

## ‘Tres ictus’ – A Fencing Poem From Before 1412<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** – The article presents a transcription, translation, and analysis of the (re)discovered text of a late medieval Latin mnemonic poem on swordsmanship, containing several vernacular terms, which was probably composed before 1412 in Prague. The history and contents of the volume, as well as its earliest owners, are summarised. The poem itself is accompanied in this article by a possible interpretation of the individual lines, and the text is set in the context of Prague's fencing culture as we know it.

**Keywords** – Late Middle Ages, Bohemia, Czechia, Duelling, Fencing, Fight Books, Mnemonic poem, Latin, Vernacular

### I. INTRODUCTION

Discoveries of previously unknown medieval fight books, referred to in German as *Fechtbücher*, have become increasingly scarce due to the rising number of researchers investigating these sources and the growing accessibility of historical library collections. Future findings are expected to consist primarily of shorter texts embedded within polythematic volumes—works that have received minimal or no scholarly attention during cataloguing, often due to their challenging readability. Such criteria, however, do not apply to the present (re-)discovery. In spite of being catalogued long ago (see below), it has until now remained unnoticed by both the academic community and practitioners of Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA).

The poem, composed of sixteen lines accompanied by an appendix, lacks a formal title. Although the appendix may appear to be an extension of the poem—and may even contain the title ‘Ars dimicatoria’—it is excluded from the poem proper due to its graphical and stylistic separation. While it is theoretically possible that the attribution includes the poem’s title, an alternative designation has been selected based on the incipit, ‘Tres ictus’, as ‘Ars dimicatoria’ is overly general. This phrase may also denote a more extensive, now-lost work from which the preserved lines may represent an extract or

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excerpt. Given the broad nature of such information, no definitive conclusions can currently be drawn.

Moreover, since other works bear the title *De arte dimicatoria*, adopting a more specific name based on the incipit minimises future confusion.<sup>2</sup> It remains uncertain whether this poem constitutes a missing section of Manuscript I.33. Gunterrodt, in his treatise, indicates that the manuscript—at least in its historical form—primarily addresses sword and buckler combat, implying that it may have included at least peripheral discussions of other weapons or weapon combinations.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, both works may have originated from the same source text bearing this title. However, *De arte dimicatoria* is such a generic phrase that, absent further supporting evidence, definitive claims remain elusive.

The text is preserved in Manuscript XIV G 45, housed in the National Library of the Czech Republic, specifically on folio 42 verso.<sup>4</sup> The manuscript comprises ninety-six paper folios, each measuring 21 × 15.5 cm, and contains twenty-three distinct textual units. All entries are written in Latin except for the Czech-language poem *Naše sestra Jana* (*Our Sister Jana*). The entire convolute appears to have been written by a single scribe, likely at intervals. The manuscript is broadly dated to circa 1412, inferred from the text *Miraculum de ducis filio, qui multa de paradisi gaudiis narravit* (fols 34<sup>r</sup>–42<sup>v</sup>), which bears the annotation ‘Anno etc. XIIo’. Additionally, watermark analysis (ox head, bell, human head) suggests a dating range within the second decade of the fifteenth century, with specific related variants recorded between 1410 and 1417.<sup>5</sup> Further confirmation is provided by the explicit in *Regimen sanitatis* (fols 79<sup>r</sup>–84<sup>r</sup>), a work traditionally attributed to Sigismundus Albicus of Uničov but credited in this manuscript to Master Nicholas of Řečice—assuming the damaged name inscription has been correctly deciphered. Nicholas attained his master’s degree in the liberal arts in Prague in 1410.<sup>6</sup> Although the manuscript was produced in Bohemia, additional specifics remain uncertain.

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<sup>2</sup> We are referring to the oldest known European fight book, which received several different designations and which is nowadays known mainly by its shelf mark as MS. I.33, see Cinato and Surprenant, *Le Livre de l'Art du Combat*.

<sup>3</sup> Gevaert, *The True Principles of Combat*, p. 177: ‘Duodecimo: Framea coniuncta pelta, parma, clypeo (quem repperunt Proteus et Acrisus inter se belligerantes, sive Chalcus Athamantiis filius), vel scuto (quod Herodotus lib:4 putat ab Aegyptiis Graecis esse traditum) apud Scotos hodie et Anglos in usu. De quo genere praecipue tractatus Monachi in isto libro, cuius supra memini.’

<sup>4</sup> XIV G 45, fol. 42<sup>v</sup>. For a complete cataloguing record see Doležalová, Dragoun, and Ebersonová, *Středověké knihovny augustiniánských kanonií v Třeboni a Borovanech* pp. 611–15, no. B55. The text of the ‘Tres ictus’ is given here under the alternative title *Versus de arte dimicatoria* on p. 613.

<sup>5</sup> Hoffmann, *Rukopis Státní knihovny ČSR XIV G 45*, p. 185. Hoffmann refers to the following specific variants of the filigranes: Briquet no. 3980, 14710, 15599.

<sup>6</sup> Tráška, *Životopisný slovník předhusitské pražské univerzity 1348-1409*, p. 417.

The convolute has long been acknowledged within Czech historiography, primarily due to its inclusion of vernacular compositions.<sup>7</sup> The earliest reference to the fencing poem appears in the 1906 catalogue of manuscripts from the Prague University Library, where it is listed as ‘*Metra super artem dimicatoriam*’ based on its final line.<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, the manuscript as a whole underwent closer examination and contextualisation by Czech historian František Hoffmann (1920–2015), who attributed its origins to the Prague university milieu, citing its inclusion of student songs and an anti-German treatise. Hoffmann also referenced the fencing poem, describing it as ‘an exposition on the art of fighting or swordplay’.<sup>9</sup> According to the 1959 catalogue of Latin rhymed incipits, this poem exists solely within this single manuscript.<sup>10</sup> However, despite its presence in prior scholarly catalogues, it has hitherto eluded the attention of military historians and the HEMA community.

The wandering of the manuscript across the centuries can only be reconstructed in a fragmentary way. On the front cover there are two entries concerning the burghers of the Moravian town of Jihlava. The first details the death of Vincent Glacz on 28 June 1417. Vincent is written here as ‘de Hohendorff alias de Iglavia’, because his family owned the village of Vysoká (Hohendorf) near Jihlava (Iglavia). He was a wealthy patrician and even became a chamberlain to the Moravian Margrave Jodocus of Luxembourg (1354–1411). The second entry refers to the birth of Vincent’s son Jerome on 25 November 1392. Thus, the manuscript was probably in the possession of Jerome Glacz shortly after its creation. He was a member of the Jihlava town council and often appears as a witness in the records of local town books.<sup>11</sup> It is not known how the manuscript came into the possession of the patricians of Jihlava. František Hoffmann thought that the manuscript may have been brought to Jihlava by a Prague student who found a job in the Jihlava town office.<sup>12</sup> However, a student or a recent graduate could just as well have become, for example, a personal scribe for Vincent Glacz, since a career as a scribe in the service of a wealthy burgher was also relatively common for educated people. In 1424 Jerome fell ill and on 27 November of the same year he had his last will recorded in the town book, from which we learn of his mother Margaret. He bequeathed all his property to her (some of which was to be given to the poor). The text of the will also mentions his sisters Margaret and Dorota, who lived in the town of Brno.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, however, the will is worded too broadly to say whether or not it included any books. Jerome died before 8 March 1425, the date from which the oldest register of the town tax collection is preserved

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Nejedlý, *Dějiny husitského zpěvu*, p. 191.

<sup>8</sup> Truhlář, *Catalogus codicum manu scriptorum latinorum*, p. 339.

<sup>9</sup> Hoffmann, *Rukopis Státní knihovny ČSR XIV G 45*, pp. 185, 189–90.

<sup>10</sup> Walther, *Initia carminum ac versuum medii aevi posterioris latinorum*, no. 19391.

<sup>11</sup> *Book III of the Council*, fols 75<sup>r</sup>, 76<sup>v</sup>, 77<sup>r</sup> (testimonies), 79<sup>va</sup> (executor of the last will of Peschlinus Mautner).

<sup>12</sup> Hoffmann, *Rukopis Státní knihovny ČSR XIV G 45*, p. 190.

<sup>13</sup> *Book III of the Council*, fol. 82<sup>va</sup>.

in the Jihlava archives. In this register, Jerome's name is crossed out under the house No. 46 in the third quarter, and his mother, the widow of Vincent, is written in his place. She paid a very high contribution to the collection, two threescore and 11 groschen, and was forgiven a further 69 groschen because of fire damage. During the siege of Jihlava by the Hussites at the beginning of September 1425, the country estate in the village of Vysoká, which is still called farmstead of Jerome Glac in the same register ('*allodium Jeronimi Glacz*'), was burned to the ground. The amount of the tax contribution indicates an estate of more than 400 threescore groschen before the siege, and still more than 260 threescore after the fire.<sup>14</sup> We can only speculate whether Margaret sold the book from her son's inheritance or, for example, donated it to one of the church institutions in Jihlava. In any case, the trace of the manuscript disappears here, only to reappear almost 200 years later in the library of a powerful South Bohemian nobleman; the ownership record (*ex libris*) of Peter Vok of Rožmberk (1539–1611) from 1609 can be seen on the back cover. Shortly thereafter, the book was probably donated to the Augustinian canon monastery in Borovany, whose ownership record from the beginning of the seventeenth century can be found on folio 1 recto.

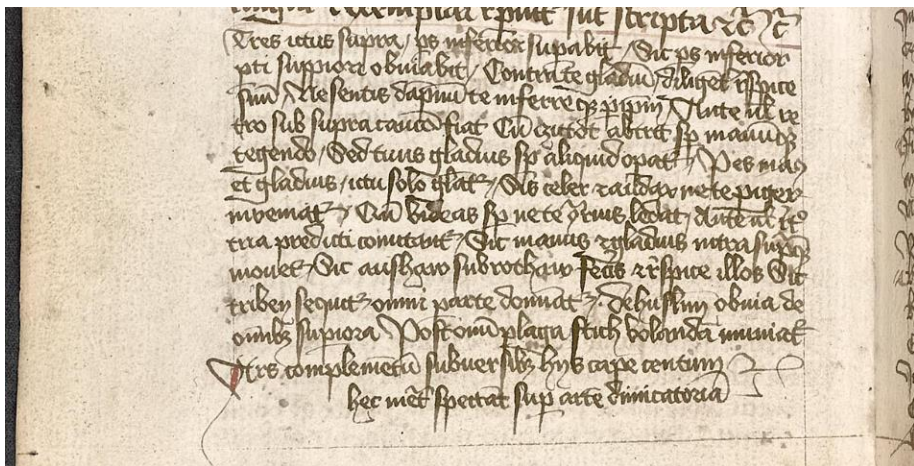


Fig. 1: The poem '*Tres ictus*'. Prague, National Library of the Czech Republic, sign. XIV G 45,

<sup>14</sup> *Archiv český vol 40/1. Rejstříky městské sbírky jihlavské z let 1425–1442*, pp. 29 (house), 56 (country estate). In Jihlava, one groschen was supposed to be paid from a property of two threescores of groschen, but according to František Hoffmann's calculations, it was less in practice. See Hoffmann, *Jihlava v Husitské revoluci*, p. 15. For the sake of interest, let us mention that according to the register, the widow Margaret also accommodated John Schulmeister, an exile from the town of Německý Brod (now Havlíčkův Brod) conquered by the Hussites, in her house in that year. On the siege of Jihlava cf. *ibid.*, p. 175.

## II. TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION

The Latin poem ‘Tres ictus’ is written in the manuscript *in continuo*, meaning that the individual lines are not separated into distinct lines but instead flow continuously, as is typical of prose. As previously noted, the text contains several vernacular terms, specifically German words. The following transcription follows established conventions for processing medieval Latin texts.<sup>15</sup> Where feasible, punctuation has been added in accordance with modern editorial practices for Latin texts of Bohemian provenience. The vernacular terms have been transliterated.

The Latin used in the poem under discussion does not seek to rival the works of the great poets of antiquity or the medieval era. It comprises sixteen (or seventeen)<sup>16</sup> dactylic hexameters, composed in what is now termed *Schenprosodie*—a form of imitation of classical metrical poetry, as opposed to the more prevalent rhythmical poetry of the Middle Ages. This imitation was common among medieval authors, primarily due to their incomplete knowledge of the natural syllabic length of Latin words. Consequently, it is not exceptional within the broader context of medieval literature.

The poem also features numerous rhymes, occurring not only at the end of each line but also at the mid-line position before the caesura. The caesura employed is predominantly penthemimeral, with the sole exception of line §13, which contains a hephthemimeral caesura. The rhymes themselves are largely grammatical—typically regarded as less refined—and appear somewhat unpolished. Additionally, the poem exhibits several grammatical inconsistencies that complicate its comprehension, translation, and interpretation for modern readers. A more detailed analysis of the verses, rhymes, and caesurae follows in the edition of the poem.

	<b>Transcription</b>	<b>Translation</b>
§1	Tres ictus supra pars inferior superabit,	The lower part will overcome the three strikes from above,
§2	sic pars inferior parti superiori obviabit.	thus, the lower part meets the upper part.
§3	Contra te gladium diligenter respice summum,	Watch carefully the point of the sword against you,
§4	ne sentis dampnum te inferreque per ipsum.	lest you feel that through it you will do yourself harm.
§5	Ante vel retro, sub, supra caucio fiat,	Before or after, <sup>17</sup> bellow, above, let the protection be made,

<sup>15</sup> Havel and Krmíčková, *Paleografická čítanka. Literární texty*, pp. 89–93.

<sup>16</sup> Line §17 is a common explicit that was also used to conclude many other Latin texts. Cf. e. g.: Base de dades de Manuscrits Catalans se l'Edat Moderna, Id MCEM 2325, and Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel Manuscript database, Beschreibung von Cod. Guelf. 433 Helmst.

<sup>17</sup> Alternatively ‘Forward or backward’.

§6	cum czittot <sup>18</sup> , abtrit, semper manumque tegendo.	[and] if it trembles, step back and cover [your] hand. <sup>19</sup>
§7	Sed tuus gladius semper aliquid operatur,	Whenever your sword does something,
§8	pes, manus et gladius ictu solo gloriatur.	the foot, the hand and the sword boast a single blow.
§9	Sis celer et audax, ne te piger inveniatur,	Be quick and bold so no one finds you lazy,
§10	quod videas semper, ne te contrarius ledat.	[and] always make sure your opponent does not hurt you.
§11	Ante vel retro tria predicti comitantur:	Before or after, <sup>20</sup> three [principles] are related to the above:
§12	Sic manus et gladius intra supraque movetur;	Thus, the hand and the sword move in inside <sup>21</sup> and above.
§13	Sic aushaw sub rothaw feras et respice illos;	Thus execute <i>Aushaw</i> under <i>Rothaw</i> and watch them.
§14	Sic triben sequitur, omni parte dominatur.	Thus follows <i>Triben</i> , which dominates every part.
§15	De huslun obvia, de omnibus superiora,	From <i>Huslun</i> the opposite, from all the upper,
§16	post omni plaga stich volanda muniatur.	after every flying strike, let the stab be parried.
§17	Ars: complementum sub versibus hiis cape centum.	Art: under these verses, master a hundred completions.
§18	Hec metra spectant super artem dimicatoriam.	These verses belong to the art of fencing.

Through a detailed analysis of select lines, it is possible to identify deviations from expected metrical rules and consider their significance in relation to dactylic hexameter and *Scheinprosodie*. Additionally, we explore the poem's rhyme patterns and the placement of caesurae, both of which contribute to its metrical composition. While the following discussion highlights key irregularities, a comprehensive evaluation of the poem's overall metrical framework, including a full assessment of rhyme and caesura usage, is presented at the end of this section.

<sup>18</sup> Alternatively 'czutot', perhaps erroneously copied as 'czutrit'.

<sup>19</sup> Alternatively 'With step forward, step backward, and always cover [your] hand.'

<sup>20</sup> Alternatively 'Forward or backward'.

<sup>21</sup> Alternatively 'in the middle'.

‘Tres ictus’ is composed in dactylic hexameter, as established through metrical analysis. This determination is based on a detailed examination of the poem’s structure, including syllabic quantity, rhythmic patterns, and the application—or absence—of elision. While certain phrases in lines §2, §4, §13, and §15 would typically be subject to elision under conventional metrical rules, they do not appear to follow this principle. These instances, highlighted in bold below, pose challenges to the expected metrical structure.

- §2      *sic pars inferior parti **suppiori** **obviabit***  
 — —|—u|—||u|—u|—u|—u|—x
- §4      *ne sentis dampnum **te** **inferreque** per ipsam*  
 — —|— —|—||—|—u|—u|—x
- §13     *sic aushaw sub rothaw feras et respic**e** **illos***  
 — —|— —|—u|—||—|—u|—x
- §15     *de huslun **obvia**, **de** **omnibus** superiora*  
 — —|— —|—u|—u|—u|—u|—x

Strict adherence to elision rules would render lines §2, §4, and §13 incompatible with dactylic hexameter. In §4, the line would lack a necessary syllable, while in §2 and §13, it would fail to conclude with a *clausula heroica* (—u|—x). Although an alternative ending (— —|—x) is technically possible in dactylic hexameter, such a structure is exceedingly rare, particularly given the period in which the poem was composed. In §15, while elision might theoretically occur, the line would then lack a caesura (||), a deviation that seems improbable in comparison to the rest of the poem. Therefore, none of these phrases, despite conventionally being subject to elision according to metrical rules, appear to conform to this principle.

As previously noted, ‘Tres ictus’ is composed in dactylic hexameter, employing *Scheinprosodie*—a form of imitation of classical metrical poetry, in contrast to the more prevalent rhythmical poetry of the Middle Ages. In *Scheinprosodie*, syllables with naturally long vowels can be interpreted as either long or short, whereas positionally long syllables must always remain long. However, lines §2 and §15 exhibit exceptions to this rule.

- §2      *sic pars inferior **parti** **suppiori** **obviabit***  
 — —|—u|—u|—u|—u|—x
- §15     *de huslun **obvia** de **omnibus** **superior***  
 — —|—u|— —|—u|—u|—x

In §2, positional length arises due to consonant clusters -RT- (*parti*) and -BV- (*obviabit*). Within *Scheinprosodie*, both syllables should theoretically be long, yet they appear



of the same word in the same form, *gladius* (E), while the second pair ends with the passive present tense suffix *-tur* (F).

Lines §9–§12 follow a similar pattern, with the grammatical rhyme *-tur* recurring at the end of three lines, while line §10 lacks any rhyme. Additionally, line §9 presents a syntactic irregularity (which will be examined separately), and theoretically, one might expect it to contain the same suffix as line §10—namely, the third person singular subjunctive active present tense *-at*, which would create a rhyme (X).

The next three lines (§13–§15) return to Leonine hexameter structures. Line §13 contains rhyming words with the suffixes *-as* and *-os* (G), line §14 features another grammatical rhyme (E), and line §15 includes words ending in *-a* (H).

The final line of the poem (§16) maintains internal rhyme patterns, linking the word before the caesura to the preceding line (H), while the word at the end of the line rhymes with the previous line (E). The line in the addendum (§17) once again follows the Leonine hexameter pattern, with a grammatical rhyme (B).

Line	Rhymes		Metres
	Before the caesura	At the end of the line	
§1	–	A	— —   — —   —    —   — ∪ ∪   — ∪ ∪   — x
§2	–	A	— —   — ∪ ∪   —    ∪ ∪   — ∪ ∪   — ∪ ∪   — x
§3	B	B	— —   — ∪ ∪   —    ∪ ∪   — —   — ∪ ∪   — x
§4	B	B	— —   — —   —    —   — —   — ∪ ∪   — x
§5	C	D	— —   — —   —    —   — —   — ∪ ∪   — x
§6	D	C	— —   — —   —    —   — —   — ∪ ∪   — x
§7	E	F	— —   — ∪ ∪   —    —   — ∪ ∪   — ∪ ∪   — x
§8	E	F	— ∪ ∪   — ∪ ∪   —    —   — —   — ∪ ∪   — x
§9	–	F (X)	— ∪ ∪   — —   —    —   — ∪ ∪   — ∪ ∪   — x
§10	–	– (X)	— ∪ ∪   — —   —    —   — —   — ∪ ∪   — x
§11	–	F	— —   — —   —    ∪ ∪   — —   — ∪ ∪   — x
§12	–	F	— ∪ ∪   — ∪ ∪   —    —   — —   — ∪ ∪   — x
§13	G	G	— —   — —   — ∪ ∪   —    —   — ∪ ∪   — x
§14	E	E	— —   — ∪ ∪   —    —   — —   — ∪ ∪   — x
§15	H	H	— —   — ∪ ∪   —    —   — ∪ ∪   — ∪ ∪   — x
§16	H	E	— —   — —   —    —   — —   — ∪ ∪   — x
§17	B	B	— —   — —   —    —   — ∪ ∪   — ∪ ∪   — x

Table 1: An overview of the rhymes found in ‘Tres ictus’.

The poem presents several problematic areas, primarily falling into two categories: difficulties in deciphering the handwritten notation and grammatical inaccuracies. These issues will be briefly outlined below.

In §2 appears the word *suppiori*, the base form of which is *suppus*, an archaic variant of *supinus*. As the manuscript presents this word without any abbreviation mark, and given that it is a documented form, we retain it in the transcription. However, this is likely a misinterpretation of *superiori*, which aligns better with the context. Consequently, we treat it as *superiori* in the translation, as the two words are, after all, quite similar in meaning.

In §6, the manuscript contains the unusual vernacular word *czittot*. However, this could be a mistranscription of *czutrit*, which seems to align with the context—especially in relation to *abtrit*.

In §9, the previously mentioned syntactic error appears in the phrase *ne te piger inueniatur*. For this phrase to be grammatically correct, the word *piger* would need to be in the accusative (*pigrum*), while the infinitive of the verb *esse* would be omitted. Several possible modifications exist, but the accusative with infinitive construction is the only solution that corrects a single word while preserving the rhyme. Thus, after the emendation, the line would read: *Sis celer et audax, ne te pigrum inueniatur*.

In §8, following the list of nouns, the verb *gloriat* would be expected in the plural form (*gloriantur*). However, the manuscript presents it in the singular, without an apparent abbreviation mark indicating plurality. While this variant is grammatically possible, it represents a case of syntactic contamination, where different grammatical structures influence one another, leading to an irregular form. The same phenomenon occurs in §12 with the verb *moventur*, which appears in the singular despite an expected plural form.

### III. INTERPRETATION

Let us now try to find parallels of this text in other fight books and identify possible interpretations of each line based on such parallels. The first two lines of the poem say that the lower part overpowers the three upper strikes or strikes from above by making the lower part meet the upper part. The reference to three upper strikes probably means two diagonal cuts, one from each side, and a vertical cut from top to bottom. The point of this instruction is to decipher the meaning of the 'lower and upper part' ('pars inferior; pars superior'). At least two interpretations are offered here. Firstly, it may concern the principle that any attack should be defended by the lower part of the front edge of the sword, from the crossguard to the middle of the blade (in German sources called the *Stärke*). This principle is described in the anonymous gloss of Lichtenauer's verses in the

so-called *Nuremberg Hausbuch* as a suitable method of defending, which can be followed up with techniques from the *Winden* category.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, this interpretation aligns with the work of Heinrich von Gunterrodt: ‘As much as you can, you must parry the high blows, or blows coming from overhead (as Julius Caesar says), with the middle or middle-strong of your blade against the opponent’s middle-weak (when you do not have enough strength or “when you are wrangling with a strong man,” as the monks say).’<sup>23</sup> However, one can also consider the word *pars* to be an equivalent to the German *Stück*, which in swordsmanship terminology denotes a technique or series of techniques. In that case, it could be a specific defence with the strike from below (hence the lower technique, coming from below) against the techniques (strikes) from above. In the *Nuremberg Hausbuch* this principle is called the *Vier Versetzen*, because *Oberhängen* based on the end positions of the strikes from below (*Unterhau*) are used against the strikes from above (*Oberhau*) and vice versa.<sup>24</sup> However, the possibility cannot be ruled out that the text is an excerpt from a longer composition and the word ‘supra’ refers to the preceding (and here absent) text in the sense of ‘moreover’.

Lines three and four speak of the necessity of cautiously observing the tip of the opponent’s sword, lest the swordsman use it to harm himself. In the context of general advice on the art of swordsmanship, this is a topos of caution that can be found in other

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<sup>22</sup> Hs. 3227a, fol. 36v: ‘Auch merke und wisse, das man mit der vördern sneiden des swertes vom mittel der selben sneiden bis czu deme gehilcze alle heue ader stiche abewendet. Und e neher eyne eyn hau ader stich czu syme gehilcze kumpt of der selben sneiden mit deme, als her nu gewendet hat dy selbe vörder sneide, e bas und e kreftiger her dy selben heue ader stiche abewenden mag. Wenne e neher czum gehilcze, e sterker und e mechtiger, und e neher czum orte, e swecher und e krenkher. Dorüm wer eyn guter fechter wil seyn, der sal vör allen dingen lernen wol abewenden, wen mit dem, das her wol abewendet, kumpt her czu hant yn dy winden, aus den her wol kunst und höbscheit mag treiben dez gefechtez. Dy vörder sneide am swerte haist dy rechte sneide und alle heue ader stiche sint vortorben mit dem wenden.’

<sup>23</sup> Gevaert, *The True Principles of Combat*, p. 139: ‘Quoad superiores, sive desuper ductas (ut loquitur Julius Caesar) plagas excipere debes tuo medio veruti vel firmo medio (si non satis habeas virium, aut cum robusto sis in lute [recte: lite], ut monachi loquuntur) medium debile veruti adversarii.’

<sup>24</sup> In the source the dialectal form *vorsetzen* is used instead of *versetzen*. Hs. 3227a, fol. 32v: ‘Hie merke, das vier vorsetzen sint czu beiden seiten, czu itlicher seiten eyn obers und eyn ünders, und dy letzen ader brechen alle hutten ader leger. Und wy du von oben ader von unden eyne heue, stiche ader snete mit dem swerte abe leitest ader abweistest, das mag wol heissen vorsetzen. [...] Auch sal eyn guter fechter wol lernen eyne an das swert komen, und das mag her wol tuen mit den vorsetzen, wen dy komen aus den vier heuen, von itzlicher seiten eyn oberhau und eyn underhau, und gen yn dy vier hengen. Wen als bald als eyner vorsetzt von unden ader von oben, zo sal her czu hant yn dy hengen komen. Und als her mit der vördern sneiden alle heue und stiche abewendet, als ist es mit den vorsetzen.’ Ibid, fol. 37r: ‘Hie merke und wisse, das czu itzlicher seiten sint czwey hengen, eyn underhengen und eyn öbirhengen, mit den du eyne wol an das swert magst komen, wen dy komen aus den oberheuen und underheuen.’

works as well.<sup>25</sup> There are also allusions to the necessity of a keen eye, which is a prerequisite for a good swordsman expressed in other texts, for example in the symbolic figure of a fencer with a falcon's head in the manuscript by Paulus Kal.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, however, in other sources we also encounter the opposite advice – that the fencer should fence in such a way as if the opponent had no sword, or as if it could not be seen.<sup>27</sup>

The fifth line begins with the phrase 'ante vel retro', which can be translated in two ways. It may bear the temporal meaning of 'before or after', characterised in German fight books as *vor* and *nach* – which are usually interpreted as a sequence of successive actions, the tempo, or gaining and maintaining the initiative. Some sources use these terms to emphasise the maintenance of the initiative through a series of attacks (*Vorschlag* and *Nachschlag*).<sup>28</sup> Other texts use these terms to explain the two possible timing variations of a response to an opponent's attack that precedes or follows it.<sup>29</sup> Other sources then refer to these terms as categories of techniques that force the opponent to react and those that are a reaction to the opponent's attack.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, it also might bear the spatial meaning 'forward or backward'. Added to these two concepts is the advice that in both cases, i.e. either 'before or after' or 'forward and backward', the swordsman should be performing a cover (parry) below or above. Perhaps this returns the author to the lessons of *Oberhängen* and *Unterhängen*, which can indeed be very well used in all the above-mentioned interpretations of 'ante' and 'retro', stepping before/forward with an attack or retreating after/backward with defence – whether as an attack containing a pre-emptive cover of the most likely trajectory of the opponent's weapon, or as a defence and counter-attack responding to the opponent's strike from above or below.

The sixth line is one of the most difficult to interpret. It combines Latin and vernacular terminology – while 'abtrit' is commonly used for a step backwards away from the opponent (more generally also *Abzug* for the final stage of the fight, disengaging from the opponent), the term 'czittot' causes problems. Perhaps it is some dialectal variant of the third person singular of the German verb *czittern* (to shake). Thus, if there is some unspecified shaking, the swordsman should step back while covering his own hand. Covering the hand while retreating is generally advisable, since the hand often remains

<sup>25</sup> Cf. e.g. Hs. 3227a, fol. 17r: 'Czu allem fechten gehört ... rischeit und kunheit, vorsichtigkeit, list und klugheit, ...' Cf. also depictions of animals or animal body parts that symbolise the qualities of a good swordsman, see MS Ludwig X V 13, fol. 23r; Cgm 1507, fol. 6r.

<sup>26</sup> MS 1825, fol. 6r: 'Ich hab augen als ein valk, das man mich nit beschalk.'

<sup>27</sup> Hs. 3227a, fol. 19v: 'Und meynt, wen eyner stark wil fechten, zo sal her von der linken seiten of fechten mit ganzem leibe und mit ganzcer kraft, czu koppe und czu leibe, wo her nur treffen mag, und nummer czu keym swerte, zunder her sal tuen, zam iener keyn swert habe, ader zam hers nicht sehe ...'

<sup>28</sup> Hs. 3227a, fol. 17v: 'Wen of das gent dy czwey wörter vor noch, das ist vorslag und nochslag, immediate et in una hora quasi unum post reliquum sine aliquo medio.'

<sup>29</sup> See e.g. Cod. I .6.4°.2, fol. 5rv.

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. MS Dresd.C.487, fols 15r–16r.

within range of the opponent as a protruding target while the rest of the body is out of immediate danger. Parallels with other works on fencing from around the same period (1400–1450) are not easy to find in this case. We can perhaps only mention Lichtenauer's verse concerning the execution of the *Krummbau* (according to contemporary orthography 'Krumphau') as a parry by deflecting the opponent's attacking blade: 'Wen is klitzt oben, / stant abe, das wil ich loben.'<sup>31</sup> This verse, however, is not satisfactorily explained in the glosses of Lichtenauer's successors, and it is therefore impossible to assess whether a similar principle may be involved here.<sup>32</sup> However, one must also consider the possibility that the word 'czittot' was misspelled and 'czutrit' – i.e. step forward – should have stood here. In such a case, the line urges precautionary covering in any tactical situation, which is – again – generally advisable.

The seventh and eighth lines speak of the need for coordination of the weapon and the swordsman's entire body in any action. A similar idea can be found among the opening lines of the Lichtenauerian *Zettel*, but there the emphasis is mainly on coordinating actions on the same side of the body – a cut from one side is to be accompanied by a step of the same foot. The line of the piece under study emphasises the question of temporal coordination (timing).<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to the relatively practical advice of the previous lines, the ninth and tenth lines are more theoretically oriented. As explained above, fencing manuals often list the qualities that an ideal fencer should possess. Here, the duo of the most important ones is mentioned – speed and courage.<sup>34</sup> Contrasted with these is laziness (figuratively speaking), passivity, and loss of initiative, which significantly increases the risk of injury and defeat.

Line eleven says that whether 'before' or 'after' (alternatively 'forward' or 'backward'), the above-mentioned advice is accompanied by a trio of techniques or principles captured in the following three lines, each of which begins with the word 'sic' (thus). The first of these three principles is hidden in line twelve, namely that the hand and sword should move 'inside and above'. Presumably, what is meant by this is the ideal bind, where the swordsman's weapon is inside or closer to the connecting (central) line

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<sup>31</sup> Hs. 3227a, fol. 25<sup>v</sup>: 'Hau krump czu flechen / den meistern, wiltu sie swechen. / Wen is klitzt oben, / stant abe, das wil ich loben.'

<sup>32</sup> Sigismund Ringeck explains it as a strike from the bind after the successful performance of the 'Krummhau zur Fläche', see MS Dresd.C.487, fols 25<sup>v</sup>–26<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> See e.g. Hs. 3227a, fol. 19<sup>v</sup>; Cod.44.A.8, fols 10<sup>r</sup><sup>v</sup>. A similar principle is found, for example, in Japanese fencing, where it is called *ki-ken-tai-ichi*.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. e.g. Hs. 3227a, fol. 17<sup>r</sup>: 'Czu allem fechten gehört ... rischeit und kunheit, vorsichtikeit, list und klugheit, ...' Cf. also depictions of animals or animal body parts that symbolise the qualities of a good swordsman, see MS Ludwig XV 13, fol. 23<sup>r</sup>; Cgm 1507, fol. 6<sup>r</sup>. Cf. also depiction of *presteza/celeritas* and *ardimento/audatia* in the work of Fiore dei Liberi, see MS Ludwig XV 13, fol. 32<sup>r</sup>; Pisani Dossi MS (without signature), fol. 17<sup>r</sup>.

of the two opponents, while the opponent's weapon is pushed outside, or to the side. At the same time the swordsman's weapon is higher than the opponent's weapon, which gives him an advantage in the bind, since the strong of his blade (the *Stärke*) binds the opponent's weaker part (the *Schwäche*). A typical case of the application of this principle from the Lichtenauer doctrine is the *Absetzen*, using *Winden* to move to the *Ochs* position.

While the pitfall of most of the lines is that they are too general, the thirteenth line introduces a specific technique, 'Aushau', to be used in response to another specific technique, 'Rothau'. The difficulty here, however, is that we do not know the names of these techniques from any other sources. We write 'the names' deliberately because the techniques are likely to be described in other sources, but under a different name. The only clues we have are the following facts – in both cases it is a cut (*-han*), although it might not be necessarily a cut aimed directly at the target.<sup>35</sup> We also know that 'Aushau' is made under or from under 'Rothau'. 'Rothau' could theoretically be a type of strike that knocks the opponent's weapon aside and downwards, putting him at a disadvantage or beating it aside completely.<sup>36</sup> An 'Aushau', then, based on the name, could be a strike that the swordsman uses to leave – or 'cut away' – from a disadvantageous bind.<sup>37</sup> Such techniques, which leave a disadvantageous bind from below or underneath with a cutting movement, are called *Abschneiden* or *Schnappen* in the sources of the Lichtenauer tradition.<sup>38</sup>

The fourteenth line then names another vernacular term – 'treiben' – which 'dominates every part'. The verb *treiben* is used in the other manuals for the execution of any technique, so its meaning may be very general and broad. Without discovering new parallels to the text under study, there is no way to determine whether the term is used similarly broadly here, or whether a specific technique or principle lies behind it. If we proceed on the theory that the 'part' in question is any technique (*Stück*) then it is probably a very general principle. As a possibility, we can look at the work in the bind in general and, in particular, at the concept of *Schiessen* from the Lichtenauer tradition, which is indeed very universal and, with some exaggeration, can be said to 'dominate every technique'. However, if by 'part' is meant, for example, a part of the blade in the sense of

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<sup>35</sup> For example, Lichtenauer's techniques *Zornbau*, *Krummbau* and *Schielbau* are often described as cuts that strike or block the opponent's sword and the target (opening) is hit afterwards with a following thrust.

<sup>36</sup> Such techniques are usually referred to in fencing manuals as *Verhauen* (see e.g. MS Dresd.C.487, fols 37<sup>v</sup>, 39<sup>r</sup>) or *Überwinden* (see e.g. Cod.I.6.4<sup>o</sup>.2, fol. 4<sup>r</sup>). The Lichtenauer's *Krummbau zur Fläche* also corresponds to them in principle.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. e.g. the *Auswinden* technique, which is described in dagger fighting as twisting the dagger out of the opponent's hand, see Hs. 3227a, fol. 84<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> The general principle of leaving the disadvantageous bind cf. Hs. 3227a, fol. 21<sup>v</sup>. The *Durchwechsell* technique could also be considered, but it is more often associated with stabbing counterattacks than with cuts.

strong and weak (*Schwäche/Stärke*), this would probably be a different principle associated with work in the bind.

The above quatrain could perhaps be summarised as follows. Whether the swordsman has gained the initiative by attacking or is trying to take it via a successful defence and counter-attack/riposte, he should always try to hit the opponent along the shortest (inner) trajectories. He should also try to gain advantage in the bind, and if he finds himself in a disadvantageous bind, he should leave it with an appropriate cutting move.

The cryptic form of the fifteenth line makes it impossible – at least for the time being – to understand its message. It is only necessary to mention the vernacular term ‘huslun’, which could perhaps be translated into modern German as *Häuschen* (small house). But whether it is a technique, a guard, or something else, the lines themselves do not say. It is likely that this line forms a sentence with the line that follows, and interpretation of it lies in this connection. The final, sixteenth line speaks of the need to cover the thrust (‘stich’) after each attack (‘flying blow’). The fifteenth line can thus perhaps advise from which position to choose the trajectory of the thrust, whether in or out of the bind. Here again, we can consider the connection with the *Schiessen* principle, which reduces the possibility of both opponents mutually striking one another by having the swordsman lead the first attack in front of the opponent. Only after successfully gaining the upper hand in the bind, or after advantageously leaving the bind, with his own point directed at the opponent and the opponent's being deflected aside, does the fencer continue to attack with the point. A typical application of this principle in the Lichtenauer tradition is the *Zornbau* technique.

The addendum after the text then says that the lines are a kind of essence, on the basis of which the whole can be understood. The author may have meant that the preserved lines are either a fragment or an excerpt from a longer poem. However, the addendum can also be interpreted to mean that the entire art of fencing can be understood on the basis of these verses. Such a note could be added after virtually any instruction manual or practical text, because through the analysis of individual examples the principles behind them can be understood, and through their interrelations the whole system can be gradually comprehended in a synthetic way.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The fundamental task for any attempt to understand the poem is the attempt to place it in its proper context. The context of the source itself (the history and composition of the manuscript) has already been discussed in the introduction. When compared with other swordsmanship texts, ‘Tres ictus’ is, at first glance, similar to the ‘Hec sunt guardiae in dimicatione videlicet’ text contained in the University of Toronto Library manuscript MS

01020.<sup>39</sup> However, the texts are distant in content; the Toronto manuscript contains only instructions on the guard a swordsman should take depending on the guard of his opponent. The scope of ‘*Tres ictus*’, despite its small size, is much broader – indeed, one might say more general – and therefore more systematic. Each text is probably also concerned with a different weapon; the Toronto manuscript probably belongs to the swordplay of the one-handed sword and the buckler, whilst ‘*Tres ictus*’ is more probably concerned with the longsword (see below). What both texts have in common, however, is that they introduce into the Latin setting the vernacular names of stances and techniques, thus showing the intermingling of universal and vernacular language in attempts to theorise something as essentially practical as the martial arts. The same problem arises when trying to compare the text under study with a Latin work often called the *Tower Fechtbuch*, which also describes fencing with a one-handed sword and a buckler and contains both mnemonic verses and explanatory prose glosses. No overlap between the two texts in terms of specific terminology has been identified.

As far as the practical context is concerned, many questions remain unanswered. For example, we do not know for sure which weapon the text refers to. At the time, the so-called longsword was already common in Central Europe, but we also still encounter the shorter one-handed sword, which in a fencing context was usually accompanied by a buckler in the other hand. Moreover, there is no clear boundary between the two types of swords. At the time, a sword with an overall length of approximately 100–115 cm was common in Bohemia, which could be used relatively well with one or both hands.<sup>40</sup> The poem itself contains no clear guidance, only the absence of explicit references to a shield of any description leads us rather towards a weapon that is primarily held with both hands. It could be argued that some lines (§ 6, 8 and 12) contain the word ‘*manus*’ in singular form. However, we do not consider this argument to be too strong, since other texts that do refer to a two-handed sword are relatively lenient in this regard.<sup>41</sup>

Questions about the intended use of the text are also difficult to answer. Only in very general terms can it be said that the fencing verses served as a mnemonic device for remembering already known and learned material. Such verses were almost always incomprehensible on their own, and in order to be understood they were very often accompanied in other sources by relatively detailed prose glosses, which is noticeably absent in the case of ‘*Tres ictus*’. It is therefore not possible to consider the martial context of the techniques, that is to say whether the art described is more suitable for the situation of an official judicial duel (ordeal) or urban self-defence. Fight books are more commonly situated in the circumstances of a judicial duel, even if such duels were practically no

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<sup>39</sup> MS 01020, fol. 105r.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. e.g. Hošek, Košta, Žákovský, and Gaul, *Ninth to Mid-Sixteenth Century Swords from the Czech Republic in their European Context*, passim.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. e.g. Hs. 3227a, fol. 23r: ‘Funf heue lere / von der rechten hant’; ibidem, fol. 37r: ‘Czwey hengen werden / aus eyner hant von der erden.’

longer taking place at the time of the source's composition. This is also the case in Bohemia, since the judicial duel as a means of proof was gradually abandoned in both municipal and land law during the second half of the fourteenth century.<sup>42</sup> A purely sportive context can probably be ruled out, as the use of thrusts, which were too dangerous in contrast to slashes and cuts, was generally forbidden in sporting matches.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, a fencer may temporarily exclude some techniques from his repertoire for the purpose of a sporting match.

If the manuscript was indeed written in Prague, it can perhaps be cautiously linked to the relatively lively local fencing scene. The first documented fencing master at the court of the Bohemian king was Jodocus, whose engagement can be traced back to 1399. Given the connection of Prague swordsmen to the local cutlers' guild, it is possible to consider that he is identical with cutler Jodocus of Nisa and also with the master of the same name (Jost von Neisse), who is listed in the *Nuremberg Compendium* – better known under the inaccurate name of *Döbringer's Fechtbuch* – among the authors of the text called 'Ander meister gefechte'.<sup>44</sup> Of course, we cannot forget the master Lamprecht of Prague ('Lamprecht von Prag'), who is mentioned in several sources as a member of the so-called Society of Liechtenauer. However, the assumption that this master worked in Prague is not justified, nor is it entirely certain that he came from Prague at all. A direct connection between the poem's author and well-known Prague swordsmen may not have existed. It cannot be automatically assumed that the author must have understood the meaning of the poem at all. Therefore, it could have been an unrelated copy of something that just happened to come into the scribe's hands and he found it interesting enough to copy. Similar practices are recommended by contemporary authors. For example, the surviving *Nuremberg Manual of Good Conduct on the Road* from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century encourages readers as follows: '... and if you find something nice written down, copy it down so that you can teach it to your children one day.'<sup>45</sup>

If the dating and other conclusions regarding the text presented here are correct, then the oldest mnemonic text of longsword swordplay from the German cultural milieu has been (re)discovered. 'Tres ictus' is an interesting milestone in the process of textualisation, intellectualisation, and codification of the fencing art, but interpretively it

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<sup>42</sup> See summary of the development of the use of duelling as a means of proof in Bohemia in Vodička, *Dy kunst gelopt vor ritter und knechten*, p. 25.

<sup>43</sup> For later bans on thrusting in sporting duels, see Jaquet, 'Die Kunst des Fechtens in den Fechtschulen', p. 255.

<sup>44</sup> The presence of the fencing master Jodocus (Jošt) at the court of Wenceslas IV in 1399 is mentioned by Tomek, *Dějepis města Prahy*, p. 50. The writings of 'Ander meister gefechte' survive in two versions: Hs. 3227a, fols 43r–52v (ca. 1400–1430); MS E.1939.65.341, fols 27r–29v (1508). See a partial edition and translation in Vodička, 'The Myth of Gemeinefechten', pp. 97–98.

<sup>45</sup> Polívka, 'Reiseanweisung für einen jungen Mann aus dem Spätmittelalter', p. 670, no. XVI.

is one of the most difficult texts known, and a number of theories about its content could be developed.

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