

## The true edge: a comparison between self-defense fighting from German “*fight-books*” (*Fechtbücher*) and the reality of judicial sources (1400-1550)

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**Abstract** – The article discusses the “self-defense” techniques presented in fight-books and treaties. The objective is to determine if these techniques take the reality of fight in account, to evaluate the difference between theory and practice in remaining safe during an aggression. In order to do so, this work uses crossed analysis, with remission letters (judicial sources) studied in the light of the knowledge contained in the fight-books. This study is based on the sorting out of weapons, wounds, and times of death found in remission letters (the data of real fight). In parallel, the theorization of fight in treaties will be taken in account.

**Keywords** – fight-books, remission letters, self-defense, weapons, wounds.

Today, it’s quite common to differentiate the fighting practices in three main categories: sports fighting, in which conventions lead to designate a winner ; martial arts, in which respect of tradition of weapons and of dueling is more important ; and the self-defense approach, in which, as opposite to to dueling, the fight is often unbalanced and the goal most often unclear. Fight-books from the 14<sup>th</sup> century up to the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> partly deal with all these topics. If the Italian tradition from Fiore dei Liberi<sup>1</sup> to Achille Marozzo (1536) is also important, we will however rather focus on the so-called German tradition in order to show elements unique to a self-defense approach. In fact, the German masters of the end of the medieval and Modern period don’t single out self-defense. It is not a specific part of their work on the art of fighting, codified in their treaties and fight-books (*Fechtbücher*). It is indeed completely integrated in the vision of fencing artists, as the art of defense remains the true and official goal of fencing during most of its history.

Etymologically, the first concept of fencing is included in the old term of *skirmjan* (to defend, to protect). As Hans-Peter Hils says, *Schirmen* was a word used alongside the one of *Fechten*, however more with the idea of defending and not fighting, or protecting oneself with the sword and the shield (Hils, 1985:244-247). Originally, fencing is above all the art of defense and in a second time an art of attack. Why ? Because fencing is the art of using correctly a weapon and without weapon it is impossible to defend oneself correctly. This is the message conveyed by status concerning the carrying of weapons in order to defend oneself inside cities (Tlusty, 2011: 133-165). This idea is equally found into the slogan “*Pour la defense et tuicion de leur corps*” (for the defense and the protection of their body), justifying the using of a weapon in judicial sources. These are mainly remission letter, a judicial document given by an authority (regarding our corpus of

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<sup>1</sup> For example:Fiore Dei Liberi, circa 1410 (*Fior di Battaglia*, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, MS Ludwig 15 13).

documents, either the King of France or the Duke of Burgundy), in which the person guilty of a crime is forgiven for his action, often a murder or a homicide. If the originals are lost, we can study copies from the registers of Court of Auditors found into different archives centers<sup>2</sup>. In these, the *suppliant* (the supplicant) sets out the development and the reasons of his crime. In a short report, he gives the time of the day, the people involved, the reason of the fight and, most important for us, the weapons used, the wounds and the body parts stricken. This type of documents, thanks to the information contained therein, is well known by historians working on history of violence, social or judicial history, (Petit-Dutaillis 1908, Muchembled 1989, Gauvard 1991, 2005, Pareysis 1998, Nassiet 2011). Although weapons are more and more taken in consideration in recent studies (Raynaud 2012), few of these are however precisely interested in the gesture and circumstances of aggression. And when they do, it is often from a psychological, not technical, point of view. The study of wounds themselves is not new, still it addresses concerns essentially the paleopathology domain (study of bones and wounds) (Mounier-Kuhn 2006, Cooper 2010, Ali Bacha 2012), leaving the martial aspect aside – also perhaps because clear indications and infirmation seem to be rare.

The combined study of fight-books, fencing treaties and remission letters from same period and near countries<sup>3</sup>, allows to raise relevant questions and to understand what could be the important parameters to be considered during a fight. Remission letters furthermore give us a better idea of the true criminality and of a “realistic” use of weapons. For example, today practitioners of historical martial arts of fencers don’t build their knowledge on the same fundamentals that their counterparts of the medieval period. The fear of injury is a principal parameter obfuscated by the wearing of protections and often recalled by people interested by historical fencing competitions or *Fechtschulen* (school of fighting), where the goal was to win with artful and skill and not only thanks to points marked by touches (Norling, 2012). Remissions letters show that people, whether they are civilians or military men, are afraid of the possibility of injury. Only one showing great courage, utter despair or under the influence of alcohol have random reactions. These factors play a great part in the course of the fight, and indeed some masters are aware of their importance. It is thus noticeable at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century: for instance, Georges Silver recommends that in order to be accepted, a new foreign master must fight with “*three of the best English Maister of Defense, & three [...] unskillful valiant men and [...] three resolute men half drunke*” (Silver, 1599:3).

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<sup>2</sup> For our study we studied approximately more of 700 remission letters, principally from the center of Archives départementales du Nord of Lille, henceforth noted ADNord, registers of the Chambre des Comptes, B 1681-B 1761, concerning a period between 1387-1550. And some other from the Archives nationales de France of Paris, henceforth noted AN, registers JJ 130-JJ 173, between 1387 and 1425.

<sup>3</sup> If the fight-books in this study mainly come from the Germanic area, the weapons and techniques shown can be found in a larger geographical area, and a chronological period corresponding to the Burgundian Netherlands. This is why it is possible to compare them with remission letters dating from the 15th century and first half of the 16th.

Unfortunately, fight-books don't speak about this type of elements and treat more systematically of the art of dueling, a fight prepared with identical weapons on each side. However, some authors have caught our attention with the exhibition of some techniques with mixed weapons and solutions to win a fight despite an uncomfortable position. This is especially what master-at-arms Hans Talhoffer shows us with different illustrations, although shabbily commented in one of his manuscript<sup>4</sup>. So does Albrecht Dürer<sup>5</sup>. Fortunately, Paul-Hector Mair presents in this books a dozen of plates accompanied with interesting sequences. <sup>6</sup>

Thus, our question would be more about a technical approach of this type of fighting, in order to answer the everlasting question: what is the part of reality in fight-books compared to the clues left by judicial sources? After a presentation of the context of an aggression and of used weapons, we will talk about the technical aspects of this type of conflict. Finally, in comparison to remission letters, we will see if these techniques could have been a useful respond during a true fight.

## I. THE SELF-DEFENSE CONTEXT: SPECIFIC SITUATIONS OR SPECIFIC WEAPONS ?

Remission letters reflect different types of fights which have a relation with self-defense; we must therefore begin by defining what self-defense means. Self-defense is the way to fight efficiently against an aggressor, with a defensive attitude. The goal is to remain safe, but not necessarily to get victory through the death of the opponent. This attitude is officially the conduct to have, but reply to weapons by weapons can be a solution, following the adage: "the best defense is the attack". A problem for the society of the late medieval and early Modern period is that a lot of people wore weapons for their defense, principally when they are outside the cities or out in the evening, on their way home. An old dispute or a real fear can be an occasion of a tragic gesture: for example Gilles Briffault is followed by a man he doesn't recognize. As he is in conflict with another person, he thinks he is going to be assaulted from behind. Taking the initiative,

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<sup>4</sup> Hans Talhoffer, 1459 (Königliche Bibliothek, Kopenhague, Thott 290 2<sup>o</sup>) fol.75r-79v. Cf. Hils's catalog: 27, Lengs's catalog: 38.3.4.

<sup>5</sup> Albrecht Dürer, circa 1512, (Albertina, Vienna, Ms.26-232) fol.87r-91r. Cf. Hils's catalog: 45, Lengs's catalog: 38.9.11. Edited by Dörnhöffer (1909).

<sup>6</sup> Essentially two versions were used for this present work. The first in German: Paul-Hector Mair, mi 16tha (Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Dresden, ms Dresd C.93) fol.227r-232v. Cf. Hils's catalog: 15, Lengs's catalog: 38.8.3. The second in Latin: Paul-Hector Mair, mi 16<sup>th</sup>c (*De Arte Athletica*, Munchen, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod.icon.393, t. I) fol.186v-187r, pl.22-23; fol.188v, pl.24; fol.217r-fol.222v, pl.1-12. Hils's catalog: 34. A third version exist mixing Latin and German, Paul-Hector Mair, mi 16<sup>th</sup>d (*Österreichische Nationalbibliothek*, Vienna, Cod.Vindob.10825/10826). Cf. Hils's catalog: 51, Lengs's catalog: 38.8.4. Some parts are edited, *Knight-Hunt* (2008).

he turns around and, with his dagger, stabs the man following him, a city sergeant...<sup>7</sup>. But such a case remains uncommon, as are true aggressions, the like of which it is impossible to escape from. Cases involving multiple stabs with a dagger or a poniard are not mere aggression, but real assassination, such as this old man, attacked from behind and stabbed seven times with a dagger<sup>8</sup>. Also, remission letters show a lot of cases of brawls and scuffles, in which it is not always possible to know who stroke who.

Fight-books show a few solutions of defense against several opponents. In the Ms.3227a<sup>9</sup>, the author gives some advice to fight against several peasants (*parren*) and especially running away<sup>10</sup>... In fact, remission letters generally present aggression contexts close to those shown in fight-books, the duel, one against one, or two or three people against a same number of opponents. Surprisingly, the attack is rarely sudden, either in an ambush or a street fight. When the goal isn't clear and the protagonists both armed, the first blow is not immediate. One can really distinguish an approach time, like the *zufechten* of German masters, just before the first attack and a weapons engagement.

Obviously, it is possible to fight with the same type of weapons and it's often the case for the fight with dagger, or little knife. Whenever one of the two opponents is unarmed, the case is one of self-defense, in remission letters, and also as appears in fight-books. But in the latter, we don't find how to fight with bare hands against a swordsman or a spearman. Indeed, remission letters show the real difficulties to defend against blows given by these weapons: fingers cut with hands in protection, holes in clothing, wounds...<sup>11</sup>. This can explain the absence of this type of confrontation in the fight-books. Only in far later books specifically about self-defense can we find solutions, although we are quite far from true duel fencing techniques<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, for a master-at-arms of the late middle ages and early modern period, only a dagger and then a poniard can be faced without weapons. For example, in the German tradition, a lot of techniques allow to stop a stab or sometimes to

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<sup>7</sup> *Un homme vestu d'un tabbart qui hastivement venoit après lui. Comme il lui sembloit et en regardant derrière lui comme tout surpris et en grant crainte pour certain débat qu'il avoit certain temps paravant eu sur son corps deffendant. Cuidant que ce feust aucun de ses hainneux, se retourna devers ledit homme qui ainsi le poursuivoit non sachant quel homme que cestoit, ne qu'il fust sergent ou autre homme de justice. Fors qu'il pensoit et creoit fermement qu'il venist pour le ferir, tuer ou vilener; et ainsi que ledit homme s'aprochoit dudit suppliant, icellui suppliant tira sa dague et feri après lui. Mais il ne sceut bonnement s'il le blecha ou non obstant l'effrayeur et la grant crainte qu'il avoit.* In ADNord, (B 1688, fol.15r-15v), Lille, August 1458.

<sup>8</sup> *Une matinée, par voye de fait et d'aguet apensé, vint audit feu [Bouchart father] qui lors estoit de l'aage de LXXVI ans et plus, et par derriere, ainsi qu'il yssoit de sa maison, lui donna sept coups de dague, et telement le navra que cinq jours après il ala de vie a trespas.* In ADNord, (B 1689, fol.19v-20r), Bruxelles, June 1459.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous, circa 1389 (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg, Ms 3227a), Hils's catalog: 41.

<sup>10</sup> About the fight alone against several opponents, see Hubert (2011, 103-116).

<sup>11</sup> This is what happens at a man-at-arms, Clais de Remerswale, when he must fight without weapon against two men, the first with a vouge, the second with a sword. In ADNord (B 1695, fol.6r à 6v), Nimègue, August 1473

<sup>12</sup> For example, *Against a halberd, not having weapons, taking it out of his hand, or throw him your mantel*, Quintino (1614:8).

prevent an opponent to unsheathe his weapons<sup>13</sup>. Like Paul-Hector Mair specifies it, the dagger is useful for staying in life<sup>14</sup>. Thus, techniques also contain a lot of specific situations, particularly the close range fighting which is found in judicial sources: the situation where one of the protagonists takes the other by his chest with his left hand in order to stab with his right hand<sup>15</sup>. But, this is only possible, despite the length blade of poniard, because one can stop a strike by taking the wrist, without being hit.

Technically, the length of the blade is important: *le suppliant* (suppliant) who asked the remission often specifies the type of weapons: a little knife, a long dagger, a sharp knife, a little knife to cut bread... This detail is useful, because we know that weapons used in fight-books are principally poniard or fight dagger<sup>16</sup>, with long blade and roundels guard<sup>17</sup>. Thrusts are essentially used. Finally, bare hands techniques against dagger illustrate one of the central points of self-defense: as opposite to a duel, the aggressor is known as the one who wears a weapon from the start of the fight.

A lot of things differ when both of the opponents are armed with different weapons. Logically, the aggressor would be the one with the weapon with the more practical range, allowing to hit his opponent first<sup>18</sup>. Remission letters tend to confirm this. However, if the great Italian master Fiore Dei Liberi gives techniques with a sword against a dagger, where following this logic, the swordsman attacks first, the presence of a counter shows that to defend oneself with a simple dagger can appear possible...and that close range fighting with the dagger can be a serious danger for one who has his sword sheathed<sup>19</sup>. It is true that range is one of the most important points: each weapon can be used between a minimal and maximal range of combat – which is why sword fighting in these fight-books is all-inclusive, between long-range thrusts and close-distance wrestling entries.

One interesting hypothesis would be that Paul-Hector Mair bases his reasoning on this specific consideration of distance. Indeed, in his works, all weapons of different sizes are presented: dagger, dussack, longsword, halberd (weapon used for cutting and thrusting), spear and half-pike (weapons principally used for thrusting). He also adds in

<sup>13</sup> For example, Meyer (1570:about poniard, ch.4, p.10)

<sup>14</sup> *Hatt vil vortails. so zu der erhaltung des lebens diennet*:“It has a lot of advantages, when it used preserves the life”. In Mair, (mi 16<sup>th</sup>a: fol.17v).

<sup>15</sup> For exemple, Mair (mi 16<sup>th</sup>b:fol.30r, pl.4 and fol.46r, pl.20).

<sup>16</sup> Tolchen odder Kaempfftegen, Anonymous (1531:31)

<sup>17</sup> Filippo Di Vadi precises:mesura de daga:La longeza de la daga vol essere fin a el gomito con un taglio e dui cantoni, el manico vol esser d'uno somesso como apare la forma d'essa dopenta qui di sotto:“Measure of the dagger:The length of the dagger wants-be up-the elbow, with one sharp edge and two edges, the handle wants-be of one somesso-(longer of an open hand) as it appears the form of it painted here below”. In Filippo Di Vadi, 1482 (De arte gladiatorial dimicandi, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Rome,Cod.1324) fol.38v, translation Cesari Luca and Rubboli Marco.

<sup>18</sup> For example Fiore Dei Liberi, 1409 (Flos duellatorum, Pisani Dossi collection, Milan) fol.34r-35r.

<sup>19</sup> Id. *ibid.* fol.34v-35r.

his Latin version a part about the rapier against a hunting spear<sup>20</sup>. As usual, Mair is more prolific about this subject than his predecessors Hans Talhoffer<sup>21</sup> and Albrecht Dürer<sup>22</sup>. The latter is more traditional, giving only some techniques combining dagger, *messer* (long knife) and longsword<sup>23</sup>. On the other hand, Talhoffer is more varied, showing three techniques with the longsword against a spear<sup>24</sup> and two against a vouge<sup>25</sup>. More originally, he shows the single handed sword (*messer*) against an “iron hand” (type of war hammer) <sup>26</sup>, as well as three techniques against a spear, where hat and dagger are thrown to the opponent’s face<sup>27</sup> ! In remission letters, if a lot of glasses or pewter pots can be thrown during a brawl in a tavern, like stones or clods outdoor, who would risk of losing his only weapon?

In any case, this type of fight is “asymmetrical” and no weapon seems to be more advantageous than the other. But in fight-books, rare are the authors clearly interested in this question until the development of the rapier<sup>28</sup>. What is important is to know if people of this period were aware of the possible advantage of each type of weapons and what this advantage could be? The answer is surely yes, the type of weapons and their size have a psychological and technical importance. For example, in the *Cent Nouvelles nouvelles*, a Scottish bowman is impressive with his “*grande, forte et bonne espée a deux mains*” (big, strong and good two-hand sword)<sup>29</sup>. In a remission letter, a supplicant justifies his action to defend his father, because this one was assaulted by a swordsman. His father, only armed with a dagger, was for him disadvantaged. That is why he takes a partisan<sup>30</sup> and strikes the assailant's head<sup>31</sup> . Thus, the main advantage given by a weapon seems to be reach: being able to hit your opponent without danger is surely a good thing. Like often, though, in real life fighting, a lot of factors impossible to measure influence the outcome.

<sup>20</sup> Mair (mi 16<sup>th</sup>c:fol 188v, pl.24)

<sup>21</sup> see note 4.

<sup>22</sup> see note 5.

<sup>23</sup> A links can be done between a *messer* / longsword technique from another manuscript: Anthonius Rast, 1553 (Stadtarchiv, Augsburg, Schatze 82 Reichsstadt) fol.44r. Cf. Hils's catalog: 1, Lengs's catalog: 38.8.1.

<sup>24</sup> *Spieß*, sometimes a spear for hunting, Talhoffer (1459:fol.75r-76r).

<sup>25</sup> Precisely an *hellenbarten* or a vouge model, *id. ibid.* fol.76v and 77v.

<sup>26</sup> *Id. ibid.* fol.79r-79v

<sup>27</sup> *Id. ibid.* fol.77r, 78r and 78v.

<sup>28</sup> We would say today a “side sword”. George Silver wrote a chapter titled “*Of the vantages of weapons in their kinds, places, & times, both in private and publike fight, where he explains why this type of weapons has the vantage against another.*” Silver (1599:30)

<sup>29</sup> Anonymous (mi 15<sup>th</sup>), *Les Cent Nouvelles nouvelles* (1928:48-53).

<sup>30</sup> A spear type with a long head.

<sup>31</sup> *Et lors son dit filz, véant que ledit Fermaige estoit embastonné de son espée qui estoit avantaigense contre la daque de son dit père, haulsa la dicte partisienne et en frappa ledit Fermaige sur la teste.* In ADNord, (B 1693, fol.30 v-31 v), Hainin, April 1468.

Although it is difficult to correctly determinate the weapon used in remission letters, we can however categorize them in six main types, like into fight-books:

- “daggers type”, with little knives and poniards.
- “dussack type”<sup>32</sup>
- ”,with long knives.
- “sword type”, longswords are rare : sword means above all common sword, but for 16<sup>th</sup> often rapier.
- “halberd type”, with all pole weapons for cutting and thrusting : battle axes, guisarmes, voulges, etc.
- “spear type”, with all pole weapons for thrusting : spears, pikes, beef tongues, quarterstaves<sup>33</sup>, etc.
- “mace type”, with all type of weapon designed for smashing (and sometime) thrusting like maces, plançons<sup>34</sup>, , war hammers.

The following table based on 75 confrontations from remission letters, gives us the weapon type used by the “winner” and the one used by the “loser”, this last being wounded or killed:

winner weapon type against loser weapon type	dagger	dussack	sword	halberd	spear	mace	average
dagger		71%	36%	33%	67%	60%	53%
dussack	29%		37%	0%	39%	50%	31%
sword	64%	33%		67%	43%	33%	48%
halberd	67%	100%	33%		50%	100%	70%
spear	33%	71%	57%	50%		62,5%	55%
mace	40%	50%	67%	0%	37,5%		39%

Tab. 1: Weapon type used by the winner and the loser of remission letter fighting.

We can see the relative efficiency of the dagger type. The goal for the one with the shorter weapon is often to come into range to prevent a correct use of the opponent’s weapon. In fact, a good weapon has two principal qualities. First, it has to be efficient, either by cutting, thrusting, smashing, etc. Second, it has to be manageable at different ranges, that is to say to be well balanced and helpful both far and near. This idea is quite clear in Talhoffer’s book where a man with a sword in his scabbard is assaulted by a man with an iron hand. The second illustration shows the assailant with his hand cut, the sword being faster than the heavy war hammer<sup>35</sup>. The halberd type seems to be the

<sup>32</sup> The *dussack* is in fight-books a long curved knife in wood or leather.

<sup>33</sup> Or a “*bâton à deux bouts*”: *Ayant ung baston de deffense, appellé baston a deux boutz*: Registre de la Chancellerie de Bretagne B33, Letter n 63, Decembre 1531, fol.222r. Letter mentioned by Nassiet (2009). About the staff as a defensive weapon, see Dupuis (2011, 153-182).

<sup>34</sup> Traditional Flemish infantry weapon, the *Goedendag* successor.

<sup>35</sup> Talhoffer (1459: fol.79r-79v).

best. It can be used for thrusting (often in remission letters), also used in close range fighting with a hand near the iron head. It wins all its fights against the dussack and mace types. For the others weapons, it seems more relevant to see the relative balance between all weapons.

Also note that the same fight can include more than one weapon: it begins with a pole weapon and ends with dagger fighting, grappling or ground fighting: for example, a supplicant named Wattier Nolet gives some thrust of spear without success, then takes a long knife and wounded the thigh of his opponent Micquiel de Le Mote. They wrestle and the supplicant takes a little dagger placed at his belt, gives him two stabs to the chest and to the stomach and leaves him dead<sup>36</sup>. This example shows that in the same fight, three weapons were used, amount for different ranges fight. This can be a real tactic, because like we will see, it is necessary in a first time to try to break (*rompre*) or to deviate (*destourner*) the blow or the opponent thrust, and in a second time, to hit his opponent. This type of technique seems to be shown by Fiore dei Liberi, when he uses two sticks and a dagger against a spear:

“This master will do a defense with these two sticks against the spear in this way: When the one with the spear is near enough-thrust, the master with his right hand throws the stick at the head of the one with the spear. And immediately with this throw comes with the other stick covering at the spear, and with his dagger hits him in the chest”<sup>37</sup>.

Albrecht Dürer’s book gives us some indications about the correct use of a *messer* again a dagger or a sword. Without text or instructions, we will only risk some general suppositions. Hans Talhoffer is not clearer, thus we will lead on Mair’s books.

## II. MAIR’S MUTLI-WEAPONS TECHNIQUES OR ASYMMETRICAL FIGHT

Like this author writes in his contents about this section, “Various weapons that are used against various weapons, so that when someone attacks unexpectedly, this allows to defend oneself”<sup>38</sup>. Here are presented situations similar to remission letters: an unexpectedly fight, not a duel. We will start by passing in review the different techniques:

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<sup>36</sup> [...] [Wattier Nolet] darda d'une javeline apres duquel cop il ne lui fit aucun mal et tira incontinent ung grant couteau qu'il avoit, duquel il navra ledit Micquiel [de Le Mote] en la cuisse et se prindrent l'un a l'autre tellement que ledit suppliant se deffest de son dit cousteau, mais d'une petite daggue qu'il avoit en sa chainture, il bailla deux cops audit Micquiel l'un environ la mamelle et l'autre entour la chainture. Des quelles navrures ledit Micquiel termina tost apres vie par mort. In ADNord, (B 1704, fol.1r-2v), Gand, August 1484.

<sup>37</sup> Questo magistro fara deffesa cum questi doi bastoni contra la lanza in questo modo, che quando quello de la lanza gli sara apresso per trare, lo magistro cum la mane dritta tra lo bastone per la testa, di quello de la lanza. E subito cum quello trare, va cum l'altro bastone ala coverta de la lanza, e cum sua daga gli fieri in lo petto [...], Dei Liberi (1409, fol.33v).

<sup>38</sup> Varia arma contra variis armis utentes, ut cum quis eximproviso obruit, se possit defendere, Mair (mi16<sup>th</sup>c, fol.15v, pl.15)



### 1. Pole weapons: thrust weapon against halberd<sup>39</sup>

The thrust weapon is a spear for hunting, a *schweinspiess* (literally a boar spear) with a little cross. The halberd (*hellenparten*) is a common model, but its point is rounded. A thrust is initiated, certainly because the spear is longer. Thanks to his axe-head (*plaf*), it can be deviated and followed by a step to riposte. The minimum range distance is broken for the spearman. This one steps back and turn away this thrust, allowing the halberd to cut, which is stopped by a spear thrust to the neck, as a *stop hit*. In a second linking, the spear is used to strike (maybe thanks to the cross). The halberdier does the same thing parrying a thrust with the axe-head. But, in the same time, the spear is thrown to the ground and a wrestling technique is realized. The intention is to pick it up to finish the opponent on the ground...

### 2. Thrust staff weapon against longsword<sup>40</sup> or rapier<sup>41</sup>

The thrust staff weapon can be a half-pike (*schefflin*) or a pike (*lanngspiess*). Talhoffer uses a spear for hunting. Obviously, the pikeman attacks the first with a thrust, the sword man steps back and does a technique with a transversal strike (*zwirvl*) to the shaft, maybe in order to break it. This technique looks similar to Talhoffer's tactic. However, the pikeman does a step and is able to give a second thrust to the body, and then steps back to keep the vantage of the range. In fact, Talhoffer shows that it is possible for the swordsman to break the distance by taking the opponent weapons with his left hand, like for Mair with the rapier (*ensis hispanicus*: Spanish sword) against a spear for hunting (*venabulum*), or by coming into with half-sword technique (with the left hand on the blade). In these cases, the spearman can correctly use his weapons and get a nasty blow on the head or a thrust in the chest. For the second linking, the swordsman chooses a low guard (*wechsek*: changing) and tries to hit the shaft too. But the pikeman retracts his weapon and thrusts again to the chest. Like his head is without defense, the swordsman can give a desperate and suicidal strike to the head in reply.

### 3. Halberd against longsword<sup>42</sup>

The halberdier gives a cut. The swordsman takes advantage of the handing of his weapons to deviate this blow, go out of the line thanks to a volte step (*inn triangel* : triangle step), and gives a second cut. However, the halberdier takes the time to follow him (*nachraisen*) in order to thrust him two times and to step back. Talhoffer's technique seems more successful, because the halberdier finishes beheaded...The second plate shows that the halberd can also be used for thrusting, which is truer in remission letters where a halberd cut seems too radical. The swordsman deviates the thrust by crossing

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<sup>39</sup> Mair (mi16<sup>th</sup>a, fol.232r and 232v, pl.11 and 12)

<sup>40</sup> *Id., ib.*, fol.227r and 227v, pl.1 and 3. Talhoffer (1459, fol.75r-76r)

<sup>41</sup> Mair (mi16<sup>th</sup>c, fol.188v, pl.24.)

<sup>42</sup> Mair (mi16<sup>th</sup>a, fol.227v and 228v, pl.2 and 4) and Talhoffer (1459, fol.76v)

his arms over his head and in the same time gives a cut. This one is ignored by the halberdier who continuous with a powerful cut to the head.

#### **4. Halberd against dussack** <sup>43</sup>

Two plates were added in Mair's latin books, surely to complete all weapon combinations. One of these is the double edged halberd (*bipennis*) against the long knife (*acinaces*). No matter the halberd cut or a thrust, this action will be parried thanks to the crown guard (*corona habitus*), with the left hand on the blade and the two hands over the head. This action is followed by a taking of the adversary halberd, like against a spear. The halberd seems to be useful at a specific distance and can multiply the blows, but it is too slow against the quick dussack and this one is each time victorious.

#### **5. Longsword against messer or dussack** <sup>44</sup>

The dussack against a longsword strike is used like against a halberd, with the crown position. The knifeman tries to break the distance, but the swordsman can protect him with defensive and offensive positions. In fact, the edge and the point are constant threats. And the length of the blade allows hitting the leg. Albrecht Dürer also shows the possibilities for a swordsman to pursue this last goal with his longer blade<sup>45</sup>. Thus, even the second linking begins by a dussack cut <sup>46</sup>, the swordsman parries this cut, takes the advantage for a second blow. The dussack allows defending himself, by parrying and by hand cutting, but the forward leg is hit again.

#### **6. Longsword against poniard** <sup>47</sup>

It is well known that the goal of somebody with a dagger is to break the range after an opponent cutting or thrusting action. That is done thanks to a common Mair's position with the weapon put under the right arm to parry. A step with a left hand in order to take opponent hand, allows to stab without problem. But the swordsman can without any hesitation use his left arm to deviate the armed arm, stepping back and striking again.

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<sup>43</sup> Mair (mi16<sup>th</sup>c, fol.186v and 187r, pl.23 and 24)

<sup>44</sup> *Idem, ibid.* (mi16<sup>th</sup>c, fol.229r and 229v, pl.5 and 6)

<sup>45</sup> Dürer (circa 1512, fol.88r, n°45 and fol.89r, n°48)

<sup>46</sup> This is true that with a stretching right arm and the right foot forward, the reach of a long knife can be almost the same that a longsword handed with two hands.

<sup>47</sup> Mair (mi16<sup>th</sup>a, fol.230r and 230v, pl.7 and 8)

## 7. Messer or dussack against dagger or poniard <sup>48</sup>

The knifeman seems subtler: against a man with a poniard, he does firstly the choice to cut from below. When he sees in front of him a correct defensive ward with the weapon under the arm, he starts by taking the opponent right hand with his left hand and follows with a cut. Dürer shows how much easier it is to thrust the opponent hand, the range between the two weapons being shorter. This is true, if in the first case the knifeman succeeds in deviating the opponent stab with his left hand, in the second he lets himself deviated his right arm and take his right hand. It is too late, he is hit, and his opponent steps back quickly...

Finally, the Paul-Hector Mair linkings are less complicated that other from his books, here only a simple action, a counter and sometimes the counter of this defense. We can recap the winner of each confrontation <sup>49</sup>:

winner weapon against loser weapon type	pike/spear	halberd	longsword	rapier	dussack/messer	dagger/poniard	average
pike/spear		100%	20%	0%	-	-	40%
halberd	0%		67%	-	0%	-	22,3%
longsword	80%	34%		-	100%	100%	78,5%
rapier	100%	-	-		-	-	100%
dussack/messer	-	100%	0%	-		50%	50%
dagger/poniard	-	-	0%	-	50%		25%

Tab. 2: Confrontations results from Mair and Talhoffer books.

Of course, these results are not very clear and are subjected to textual adaptation: Talhoffer shows how to win against a vantage weapon, in consequence this last loses. Mair likes exchanges and often gives the solution for the counter. But the interesting point is that a lot of actions or techniques seem problematic or hazardous. Mair, and that is one of the only cases of all the manuscript, precises at the end of the confrontation between the spear and the longsword : “If he thrusts through your body, then strike with all your might with your long edge into his head and this strike must be quick, otherwise this is loose“ <sup>50</sup>. And the illustration shows the two opponents hit, bloody... If this use of blood is not very original for Talhoffer (cut heads and hands clearly show the violence of actions), it is more specific for Mair. This one only uses blood for these plates of self-defense with poles arms and for brutal action like the terrible deadly strikes (*mordschlagen*) with the heavy double-handed peasant staff

<sup>48</sup> *Id. Ibid.*, (mi16<sup>th</sup>a, fol.231r and 23v, pl.9 and 10)

<sup>49</sup> We insert here Talhoffer's plates.

<sup>50</sup> Er dich also durchstochen durch deinen leib, so haw Im mit sterck mit deiner lanngen schneid nach seinem haupt und dieser haw muosz behend geschehen, sunst ist es verlorn, *Id. Ibid.*, (mi16<sup>th</sup>a, fol.228r, pl.3)

(*Baurnstangen*)<sup>51</sup>. But he also uses another violent and random situation for a conventional fencing confrontation, the case of double hit with a longsword, where someone is hit into the head while he strikes the body<sup>52</sup>. This type of opposition and double hit has an aspect which remembers us the duel in remission letters. Wounded people don't stop their action while they are striking. The hypothesis that this aspect of double hit is taken into account lead us to wonder whether this techniques are able to respond properly to remission letters situations.

### III. SOME TRUE FIGHT ASPECTS

Like often with the involvement of contemporary self-defense practices, the question is to know whether the feasibility of each techniques and the praxeology in a real fight match. Indeed, the "true" fight is rarely that clear and so much fast (Pentecost,1998). If the exact goal of some general techniques in fight-books can be sometimes difficult to define <sup>53</sup>, it is different for self-defense techniques. For Talhoffer, hands and heads cuts, perforated chests show the tragic end of the aggressor. But in Mair's books, safe training weapons -*fechtschwert*<sup>54</sup>, *dussacken* and wooden daggers- are also used.

However, the idea that in aggression context the aim is to kill his victim is not always evident. Sometimes the first action is just to hit without injuring. The importance is to move from verbal threat to action (Tlusty, 2011 :63-66). For this purpose, the flat of a sword or a spear, or the rear tip of a pike can be used. Often the supplicant doesn't wait to be injured. Like in some techniques against a pole weapon, he can grab the haft<sup>55</sup> or deviate the blow with a shorter weapon, and strike... <sup>56</sup> At this stage, fight-books, except for Talhoffer's, don't give us the consequence of this last action. This is in opposition to remission letters, which remember us that all hits are not deadly or disabling:

For example, a named Raniequin is insulting the supplicant <sup>57</sup>, he takes a long knife (*braquemart*) and strikes him. He gives him two hits at the left thigh. The supplicant takes

<sup>51</sup> Id. Ibid., (mi16<sup>th</sup>a, fol.225r-226v, pl.5-8)

<sup>52</sup> Id. Ibid., (mi16<sup>th</sup>a fol.52v, pl.62) and Id. (mi16<sup>th</sup>c fol.48r and 48v, pl.61 and 62)

<sup>53</sup> That is the question about the context of use of these techniques: for the game or the real fight ? For example the anonymous author from the Ms.3227a says *Und was eyner redlichs wil treiben ezu schimpfe / ader ezu ernste / das sal her eyne vor den ogen / fremde und vorworren / machen / das iener nicht merket was deser keyn im meynt ezutreiben/;* „And what you would try readily in earnest or in play, should be hidden from him so that he does not know what you intend-try against him, Ms.3227a, (circa 1389), *op. cit.*, fol.15v, trad. David Lindholm. About fencing like a martial sport, see Tlusty (2011: 210-217), Anglo (2000: 7-39) and Jaquet in this volume (p. 47)

<sup>54</sup> A longsword without point and sharpened edges.

<sup>55</sup> For example, ADNord, (B 1711, fol.109r à 109v), Bruges, April 1501.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* (fol.3r-3v), Gand, December 1499.

<sup>57</sup> [...] *Ledit Raniequin qui incontinent en lui injuriant de parolles tira un grant braquemart et en frappa ledit suppliant d'estocq et lui en donna deux playes en sa cuisse senestre et fist sa puissance de l'occir et tuer. Pour a quoy*

him by the arm and tells him to yield his weapon, but Raniequin tries to take a poniard (a *dollaquin*) or a little knife. The supplicant takes out a little dagger and strikes two times his opponent's buttock. But Raniequin passes over. The supplicant then strikes him to the chest and kills him... This is a good and a common example where a man is able to win a fight, although he was initially bare hands, then wounded.

Finally, the remission letters balances the goal of fencing where it is necessary to touch without to be touched, or to hit first. More important in true situation, is not to be seriously hit. But the extend of trauma is difficult to judge before the action. Statistics about more 700 remissions letters and a superficial review give us an idea of the ratio between injured body parts and consequences:

target aimed or hit :	number of hit in %	fatal cases in %	non-fatal case in %
head and face :	35,3	64,1	35,9
upper body (shoulders, neck and chest) :	20,2	68,5	31,5
middle of the body (stomach and side) :	9,3	73,7	26,3
body and back :	9,9	56,8	43,2
upper and middle body, body :	39,4	66,8	33,2
lower body (buttock, thigh, groin) :	8	58,5	41,5
upper limb (hand and arm) :	12,6	27,2	72,8
lower limb (knee, feet, leg)	4,7	44,7	55,3
<b>Total :</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>59,1</b>	<b>40,9</b>

Tab. 3: Connection between target and fatal cases in remission letters.

We can see that the head and the upper body are the most affected. But fatal cases seem to be even more important for the stomach and side, given that these parts are easier infected, while the lower body with thigh contains the femoral artery. A hit here would result in a massive hemorrhage, often deadly. The hands and arms are also hit, but rarely voluntary. The loss of a finger or a hand can stop the fight, but most surely leads to the death. For example, that is the case of a spearman hit twice in the head with a sword, while his two hands are falling to the ground.<sup>58</sup>

If almost 60% of hits are fatal, the dying time, namely the time spent between the hit and the death, is important too. Remission letters indicate that if the death can be quick, it is often not immediate and even less instantaneous. We can estimate that on 553 deaths from the remission letters, the death was not immediate in almost 60% of cases.

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*obvier ledit suppliant saisi et print en ses bras icellui Raniequin et lui dit qu'il laissast aller sondit braquemart ou il lui feroit vilonné, ce que ledit ~~suppl~~ Raniequin ne volt fere ains s'efforça de tirer ung dollaquin ou autre petit couteau qu'il avoit pour en occir ledit suppliant, lequel pour a ce remedier et pour contraindre ledit Raniequin a laissier aller ledit braquemart, tira une petite dague que'il avoit en sa chainture et lui en donna deux cops vers ses fesses, dont ledit Raniequin ne tint guerres grant compte ains de plus en plus s'efforçoit de vouloir occir ledit suppliant. Lequel considerant que s'il habandonnoit ledit Raniequin et le laissez aller garny dudit braquemart qu'il s'en repentiroit. Il lui dit que s'il ne laissez aller icellui braquemart qu'il l'occiroit, de quoy icellui ~~suppl~~ Raniequin ne tint oncques compte Mais en continuant tousiours ses rudesses s'efforçoit de plus en plus de lui oster la vie. Pour a quoy obvier icellui suppliant frappa ung cop ledit Raniequin de sadicte dague en la poitrine, duquel cop icellui Raniequin trouva brief apres vie par mort, In ADNord (B.1700, fol.87r-88r), Amiens, March 1479.*

<sup>58</sup> ADNord (B.1703, fol.21r-22r), Bois-Le-Duc, June 1481.

The patient dies often after three days in a bed and not lying down in the street... In a few cases the death occurs over a month later, such as a cut near the hand leading to an infection <sup>59</sup>. In fact, if a lot of wounds are fatal, it is principally those to the neck or to the brain that can be instantaneous deadly and will immediately stop the action (Briost, Drévilion, Serna, 2002 : 338 and following) Therefore it is important to strike correctly his opponent and like it is often proposed in Mair's techniques, to retreat out of range of opponent weapons after the last strike.

Thus, masters-at-arms seem to take in account some elements of the real fight to improve their techniques. But remission letters show us that the facts are often different. Rare are the techniques proposing to wrestle in order to throw the adversary to the ground. Although, as seen, it allows balancing of the fight. We can explain this because the arm wrestling has already been demonstrated in other plates. But above all, because Mair shows these confrontations between different weapons to complete his work, keeping a technical and theoretical view and respecting his fencing system. His goal is not necessarily to propose something new like the use of a cloak (*pallium*) around the left arm against a sword or only adapted for the self-defense like Talhoffer. <sup>60</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Evaluating the real differences between theory and practice seems, as usual, difficult. In fact, fight-books are above all technique repertoires and especially Mair's works. Thus, self-defense is presented under its traditional form, one against one. This one is true to the reality of the great majority of conflicts described in letters and allows to keep the same type of usual presentation as a duel.

When we study self-defense books, we shouldn't forget that each technique shows more concepts and principles, than a perfect application. This is clearer with Talhoffer or Fiore where it is possible to do the technique with other equipment. That is clearer too, when Talhoffer and Mair's works are compared, where the same technique can be applied with different weapons. These are not really important; this is evidenced by the use of training weapons by Mair. Could it mean that they themselves trained with "safe" weapons or training tools? Maybe, but the studying of illustrations doesn't allow us to see this.

Mair is attached to treat all kind of weapons, basing his teachings on the range of the fight. This concept is pertinent compared with the situations of remission letters. No weapon really has an advantage against another; the correct use of it can make the only difference. Thus, in some remission letters, a man with a dagger doesn't hesitate to attack another with a longer weapon. Taking the initiative, and the importance of the range can make the difference. However this is only a technical aspect, because this parameter is limited by other considerations both psychological and physical. If these two domains can be combined (the effect of a wound often depends of the emotional

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<sup>59</sup> ADNord (B 1710, fol.2v-4r) Bruxelles, November 1498.

<sup>60</sup> See notes 24 ; 25 ; 26 and 27.

state), remission letters demonstrate that they seem to be more important than technical issues. During an aggression, hitting the opponent doesn't have the same importance as for playful duel. It is necessary to strike to stop the fight, to wrestle to wound, or to kill his opponent to be safe first and foremost, not to win a game. The problem is that the localization of wounds has not the same effect and that this last depends on time. A little infected cut at the hand can lead to the death...

The parallel study of remission letters and the fight-books is very interesting and both an opportunity to do a second reading of the remission letters and to understand a little more about the mechanism of theorization and codification of this technical knowledge. The asymmetrical aspect disturbs masters-at-arms, as one leaves the noble duel with equal weapons for the darkness of the brawl. Furthermore, the combinations seem infinite if the aggressor doesn't perform a basic attack. Would all not be said already through the principles and the techniques shown with equal weapons? Certainly not and even the great master of the end of the 16<sup>th</sup>, Joachim Meyer will give some techniques with a single-hand weapon against a *kenbelspiesz*<sup>61</sup>, inscribing for a long time the initial and theoretical advantage obtained by a pole weapon...

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<sup>61</sup> *Wie du dich mit einer Handgewehr, gegen einem Kenbelspiesz oder dergleichen gewehr halten solt*: "How you must stay up with a spear with a *kenbel* (the cross on head spear for hunting) or a same type of weapon". In Meyer (1570, t.3, 106v-107r).

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