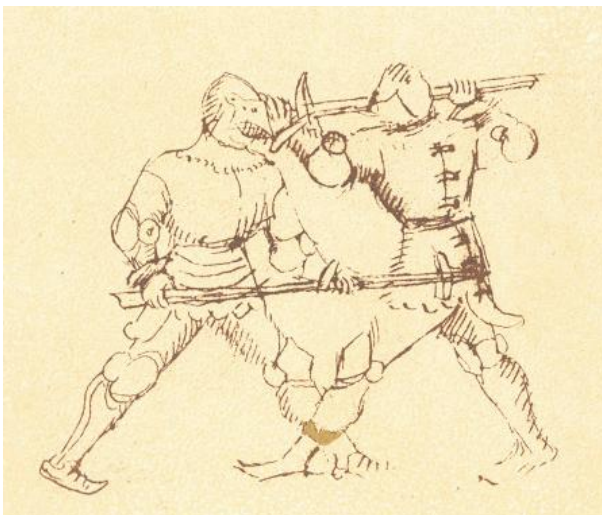
Right, probably after an attempt of grappling or projection made by **Left**, move his left leg to the left of his opponents and place the pollaxe between **Left** legs.

At the same time he puts his left hand on **Left**'s face, in order to blind him.

Then **Right** pushes forward and down with his left hand, and eventually uses pollaxe as leverage, in order to make his opponent fall down.

The position of **Right**'s pollaxe is pretty strange, maybe an error of the illustrator?

II Play



▲ [FL/FV] **Right** steps forward in order to close the distance (maybe after dodging a point thrust by **Left**, or maybe, better, after a successful parry).

Then he lifts the adversary's visor with his left hand or the point of his pollaxe (grabbed with his left hand), and hits with a thrust opponent's bare face.



III Play



▲ [FL/FV] From a crossing, or after a parry, **Left** passes his left arm under **Right**'s right arm and pushes him in the leverage called by Fiore de' Liberi *Chiave di Sotto*; then he can either throw him down or hit him on the head with the pollaxe.

IU Play



◀ [HT]

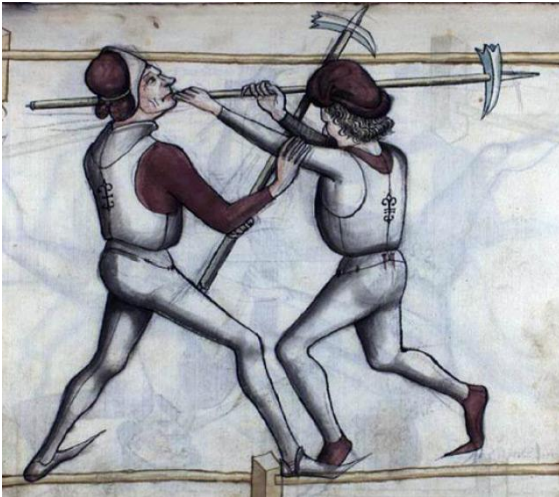
After a strike and a parry, **Left** disengage his pollaxe rotating it clockwise (i.e. the pedal goes up and the head down). Moving forward with the left foot, he puts his staff against **Right**'s neck (or chest) and his left leg behind the opponent's right knees. Then **Left** rotates to his left knocking down **Right**.

[PK] ▶

There are other ways to come to the same action:

Left holds the weapon in front of him, between himself and the enemy, like in "Posta Breve" (or he delivers a *sottano*). **Right** puts the staff of his weapon upon adversary's, as protection. Then he moves forward, placing his right leg behind **Left**'s left leg, and continues the action as seen before.





◀ [HT]

It's not perfectly clear how to get easily to the situation shown in this picture, but we can intend it as a counter to the previous action:

Right tries the previous technique.

Left anticipates him, not allowing (probably moving back) **Right** to put his left leg behind **Left's** right leg. At the same time he leaves the pollaxe with his right hand and use it to grab opponent's right elbow in order to push it to his left side, forcing the adversary to turn.

[HT] ▶

Othewise, from the position of the previous technique, **Right** (the one who counters it) quickly leaves the pollaxe with his right hand and, passing it under **Left's** armpit, grapples his neck. At the same time **Right** move his right foot in front of (or between) adversary's legs. Finally he rotates to his left projecting the adversary over his own right hip, or blocking **Lefts** legs with his right leg, until he get the adversary down.

It must be said that this action is both valid as a counter of the previous action (in case you are able to neutralize or anticipate adversary pollaxe push) and as its continuation.

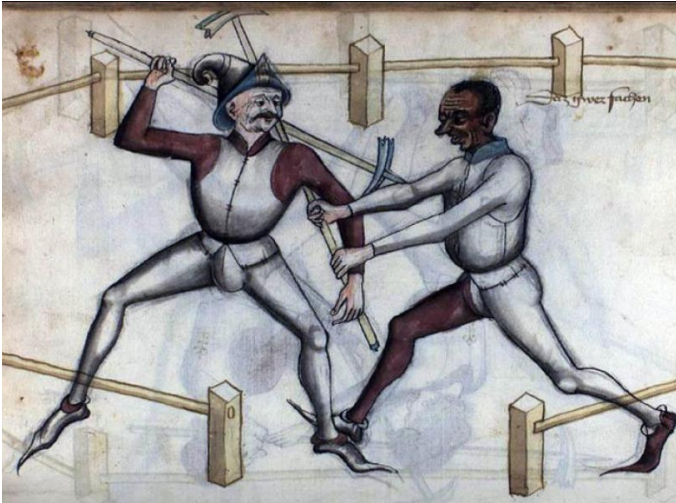
In other words, if **Right** (the one who is getting unbalanced) counters **Left's** pulling, pushing forward his upper body, the best **Left** can do is to go along with that, inverting the direction of his pushing: after leaving the pollaxe with his foremost hand, **Left** can grapple adversary neck with his arm, while his leg, which was behind the adversary's one, passes quickly in front of it. The conclusion is still the same: adversary knockdown.



[cf. IV Play of Wrestling]



U Play



◀ [HT]

Right delivers a *fendente*.

Left parries with the pollaxe, while he closes the distance coming forward with the left step. At that point, once left the pollaxe with his left hand, he passes under his weapon which is still contrasting the opponent's one, and, with his own left arm, grapples and blocks **Right's** arms.

[HT] ▶

The same technique can be performed also on the other side:

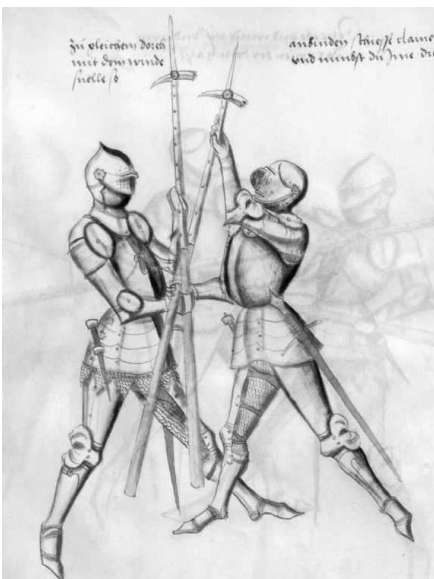
Right delivers a *fendente*.

Left (who has two right hands...) parries with the pollaxe, while he closes the distance coming forward with the right step. At that point, once left the pollaxe with his right hand, he passes under his weapon which is still contrasting the opponent's one.

At the same time he embraces or blocks **Right's** arms from top to down, with his right arm.



Ul Play



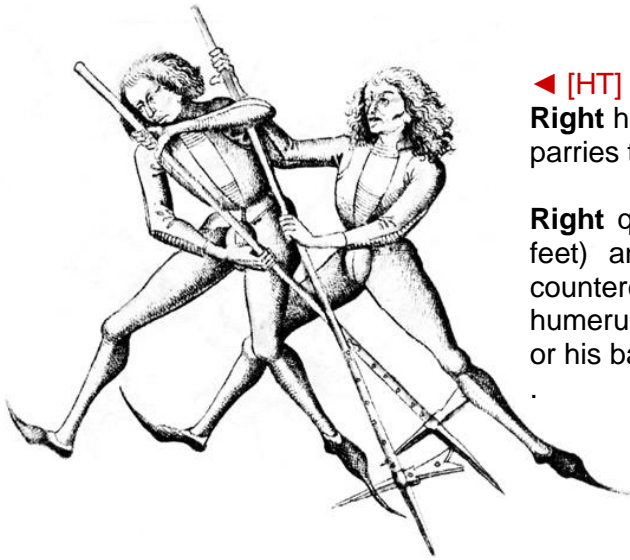
◀ [PK]

It's not clear how to get easily to situation shown in this picture. Maybe, after a parrying action by **Right**, or after a feint of *fendente* that becomes a quick thrusting with the pedal spike.

Anyway, after **Right** inserted the pedal in the space between adversary hands, close to his right hand, he turns the weapon counterclockwise in order to disarm **Left**.



ULL Play



◀ [HT]

Right has deflected to the left a blow delivered by **Left**, or parries the blow with a block.

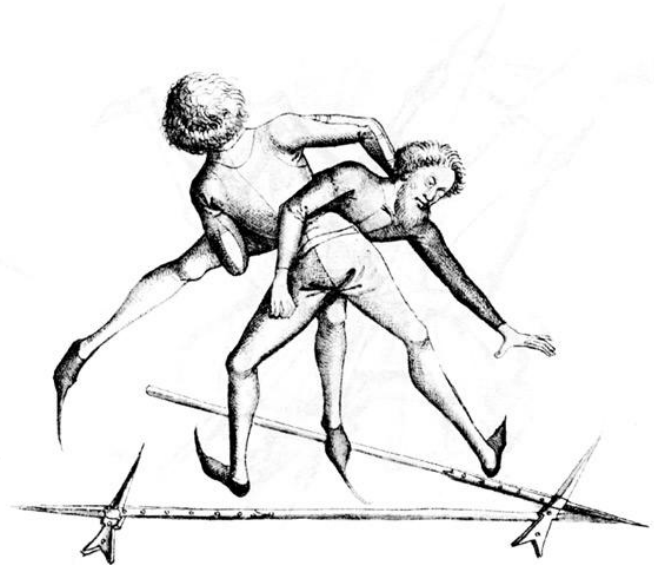
Right quickly moves forward with a diagonal step (right feet) and, at the same time, he rotates his pollaxe counterclockwise, hitting with pedal the elbow or the humerus of **Left**, who is forced to rotate exposing his side or his back.

[HT] ▶

Left's counter: he drops his pollaxe while he rotates clockwise seconding **Right's** push, until he comes to **Right's** side. At that point he passes his right arm behind adversary's back and he grabs **Right's** right thigh with his left hand.

Keeping on rotating he's able to knockdown the adversary.

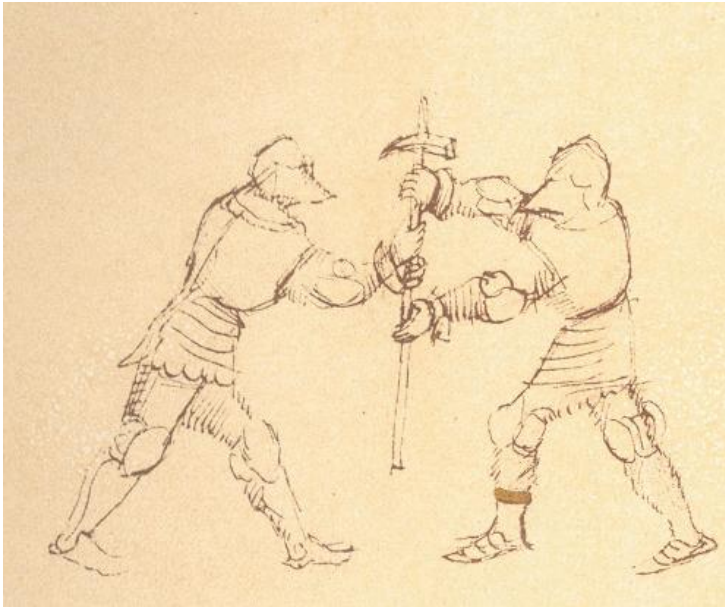
[cf. II Play of Wrestling]





Wrestling

1 Play



▲ [FL/FV] **Right**, having lost or left his weapon, grabs **Left**'s pollaxe, placing his hands wider than the adversary's. Then he turns slightly to his right, at the same time rotating clockwise the pollaxe, in order to disarm **Left**.

[HT] ►

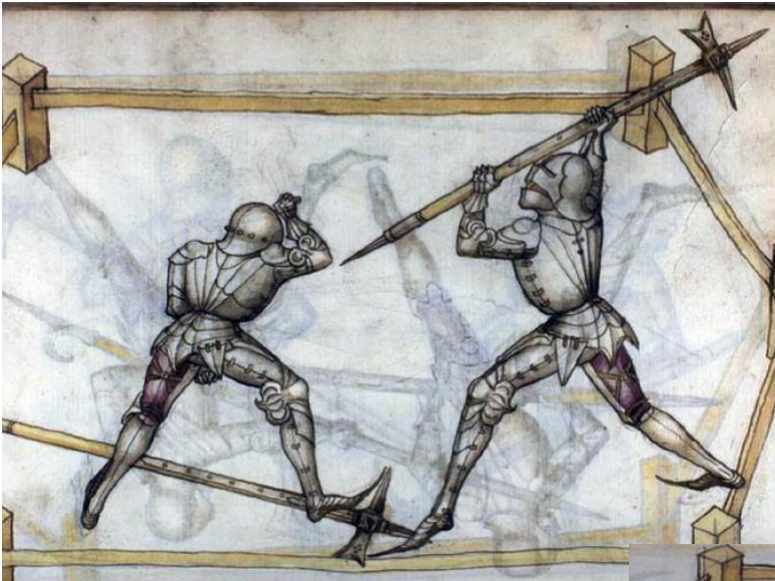
Very similar to the previous one, this picture shows probably how to contrast a hook to the neck performed by **Left**.

Right drops his pollaxe and grabs the adversary's one trying to get it from him.





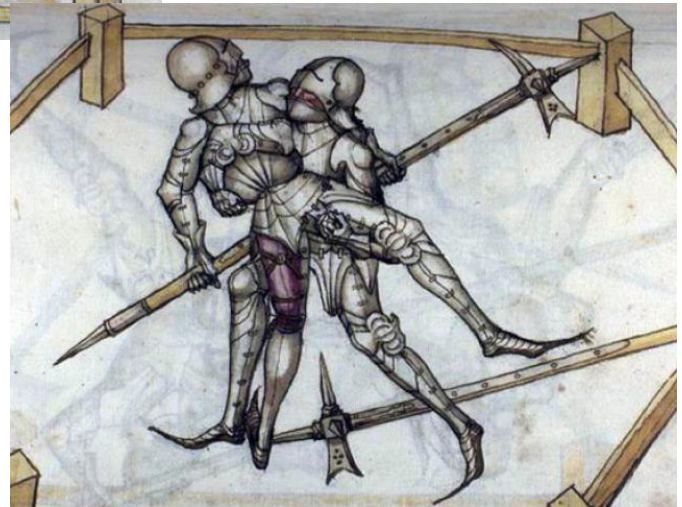
II Play



◀ [HT]

Right is about to hit by above.

Left, lost or dropped his pollaxe, protecting his groin with the left hand and his head with the right one, rushes toward the adversary to wrestle.



[HT] ▶

Right (**Left** in the previous action) ends the fight: he passes his right arm around adversary's back, with the other hand grabs **Left**'s left thigh, lifts the opponent and, turning on his right, tosses him to the ground.

[cf. counter of VII Play of *Gioco Stretto*]

III Play



◀ [HT]

Left throws himself onto **Right**, to wrestle: his right arm surrounds **Right**'s arms and waist, while his left hand grabs **Right**'s right thigh in order to lift the leg and floor the adversary.

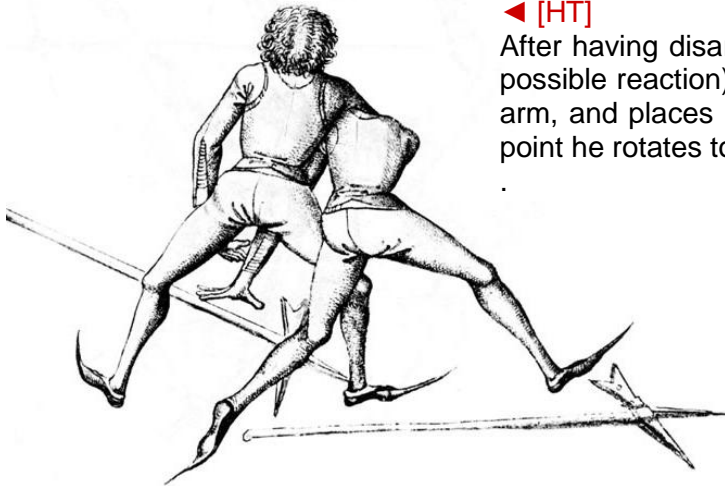


[HT] ▶

Otherwise, **Left** grabs adversary left wrist with both hands, blocking with his chest **Right's** right arm, which is between **Left's** arms. Pushing down and right, **Left** is now able to knock down the adversary.



LU Play

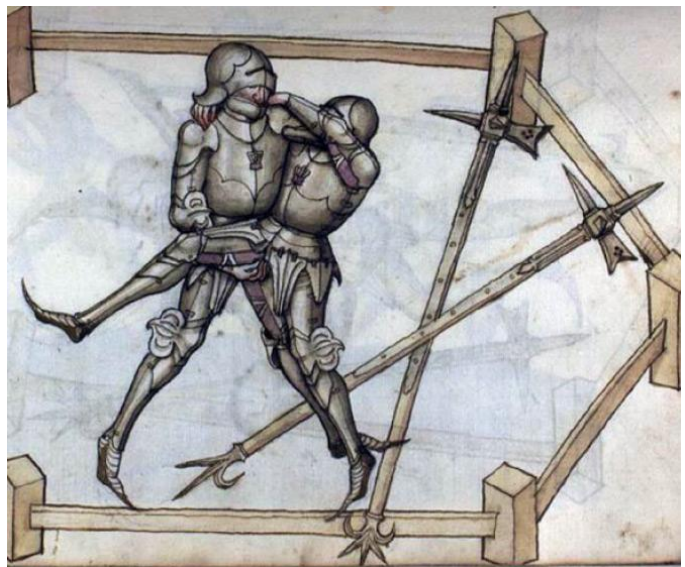


◀ [HT]

After having disarmed the adversary (or having nullified any possible reaction), **Left** surrounds **Right's** neck with his right arm, and places his right leg in front of **Right's** legs. At this point he rotates to his left tossing the adversary to the floor.

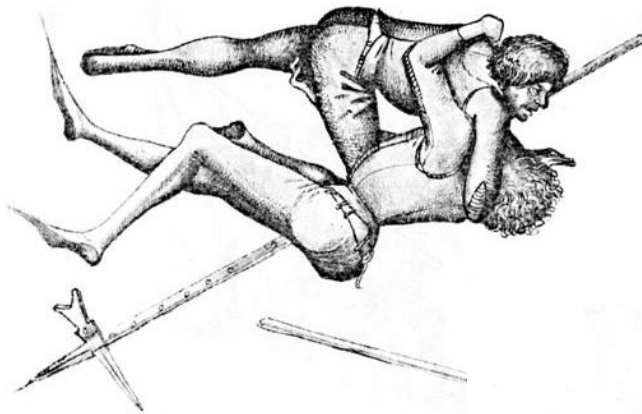
[HT] ▶

Left counters: he puts his left arm against **Right's** neck (or chest) and, at the same time, with the right hand he grabs adversary's right leg from the back, and lifts it. By rotating to the left, he's able to knock **Right** down.





Conclusions

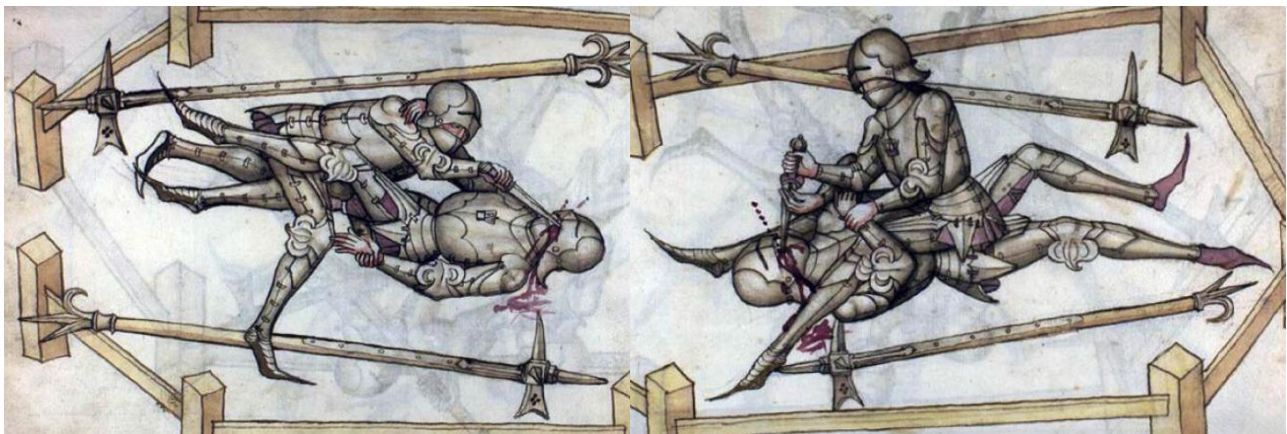
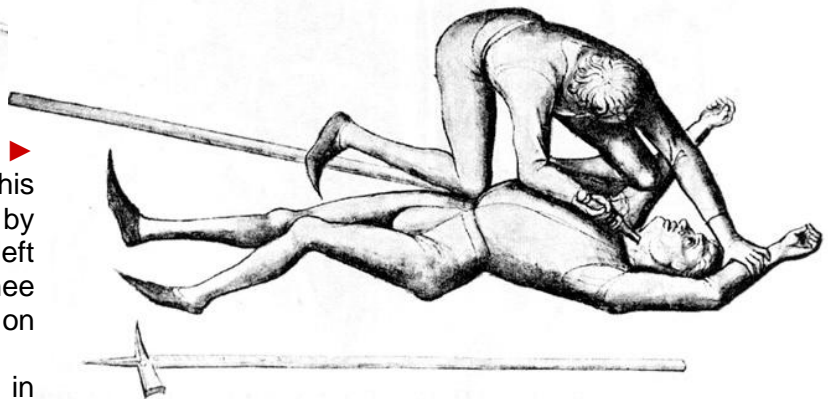


◀ [HT]

Once the adversary is knocked down, the fight continues by wrestling on the ground.

[HT] ▶

Once on the floor, **Right** wield his dagger; he holds the adversary by blocking the left wrist with his left hand, the right arm with his left knee and maybe pushing the right knee on adversary chest or stomach. Eventually he stabs the adversary in the neck with the dagger.



▲ [HT] Whatever the knocking down action is, the main aim is to immediately hold the adversary, blocking his arms if possible, and to stab him into the face with the dagger.



Sources

- [FL] **Flos Duellatorum** • Fiore de Liberi • 1409
- [HT] **Codex Gotha - Kampfbuch** • Hans Tallhoffer • 1443
- [PL] **Manoscritto 1825 Univ. Bologna** • Paulus Kal • 1458
- [HT] **Das Fechtbuch Right Hans Tallhoffer** • Hans Tallhoffer • 1467
- [FV] **De Arte Gladiatoria Dimicandi** • Filippo Vadi • 1482