



“Elegant Solutions to a Simple Problem”

An Analysis of Hans Talhoffer's Messer
by Njall Prince



Introduction

Hans Talhoffer was a German mercenary and fencing master from the 15th century. Although little is known about his training he is often regarded as having links to the Liechtenauer lineage of fencing and also is a suspected member of the Marxbruder fencing guild. Currently, he has four works attributed to him. We will be looking at the section on Messer fencing included in his last fencing manual, published in 1467.

I have selected this section as I believe it serves as an ideal basis for an introduction to HEMA for those looking to investigate the hobby. After only a couple of hours, the new student can start to understand some of the main concepts in historical fencing, namely Footwork, Cutting and develop an understanding of Guards and their application.

The Messer

The German term “Messer” means (when translated literally) “Knife”. In the context of Talhoffer’s treatise, Messer refers to a single edged sword. The term is used due to the similarity between the Messers hilt construction and those which can be observed on knives from the period in which Talhoffer was writing.

The Three Guards

From Talhoffer’s Messer, we can determine three distinct guards which are used. None of these guards are given explicit names but by analysing other systems in the German fencing traditions it is simple enough to identify and label them.

Guard the First - “Vom Tag”



Guards with the blade extended above the head are common in many fencing systems. I have used the term “Vom Tag” (“From the Roof” / “Of the Day”) from the Liechtenauer traditions of

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fencing but the term “Luginslaand” (“Watchtower”) would be just as applicable. This guard naturally lends itself to being the beginning of an Oberhauw (a descending high cut) but other cuts are also possible to execute. Note that the right leg is shown as being forwards while moving into this guard.

Guard the Second - “Nebenhut”



Nebenhut is a low guard which is common in many German fencing systems. Note that the edge of the weapon is held facing forwards, setting up for an Unterhauw (an ascending cut from below). This can also be marked as the endpoint of a cut from Vom Tag. The lead leg shown is the right.

Guard the Third - “Bogen”



“Bogen” (“Bow”) is not included in the plate demonstrating the guards but we see it during the first play. As we can see, it is used as a response to a cut from above and serves as a barrier

for the Defender. Given the popularity of similar “hanging” guards through various fencing traditions throughout the ages, I have seen fit to include it as a third guard.

A note on the term “Guard”

To hear the term “Guard”, it is natural to think of a defensive stance which is used to deflect or prevent an opponent's attacks. This is, however, a limiting view to take. Looking at Talhoffer's fechtbuch, only one of the three guards recorded (Bogen) is used in a defensive manner. When thinking of the guards, it is more beneficial to recognise them as the starting, middle or ending points of cuts from certain positions. For example, a high cut descending cut from the right moves through the following guards;

Vom Tag > Nebenhut

Cutting From the Guards

There are two possible interpretations for how cuts are to be delivered in Talhoffer's system of Messer fighting.

The first is that cuts are delivered while keeping the lead leg forward. Looking at the position of the feet shown in Vom Tag, we can see that the right leg is forward while the fencer is preparing to throw a cut. Compare this to where the fencer has completed his cut in the first plate of the first play and we can see that the right leg is still forwards, suggesting that the cut has been delivered with a gathering step.

The second is that cuts are delivered with a passing step. Looking at the angle of the body of the fencer in Vom Tag compared to the angle when the cut is finished in the first play, we can see that the fencer has turned almost entirely to the left (to allow the mechanics of the body to power the cut). While this is certainly possible, it makes less sense than simply starting in the position facing the left*. In terms of body mechanics, it makes sense that a cut accompanied by a twist in the body such as this is thrown using a passing step.

Both are valid methods of throwing cuts and as the text itself does not supply any further information, I will leave it up to the student to experiment and see what works in practice.

*It is however entirely possible that the orientation of the body was the decision of the artist made in the hopes of being able to better illustrate the stance (rather than just showing a drawing of the fencers back)

The Stance as Observed in Talhoffer

The stance demonstrated in Talhoffer's plates is a simple, balanced affair. The knees are gently bent and the feet placed somewhat wider than the shoulders (maybe one and a half times shoulder width).

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Both fencers are shown with the left arm tucked behind the back. This keeps the arm from being targeted and prevents it from interfering with the fencers own attacks. Also, the application of an arm in the small of the back can be used as a method of support to keep the torso straight, allowing for more power to be generated when delivering a cut.

Due to the artistic limitations of the time, it is difficult to be entirely sure of the orientation of the fencers torsos. Looking at the plates and applying solid fencing principles, it is realistic to surmise that the fencers are turned away from each other, presenting their sides rather than fronts. This minimises the target area for the opponent and also allows for maximum reach when cutting.

Footwork

Looking at the plates, we can assume that two common forms of stepping are used with the Messer.

The Passing Step

To perform a passing step, weight is shifted to the forward foot and the rear foot is brought forwards, reversing the stance. In the first plate of the first play, we can see that the Defender (who has started in Nebenhut with the left foot back) has the left foot in the lead, signifying that a passing step has been made. Passing steps are also evident later in the same play and also in the second play.

The Gathering Step

To perform a gathering step, weight is maintained on the rear foot and the lead foot is sent forward. Once the lead foot is placed, the rear foot is brought forwards to re-establish the previous amount of space between feet. We can surmise the use of gathering steps from the first play. The Attacker has started in Vom Tag (with the right foot forwards) and has completed his cut with the same foot forward.

The Three Plays of Talhoffer

All three plays presented describe ways of defending against an Oberhauw (descending cut) delivered from Vom Tag. These defences all come from the position of Nebenhut.

The First Play

This first play makes use of what would be referred to in modern martial arts as an Arm Rake/Arm Bar. Talhoffer himself names it as “übergryffen” (Over Gripping). The play assumes the Attacker is striking down from Vom Tag and the Defender is in Nebenhut.



The Defender raises into Bogen to defend against the strike. The left arm is brought forwards from behind the back and can be used to support the back edge of the blade. A passing step is used to bring the defender into closer range of the attacker.



The left arm is then looped over the Attackers right forearm and the Defenders forearm puts pressure on the outside of the Attackers elbow. From this position, the Attacker has three available options. First, they can exert pressure on the Attackers elbow joint and break it. Second, they can attack the head with a cut from above as shown in the plate. Or...



Execute a thrust to the belly (or, indeed, any target of choice).

When executing the arm lock, it needs to be applied to the forearm of the opponent. If it is applied higher, say to the bicep region, it loses its efficiency as a joint lock and also allows the Attacker some margin to use their weapon. With the lock applied closer to the Attacker's wrist, it not only allows for the option of breaking the elbow but it also completely immobilises the Attacker's weapon.

The Second Play

The second play introduces the use of an inverted parry and “Ryssen” (wrenching) with the pommel. Both of these techniques can be found in other German fencing treatises. An arm bar is also again used towards the end of the play. As before, the play works on the assumption that the attack has come from Vom Tag and the Defender stands in Nebenhut.



The Defender raises their weapon to stop the attack with a parry. This parry is executed with the outside flat of the blade with the knuckles facing downwards. The sharp edge faced upwards.



The pommel is then hooked over the wrist of the Attacker from the outside and the blades disengaged. This movement is accompanied by a passing step from the Defender which moves them into range to press on the Attacker elbow. When stepping, the lead foot is placed in front of the Attackers leading leg. From here the Defender can pull with the pommel and push with their hand to snap the Attackers arm at the elbow or the Defender can exert a more mild pressure and cast the Attacker over their lead leg (while maintaining control of the Attackers sword arm).

An interesting line occurs with this play in the original text;

“The thrust to the elbow shall one not forget.”

Shall we take this as a reminder to the defender to not neglect the importance of the strike to the elbow or as Talhoffer referring to the extreme pain a broken elbow incurs?

The Third Play

This is the most direct way of dealing with an oberhauw presented by Talhoffer - an unterhauw to the wrist. It requires a fine understanding of distance and time due to the small target presented and the danger the Defender puts themselves in if the defence was to fail. As before the attack comes from Vom Tag and the Defender is in Nebenhut.



In response to the incoming attack, the Defender cuts from below at the wrist of the incoming Attacker. It would be wise to accompany this technique with an offline step in order to move out of the way of the attack (should the defence prove inadequate). Note that the wrist has been entirely severed in the plate, attesting to the sharpness of the weapon.

Out of all the three plays presented, this is the most widely adaptable. A simple strike to an incoming arm, hand or even leg will often be the end of an exchange. The fencer must be quick however as no additional parries are used in tandem.

Summary

The techniques covered in the previous plays can, with some adaptation, be used against attacks from other quarters but I will leave that up to the readers own study.

This system of Messer fighting is exceedingly simple and can be covered in a little under two hours. As an introduction to HEMA in general, it lays down a groundwork of techniques which the observant fencing student will be able to spot in other systems. Take for example the hanging parry in the second play. If the student were to use a similar motion with a double edged weapon (a longsword for example) they will find that not only to they parry the Attackers strike, they also create an opportunity for themselves to send in an attack with their short (reverse) edge.

Specific tools do also not have to be acquired to learn the fundamentals of this system either. For those who are not yet sufficiently engrossed in the study of HEMA, a stout shaft of around 95cm is adequate for learning the principles set down by Talhoffer.

That being said, there are clearly limitations to what can be done with such a simple system but one should never underestimate the use of knowing how to do a small number of things exceedingly well.

Glossary

“Vom Tag” - “From the Roof” or “Of the Day”. A Guard position where the blade is held above the head and points upwards. Comes from the Liechtenauer school.

“Luginslaand” - “Look into the Land” or possibly “Watchtower”. Comes from Leckuchner’s Messer.

“Nebenhut” - “Near Ward”. A guard held to the lower left of the body with the blade and knuckles pointing downwards. Found in many German systems..

“Bogen” - “Bow”. A parry from blow which catches an incoming Oberhauw on the Edge of the blade. From Meyer’s Dussack.

“Oberhauw” - “Over Cut”. A descending cut from above.

“Unterhauw” - “Under Cut”. An ascending cut from below.

“Ubergryffen” - “Over Gripping”. In Talhoffer, this refers to an Arm Lock applied with the left arm. The term is also used for varying techniques in other treatises.

“Ryssen” - “Wrenching”. The use of the pommel to hook/pull an opponent's weapons/arms. The term appears in a number of fencing treatises and mostly has the same application.