

# MEDIEVAL HISTORY

MAGAZINE

Issue 10

June 2004

£ 3.60

published with



ROYAL

ARMOURIES

The first magazine dedicated to the Medieval Era

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Archaeology &  
Anthropology of  
Medieval Warfare



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ISSN 1741-2285



9 771741 228008

UK: £3.60 - US: US\$8.95 - Canada: CAD\$11.95

# 'Trip up his heeles': self defense in Renaissance Europe

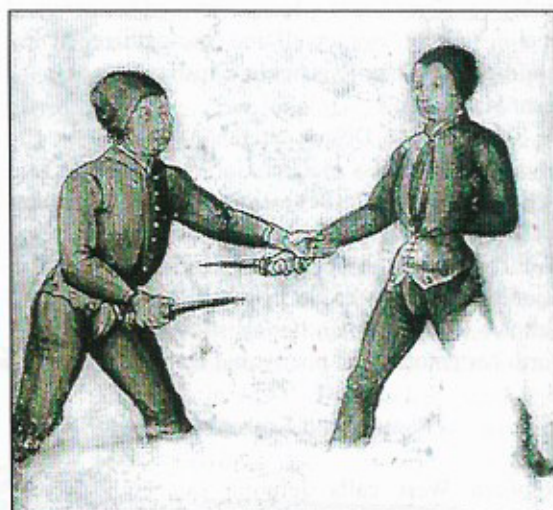
The expression 'martial arts' is traditionally today associated with the Far East, and thought to denote forms of combat which are likely to be unarmed, and certainly unarmoured. It was not always so, however...

In earlier times in the West society was not rigidly divided into military and non-military castes, as was commonly the case in Asia. Any person who could afford it could own arms, and, indeed, most adult males were expected to have some martial skills which could be mobilised in defense of the realm. Thus, *Artes Martii*, the Arts of War, made little distinction between where combat happened—battlefield or street. Yet such a lack of distinction by no means meant that the West lacked sophisticated 'non-military' or unarmed fighting styles.

## Ancient times

Such forms go back as far as we have records. A form that is still with us is, of course, wrestling, yet its unbroken history as a sport makes it hard to think of it as 'real fighting'. An event in the original Olympic games was *pankration*, and all-in combat form which disallowed only biting and eye-gouging. Art works show that *pankration* used punches, kicks, elbow- and knee-strikes, grips and throws. *Pankration* seems to have survived into late antiquity, perhaps even to the very end of the ancient games in 520. Roman wrestling and boxing were similarly brutal affairs.

The fall of the Western Roman Empire and the onset of the 'Dim Ages', although not as dark as they have been painted, does interrupt the evidence for Western martial science. Yet, the need was still there as much as ever, and the sophistication of the techniques which become visible again from the beginning of the fourteenth century suggests that development had continued.



Above: 1. Detail of a panel in the Solothurner Fechtbuch, c.1425, showing a method of sweeping aside a low forehand thrust.

## Renaissance

The fifteenth century saw an explosion in martial arts literature in Europe, and the genre flourished over the following centuries. The many manuscripts which were produced continue to assert the lack of division, for most contain sections on armed combat with various weapons, armoured combat, wrestling, and what is today called 'self-defense'. The fact that anyone might bear arms does mean that armed forms predominate, for both parties to an affray were likely to be so equipped, yet it was not always the case, and became less often the case in the sixteenth century and onward as societies became more 'civil'.

The one implement that virtually everyone carried was a knife. Normally these were small, general purpose tool and eating utensil, but even those could be turned to offensive use at times. Hence, the most prevalent and effective category of self-defense in the sources of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is against knife attacks. The majority of techniques again presume that both combatants are armed alike, but some of them can work very effectively even unarmed. A knife could be gripped either 'forehand', with the blade projection beyond the thumb and index finger, or 'backhand', with the blade below the heel of the palm. Each prefers particular attacks. Forehand is a little more adaptable, but prefers low attacks.

**Below:** An unusual case of unarmed defense against a sword attack. The man on the right has swept his opponent's 'murder stroke' aside by bringing his right arm up and across against his enemy's arm and has closed in an attempt to throw him. *Fechtbuch* of Talhoffer, 1443, pl. 64.

Backhand prefers high attacks and delivers much more force. A forehand thrust is more readily deflected with the sort of sweeping motion shown in the picture from the *Solothurner Fechtbuch*. (ill. 1) Backhand strikes can be deflected with sweeping techniques, although with more difficulty. Merely deflecting an attack, however, is of limited use, since it leaves the attacker free to renew the attack. And indeed, with the speed at which a knife blade can be realigned, the renewed attack can come very quickly. Thus techniques were devised which allowed the deflection to lead to a grip and a throw or disarming.

Defense against other sorts of attack occur less commonly. It is almost impossible to mount an effective unarmed defense against a sword attack for generally the distance is too great and the swordsman's options are too wide, yet there are examples. (ill. 2) The only such attack which can be effectively countered is a vertical strike, and involves the defender closing on the attacker to get

inside the blade engagement range.

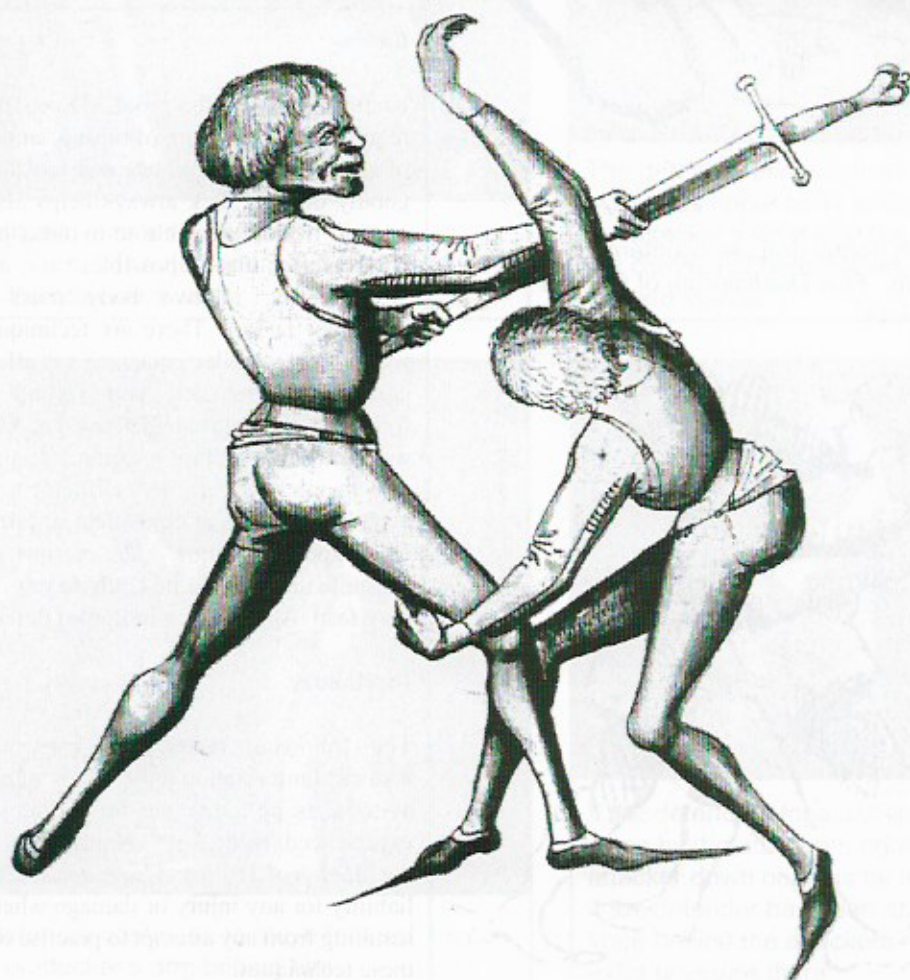
Grappling attacks fall into the wrestling sections of the manuscripts of the period, and the techniques are far too extensive to cover here in any detail. In many cases they are much less sophisticated than the methods of defence against weapons, tending to rely more upon strength than skill. (ill. 3)

A universal principle visible in Renaissance styles of martial arts and self defence as much as in any other, is to take countermeasures against the most vulnerable and discouraging areas. Hence the face and genitals are primary targets, (ill. 4) as are the joints (techniques 2 and 3 on the following pages).

The following pages show several of the simplest and most effective techniques from manuals of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – techniques which can be just as effective and useful today.

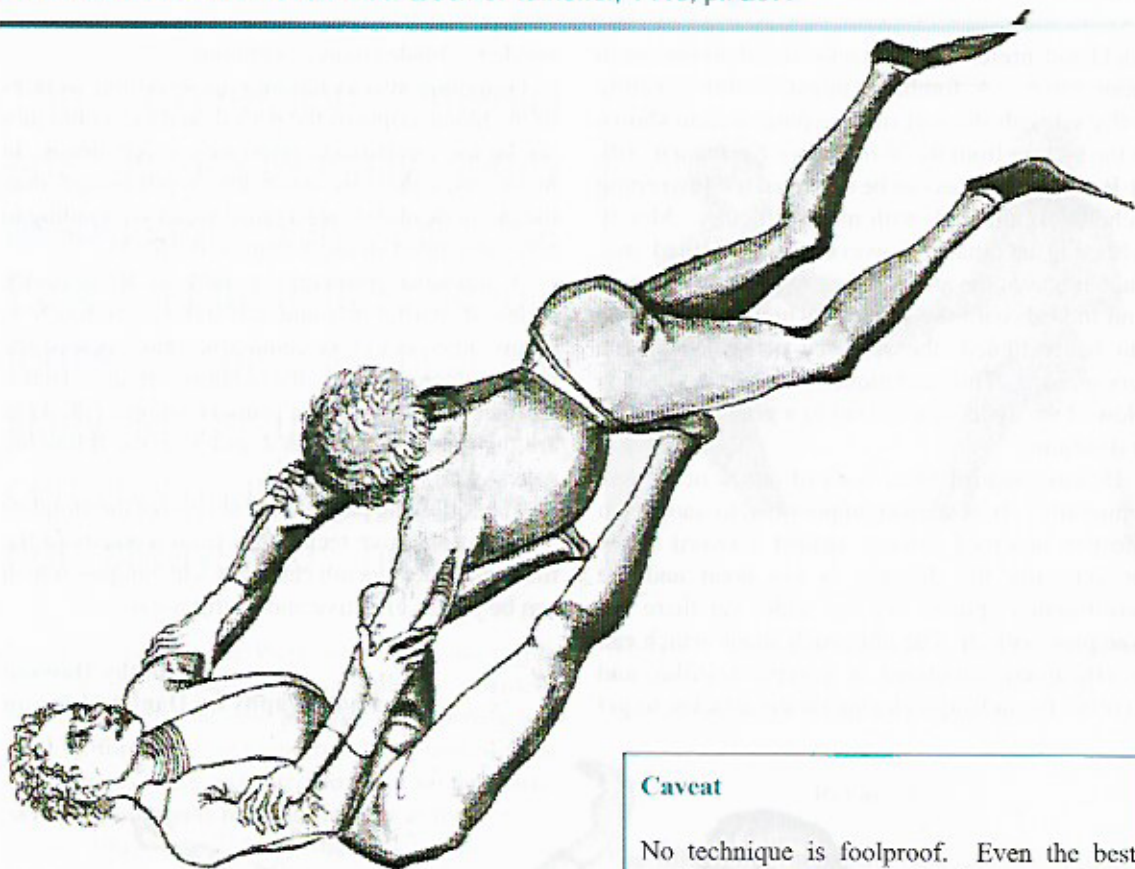
Timothy Dawson

Photography by Daniel Alderson



## 'Trip up his heeles'

**Below: 3.** The oldest technique in the book, what the ancient Greeks called 'the heel trick', continues to be illustrated in the Renaissance. The fighter grasps some portion of the opponent's upper body or clothing, and falls backward, placing a foot in the opponent's abdomen to throw him over. *Fechtbuch* of Talhoffer, 1443, pl. 207.



**Below: 4.** A frontal grapple countered by a nose strike. *Flos Duellatorum* of Fiori de Liberi, 1410, pl.



### Caveat

No technique is foolproof. Even the best requires some measure of timing, smoothness of execution, stable stance and footwork. (A goodly dose of luck always helps also!) In general it more sensible to avoid a physical confrontation if at all possible.

Obviously, relative body mass is an important factor. There are techniques that will allow a smaller person to act effectively against a larger one, and several of the following techniques will allow that if execute well, yet in the author's experience there are also people who are very difficult to throw, even by someone of equivalent or larger size using good technique. The reasons for that are quite unclear. So be ready to run ... very, very fast! Absence is a foolproof defense!

### Disclaimer

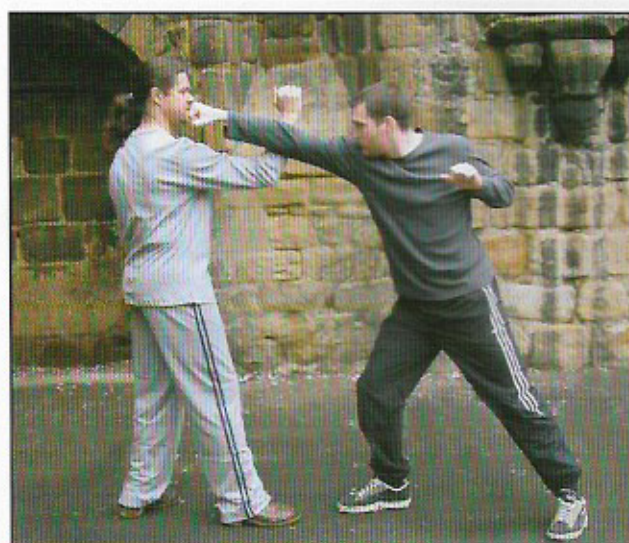
The following material is presented for historical information only. Study of pictorial material is no substitute for training by an experienced instructor. Neither the author nor *Medieval History Magazine* accepts any liability for any injury or damage whatsoever resulting from any attempt to practise or apply these techniques.



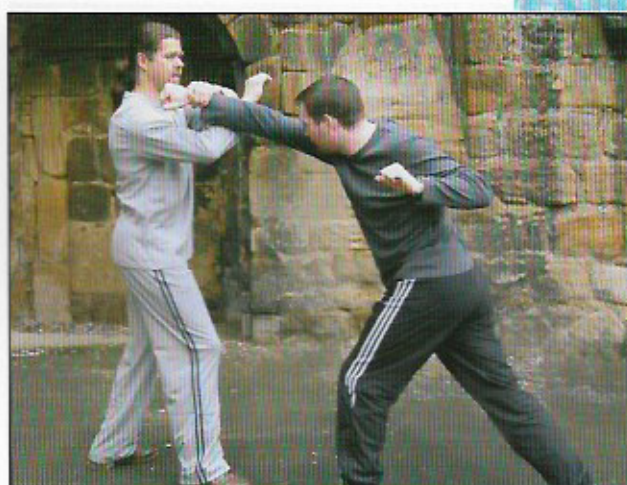
Defence against a punch or choke hold.



*Codex Wallerstein, c. 1476, plate 39.*



The right arm initiates a deflection of the attacker's arm. The defender's left hand firmly grasps the attacker's wrist.



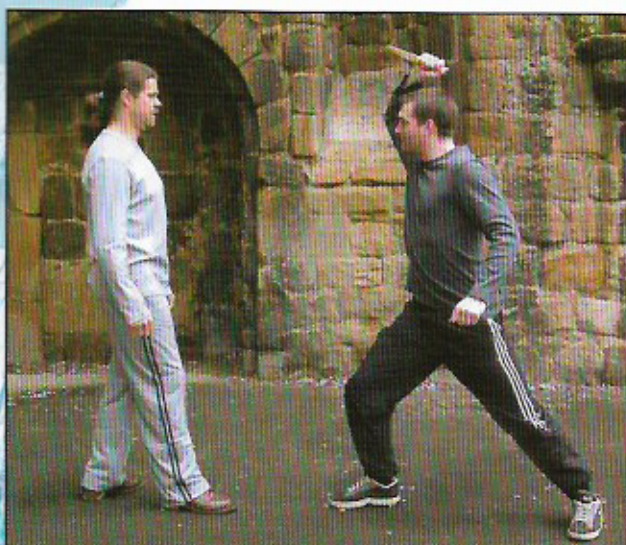
The defender brings his left leg forward and twists his upper body to his right, while twisting the attacker's wrist in a clockwise direction. This will commonly bring the attacker into a right leg forward stance.



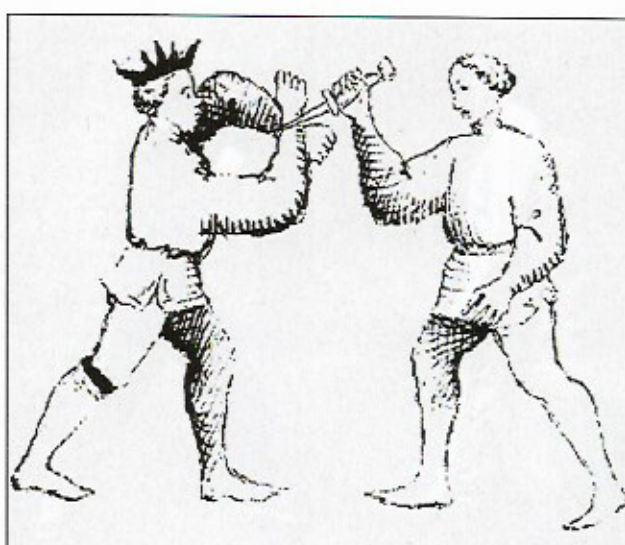
If the defender continues to move forward, he can twist the attacker's arm behind him.



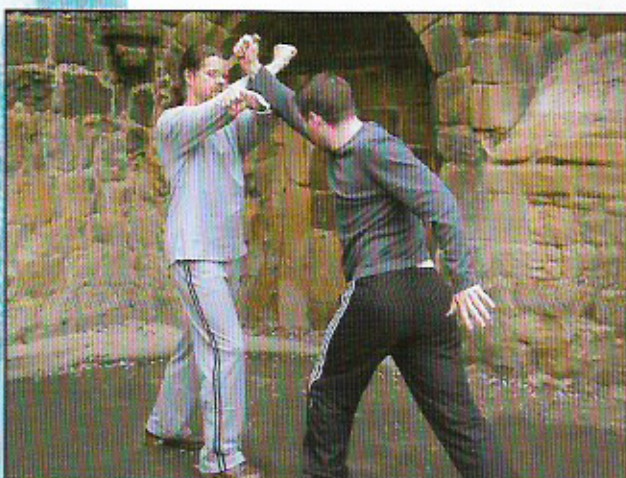
If the defender stops and takes a firm stance close by the attacker's right side, he can bear the attacker down onto his face. This can be assisted if the defender has been able to place his left knee behind the attacker's right knee, and exert extra pressure there.



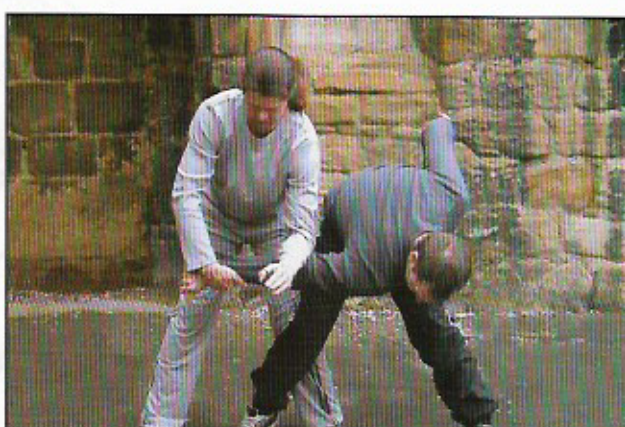
Defence against a backhand dagger attack.



*Flos Duellatorum* of Fiori de Liberi, 1410, pl. 43.



The crossed arms ('scissors-hold') halt the heavy force of a committed strike and prevent the attacker from realigning his attack. (The manuscripts commonly illustrate this technique as also being done with a dagger.)



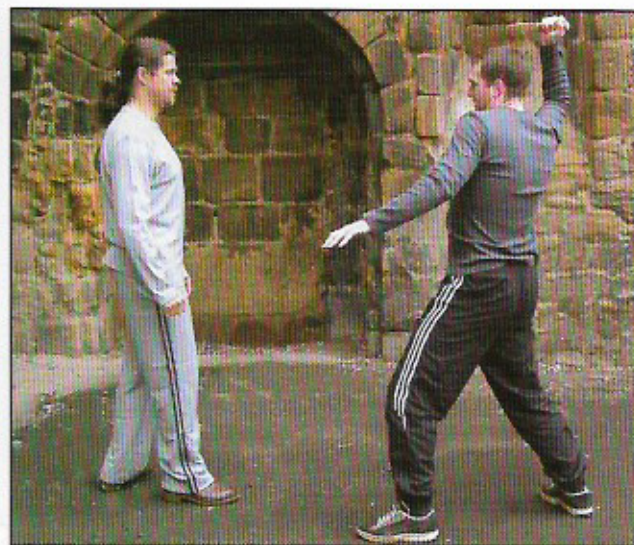
In an empty hand situation it can be more effective for the defender to bring his right leg behind the attacker's leg as before, and to move close in to the attacker's right side as he again twists to his right. As he does this he disengages the scissors, bringing his right hand down to the attacker's wrist, to grip firmly and twist clockwise.



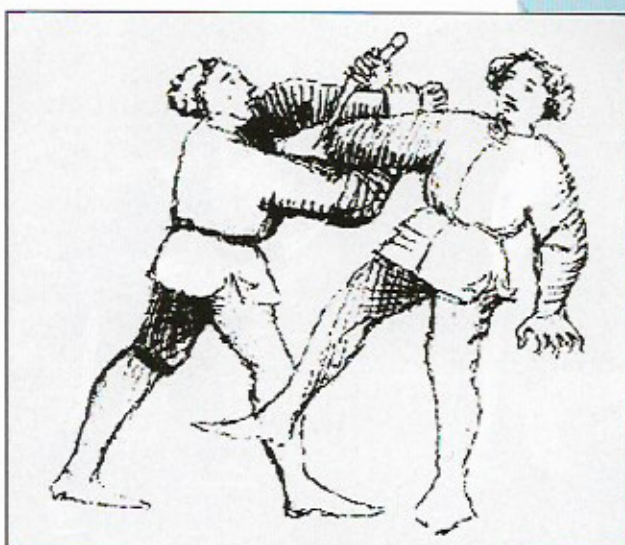
Simultaneously, he rolls his left arm over the attacker's arm, to place his forearm on the back of the attacker's elbow. From there the defender can bear the attacker forward, to his knees or even he ground, and having so immobilised him can disarm him of the knife.



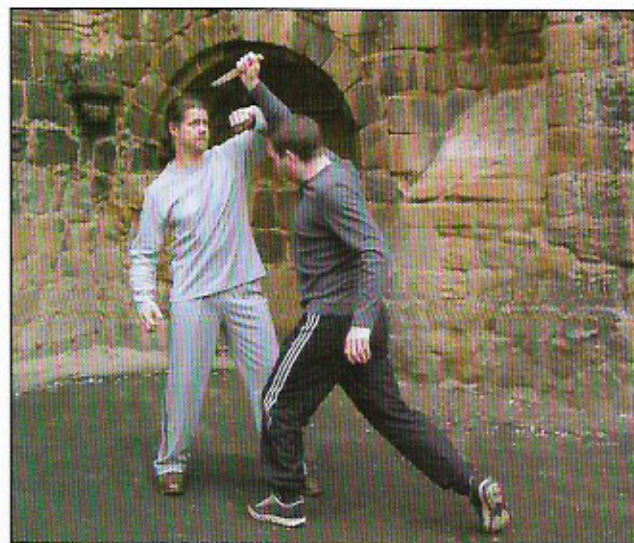
Alternatively, the placing of the forearm on the joint will allow the defender to break the attacker's elbow, should that seem like a more appropriate course. *Flos Duellatorum* of Fiori de Liberi, 1410, pl. 58.



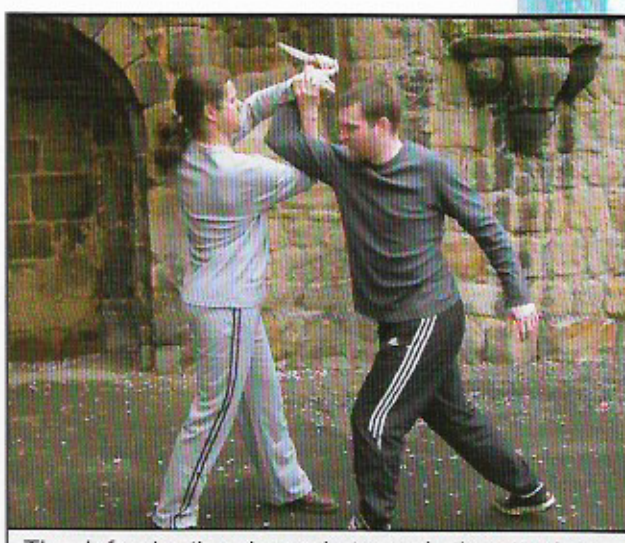
Another defence against a backhand dagger attack.



*Flos Duellatorum* of Fiori de Liberi, 1410, pl.



The force of the attack is initially taken against the left forearm.



The defender then bears in towards the attacker, causing his arm to flex, then exploits that flex by reaching behind the attacker's arm to grasp his own wrist, thus trapping the knife.



The defender may now exert great force in twisting the attacker's shoulder against its natural direction. This will dislocate the shoulder if done swiftly.

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Defence against a low forehand attack.



*Opera Nova* of Achille Marozzo, 1536, p. 187.



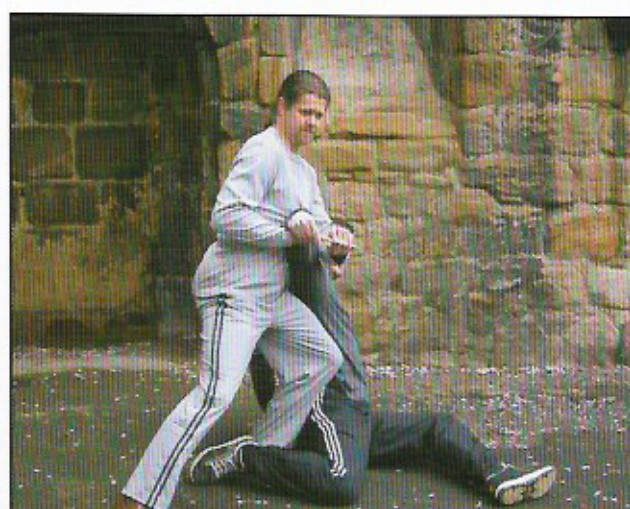
A highly effective technique. The defender moves forward and left while sweeping the attack away to the right with right forearm.



He rolls his arm to bring his right hand to place for a grip on the attacker's wrist. (This can be done more directly onto the bottom of the attacker's wrist.) Meanwhile, he reaches across the attacker's throat with his left arm.



He is then in a position to throw the attacker over his left leg.



If he retains the grip on the wrist, and pivots with his falling opponent, he is then in a position to disarm the attacker by wrenching the knife against the natural rotation of the wrist.



Defence against a sword or staff attack combining techniques previously seen.



Talhoffer, pl. 64 and Marozzo, p. 187.



As the assailant strikes down, the defender passes in and left, making a deflection with the right arm.



The defender follows the blow down with the right arm to minimize any response from the attacker. Meanwhile, he reaches across the attacker's throat with his left arm. The defender throws the assailant over his left leg.



The previous technique is somewhat dependent on the defender being as tall as or taller than the attacker. A simpler option is a heel palm strike to the nose.



If that does not work, run like the wind!