

Book review: Forgeng, Jeffrey L. (ed.), *Das Tower Fechtbuch. Ein Meisterwerk der mittelalterlichen Kampfkunst* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2021), translated into German by Gisella M. Vorderobermeier. 176 pages, 23 × 30 cm, hardcover with dust jacket. ISBN 978-3-534-27239-6

Cornelius Berthold,
Hamburg University

The manuscript now kept in Leeds as Royal Armouries Record 0033 (currently Fecht 1 and formerly – and here in the following – MS I.33) contains not only the oldest known German but also the oldest extant European fight book. It may therefore come as a surprise that until now, a physical edition of the book with a professional translation into modern German had never been published. Admittedly, an edition plus translation provided by Dieter Bachmann has existed online since 2003, but this version is now considered outdated by its author, though it remains accessible for the time being.¹ The situation is only slightly better with regard to German-language scholarship on MS I.33.² The first ever edition of the book in English was published by Jeffrey Forgeng in 2003 (only to be quickly out of print and subsequently sought-after for years) with an introduction, translation and facsimile pages.³ It was followed by a high-grade facsimile edition by the same editor in 2013, and an affordable new edition that was published directly by the Royal Armouries in 2018.⁴ Franck Cinato's and André Surprenant's edition and translation of the text into modern French was published in 2008, together with an introduction of around one-hundred pages (not counting the extensive appendices).⁵ Its scholarly depth is unrivalled so far, and Forgeng drew on it a lot, especially for the 2018 edition. Besides these printed editions, several other translations of the text can be found online.

Forgeng's 2018 edition is also the basis of the German edition under review here. Published in March 2021 by the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (wbg) in cooperation

¹ Bachmann, 'I.33. Übersetzung mit Kommentar'. A more recent edition of his work is only available in English.

² See e.g. Bodemer, 'Das Fechtbuch', pp. 83–101; Leng, *Fecht- und Ringbücher*, pp. 125–127 (cat.-no. 38.9.8). The MS is also briefly mentioned in a few places in Gehrt, *Mit Schwert und Degen*. For a more extensive bibliography, see the publication under review or Forgeng's 2018 edition.

³ Forgeng, *The Medieval Art of Swordsmanship, A Facsimile & Translation of Europe's Oldest Personal Combat Treatise*.

⁴ Forgeng, *The Medieval Art of Swordsmanship*.

⁵ Cinato and Surprenant, *Le Livre de l'Art du Combat*. A second edition with a few changes was published in 2015.

with the Royal Armouries Museum, it preserves most of the appearance of the English original, including the book's dimensions (the German one is slightly thinner due to a different paper variety that is also smoother), its layout, and even the decoration on the endpapers. The different design of the dust jacket is probably the greatest visual deviation from the 2018 edition. The page breaks are completely identical in the edition part of the book, where a full-page facsimile image faces the Latin edition and German translation. The facsimile images are slightly brighter than in the 2018 edition and have more contrast, but without a side-by-side-comparison with MS I.33 itself, it is impossible for me to evaluate which comes closer to the original. Regarding these 'physical' features, the German edition is a well-made book, nice to the touch and with a decent print quality.

All of Forngeng's texts have been translated into German by Gisella Vorderobermeier: the introduction (twenty-six pages), his English translation of the Latin glosses of the manuscript (the Latin edition itself is preserved without changes except for editorial comments), the glossaries, appendices, and the bibliography. The decision to have the entire book translated from the English original makes sense from a practical point of view, and in general, the quality of the translation is high. In the introduction, there are a few unfortunate choices in terminology and very few omissions (perhaps to make the page breaks match?) and grammatical mistakes when compared to the original (pp. 22–23).⁶ Only in a few places does the unfamiliarity with fight books and fencing in general result in misleading translations. Examples are Forngeng's 'Liechtenauer manuscript of 1389', which was turned into the 'Liechtenauer-Handschrift (1389)' (p. 8 in both), as if there was only one manuscript that could be described as such. The buckler plays of Andre Liegnitzer (p. 11) became 'Schwert-und-Buckler-Kampfzüge' (p. 10), perhaps under the assumption that the 'plays' were martial displays at a pageant and not fight lessons.⁷

One could assume that the most problematic part of this edition was the translation into German of Forngeng's English translation of the, in turn, Latin glosses. Assuming that even the Latin text can be considered a translation of the author's or scribes' Middle High German thoughts on buckler fighting, this would make the 2021 edition a translation not

⁶ For example, Vorderobermeier uses the ambiguous German 'Handschrift' with both its meanings (i.e. an entire manuscript but also the handwriting of a scribe), which results in the text declaring that the 'Handschrift' contains a 'Handschrift' (p. 7). In German-language palaeography, one would speak of the 'hand(s)' of a scribe ('Hand' and 'Hände') with regard to the second meaning. The flat of a blade is once described as a 'Blatt' (which refers to the entire blade) instead of 'Fläche' or 'Klingenfläche' (p. 19), although this distinction is important in the according text passage, as the manuscript's images only show the swords' flats facing the observer, never the edges.

⁷ There are a few other minor cases: when Forngeng describes a technique as analogous to a 'thrust with opposition' in Olympic fencing, in German it is stated that this would today (!) be called 'Absetzen', although the latter is a term from the late medieval Liechtenauer tradition. The equivalent of a 'thrust with opposition' would be called 'Oppositionsstoß' or 'Sperrstoß', according to my experience.

of the third but even fourth degree. In this respect, it may be regarded as questionable that the publisher opted to preserve and even translate the blurbs on the dust jacket, including a quote by Sydney Anglo about the accurate translation, even though they refer to the original English edition of 2018. It might come as a relief that Vorderobermeier's translation is largely accurate. The English model remains noticeable in the capitalisation of the numbered guards (*custodiae*), for example, which is not as common for foreign or technical terms in German as it might be in English. Some of the medieval German terms have been adapted to their modern spellings (e.g. 'Schildschlag' or 'Durchtritt'), but others were left transliterated (e.g. 'schutzen' instead of the modern 'schützen'). There are also a few downright misleading translations where the meaning has shifted significantly from the Latin original, such as the consistent rendering of Forggeng's 'to set to sb.' as 'auf jmd. losgehen' (literally 'to slash/charge at sb.', see pp. 114, 118 and 129). A look at the corresponding Latin verb *ponere* would have clarified the matter, as it means the positioning of a fighter or their weapon in relation to the opponent.⁸ With regard to the binding actions, which are crucial for the fighting system reflected in MS I.33, to establish a bind (*ligare*) above or below the opponent's sword is translated with the German verbs 'überbinden' and 'unterbinden', respectively. The former is somewhat unfortunate as it implies a manipulation of the bind (and thus overlaps with the term *reliigare*); the latter, because it also means 'to prevent' in modern German. Sticking closer to the English original ('to bind above/below the sword') would have been the better choice here. Curiously, the recurring term for a counter-posture, *obsessio*, is translated with the German 'Versatz' – as known from the later Liechtenauer tradition where it appears to designate a somewhat different concept – just as in Dieter Bachmann's old rendition. It is hard to believe that it came from Forggeng, who translated it more adequately as 'opposition' throughout.⁹ Besides these examples, there are a few other less important words or phrases that could be improved.¹⁰ On the whole, however, the translation is fairly accurate

⁸ On p. 118, in a second place, the verb is equally misleadingly translated as 'drücken' ('to press'). There are more examples of the same kind: Forggeng's term 'common' with regard to fencing techniques is rendered throughout as 'gebräuchlich' (e.g. pp. 57, 61, 94, 130) and hence does not convey the original slightly pejorative connotation of an 'ordinary' fencing action that differs from the art of the priest. The 'occupied' blade on p. 78 becomes 'beansprucht', which reads more like 'kept busy' and less like 'kept in check', although the latter seems to be meant. A third example is on p. 69, where the reader of the gloss ought 'to consider' what technique can be executed from a certain situation. It is translated into German as 'erwägen' ('to ponder'), although the Latin *inspicere* implies observation, perhaps suggesting that the reader ought to look for similar situations in the book if they want to find the solution.

⁹ I am grateful to Jan H. Sachers for pointing out to me this detail that I had failed to appreciate.

¹⁰ On p. 73, the plural 'Aktionen' should be a singular. On p. 77, the one who does not shift sword or buckler has become the priest in the German text, while it is the student in both Forggeng's translation and the Latin original (I am grateful to my colleague Till Hennings for clarifying the issue). The grammatical gender of 'das Schild' on p. 97 is wrong and the previous sentence is needlessly convoluted. The student 'bringing the sword back' (p. 154) is 'raising it [for a strike]'

with only very few distortions of the text. Whoever wishes to know its exact meaning will eventually have to turn to the Latin edition or the photographs of the actual handwriting, both of which are provided by the 2021 publication.

In conclusion, the German edition published by wbg is a great choice for those fluent in German who are less comfortable with the English version. It is a well-made publication with a few drawbacks that become obvious only at a closer look, when one has already familiarised oneself with the material and is probably working with the original text anyway.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bachmann, Dieter, 'I.33. Übersetzung mit Kommentar', 2003, <<http://schwertfechten.ch/html/i33>> [accessed 30 March 2021]
- Bodemer, Heidemarie, 'Das Fechtbuch. Untersuchungen zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der bildkünstlerischen Darstellung der Fechtkunst in den Fechtbüchern des mediterranen und westeuropäischen Raumes vom Mittelalter bis Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Stuttgart University, 2008), <<https://elib.uni-stuttgart.de/handle/11682/5275>> [accessed 30 March 2021]
- Cinato, Franck and André Surprenant, *Le Livre de l'Art du Combat* (Liber de arte dimicatoria). *Commentaires et exemples. Édition critique du Royal Armouries MS. I.33* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2008)
- Forgeng, Jeffrey L., *The Medieval Art of Swordsmanship. A Facsimile & Translation of Europe's Oldest Personal Combat Treatise, Royal Armouries MS I.33* (Union City: Chivalry Bookshelf, 2003)
- Forgeng, Jeffrey L., *The Medieval Art of Swordsmanship. Royal Armouries MS I.33* (Leeds: Royal Armouries Museum, 2018)
- Gehrt, Daniel, *Mit Schwert und Degen. Zweikampf in historischen Fechtbüchern* (Gotha, 2021)
- Leng Rainer [et al.], *Katalog der deutschsprachigen illustrierten Handschriften des Mittelalters 4,2/1,2, 38. Fecht- und Ringbücher* (München: C. H. Beck, 2008)

(‘ausholen’) in German, although the Latin *ducendo gladium seorsum* does not convey this specific (and rather coarse) meaning.