

Theory and History

The purpose of this section is to provide some of the necessary theoretical and historical information necessary to satisfy the scholar requirements. It is extremely important that the student begin to develop a deep level of understanding of swordsmanship and all the aspects that surround it, i.e. the theoretical aspects as well as the historical aspects. Most material is available on the AEMMA website at <http://www.aemma.org>, while others will require some investigation on the part of the student.

The student must review and study the works written by historical masters that include Fiore dei Liberi, Hans Talhoffer and George Silver. The units below will aid in identifying the salient points that should be understood from each manuscript.

1) Fiore dei Liberi – 1410

Liberi documented a very systematic and complete training manual for the development of contemporary martial art skills of the time. Liberi recommends that this training system not be used to train thugs, given the techniques are sophisticated and deadly. Thugs would not possess the self-discipline to control when and when not to employ the techniques described. He begins the training program with grappling. Although students of the sword would prefer to begin training with the sword, Liberi reasoned that those students who are committed to learning the way of the sword would remain throughout the earlier levels of training and develop an appreciation of the skills learned and recognize how these skills can be leveraged to longsword or pole- weapons training. Those students that are not cognizant of this leave the program early – a good filtering mechanism. The AEMMA training program structure is heavily influenced by this approach by Liberi and is clearly visible in its structure with respect to recruit training. The student undergoing this level of training will consider the following point:

- i. review the classical Italian nomenclature and description of each of the posts and guards found in his manuscript entitled “**Flos Duellatorum**”

2) Hans Talhoffer – 1467

This manuscript was one of the first that received attention by the western martial arts community. An initial re-publication of this manuscript by VS Books, Hearne, Germany suddenly made this manuscript available to the fledgling western martial arts community back in 1998. Since then, a new publication by Mark Rector has provided the WMA community with the same German treatise in English.

The difference between Talhoffer and Liberi is that it appears that Talhoffer’s manuscript is simply a collection of techniques, many quite interesting and considerably sophisticated. It is implied that one that studies this manuscript, should have a good basis

of skill and expertise in order to successfully utilize this manuscript. The student will need to consider the following points:

- i. review the section on “*langes schwert*” (longsword) – plates 1-67
- ii. review and identify similar dagger techniques as instructed previously in this training program in the online section entitled “*Degen (Dolch)* (Dagger) - plates 170 – 190”
- iii. review and identify similar grappling techniques as instructed earlier in this training program in the online section entitled “*Ringen* (Wrestling) - plates 191 – 221”

3) Giacomo di Grassi – 1594

Although a later period master, di Grassi does make references to the importance of footwork, timing and judgment. These are the “soft” skills that all martial artists must develop. di Grassi discusses how one would obtain the necessary attributes to develop skills in judgment (knowing when to strike without leaving an opening to be struck in return, straight line attacks and timing). The student will need to consider the following points:

- i. of paces – principles of harmony of footwork and hand
- ii. principles of the true art of defence – judgment, strength and activity – falsing/deceit

4) George Silver – 1599

Although “George Silver spends a fair amount of time frothing at the mouth about the folly of the newfangled Italian rapier play, as opposed to the English sword.”, he reveals in an easy to read style, the classic principles of the true fight. He discusses the four critical components of a true fight engagement that the fighter must internalize: four true times, four false times, four grounds and the four governors. Of course, the utilization of such concepts is dependent upon the engagement situation and the fighters involved.

For example, consider two swordsmen engaged but out of range of each other. One moves his hand in order to position his sword and then steps forward. He is using the *true time*. The opponent however, steps forward first and then positions his sword. He is using *false time*. This means that the user of the true time is now already prepared to attack the opponent because the opponent’s sword would not as yet be in place due to his using the *false time*.

Silver’s work is extremely important and the student should “nail” down the principles. For convenience, a brief of summary of the principles follow.

The Four True Times

1. The time of the hand.
2. The time of the hand and body.
3. The time of the hand, body, and foot.
4. The time of the hand, body, and feet.

The true times refer in descending order the comparative speeds of movement of the various parts of the body. The movement of the hand only is the fastest moving part while the more complex movement that involves the hand, body and feet are slowest in comparison.

The Four False Times

1. The time of the foot.
2. The time of the foot and body.
3. The time of the foot, body, and hand.
4. The time of the feet, body, and hand.

The false times are the inverse with respect to speed of the body parts. The fighter must be aware that false times would create openings that the opponent will take advantage of.

“Thus have I thought good to separate and make known the true times from the false, with the true wards thereto belonging, that thereby the rather in practicing of weapons a true course may be taken for the avoiding of errors and evil customs, and speedy attaining of good habit or perfect being in the true use and knowledge of all manner of weapons.” **George Silver, 1599**

The Four Grounds

1. Judgment
2. Distance
3. Time
4. Place

Within the context of the four grounds, judgment defines the ability to maintain the optimum distance between yourself and the opponent. The optimum distance is to be positioned such that you are out of striking range, however, you are close enough to take advantage of any openings that may occur. Time is that defining moment when you can safely attack your opponent without him being able to reciprocate. Place refers to the opening in the opponent's defence through which you can deliver your attack. Therefore, through judgment, you keep your distance, through distance you get your time, through time, you safely win the place in which to strike the opponent.⁶

The Four Governors

1. Judgment
2. Measure

⁶ The four grounds were originally written by Silver, however, Maestro Terry Brown does an excellent interpretation in his book.

3. Pressing In
4. Flying Out

The first governor is judgment, which is to know when your adversary can reach you, and when not, and when you can do the like to him, and to know by the goodness or badness of his lying, what he can do, and when and how he can perform it. The second governor is measure. Measure is the better to know how to make your space true to defend yourself, or to offend your enemy. The third and fourth governors are a twofold mind when you press in on your enemy, for as you have a mind to go forward, so must you have at that instant a mind to fly backward upon any action that shall be offered or done by your adversary.⁷ The student must consider the following points:

- i. the issues regarding the Italian masters
- ii. principles of the true fight, independent of weapons employed
- iii. timing of the true fight vs the false fight
- iv. the four grounds/principles and their meaning and application to the fight
- v. the four governors and their meaning and application to the fight
- vi. the general rules of a successful engagement

5) Sigmund Ringeck – c1389 – 1440

Ringeck's "Commentaries on Johannes Liechtenauer's Fechtbuch" is included because Maestro Liechtenauer is often considered the grandfather of fechtbuchs. A number of fechtbuchs written since Liechtenauer's day all demonstrate his influence. His commentaries support the critical attributes of a good fighter, those being footwork and tactics (judgment, distance, time, place). The following is a self-explanatory extraction from Ringeck's translated text. This text is available freely from a number of sources on the internet.

Footwork

Note: This is the first tenet of the long sword: learn to strike blows equally well from both sides if you want to learn to fence well.

Note: If you want to strike from the (your) right side, make sure, your left foot is forward (at the beginning); if you want to strike from the left side, the right foot must be forward.

If you strike an oberhau from the right side then, follow the blow with your right foot.

If you do not the blow is wrong and ineffective, because your right side stays behind. Because of this the blow will fall short and cannot travel in its proper arc towards the left side. If you strike from the left side and you do not follow the blow, it too is wrong. That is why no matter from which side you deliver the strike, follow the blow with the same foot. So you will succeed in all techniques. This is how you shall strike all blows.

⁷ The four governors were extracted directly from Silver's "Brief Instructions..."

Tactical Basics

When you are closing to an opponent, do not watch his blows and do not wait for what he might use against you. Because all fencers, who just wait for their opponents blows and do not do anything else than warding them off, do not succeed very often. They are defeated very often.

Note: Always fence using all of your strength! When you're close, strike at his head and at his body, so he may not be able to change through (*Durchwechseln*) in front of your point. After the blow, from the bind, strike light blows at his next opening, as is described in the section about different blows and other techniques.

Note: This tenet is addressed to left-handers and right-handers. If you are a right-handed fencer and you are closing to an opponent and you think you can hit him, do not strike the first blow from the (your) left side. Because you are weak there and you cannot resist, if he binds strongly against your blade. Because of this, strike from the right side, you can work strongly "*Am Schwert*" ("on the sword") and you can use all techniques you like. So, if you are left-handed, do not strike from the right side, since left-handers are usually not used to strike effectively from the right side and vice versa.

Note: Above all other things, you must understand the principles of "before" (*Vor*) and "after" (*Nach*), because the entire art of fencing is based upon it. "Before" means, preempting him with a blow or a thrust against an opening before he can hit you, so he must defend/displace (*Versetzen*). So, be flexible in your defence and aim with your sword at one opening after the other, so he cannot get through with his own techniques. But, if he rushes in, start wrestling.

"After" means: If you do not succeed with the "before", wait for the "after". These are the defenses against all techniques he uses against you. So, if you have to displace him, make the displacement 'simultaneously' (*Indes*) and from the bind, strike immediately at his nearest opening. So you win the "before" and he remains in the "after". Also, you should –during the "before" and "after" –notice 'simultaneously' (*Indes*) how you can "work" against the strong or the weak of his sword.

This means: The strong of the sword reaches from the cross guard to the middle of the blade, with it, you can hold opposed, if somebody binds against it. The weak reaches from the middle of the blade to the point. Here you cannot hold opposed. If you firmly understand this, you can "work" and defend yourself very well.

Princes and Lords learn to survive with this art, in earnest and in play. But if you are fearful, then you should not learn to fence. Because a despondent heart will always be defeated, regardless of skill.⁸

⁸ Due to the proliferation of "photocopies" of various historical texts from unknown origins including Ringeck, the only known public source is available on the HACA website at <http://www.thehaca.com>. - permission to use the extract was granted by HACA