

## Vor, Indes, Nach: The Kightly Art of the German Longsword

*Jünk ritter lere  
Gott lieb haben frowen ja eren  
So wechst dein ere  
Ube ritterschaft und lere  
Kunst die dich ziert  
Unnd in kriegem zu eren hofiert  
Ringet gutt fasset glefen  
Sper schwert unnd messer manlich bederben  
Unnd in andern henden verdörben*

Young knight  
Learn to love God and revere women  
That your honour waxes  
Learn knightly skills and practice  
The art that dignifies you  
and brings honour in war  
Grapple well and wield lance  
Spear, sword and knife manfully,  
That are wasted in other hands.

Thus begins the *merkverse* of Johannes Lichtenauer, the 14<sup>th</sup> century German sword master. Our knowledge of this man is not great, he was likely born some time during the 1320s in Lichtenau, Franconia and spent many years travelling through the Holy Roman Empire and into Eastern Europe learning from local masters at arms and incorporating their methods into his own system.

His system includes the use *langeswerd* (hand and a half sword), spear, standing, mounted and ground based grappling. These are used in *bloßfechten* (unarmoured combat), *harnisfechten* (armoured combat) and *roßfechten* (mounted combat). The system is described in the *merkverse* (teaching verses), a long series of extremely cryptic rhyming couplets (though admittedly the rhyme sometimes looks a little forced) that act as both a mnemonic for the initiated and as a barrier to their comprehension by outsiders. If we were left with these alone there would be great difficulty in interpreting them, fortunately however, over the next several hundred years, exponents of the system would add their own commentaries and interpretations, as well as adding elements to the school. This tradition would dominate German martial teachings for 300 years and continue to have an influence up to the present day (it was Lichtenauer who first described the body target divisions used in modern fencing).

These later commentators have sometimes quite distinct glosa of the verses, or even where they don't quote them verbatim, different interpretations of the techniques, depending on the purpose of their writings and the specific understanding they have reached in their own study. The first commentator known was the cleric Henko Dobringer, who presents a very conceptual view of the system in his *fechtbuch* of 1386, a tremendously useful examination of the theoretical concepts behind it which has, unfortunately not yet been translated into English.

The next two famous exponents of this system are Sigmund Ringeck and Hans Talhofer, representing to very different kinds of publication in this system. Talhofer is probably the most famous teacher of the tradition, writing several works on it during the mid 1400s. These are not explanations of the system but seem rather to be a catalogue of somewhat higher or exotic techniques and concepts, including some somewhat bizarre siege equipment, serving as an advertisement of his skills as an instructor.

Sigmund Ringeck, was *schirmeister* (fencing master) to Albrecht, Count Palatine of the Rhine and Duke of Bavaria during the early to mid 1400s. During this period he set to paper a series of interpretations of the *merkverse*, that of all these works is most clearly intended for practical instruction. This work includes commentaries on many of the verse sections but is not limited to them, also including sections on sword and buckler and wrestling that are not from the *merkverse*. The sword and buckler system is one that crops up regularly in works of this period and consists of 6 two man set plays, plays that are attributed to one Master Andres Lignitzer by Peter von Danzig, who reproduced them in his *fechtbuch* of 1452. Nevertheless, they use many of the same biomechanical principles as the rest of the techniques.

The fundamental theoretical basis of the system is that of controlling initiative. Lichtenauer divides any exchange in combat into three phases during which one may attack *vor*, *indes* and *nach*. *Vor* (before) is an initiating attack in an exchange, forestalling an enemies attack. *Indes* (simultaneous) is an attack at the same time as the opponent while *nach* (afterwards) involves attacking after avoiding or otherwise dealing with an incoming attack. The goal of the Lichenauer system is to keep the opponent in the *nach* by continually remaining on the attack. Key to this are the five *meisterhau* (master strikes), *indes* techniques used to take the initiative back from the opponent and force him into the *nach* should he attack *vor*. These used the length and leverage properties of the weapon involved (*langeswerd* for most of the works) to use the forte (strong section of the blade nearest the hands) of ones own blade against the foible (section towards the tip) of the opponent's to control the attack, by using the leverage provided while attacking with one's own foible. Thus by attacking *indes* one seizes the initiative, forcing the opponent back into the *nach*.

These five techniques are the *zornhau*, *krumphau*, *zwerchhau*, *schielhau* and *schietelhau*. The cut of wrath, the crooked cut, the cross cut, the squinting cut and the parting strike (crown of the head strike). The last does not fall into the general pattern of controlling the sword while striking, but instead controls distance, it being the longest-range strike, delivered to the brow or extremity with extended arms. When two practitioners of the art meet, there is a rapid exchange of these strikes as each combatant struggles to claim the initiative. The use of these strikes however is limited to *bloßfechten* as cuts are not effective against the armour of the day.

These strikes come from the main guard positions of *vom tag* (sword held either above the head or vertically at the right shoulder) *ochs* (hilt next to temple, point towards opponent's face) and *pflug* (hands low, in front of groin on inside of forward leg, point towards opponent's face). These last two are also displacements, allowing control of the opponents blade and the line of engagement.

The next section is the aforementioned sword and buckler chapter. This is based on the same principles as the previous section while also bearing some resemblance to Tower ms I.33, in terms of using the buckler to bind up the opponents arms. Not unexpected considering that the systems are from the same region.

Following the sword and buckler system is a *melange* of grappling techniques. These are largely concerned with unbalancing and throwing the opponent by uprooting the leg. From the format in which they are presented, they are seemingly drawn from a number of different sources rather than one cohesive system. The source for much of the grappling in the German tradition is reported to be from a man named Otto Jud, who was a combat instructor to the Hapsburgs but information about him and his entire system remains elusive.

Following the grappling comes the *harnisfechten*. Here the use of the sword changes radically, using the *halbswert* or, shortened point instead of cutting. The off hand grips the blade about two thirds of the way down the blade, turning the sword into a short spear, used to thrust into the weak points of the armour, also useful for tripping and binding one's opponent. These techniques are illustrated in some texts used unarmoured and those who have tried it say that while it is possible if one grips tightly enough, allowing one's hand to slip is an unpleasant experience. This section also includes the spear section and further grappling techniques, specialised for armoured use.

The last chapter, mounted combat or *roßfechten*, gives techniques for spear, sword and mounted grappling, all from the perspective of *harnisfechten*. These use very similar principles to foot combat, displacing the opponent's weapon or attack while attacking in one movement.

This is a very brief overview of the contents of this seminal set of commentaries, and while I could go into further depth, I fear that the entire journal would be filled. Hopefully further articles in this series will examine individual principles in the system in greater depth than this overview permits.