

# *Research methods and tools for understanding combat manuals*

*Roger Norling*



# Who are we?

“An international anarchistic and flat roots movement with amateurs of widely varying backgrounds and experiences, collaborating on a work that is greatly facilitated by the Internet.”

# Lecture contents

- ◇ Discussion on what HEMA is and what our research needs to do in order to reach its original goals.
- ◇ Methods on macro and micro level.
- ◇ Example of how to systemize a source using primarily Joachim Meyer as an example.

# What is our mission?

“To recreate the forgotten martial arts systems of Europe to a once again living martial art, true to its sources, within the limitations of modern society.”

# Greatest obstacles

- ◇ We study a mostly dead tradition and therefore have no one with real experience to help us.
- ◇ We are a small community.
- ◇ We have limited resources and funds.
- ◇ We are far removed from the society that the art sprung out of.
- ◇ We have bad equipment to base interpretations on.
- ◇ Our modern contexts and goals are very different to those of the ones who created the art.

# What has signified the HEMA Community?

- ◇ Limited material, resources and understanding.
- ◇ Humility before the sources.
- ◇ Exploration, fascination, epiphany.
- ◇ Willingness and eagerness to share - simplified by the Internet.
- ◇ A benevolent “missionary” attitude seeking to enlighten others.
  
- ◇ Somewhat naïve romanticism about swords, the Middle Ages, knights and chivalry.

Is it changing?

Feeling cocky?



# Professionalism, Hubris & Fossilization

## THE POSITIVE

- ◇ An internationally growingly accepted corpus of interpretation
- ◇ Professional setup & profile
- ◇ Outside recognition
- ◇ Becoming mainstream
- ◇ The art is “alive” in sparring and tournament
- ◇ We have fun and get techniques to work in our modern context

## THE NEGATIVE

- ◇ Plateaus of understanding & “good enough” attitude
- ◇ Complacency and thinking we understand things well now, although it is primarily working in our modern context.
- ◇ *Missing how little we actually know, because we do not know what we do not know*
- ◇ A martial art like any other with paying students *seeking to be taught, not to study*
- ◇ *Fossilization kills healthy influx of new ideas and regrowth of new researchers*

# How do we recreate the European Martial Arts?

- ◇ It is crucial that we understand *how* and *why* it is designed the way it is as a *martial art*.
- ◇ Not understanding the *why* means we can't really understand the *how* either.
- ◇ Mimicking movements is not enough – that is just an empty gesture without real meaning, like *sword dancing* or *sport & ritualized combat*, however hard and technical it may be.



*“Why is an action performed in a specific manner?”*

To understand this question is vital for the study of the martial art,  
but not necessarily for the sports aspect of the same


# Solutions

- ◇ Awareness about the issues, at all levels
- ◇ Use various methods to test our interpretations
- ◇ International collaboration
- ◇ Openness to other approaches and research
- ◇ Research in accessible format
- ◇ Modern pedagogics & teaching methodology

11 questions we need to answer to understand fencing treatises

# 1. Who is the author and what is his background?

- ◇ Was he a soldier or a civilian?
- ◇ Was he trained formally in civilian or military combat?
- ◇ Did he have personal experience of self-defense, dueling or war? Was he well-regarded or even famous?
- ◇ How are the teachings connected to earlier works?



## 2. Why are the teachings in the book and how will they be used?

- ◇ Is the author sharing his knowledge for *financial* or *ideological* gain?
- ◇ Was the intent
  - to print the book in many copies and sell it,
  - to teach a single individual self-defense, duel and war?
  - to train large troops for war
  - to keep a diary with memory notes for teaching
- ◇ Are the instructions teaching how to defend, attack, frighten, capture, maim or kill?

Are there instructions for exercise or “show-off”?





### 3. Who is he teaching to and for what purpose?

◆ Is the target group:

Civilians and/or soldiers?

Young boys or grown men?

Burghers or nobles?


Depending on the answer to this question we will easier understand the contexts in which it will be applied and how that context is defined and regulated.



**Gründtliche Beschrei-**  
**bung/ der freyen Ritterlichen vnd Ade-**  
**lichen Kunst des Fechtens/ in allerley gebrenchli-**  
**chen Wehren / mit schönen vnd nützlichen Figuren**  
**gezieret vnnnd fürgestellt.**

**Durch Joachim Meyer/ Freyscheer zu Straßburg.**  
**Bedruckt zu Augspurg/ bey Michael Wanger/**  
**In Verlegung Eße Willers.**

**Anno M. D C.**



◇ *Moreover no proof is needed that it was the custom with our ancestors and the ancient Germans to raise their youth in knightly practice along with other good arts, since this is self-evident from what they achieved. For once the Romans thought they had conquered the entire world, as an overconfident nation they devoted themselves to sensualities more than to good arts, policy, and knightly practices, and through this the entire empire was undermined, attacked on every side, and torn apart by enemies; and the knightly Germans were appointed and advanced before all peoples to save it, take it over, and erect it again. This would never have happened, were not the excellent Germans wisely trained and experienced in all kinds of knightly play and matters of war...*

## 4. What are the contexts, i.e. the situations and the environments in which it is applied?

- ◆ Will it be used on

  - the battlefields

  - in the streets performing city guard duty

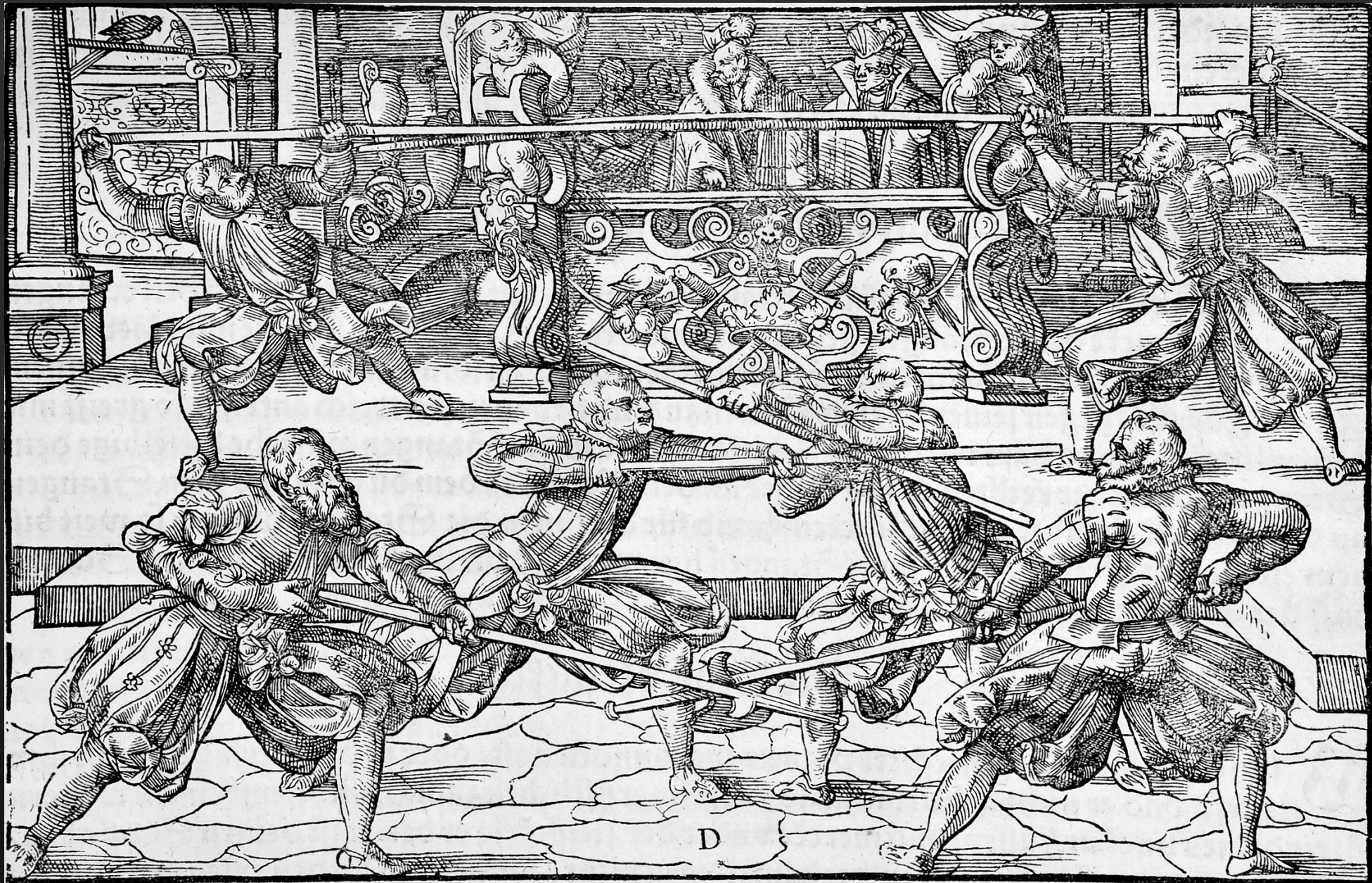
  - for self-defense

  - for judicial / noble / military dueling,

  - defending honour or right to property of land.

- ◆ Burghers, guilds and social stability

The possible contexts are many and are all defined and regulated somewhat differently.





*Adspice Nycticorax que tentet praelia Cyclops,  
Dum Bromio madidus vigilacia munia turbat.*

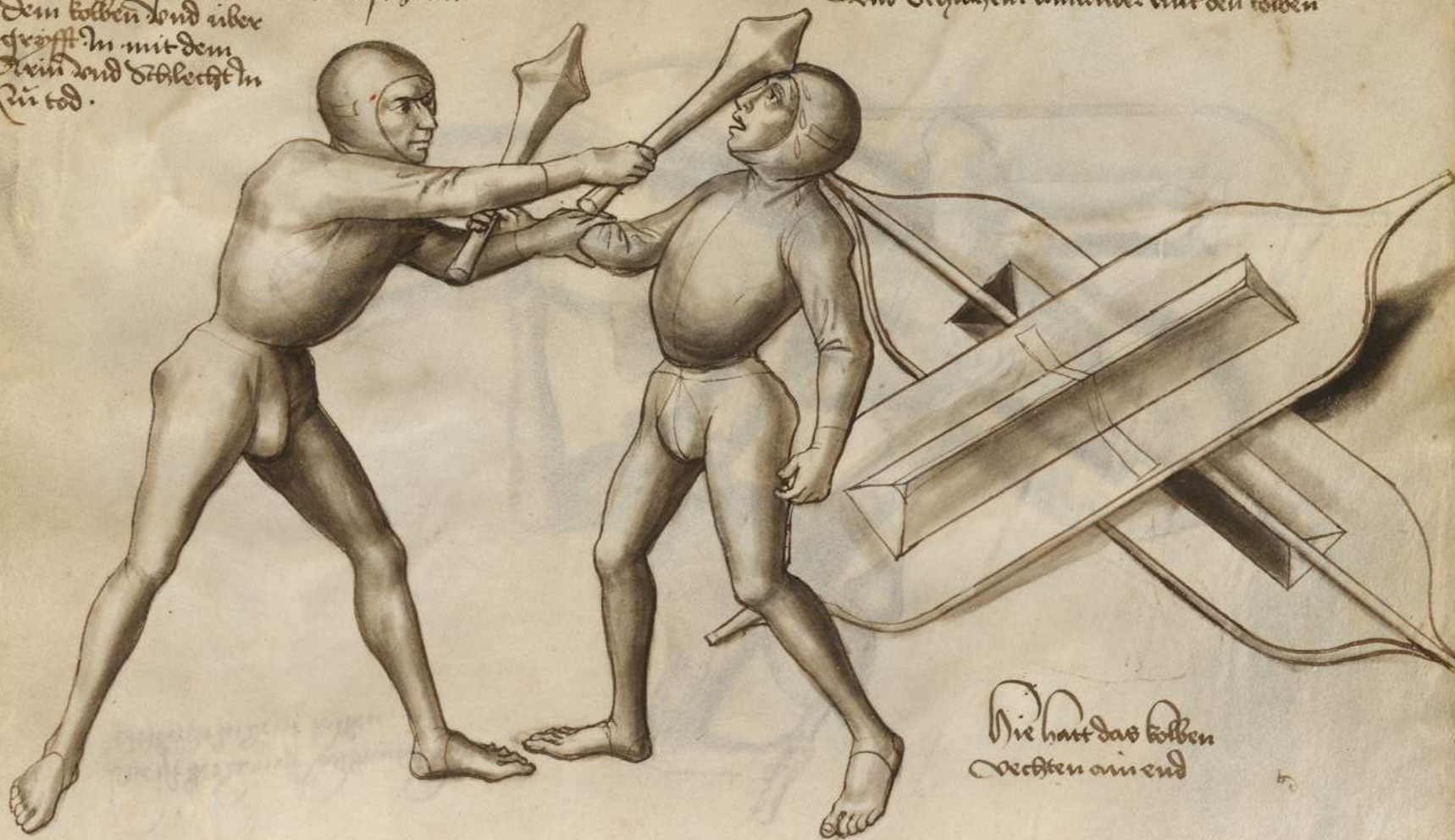
*Angels, P.*

*Stich, Saw, Schlag, Werff, dapper mit macht,  
Wie ſ uns feutzten die vorig nacht*





Der hart im sinen Straich versetzt mit  
dem kolben und über  
geofft in mit dem  
Krein und schlecht in  
zu tod.



Da mit sie kommen von den stützen  
und schlahent amander mit den kolben

Hie hat das kolben  
verchten am end

## 5. What are the social limitations for the context, e.g. laws and customs?

- ◇ In modern society we have laws specifically for war, for societal violence but also unwritten rules for bar/street fighting.

Many of these unwritten rules revolve around ideas on manliness and cowardice, and in history that often came in conflict with the laws that were designed to govern and limit violence in society.

Consequently, certain acts are still today being regarded as extremely dishonorable, like *attacking genitals or eyes*, or *attacking the weak; elders and children*.

- ◇ The historical rules are often similarly context-dependent but also sometimes drastically different to today.

Concepts like *'first blood'*, *'unmanly thrusting'* and *'fair play with flat strikes'* are important examples of this.



*“Grocer Hans Müller from Mindelheim was teased by Christof Lang from Kirchdorf, for guarding the town gate without a gun, he responded by saying, “here’s weapon enough”, and attacked Lang with the flat of his sword.”*

– Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany

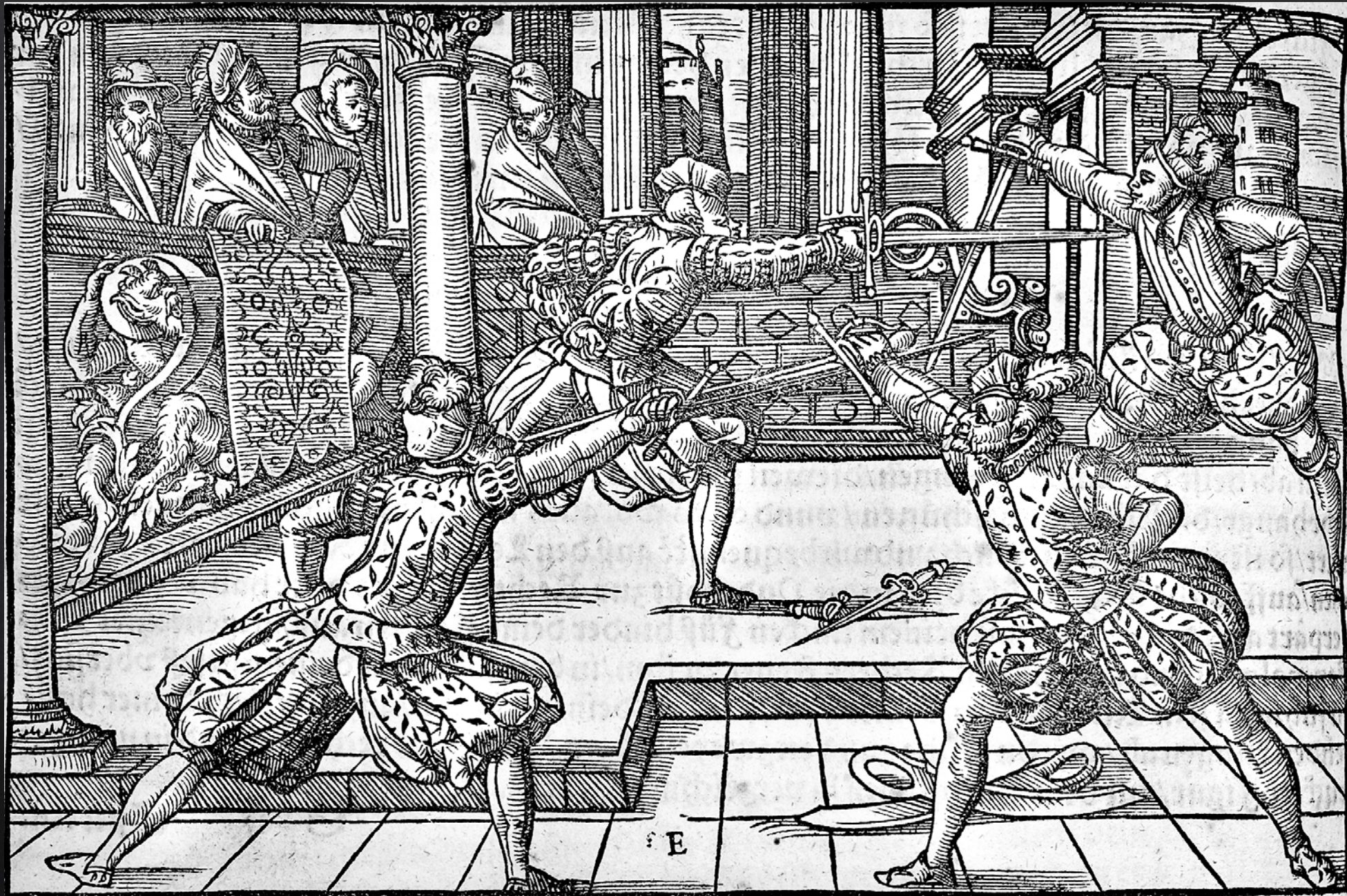
*“For although the thrust was permitted by our forefathers in earnest cases against the common enemy, yet not only did they not permit it in sporting practice, but they would also in no way allow it for their sworn-in soldiers or others who had come in conflict with each other, except against the common enemy, a custom that should still be observed today by honorable soldiers and by civilian Germans”*

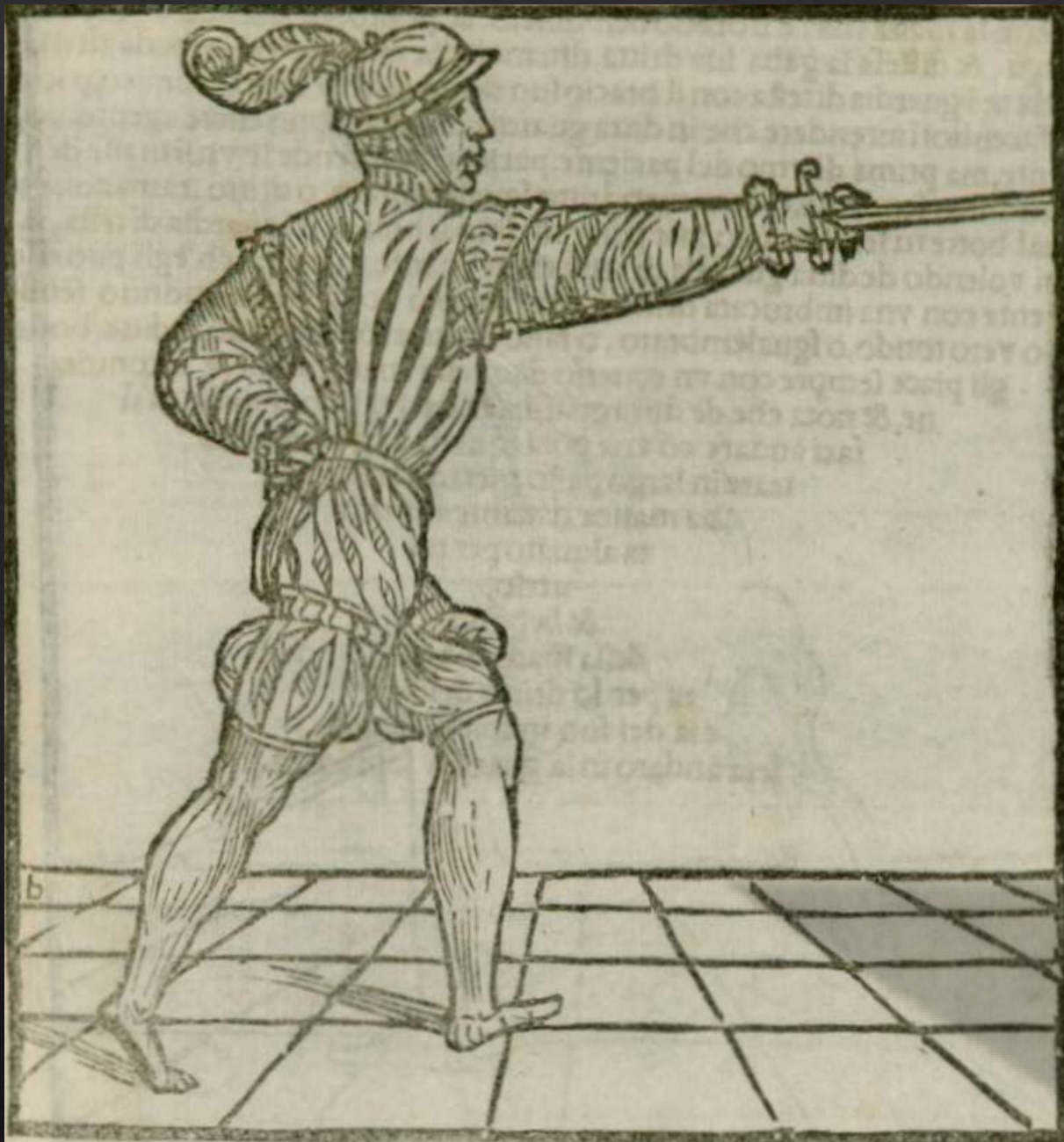
– Joachim Meyer

*“The customary rules of military honor also dictated the standards of proper fighting. Few rules existed for fighting enemy troops in early modern Europe, but codes governing ethical fighting among soldiers on the same side, or between soldiers and civilians who were not officially enemies, could be detailed.*

*Military ordinances also threatened harsher punishment for unfair fighting among soldiers than civic ordinances did for civilian brawls. Hitting a man while down, for example, or stabbing at someone rather than striking with the flat of the sword in accordance with the customary rules of fencing could result in corporal punishment even if the fight did not lead to any injury.”*

- The Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany by Ann Tlusty





## 6. What are the purpose, tactical motivations and goals of the action?

- ◇ Some actions can be meant not to *kill* or *maim*, but to *distract* and *annoy*, or to *provoke an attack* or a *particular defense*, to enable another action on your behalf that is the final intent and goal.
- ◇ Other actions can be meant to scare and make the opponent apprehensive.

Fighting is not just physical, but just as much a mental and psychological exercise.



## 7. How are the actual 'sharp' weapons commonly designed and how do they behave?

- ◇ Weight, balance, sharpness, sharpening & edge profile and durability of components are all examples of aspects that very much affect actual combat with weapons like daggers, swords and polearms. Attacks will be more or less effective depending on what part of the weapon that is used.
- ◇ Taking the opponent's weapon with your hands, or moving in for close combat is more or less safe depending on what part of the opponent's weapon you expose yourself to.
- ◇ Slicing and drawing cuts are often more effective than just meat cleaving-type strikes.  
Thrusts penetrate things with little power while strikes just won't penetrate some things.
- ◇ Furthermore, a blunt training weapon and a sharp weapon behave differently, both when handling on their own, and on impact with the opponent's weapon and body.



## 8. What are the effects on garments and body parts of the weapon and technique in question?

- ◇ “Historical clothing” affected the effectiveness of an attack. *Buff leather, thick silk doublets and high silk collars* protect against many types of attacks. This makes some attacks less effective while making some counteractions less risky.
- ◇ Likewise, the body is more vulnerable in areas not protected by bone, where veins and arteries are near the surface, like the *neck from the ear to the shoulder*, which is likely why we are often told to strike down to the *ear* (meaning the top of the neck), *the insides of the arms & legs* and *the gut*. Of course thrusts pierces all this easier than cuts.



## 9. How does the human body work and respond to the type of injury inflicted?

- ◇ Given the effects of the injuries caused by an attack, what is the actual effect?
- ◇ How does the body respond to such an injury? Does the opponent commonly die instantly?
- ◇ Does he or she commonly continue to fight and if so for how long?

# 10. How do these effects vary when one uses different levels of force and parts of the weapon?

This is actually the most deciding question that defines how the martial art is performed in regards to speed and power:

- ◇ How much force, with a margin, is needed to create the desired effect considering all the above?
- ◇ These last four questions...

*Effect of sharp weapons*

*Effects on garments and body*

*Body response to trauma*

*Different effects of force and weapon parts*

... combined add up to how you should manage distance in the various stages of a fight, where you should target your attacks and how much force to use.

- ◇ It is also where sparring and tournament fighting is the most lacking as neither take any of this into consideration in most such arenas.

# 11. How does combat affect the mind?

- ◇ This is something the tournaments have tried to approach, putting strong stress on the participants, often causing them to go back to the very core of their fencing, relying on what feels safe. In that the tournaments have had a great value.
- ◇ Another approach has been to fence with little protection and a sometimes higher risk of injury, which also has an equally great value.
- ◇ However, neither of these will be quite the same thing as standing in front of someone who actually tries to kill you with a sharp weapon. For that we will have to resort to testimonies from people who have actually experienced these things for real.



# Final words for Part 1

Right now, HEMA is running fast towards semi-professionalism which in itself is very good, but which also carries certain dangers. Worst of all, we risk forgetting the spirit that permeated early HEMA, with sharing and helping with no concern for own gain, just for the love of it all.

It doesn't have to happen, but we need to nurture an awareness of the unique generous spirit of HEMA as we move onwards to greater things and stay humble in front of the sources and the tasks ahead.

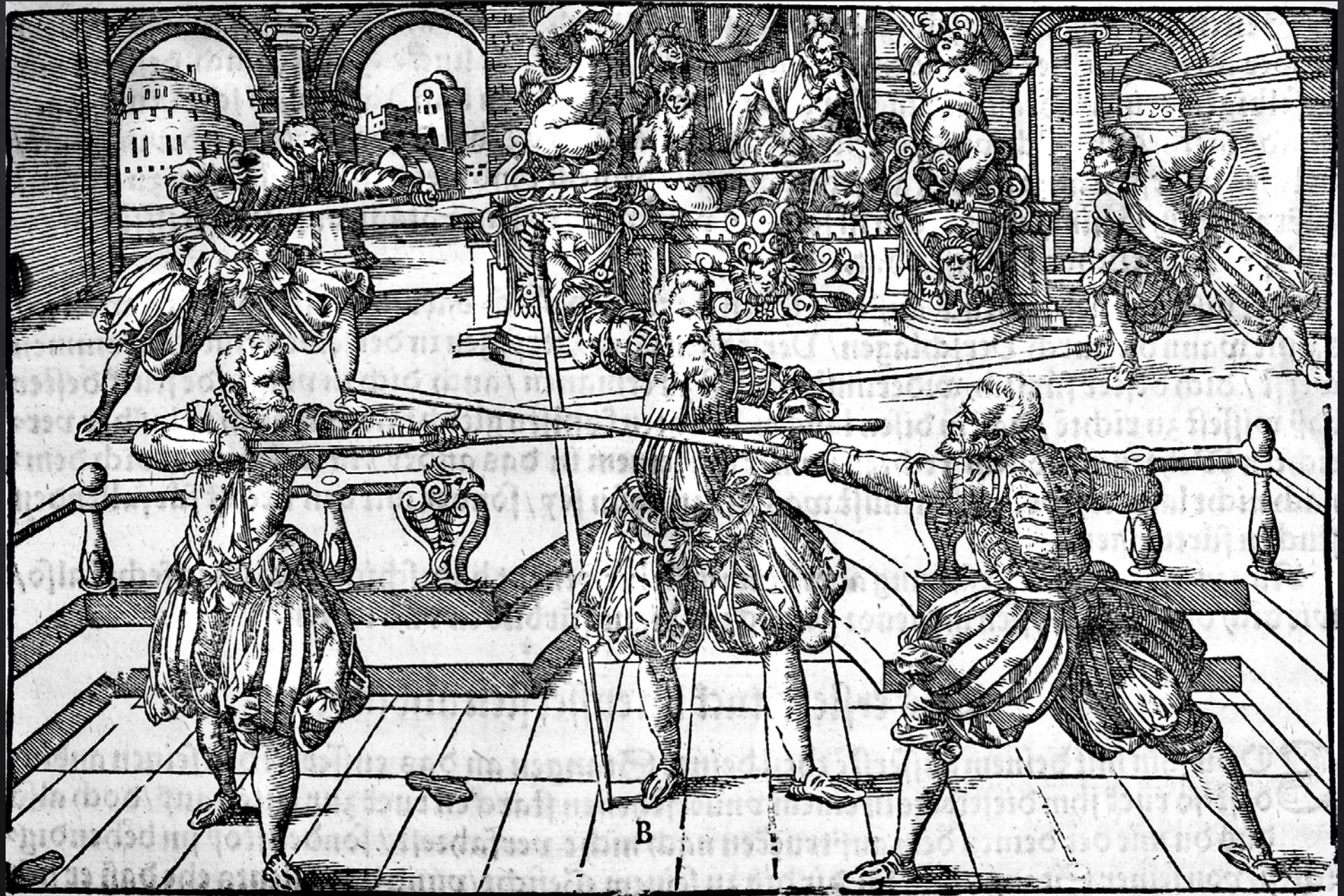
## Part 2: *Method example*

# Method example

- ◇ Read the material.
- ◇ Read related material.
- ◇ Analyze the images carefully.  
Note in particular stances, grips and how shadows and light fall on the combatants, their weapons and the ground.
- ◇ If the images are reliable, compare the different lengths of weapons to judge their relative angles and note also the angles of the blades.
- ◇ Note also the relative angles and distances between the combatants and their weapons.
- ◇ Keep in mind that the image might illustrate the end of a complicated action, and they may also reflect several actions in time in a single image
- ◇ Sometimes only part of the image shows the specific action and occasionally not perfectly so, even according to the author.



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# Method example

- ◇ Build an image of the body and weapon mechanics.
- ◇ Build an image of the range of techniques.
- ◇ Create categories under which all exemplified techniques can be sorted, e.g. *principle, distance, target, where the bind is* etc.
- ◇ Study the weapons and clothes worn and analyze how they affect the fighting.
- ◇ Pay close attention to what the possible multiple interpretations are for each example.



# Method example

- ◇ Pay close attention to how the opponent acts and responds, particularly when the descriptions are vague.
- ◇ Compare to reports of actual contemporary and modern real-life incidents.
- ◇ Get weapons that are similar to those used in the source of study. Also make sure to handle sharp versions for deeper understanding.
- ◇ Test the interpretations in aggressive and uncooperative “random” settings.
- ◇ Test the interpretations in sparring.

# Method example

- ◇ Document with video for analysis, in order to gain a better appreciation for your own movements and mechanics.
- ◇ Reread the text and analyze possible issues while taking into account influence from the friendly training context and possible side effects from protective gear and non-sharp weapons.
- ◇ Test again, reread and test again in an iterative process.
- ◇ Continue forwards in the material with new techniques.
- ◇ After some time return to the material with “fresh eyes” and reconsider your interpretations.

# Analysis example: *Meyer's dagger system*

- ◇ Characteristics
- ◇ Parameters
- ◇ Purpose
- ◇ Stances
- ◇ Grips
- ◇ Tools
- ◇ Pressure points
- ◇ Leverage areas on your own body
- ◇ Primary targets
- ◇ Secondary targets

# Characteristics

- ◇ Holistic system tied to the teachings of all weapons he teaches.
- ◇ Retaking & maintaining control, retreating and withdrawing safely.
- ◇ Sometimes attacks first.
- ◇ Multiple attacks.
- ◇ Shit happens, so what to do?
- ◇ Low and wide stances.
- ◇ Opposing stances with e.g. left foot leading and right hand forward.

# Purpose

- ◇ To get out alive; parry, threaten and escape.
- ◇ To capture and control.
- ◇ To injure.
- ◇ To kill.

# Stances

- ◇ Oberhut
- ◇ Mittelhut
- ◇ Kreuzhut
- ◇ Unterhut

# Grips

- ◇ Overhand, Reversed (Ice-pick)
- ◇ Underhand, Forward (Hammer)
- ◇ Middle-grip for wrenching and pommel strikes

...and continue with all categories

- ◇ **Characteristics**
- ◇ **Parameters**
- ◇ **Purpose**
- ◇ **Stances**
- ◇ **Grips**
- ◇ **Tools**
- ◇ **Pressure points**
- ◇ **Leverage areas on your own body**
- ◇ **Primary targets**
- ◇ **Secondary targets**

# Visual systemization

Tables arranged by

- ◆ Techniques and occurrences in the Stucken
- ◆ The Stucken and the contained techniques

# Techniques and occurrences in the Stucken

## **Thrusting**

Stoss - Stucke 1, 2, 4-12, 14- 16, 20-24, 26-29, 32, 34, 38

Hindern ort-Stoss - Stucke 19

## **Striking**

Schlagen – Stucke 3 , 4, 6, 9, 11-13, 16, 17, 19, 25, 29, 33, 34

Umbschlagen (Reiß) – Stucke 3, 4, 10, 12

Umbschlagen (one-hand) – Stucke 3, 12, 30, 31, 39

Mittelschlag – Stucke 30, 31

Hirnschlag – Stucke 17, 28, 30

Schöfferstreich – Stucke 18

Die Rose – Stucke 4, 16

## **Binding**

Winden - Stucke 1, 5, 8, 12, 24, 34

Inbinden – Stucke 34

Überschiessen – Stucke 19, 33, 34

Gesperren– Stucke 19, 33, 34

# Techniques and occurrences in the Stucken

## **Weak vs. Strong techniques**

Schnappen – Stucke 17, 19, 29

Zucken – Stucke 7

Umbzucken – Stucke 13, 16, 25, 28, 31

Rucken – Stucke 6, 14-16, 18, 20, 23, 24, 32

Trucken – Stucke 28

## **Deceiving**

Schlagen/Fehler - Stucke 2

Verzucken Stoss - Stucke 32

Verfuhren – Stucke 23, 24, 26,

Dürchwechselln – Stucke 7, 15, 21-23, 25, 27, 32, 38, 39

Umbwenden – Stucke 13, 30

Übergehen – Stucke 13, 30

Treiben – Stucke 37-39

Stangen Nehmen – Stucke 36

## **Other**

Wirffen – Stucke 34, 35

Verkehret hand – Stucke 18, 36

# The Stucken and the contained techniques

## OBERHUT

**Stucke 1 - 3.18 r1**

**Techniques:** Winden Stoss

**Stucke 2 - 3.18r2**

**Techniques:** Schlagen/Fehler,  
Stoss.

**Stucke 3 - 3.18v1**

**Techniques:** Schlagen,  
Umbschlagen (Reiß), Schlagen  
(one-handed)

**Stucke 4 - 3.18v2, 3.19R**

**Techniques:** Schlagen,  
Umbschlagen (Reiß), Die Rose,  
Stoss

## UNTERHUT

**Stucke 5 - 3.19v1, 3.19V**

**Techniques:** Winden Stoss

**Stucke 6 - 3.19v1**

**Techniques:** Schlagen (Ruck), Stoss

# Thank you

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