

The German Spearman's Primer

Christian Henry Tobler – July 2010

Introduction

The spear is one of mankind's oldest weapons. Spears were used throughout the Migration Era, through the medieval period, and into the early modern era. They are a staple of the Liechtenauer tradition, appearing in the grandmaster's verses for armoured combat on horse and foot, and in various illustrated works.

Two different types of spear may be observed, with different methods applying for each. The long spear is essentially the cavalry lance, wielded on foot. It is wielded such that the point always stays on line. The lighter short spear is more dexterous and can be used to strike, creating strong parries and forcing open lines of attack; its butt end can be swung around if the head of the spear becomes bound.



Spear combat from KK 5013, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, fol. 4r. This manuscript is a part of the so-called 'Gladiatoria Group' of treatises on armoured combat.

Guards



L: Guards (Ochs and Pflug) for either the long or short spear. R: Guards for the short spear (vom Tag and Nebenhut), mirroring those often shown for fighting with the poleaxe. Hans Talhoffer, Vienna Codex, c.1450.

For the long spear there are two main guards, *Ochs* and *Pflug*, plus the implied position of a fully extended thrust (*Langenort*) and a position with the spear couched under the arm. This last allows for a very strong thrust into the gaps of the armour once purchase has been found, just as Ringeck's 4th half-sword guard does.

The short spear employs all the above guards and adds a low guard, much akin to *Nebenhut*, and a high guard – essentially *vom Tag*. From either of these open wards, you can strike away an opponent's spear. Talhoffer shows these two guards pitted against each other, much as they are with the poleaxe in numerous treatises.

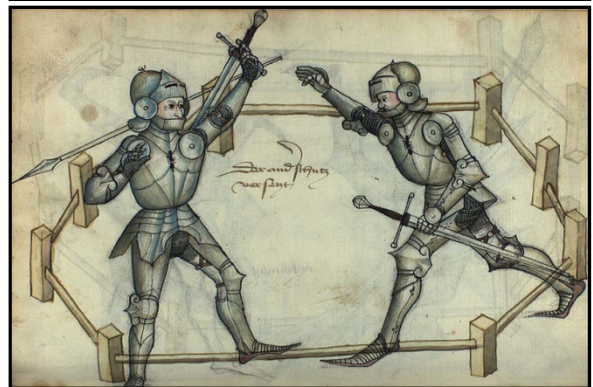
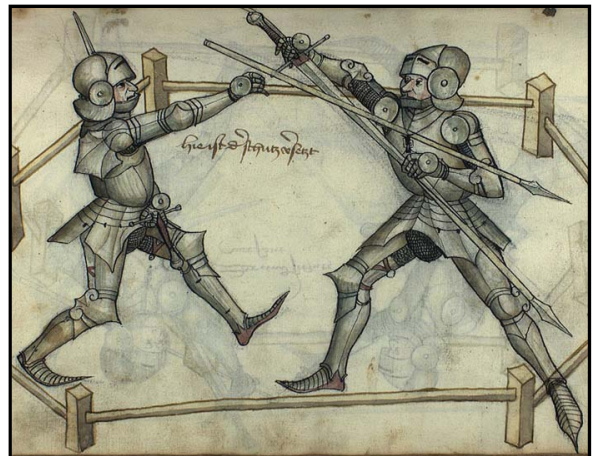
One final guard is shown with both the long and short spear, a position with the spear held vertically on the ground, with the point facing upward. This is used for parrying a cast spear. This appears in various Kal, Talhoffer, and the so-called 'Gladiatoria Group' manuscripts.



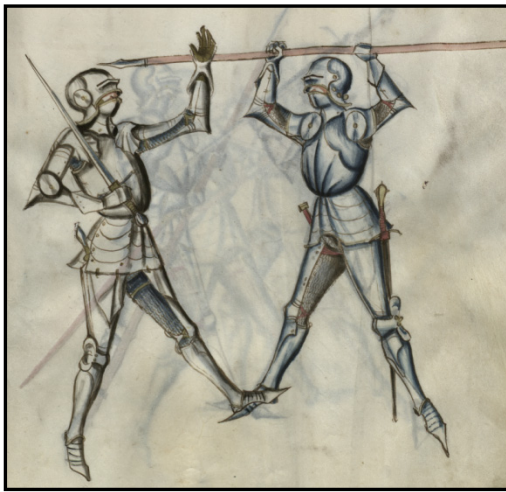
The spear held vertically against a thrown lance.
KK 5013, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna,
fol. 4v.

The Long Spear in Liechtenauer's Harnischfechten

1. The *Vorstich* (First Thrust): From *Pflug*, thrust first. Or, from *Ochs*, cast the spear.
 - a. If you find purchase, wind the spear to couch it under the armpit and crowd him.
 - b. If you cast the spear, then regardless of whether it hits or not, follow after him with your sword or to wrestle.
 - c. If he casts the spear at you, parry it with the spear and/or sword, as seen in the Talhoffer images at right.
2. If you both thrust, bind and wind up high into *Ochs* and spring and plant upon him.
3. If he then goes up high to parry that, then pull from the bind and thrust it into the armpit or elsewhere.
 - a. Master Peter von Danzig advises pulling by keeping the left hand loose on the shaft and sliding the spear forward and back.
 - b. Pull from the bind *only* if his point is to the side, otherwise work with the winding.
 - c. If he pulls, travel after him and thrust in the tempo of his retreat.
4. If he flees by turning his side to you, then *immediately* spring to him and wrestle.
5. If you have a shorter spear or just your sword, parry his spear thrust, with your hand in *Ochs* or *Pflug* as appropriate (below left, from Paulus Kal). From there, grab the spear with



your hand or enwrap it with your arm (below right, from Hans Talhoffer). If he pulls the spear back, rush him with the sword or grapple him.



The Short Spear of Hans Talhoffer

In the Hans Talhoffer codex dedicated to the Swabian knight Leutold von Königsegg, and its copy in Vienna, Master Talhoffer shows combatants in the guards *vom Tag* and *Nebenhut* positioned against each other (see the guards, above), much the way various masters, including him, show these two guards opposing each other with the poleaxe, another popular staff weapon in the Liechtenauer corpus.



As the man in *vom Tag* swings his spear into place, the other binds it with the butt end of his spear (upper left). From this bind, come three different plays with the short spear, each involving the spearhead coming around forward:



1. Rear Thrust – The combatant at right (in *Nebenhut*), steps around to thrust through the buttock and groin from behind, capitalizing on his striking attacker’s circular momentum to allow him to wheel behind him, using a passing step with the left foot, followed

by a compass step backward with the right foot (lower left).

2. Thrust to the Abdomen – Once the man in *Nebenhut* makes contact in the bind, he immediately swings the point forward to impale his opponent through the lower abdomen (upper right).

3. Collar Throw – This is one of the most common techniques with any weapon, in any system of fencing. Once the combatant in



Nebenhut binds, he steps forward to place his left leg behind his man's right leg, thrusting his spear over his opponent's left shoulder. From there, he pulls him down by the neck over the left leg to the ground (lower right, previous page).

4. Arm Wrap – Here, the defender in *Nebenhut* binds, then wraps his left arm around the attacker's left arm, thrusting with his right hand holding his spear (upper right).

5. Leg Hook – Here, the defender in *Nebenhut* binds between his hands then drives his point behind the attacker's left leg to throw him (lower right).



Two Short Spear Techniques from 'Gladiatoria'

The first of these techniques begins with a little different setup from we saw with Talhoffer's techniques – one spearman is in *Ochs*, the other in *Nebenhut*. When the spearman in *Ochs* moves to thrust down, the one in *Nebenhut* should strike this away to his right side, stepping forward with his left foot, and thrust strongly against his man. Note (right) that the combatant in *Ochs* is holding his spear with one hand, his left occupied with a small shield, or *target*.



The first play of the Krakow edition of 'Gladiatoria'



From KK 5013, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, fol. 1v.

In this second technique (left), the figure at left frames the guard *vom Tag* with his spear's butt on the ground, while his antagonist at right forms *Ochs*. The spearman at left sweeps the butt upward to parry the strong thrust of his foe up and away, and then turns his own point forward to thrust.