

The *Walpurgis Fechtbuch*: An Inheritance of Constantinople?

TIMOTHY DAWSON

Independent researcher

The primacy of the *Walpurgis Fechtbuch* (Royal Armouries I.33) as the earliest surviving illuminated book giving instruction on individual combat has generated a great deal of discussion about why it was compiled, and where the techniques depicted came from. Much of this is quite speculative, yet there are early sources which suggest a historical background which is simultaneously of sufficient antiquity and sufficient sophistication as to be a plausible point of origin for the I.33 style.

In his historical introduction to the facsimile edition, Jeffrey Forgeng observed that the style of I.33 is significantly different from other early examples of sword and buckler combat, yet one that ‘enjoyed a long history in the German-speaking world’ and ‘appears to spring fully armed from the heads of its creators’.¹ An opinion implicit in Forgeng’s comments, and in the writings and practice of many of those now working to reconstruct the techniques, is that the manuscript represents a complete system. This is far from the truth. As Forgeng notes, the target areas are very circumscribed — there are no blows to the torso or lower areas, and the arms are almost entirely ignored. In fact, the targeting and blow forms represented are even more restricted than that. Virtually all the basic attacks, especially from guards 2 to 5 are ignored. There are few simple open cuts. The text states this explicitly on page 18, avoiding an open cut in favour of more complex and ‘stylish’ technique of one on the opposite side. Further, while the head is understandably preferred as a target, there are no ‘down-right blows’ (to borrow a phrase from George Silver), almost all the cuts concluding an encounter are executed over a very short arc and often upward. Such blows would certainly end a bout effectively in the sort of civilian context depicted, yet would be very unlikely to do life-threatening injury. The same is largely true of all the cuts depicted in the manuscript. The lower power of the blows in the technique points to another observation — this style would be ineffective against any of the armour of the period. Thus, the *Walpurgis Fechtbuch* style is a veneer of sophisticated techniques designed for polite, and generally non-lethal, civilian dueling.

So if I.33 was the icing, what was the cake? The origins of martial discipline lie (by definition) in warfare. In war, the objective is to permanently remove an opponent

from combat as quickly as possible, and in spite of whatever protective equipment he may have. Earlier medieval art in Christendom certainly has no lack of depictions of warriors and combat, but nothing in the European cannon presages the methods of the *Fechtbuch*. Admittedly, this may be mainly because the elite patrons of such art preferred scenes featuring their own class and so more frequently show cavalry and the longer shields fitted with forearm straps that were popular in the West. Looking further East, however, brings to light a group of sources which change the picture dramatically. In the 10th to 12th centuries, Constantinople evidently had a very prosperous industry producing caskets made of wood and faced with carved ivory. A considerable number of these ivories survive in collections across the northern hemisphere, either detached or still in place on their boxes. The standard pattern for decoration on these caskets was to define the edges of each face with a border, and then treat the space within that as one or more fields for figural portrayals. One of the most popular subjects for such figural depictions was military. Sometimes there was a mythological or biblical pretext, such as with the Joshua Casket in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, with its massed battle scenes, but much more often one or two warriors are represented for their own sakes. They are shown not in the formal, static poses common to icons of warrior saints, but caught in the act of vigorous combat. Sword and buckler predominates, while very occasionally there are men equipped with spear and buckler, or horsemen.

As can be seen from the accompanying pictures, some of these bear a striking resemblance to scenes in I.33. Figure 1a² is almost identical to the manual's Sixth Guard, but has, of course, impeccable classical credentials inherited from the old Roman use of the *gladius*. Figures 2a³ and 3a⁴ replicate Second and Fourth Guards, respectively. Figure 4a⁵ looks very much like a precursor to 'half shield'. Figure 5a⁶ shows a guard which is not precisely represented in the Royal Armouries' manuscript, although it might be deemed to be a high version of Fifth Guard. (The interpretation of I.33's Fifth Guard is, of course, hampered by damage to the manuscript, as well as the quirks of the illuminator's art, but it is commonly accepted that it is what other sources represent as a trailing guard and, hence, its determining characteristic is that the sword hand is behind the warrior's body.) It is by far the most commonly illustrated in medieval sources, appearing also on armoured men in Byzantine ivories,⁷ and most often in battle scenes of both East and West. This is not merely convention, as this guard allows the most powerful and flexible cut driven by body mass possible. One scene not given here shows an almost identical position, but with the point behind in the manner of George Silver's 'Open Fight'.⁸

Admittedly, guards yield limited evidence for the conduct of the engagement, but a few other scenes do. Figure 6a⁹ is the most striking, with the man's arms crossed as he uses his buckler to block what must be a near horizontal attack in the mid line. His simplest riposte from here would be to cut over his shield more-or-less horizontally to his opponent's throat or face in a manner much like several of the concluding blows in the *Fechtbuch* sequences, (figure 6b) albeit with rather more force from this



FIGURE 1a A low sixth guard. Based upon Hermitage, St Petersburg, inv. no. w20.



FIGURE 1b Sixth guard. Illustration from *Royal Armouries I.33*, page no. 2.

position. By comparison, figure 7 is one of the few ivories to show two men in the midst of a bout.¹⁰ The swordsman is in *I.33*'s Fourth Guard, yet rather than the very extended buckler position of most of these pictures, he has taken a very close and closed covering against the potential speed and distance of the spear's cast or thrust.



FIGURE 2a *Second guard. Based upon Metropolitan Museum, New York, inv. no. 17.190.237.*



FIGURE 2b *Second guard. Illustration from Royal Armouries I.33, page no.1.*



FIGURE 3a *Fourth Guard*. Based upon State Art Gallery, Dresden, inv. no. (I) 448.

The same contrast can be seen in many other depictions of battle, where the protective mode is to keep the shield close and closed. This shows that the open and extended shield positions of the other pictures make them more characteristic of a flexible single combat duelling mode. We might note in passing that the nickname of one eleventh century emperor was, in fact, ‘the duelist’ (*Monomakhos*). The array of surviving manuals produced and reproduced in the tenth and eleventh centuries¹¹ show us that despite its territorial losses, the Roman Empire retained a very firm grasp of the sophisticated military methods that had allowed the ancient legions to conquer the Known World. These sources suggest that the sophistication in organisation, logistics and tactics were, unsurprisingly, complemented by sophisticated single combat training, which no doubt descended from the *armatura* mentioned by Vegetius.¹²

One question which must surely have occurred to anyone who has looked closely at I.33 is why the at-first-sight somewhat odd underarm position should have pride of place as First Guard. This, too, could have a Roman source, albeit with one specific adaptation to Western custom. Amongst their diverse weaponry, the military manuals list two full-size single-handed swords. The *spathion* was a straight, double-edged weapon descended from the *spatha* adopted by the Romans from the Celts



FIGURE 3b *Fourth guard. Illustration from Royal Armouries I.33, page no.1.*

in the early imperial era, while the *paramêrion* was a single-edged, slightly curved sabre originally brought West by the Avars. The *paramêrion* was worn slung from a shoulder belt or baldric attached at two points on the inside curve of the scabbard, and so hung at a slight angle to the horizontal beside the thigh (which is the very meaning of its name). The *spathion* was worn in two ways. One was the same as the old *gladius* — a baldric attached on opposite edges of the scabbard and so hanging vertically down the leg. This method was most common to cavalry (figure 8). The preferred infantry form was the ‘belt-hung’ (*zôstikion*) *spathion*, which was suspended from a waist belt by two straps attaching to one edge of the scabbard, and which therefore hung, like the *paramêrion*, at a slight angle to the horizontal beside the leg (figure 8). In this position, the *paramêrion* and *zôstikion spathion* could be drawn from the scabbard directly into an engagement, whether a cut, or parry to supplement the shield, in a manner impossible for the other variety of *spathion*, or for the prevalent methods of a carrying a sword in the West through the ‘Age of Chivalry’ (figure 11). You will note, however, that the hilt position of the *paramêrion* and *zôstikion spathion* is comfortably low, while the *Fechtbuch*’s First Guard is oddly high. This is the specific adaptation mentioned above. From Antiquity through the Early Middle Ages Westerners carried their *spathae* slung from a shoulder belt or baldric that was not fixed to the scabbard, but threaded through an attachment known as a ‘scabbard slide’. This is a rather loose arrangement by which the sword



FIGURE 4a A guard resembling a close half-shield. Based upon Musée du Petit Palais, Paris, inv. no. O.DUT.1273.

normally hangs vertically beside the leg (figure 10). If one raises a scabbarded sword thus slung to a placement where it can be drawn into engagement in imitation of a *paramêrion* or *zôstikion spathion*, it does indeed result in a high position under the arm, figure 11). By the 13th century, the baldric-and-scabbard-slide arrangement had long been superseded by belt-hanging methods that fixed the sword more firmly in place and precluded direct scabbard-to-contact technique, (figure 9) thus leaving the now long-established First Guard in use solely with naked blades.

How could any of these observations be relevant to Germany? In reality, that is easiest aspect of this scenario. It is a curious historical irony that Germany, who had so robustly and effectively resisted the expansion of the Roman Empire in antiquity, should by the beginning of the tenth century have become one of the Empire's most enthusiastic clients. The flow of diplomatic, religious, artistic and military contacts throughout the 10th to 12th centuries was prodigious. The pinnacle was when a



FIGURE 4b *Half-shield*. Illustration from *Royal Armouries I.33*, page no. 16.



FIGURE 5 *High (fifth) guard*. Based upon *The Hermitage, St Petersburg*, inv. no. w20.



FIGURE 6a A crossed guard. Based upon Musée du Petit Palais, Paris, inv. no. O.DUT.1273.

minor Roman noblewoman, Theophano, became the wife of Otto II in 973, introducing yet more Byzantine influence to the court.¹³ Military contact was less vaunted, but much more extensive. Through these centuries Germans were amongst the most common and effective of the mercenary troops employed by the emperors.¹⁴ Around 890, for example, Petrus, the nephew of the German king took political asylum in Constantinople and was granted the court rank of *spatharios* and made *Domestikos* of the *Exkoubitores*, that is, a commander of one of the principal urban guard units.¹⁵ A wholly German unit guarded the Kharisios Gate of the City, and we are told that the Nemitzoi, a life guard unit very much like the better-known Varangians, promised to offer some of the strongest resistance to Alexios Komnēnos' campaign to gain the throne in 1080 until they were persuaded to change sides.¹⁶ With the advent of the Crusades the flow of military men through Constantinople necessarily increased, and, of course, the Second Crusade is known as having been predominantly German. Hence, there was plenty of opportunity for martial techniques learned in Byzantium to be carried back to Allemania.

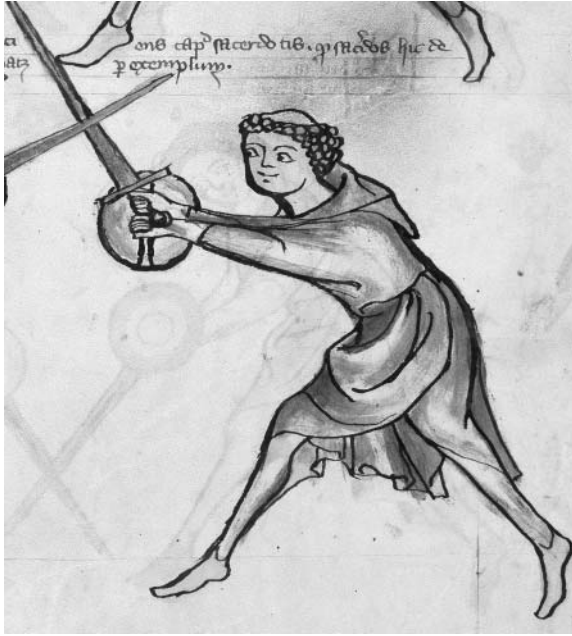


FIGURE 6b A crossed cover from *Royal Armouries I.33*.



FIGURE 6c A crossed cover from *Royal Armouries I.33*.

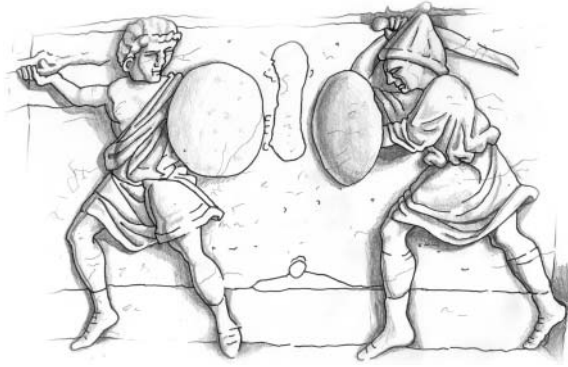


FIGURE 7 *A representation of combat. Based upon Hermitage, St Petersburg, inv. no. w18.*



FIGURE 8 *Author's reconstruction illustrating the simple (baldric-hung) spathion and paramêrion as worn by a middle Byzantine cavalryman. The belt-hung spathion would lie very similarly to the paramêrion. Author's photograph.*



FIGURE 9 Detail of a reconstruction showing a characteristic form of sword belt of the early Age of Chivalry. Author's photograph.

The Constantinopolitan connection can also offer a solution to the other noted oddity of the *Walpurgis Fechtbuch*, the fact that the master is a man of the cloth. The standard retirement plan of the man of status in the Eastern Roman Empire was to prepare for the next world by entering a monastery. After long service in the City, a German who had assimilated somewhat might well have followed Roman custom this way, and then returned across the Alps. This scenario might be all the more likely in the case of the political refugees mentioned earlier, as their new religious vocation could allow them to return home with a degree of safety they would not otherwise have had. Hence, a newly tonsured ex-soldier could easily have been a ready conduit for introducing a sophisticated new fighting style to Germany, say around the end of the eleventh century, and establishing it within a monastic milieu where it was handed down, elaborated and ultimately recorded in our manuscript.

A great deal more evidence is needed to allow the fuller recovery of the individual combat techniques of the enduring Roman Empire, and to conclusively prove a link between those and medieval Germany, yet the evidence to hand suggests strongly that the former were as functional and sophisticated as one would expect of a society 1500 years old in the eleventh century, and that there were ample conduits by which they could have been transmitted to the North, before being elaborated into the civilian duelling tricks embodied in the *Walpurgis Fechtbuch*.



FIGURE 10 *Detail of a reconstruction illustrating a broadsword slung in the earlier manner on a baldric through a scabbard slide. Author's photograph.*

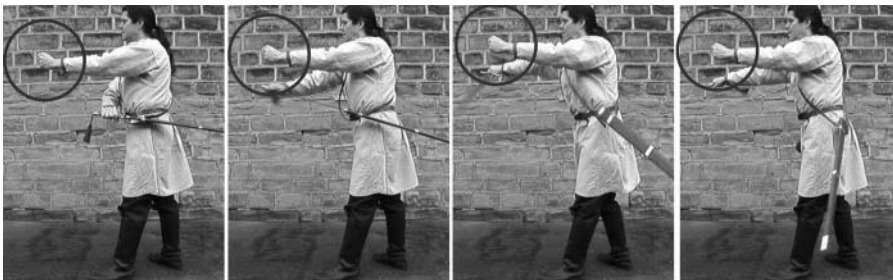


FIGURE 11 *Sequence demonstrating the process of drawing a baldric-hung spathion from I.33's First Guard directly into a mid-line cut. The buckler is omitted to show the trajectory. Author's photograph.*

Notes

- ¹ Forgem 2003: 9–10
- ² From Hermitage, St Petersburg, inv. no. w 20. This also appears on an 11th-century casket in the Musée de Cluny, Paris.
- ³ From Metropolitan Museum, New York, inv. no. 17.190.237.
- ⁴ From State Art Gallery, Dresden, inv. no. (I) 448. This guard also appears on an 11th-century casket in the National Museum, Florence.
- ⁵ From Musée du Petit Palais, Paris, inv. no. O.DUT.1273.
- ⁶ From The Hermitage, St Petersburg, inv. no. w 20. Represented twice in slight variants.
- ⁷ Used by several men on Museum for Late Antique and Byzantine Art, Berlin, inv. no. 2720.
- ⁸ On an 11th-century casket in the Musée de Cluny, Paris.
- ⁹ From Musée du Petit Palais, Paris, inv. no. O.DUT.1273.
- ¹⁰ From The Hermitage, St Petersburg, inv. no. w 18.
- ¹¹ All the surviving versions of the *Strategikon* attributed to Emperor Maurikios, originally early 7th century, were copied in the 10th or 11th centuries. New volumes in the 10th century include the anonymous *Syllogê Taktikôn*, Leo's *Taktika*, and Nikêphoros Phôkas' *Stratêgikê Ekthesis* (a.k.a. *Praecepta Militaria*).
- ¹² Stelten 1990: 30–31
- ¹³ Davids 1995
- ¹⁴ Treadgold 1995
- ¹⁵ Cigaar 1996: 243, 201–44. Chapter 7, pages 201–44 discusses German contacts exclusively.
- ¹⁶ Komnena 1986: 95

References

- Cigaar, K N 1996 *Western travelers to Constantinople*. (Leiden: E J Brill Leiden).
- Davids, A 1995 (ed) *The Empress Theophano — Byzantium and West at the turn of the First Millennium*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Forgem, J L 2003 *The medieval art of swordsmanship*. (Leeds: Royal Armouries, Leeds).
- Komnena, A 1986 *Alexiad*. (Translation E R A Sewter) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books).
- Stelten, L F (ed.) 1990 *Flavius Vegetius Renatus, Epitoma Rei Militaris*. (New York: Peter Lang, New York).
- Treadgold, W 1995 *Byzantium and its army: 286–1081*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press).