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EMPEROR'S GAMBIT? ON THE ROLE OF URBAN CULTURE AND FENCING FRATERNITIES IN THE MILITARY REFORM OF MAXIMILIAN I HABSBURG

Summary. This paper aims to trace potential links between the military reform undertaken by King Maximilian I Habsburg, initiated by forming the first Landsknecht regiments in 1486, and the privilege issued in 1487 by his father, Emperor Frederick III, for the first association of fencing masters in German history, the Brotherhood of St. Mark (*Marxbrüder*).

The analysis presented in this paper begins with a description of the Army of the Empire (*Reichsheer*) prior to its reform at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries, with particular focus on the role and military potential of the ministeriales. Next, the socio-cultural contexts and outcomes of the aforementioned reform are discussed, which serves as a backdrop for tracing the evolution of social perception and functioning of professional swordfighters in Germany. Especially important from this perspective is a change in the social standing of this group – from marginalisation as *lose Leute* to integration with the urban community and achieving the status of craftsmen. This process saw its culmination in an imperial privilege issued for the *Marxbrüder* by Frederick III in 1487.

In the final part, somewhat contrary to previous studies (which have presented the aforementioned social advancement of fencers as a natural part of the formation of the urban guild culture), this paper posits that the imperial privilege for the *Marxbrüder* happened, in fact, not on Frederick's, but rather on Maximilian's initiative. Such a view seems to be supported by Maximilian's strong connections with the martial arts community of the period and his war experiences in the Netherlands, as well as his personal involvement in designing and realising a thorough military reform. In this context, it may be hypothesised that by procuring imperial privilege for urban fencers, the young monarch hoped to initiate social change within the German urban community which would facilitate incorporating burghers into the structures of the new military model.

Keywords: Maximilian I Habsburg, late-medieval warfare, urban culture, history of Germany, martial arts, martial culture

Introduction

The impulse for writing this text came from the temporal coincidence of three events which I found interesting. In 1486, as scholars believe,[1] King of the Romans Maximilian I formed the first regiments of a new type of infantry which later came to be known as the *Landsknechte*; a year later (1487), his father, Emperor Frederick III, founded the first fraternity of fencing masters in the history of the Holy Roman Empire – the Brotherhood of Saint Mark (*Marxbrüder*).[2] In 1488, the so-called Swabian League, a regional political and military alliance between major towns, lower nobility, and aristocracy[3] was reactivated on the emperor's initiative. These events may appear unrelated, but this becomes less obvious if one takes into account that between 1477 and 1493 Maximilian I was fighting in the Netherlands, where he keenly observed a new and very efficient type of infantry formation introduced by the Swiss. Both the Netherlandish forces and the Swiss *Reisläufer* confronted by the young monarch were embedded in urban rather than knightly culture, but they nevertheless

[1] C. Jörgensen *et al*., *Fighting Techniques of the Early Modern World. Equipment, Combat Skills, and Tactics*, New York 2006, p. 11.

[2] B.A. Tlusty, *Martial Identity and the Culture of the Sword in Early Modern Germany*, [in:] *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*, eds. D. Jaquet, K. Verelst, T. Dawson, Leiden–Boston 2016, p. 555. For a broader and in-depth discussion of urban martiality: eadem, *The Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany. Civic Duty and the Right of Arms*, New York 2011. Essential information on development of fencing fraternities and schools in Germany still quoted in newer studies can be found in the works by Hans-Peter Hils (idem, *Meister Johann Liechtenauers Kunst des langen Schwertes*, Frankfurt am Main–Bern–New York 1985) and K. Wassmannsdorff (idem, *Sechs Fechtschulen (di Schau-und Preisfechten) der Marxbrüder und Federfechter aus den Jahren 1573–1614: Nürnberger Fechtschulreime v. J. 1579 und Rösener's Gedicht: Ehrentitel und Lobspruch der Fechtkunst v. J. 1589; Eine Vorarbeit zu einer Geschichte der Marxbrüder und Federfechter*, Heidelberg 1870). An interesting synthesis of the social, political, and kinaesthetic aspects of urban fencing contests in 16th-century Germany is offered by Kevin Gajdziński, *Mieszczański turniej szermierczy w XVI-wiecznych Niemczech*, [in:] *Regiony – Kultura – Demokracja. Wybrane teksty z V Konferencji Młodych Naukowców 9–10.06.2011 r*., ed. N. Niedzielska-Burdzy, Wrocław 2013, pp. 24–30. Finally, the latest comparison of these urban contests with contemporaneous knightly tournaments can be found in: M. Talaga, *Taniec to (nie) walka. Agonistyka i antagonistyka a choreografia na przykładzie turniejów rycerskich i mieszczańskich w Niemczech*, "Kultura Współczesna" 2020, No. 4, pp. 157–173.

[3] The fundamental work on the history of the League is H. Carl, *Der Schwäbische Bund 1488–1534: Landfrieden und Genossenschaft im Übergang von Spätmittelalter zur Reformation*, Leinfelden–Echterdingen 2000. The political and social context of its formation was thoroughly discussed in: *Ibidem*, pp. 21–148.

posed a serious challenge to the feudal Army of the Empire (*Reichsheer*) and the newer troops of the "English model" at his disposal. The Swiss system was based on a mixture of foot soldiers armed with staff weapons and firearms employing a characteristic combat technique and tactics – innovations later adopted by the German Landsknechts.[4]

During my attempt at reconstructing the process which eventually led to adoption of this model in Germany at the end of the 15th century – quite late, considering the geographical and cultural proximity between Switzerland and the Habsburg domains in Swabia and Austria – I noticed this transformation's coincidence with the foundation of the fencing fraternity of the *Marxbrüder*, an organisation showing the peculiar combination of martial profile, knightly aspirations, and a definitely urban character. Having scrutinised this coincidence – between the formation of the *Landsknechte* (1486) and the foundation of the *Marxbrüder* (1487) – I hypothesise that it was not by chance but rather reflects efforts taken by Maximilian I in order to create a strong imperial army based on the new model, in spite of resistance from German feudal aristocracy. A pivotal role in this endeavour, as I will argue, was played by the previously untapped military potential of German burghers and the hitherto-marginalised travelling master fencers who were to become the evangelists of its future success. If we consider that in order to make use of the said potential Maximilian seems to have resorted to a sort of social engineering, an indirect and risky action, it appears fit to term this plan an "emperor's gambit."

In closing this introduction it is necessary to explain that today's definition of the word "fencing" does not work well in the period under discussion and may be misleading. Unlike nowadays, when we understand fencing as a sport involving subtle handling of conventionalised, "elegant" cold steel weapons, at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries the term "fencing" (German: *schirmen* or *fechten*) encompassed all kinds of activities related to coping with a violent physical confrontation – it referred in equal measure to weapon handling, unarmed fighting and wrestling, and mounted combat.[5] Hence, it would fit both (proto)sportive

[4] The socio-cultural background and historical circumstances of development and reception of the "Swiss model" and other traditions has recently been investigated in a paper on the Battle of Guinegate (1479) by M.J. Krasoń; idem, *The success of the pike over the bow discussed through the battle of Guinegate, during which the Swiss type infantry clashed with the armies of Louis XI. Twilight of the English military system*, "Open Military Studies" 2020, vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 1–10.

[5] H.P. Hils, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

or ludic forms of combat, as well as those of a purely pragmatic nature which today would be jointly called "self-defence." In effect, such phrases as "fencing with a sword" or "with a pike" should not come as surprising in this text – in the past, they were perfectly natural.

Army of the Empire before the reform

A broader situational context is needed to understand the dynamics of the events under discussion. The first crucial step is to examine the state of the Army of the Empire as found by Maximilian I when he had to use force in defence of the Netherlandish dominion of his wife, Mary of Burgundy, threatened by the king of France. Since the reform of the army undertaken in 1422 (Diet of Nuremberg), the armed forces of the Empire relied on contingents provided by particular territorial units and the feudal lords responsible for them.[6] In effect, in the late 15th century the mainstay of the Imperial troops was still composed of the *ministeriales*, i.e. representatives of lower knighthood for whom military service was at the same time a basic duty and the main avenue for material and social advancement.[7] It is worth noting, however, that as a rule the *ministeriales* were not free men, but descendants of serfs (*Dienstleute*), people assigned different menial functions at the courts of German aristocracy.[8] Nevertheless, this state of affairs gradually evolved, because the *ministeriales* were often given land, usually non-hereditary, thus becoming able to pursue professional military training and develop practical martial knowledge and skills[9] which, in turn, would be used to justify their claims to knighthood.[10]

However, at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries, the *ministeriales* started to slowly lose the assets which had previously warranted their crucial role within

[6] Heeresmatrikel, auf dem Reichstage zu Nürnberg beschlossen. – 1422, [in:] *Quellensammlung zur Geschichte der Deutschen Reichsverfassung in Mittelalter und Neuzeit*, ed. H. Triepel, Thübingen 1913, pp. 232–234.

[7] B. Arnold, *German Knighthood 1050–1300*, Oxford 1985, p. 12–29.

[8] J. Keupp, *Ministerialität und Lehnswesen. Anmerkungen zur Frage der Dienstlehen*, [in:] *Das Lehnswesen im Hochmittelalter. Forschungskonstrukte – Quellenfunde – Deutungsrelevanz*, eds. J. Dendorfer, R. Deutinger, Ostfildern 2010, pp. 347–349.

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 352.

[10] B. Arnold, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

the Army of the Empire. In the face of the growing military strength of German towns, which proved capable of enduring sieges (e.g. Rothernburg-ob-der-Tauber in the years 1407–1408) and winning pitched battles (e.g. the Swabian League of Towns at Reutlingen in 1377), not to mention the numerous Swiss victories (e.g. Morgarten in 1315), the military monopoly, or even advantage, of the German knighthood was becoming increasingly illusory. This led to undermining the traditional model of warfare and personal martial training which was centred on horsemanship and skilful wielding of the lance. Simultaneously, growing economic pressure was put on the *ministeriales* by the towns, the latter often acting as creditors to the former, as well as by higher nobility and aristocrats who opposed admitting lower knights to the *Reichstag* and burdened them by requiring military service in numerous feudal feuds.[11] It caused increasing frustration among the *ministeriales*, pushing many of them into crime and robbery. It also resulted in their deeper dependence on local checks and balances, which had a negative impact on their loyalty towards the emperors.

This situation created a demand for mercenaries – mostly foreigners. It bears emphasising here that these professional combatants were recruited primarily from urban dwellers. This process entailed not only a significant increase in war costs – unlike mercenaries, the *ministeriales* did not receive pay in money but in land and spoils of war – but also a major shift in the social structure of the army.

Military reform: inspirations, challenges, and solutions

As I mentioned in the introduction, the 1470s saw Maximilian I fighting in the Netherlands to defend his wife's dowry. His main adversary was King of France, Louis XI – an experienced politician with a victorious war against the military superpower of Burgundy already under his belt. It was during this earlier conflict, i.e. the Burgundian Wars (1474–1477), that the Swiss foot mercenaries hired by the French – *Reisläufer* – shined particularly clearly and played major roles in three victories achieved by the anti-Burgundian coalition (at Grandson,

[11] H. Zmora, *The Feud in Early Modern Germany*, Cambridge 2011, p. 13; the aforementioned publication offers a comprehensive analysis of violent feuds taking place in Germany at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries and lists key bibliographical references.

Murten, and Nancy). These accomplishments strengthened the reputation of the Swiss as excellent soldiers but also initiated transformations within the defeated Burgundian army which quickly adopted the new model of warfare. In result, when King Maximilian had to fight a pitched battle with the French at Guinegate in 1479 he could count on advice from a veteran experienced in the Swiss ways, Jacques of Savoy, Count of Romont, who helped the fledgling monarch prepare his forces to fight in the new style.[12] This support, combined with the high morale of the Burgundian-German troops (mostly urban militia from Flanders), allowed Maximilian to gain a decisive, albeit hard-fought and politically unexploited,[13] victory over the more numerous French army composed of mounted knights and mercenary English longbowmen.[14] This event became the spark which started far-reaching changes in warfare in the whole region, including France and the Empire. It is particularly important for the discussed matters that it was this battle experience that is commonly held responsible for Maximilian's strong commitment to the idea of transplanting the Swiss model to Germany, which led to the emergence of the Landsknechts in the following decade.[15]

It has to be noted, however, that this process took time and by no means happened automatically as a kind of Hegelian "historical necessity." The Army of the Empire was not at the time a centralised organisation, and its shape was essentially the effect of decisions taken by individual feudal lords. The latter, in turn, were more interested in local feuds and conflicts than in a comprehensive military reform.[16] In result, Maximilian's efforts aimed at creating a significant Landsknecht corpus were of quite a limited scope during the first years after Guinegate. It comes as no surprise, however, if one takes into account that introduction of a new formation – not only armament but also drills, patterns of cooperation between different sub-formations, and a stable recruitment base – is not a simple administrative decision but rather a complex technological, social, and political-economic process.

[12] H. Delbruck, *History of the Art of War. The Dawn of Modern Warfare*, vol. 4, transl. W.J. Renfroe, London 1990, p. 4.

[13] Maximilian I was, nevertheless, eventually forced to sign the unfavourable Treaty of Arras (1482).

[14] M.J. Krasoń, *op. cit.*, pp. 6–9.

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 9.

[16] For more on this, *vide*: H. Zmora, *op. cit.*, pp. 77–111. In the quoted chapter, H. Zmora argues that "the feuding scene in the 1470s was dominated by large, wealthy, pre-eminent families", *ibidem*, pp. 92–93.

The weapon, as noted by Alfred Gell in reference to Cambodian soldiers of Pol Pot and their landmines, "makes the soldier."[17] However, it has to be added that the weapon does not fight by itself and mere change in arms does not make new soldiers – other means are also necessary, the most important of which is training. Borrowing from Gell once more, it may be stated that although armament is often a key factor deciding outcomes of battles or wars, its "agency" can, nevertheless, manifest itself only when complemented by an attuned user.[18] It is especially clear in those combat methods which rely on simple technologies, when the main responsibility for weapons' correct functioning lies with the human operator.[19] Convincing examples from the period in question would be English longbowmen or the Spanish *tercios*. Both gained renown for their numerous and spectacular victories which turned them into sought-after mercenaries. The fact that their employers hired them instead of simply copying their weaponry indicates that the key value was in their training – not so easy to reproduce. Such conclusion is corroborated by bioarchaeological research conducted on remains of crew members of the 'Mary Rose', a flagship of Henry VIII of England. Traces on the bones, especially the structure of upper limbs and muscle attachments, witness to the crewmen's intensive and prolonged training necessary for efficient use of the longbow.[20] The well-known measures taken by English monarchs to supress other sports, such as football, which allegedly drew youth away from archery, should be interpreted as another appreciation of the importance of training.[21] The *tercios*, on the other hand, did not possess

[17] "Soldier's weapons are parts of him which make him what he is", A. Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford 1998, pp. 20–21.

[18] To provide additional support to this thesis, one may quote Manjari Chakrabarty: "[t]he fundamental relational unit of the »agent + tool« confronts the world in a markedly different way than the non-relational unit of »the agent without the tool«" (M. Chakrabarty, *How stone tools shaped us: Post-phenomenology and material engagement theory*, "Philosophy & Technology" 2018, vol. 32, No. 2, p. 253). From the perspective of the discussed matters, this statement remains true even when reversed: if an agent with a tool confronts the world in a markedly different way than without, then the same tool will act differently when interacting with different actors and in yet another way when left alone.

[19] An opposite example may be modern highly-advanced military technologies, such as drones, in which the weapon-user interface takes care of the lion's share of necessary computations, safeguards against errors, and thus significantly lowers the minimal personal competences required from a soldier.

[20] A. Stirland, *The Men of the Mary Rose*, [in:] *The Social History of English Seamen 1485–1649*, ed. C.A. Fury, Woodbridge 2012, pp. 68–69.

[21] J. McClelland, *Body and Mind: Sport in Europe from the Roman Empire to the Renaissance*, Abingdon 2007, p. 108.

any particularly unique weaponry – they largely copied solutions popularised by the Swiss *Reisläufer*. Hence, their many victories over similar formations in the Netherlands or against the German Landsknechts should be related to their higher martial proficiency – as a matter of fact, the long training required to form a unit of *tercios* was also the main reason behind their low numbers and the limited reception of their combat technique and tactics in other countries.[22]

In the light of the above observations, it should come as no surprise that Maximilian decided to begin his project of implementation of the Swiss model in the Army of the Empire by acquiring what today is often termed *know-how* – in this case, both theoretical knowledge and practical skills embodied in properly trained soldiers. Initially, this *know-how* was provided by advisors and instructors from Switzerland and the Netherlands, whereas the recruits came mostly from Flanders.[23] Such a choice seems logical, if one takes into account that since the 14th century Flemish burghers enjoyed a reputation of being warlike and disciplined.[24] Moreover, organised urban shooting fraternities are traceable in Flanders since the 11th century, Bruges boasts the oldest currently-known fencing school in Europe (ca. 1430), and from the late 15th century onwards most of the major towns of the region had fencing guilds.[25] However, the first army of the new model in Germany, composed mostly of foreigners, was not formed before 1488, when Emperor Frederick III gathered the Army of the Empire to free his son from the hands of Burgundian rebels who had imprisoned him in February of that year. It is no coincidence that these new forces were funded by the Swabian League, freshly reactivated by the emperor;[26] the 14th century saw further progress in gradual emancipation of towns from feudal control and during this process, in exchange for legal and economic privileges and military prerogatives, the emperors obliged burghers to maintain peace of the land (*Landfrieden*) in their respective territories. Towns obviously benefitted from

[22] For a detailed discussion, *vide*: F.G. de León, "*Doctors of the Military Discipline*": *Technical Expertise and the Paradigm of the Spanish Soldier in the Early Modern Period*, "The Sixteenth Century Journal" 1996, vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 61–85.

[23] M.J. Krasoń, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[24] *Ibidem*.

[25] B. Gevaert, R. van Noort, *Evolution of Martial Tradition in the Low Countries: Fencing Guilds and Treatises*, [in:] *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*, eds. D. Jaquet, K. Verelst, T. Dawson, Leiden–Boston 2016, pp. 379–381.

[26] C. Jörgensen *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

it, as it allowed them to oppose oppression from the aristocracy more efficiently and ensured safety along trade routes, which was crucial for towns' prosperity.[27] In effect, by the end of the 15th century burghers would have already gathered significant experience as combatants and were ready to act as a driving force of the military reform.

There were two major problems, however. While Swabian burghers could afford to pay large sums to maintain foreign mercenaries, the loyalty of such troops was fragile, as the young monarch would learn from an episode during the Austro-Hungarian war of 1490. Then, having looted Stuhlweißenburg (Székesfehérvár), a royal residence of the kings of Hungary, Maximilian's Landsknechts refused to serve any more until given their promised pay. This incident allegedly convinced Maximilian that his army had to be based on the Germans, not foreign mercenaries.[28] And there, as I propose, he encountered the second problem. Namely, as mentioned earlier, at that time German towns would already have a long history of armed opposition against the feudal lords and thus some sort of military tradition, but it was arguably not as developed as in the cases of Switzerland or Flanders. German burghers gained victories mostly while defending their walls (for instance, during the siege of Rothenburg in 1407[29]) and less often in the open field. Besides that, burghers' main occupations were craftsmanship and trade, hence their level of personal combat preparation was lower in comparison to the *ministeriales*, who could dedicate much more time to training. This seems in line with the fact that, apart from shooting fraternities, martial training institutions, such as public fencing schools and contests, started to proliferate in Swabia roughly two decades later than in Flanders and Switzerland[30] – *ca*. 1480 (Tab. 1) – and enjoyed only local popularity until the beginning of the next century.[31] It appears, therefore, safe to assume that urban martial culture in Germany differed significantly from the one which the new model army originated from. This begs the question: What changes had to occur

[27] H. Zmora, *op. cit*., p. 17.

[28] J. Richards, *Landsknecht Soldier 1486–1560*, Oxford 2002, p. 7–8.

[29] J. Gassmann, *Honour and Fighting. Social Advancement in the Early Modern Age*, "Acta Periodica Duellatorum" 2015, vol. 3, No. 1, p. 149.

[30] *Cf*. B. Gevaert, R. van Noort, *op. cit*., and D. Jaquet, *Fighting in the Fightschools late XVth, early XVIth century*, "Acta Periodica Duellatorum" 2015, vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 47–66.

[31] K. Gajdziński, *op. cit*., p. 25.

in order to turn German burghers into valuable recruits for the Landsknecht formations which, according to Maximilian's idea, were to match and counter the deadliest war machine of the period, i.e. the Swiss?

Table 1

Juxtaposition of fencing schools or contests (*Schirmschulen* or *Fechtschulen*) from German-speaking lands predating 1500 and confirmed in written sources[32]

Date	Place	Fencing master(s)	Source(s)
1348	University of Prague (ban)	?	D. Jaquet, *op. cit.*, p. 56, fn. 39.
1365	University of Vienna (ban)	?	*Ibidem*
1386	University of Heidelberg (ban)	?	Wabmannsdorff, *op. cit.*, p. 1
1392	University of Erfurt (ban)	?	D. Jaquet, *op. cit.*, p. 56, fn. 39.
1397	Frankfurt-am-Main	?	J.G.G. Büsching, *Wöchentliche Nachrichten für Freunde der Geschichte, Kunst und Gelahrtheit des Mittelalters*, vol. 3, Breslau 1817, p. 305.
1444	Rothenburg	Conrad von Siebenbürgen, Hans Talhoffer (?)	O. Dupuis, *A fifteenth-century fencing tournament in Strasburg*, "Acta Periodica Duellatorum", vol. 3, no. 2, p. 67; J.P. Kleinau, *1444 Two fencing masters in Rothenburg*, https://talhoffer.wordpress.com/2012/12/03/1444-two-fencing-masters-in-rothenburg (access: 8 I 2021)

[32] The comparison includes only the German-speaking cultural circle. Institutions similar to the Swiss fencing school seem to have emerged roughly at the same time in Flanders (*cf.* B. Gevaert, R. van Noort, *op. cit.*) and France (O. Dupuis, *The French Fencing Traditions, from the 14th Century to 1630 through Fight Books*, [in:] *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*, eds. D. Jaquet, K. Verelst, T. Dawson, Leiden–Boston 2016, s. 355–375). At the current state of research it is hard to decide whether it was a case of convergent evolution or cultural diffusion – the latter, if assumed, could happen either way, given the Swiss involvement in the French and Flemish military arenas in the 15th century.

Date	Place	Fencing master(s)	Source(s)
1445	Basel	?	D. Jaquet, *op. cit.*, p. 55
1454	Zürich	Hans Tachselhofer	D. Jaquet, *op. cit.*, p. 55
1459	Lucerne	?	D. Jaquet, *op. cit.*, p. 55
1463	Lucerne	?	D. Jaquet, *op. cit.*, p. 55
1470/71	Strassburg	?	Dupuis, *op. cit.*
1477	Nuremberg	?	K.E. Lochner, *Zur Geschichte der Fechtschulen in Nürnberg*, https://www.schwertkampf-ochs.de/essays/Zur_Geschichte_der_Fechtschulen_in_Nuernberg.pdf (access: 8 I 2021)
1478	Nuremberg	Nicklaus Bruckner	J.P. Kleinau, *1478–1523 Marxbruder Nicklaus Bruckner*, https://talhoffer.wordpress.com/2014/07/28/marxbruder-nicklaus-bruckner (access: 8 I 2021)
1479	Nuremberg	Nicklaus Bruckner	*Ibidem*
1479	Nuremberg	Nicklaus Bruckner	*Ibidem*
1485	Baden	Peter Switzer	D. Jaquet, *op. cit.*, p. 58–59
1487	Nuremberg	?	Lochner, *op. cit.*
1489	Solothurn	?	Daniel Jaquet, personal communication
1490	Basel	Peter Switzer	F.K. Mathys, *Spiel und Sport im alten Basel*, Basel 1954, pp. 26–27
1492	Nuremberg	Jobsten Erlheimer, Hannsen Zullen	Lochner, *op. cit.*
1492	Basel	Peter Switzer	Mathys, *op. cit.*, p. 27
1493	Nuremberg	Ludwig Klingenstein	Lochner, *op. cit.*
1494	Nuremberg	Jobsten Erlheimer	*Ibidem*

Table 1 (cont.)

Date	Place	Fencing master(s)	Source(s)
1495	Nuremberg	Nicklaus Bruckner	Kleinau, *Marxbruder*...
1497	Wrocław (Breslau)	?	S.B. Klose, *Darstellung der inneren Verhaltnisse der Stadt Breslau vom Jahre 1458 bus zum Jahre 1526*, [in:] *Scriptores rerum Silesiacarum*, vol. 3, ed. G.A. Stenzel, Breslau 1847, p. 86.

From the left, subsequent columns indicate the time, place, names of involved fencing masters, and bibliographical references. Compiled by M. Talaga.

Fencing masters, urban martial culture, and the military reform

Before it is possible to give a hypothetical answer to the question raised in the previous section, it is necessary to discuss one more aspect. As suggested above, the phenomenon of fencing schools and contests (*Schirm-* or *Fechtschulen*) in Germany was clearly delayed in comparison to Switzerland (Tab. 1) and Flanders. The earliest mentions from the 14th century are indirect or negative ones, since they come almost exclusively (with Frankfurt as an exception[33]) from university regulations strictly forbidding students from attending fencing schools. Rothenburg is the only positive case known from Germany from before 1450, but it was rather a quarrel between two fencing masters, not a proper *Fechtschule*. All the following accounts up to 1477 come solely from Switzerland. Next, until the end of the century, the practice of *Fechtschulen* in Germany seems to have been limited almost entirely to Swabia, with Nuremberg as a clear centre. This may be interpreted as a consequence of differences in martial culture, or what Barbara Ann Tlusty calls "martial identity."[34] These differences would be responsible for the fact that organised urban martial practices developed earlier in Switzerland and only then diffused to southern Germany. Without passing

[33] In Frankfurt, the fencers acted not as professional teachers or fighters but rather entertainers catering for the nobility gathered for the *Reichstag* – this information will become important later, when I reach the question of changes in the social standing of fencers in the 15th century.

[34] B.A. Tlusty, *Martial Identity*...; it seems worthwhile here to clarify the distinction between "martial" and "military" culture. B.A. Tlusty uses the former to refer to bellicose aspects of early-modern masculinity and mentality which manifested themselves not only in military but also civilian contexts, in everyday life of German burghers.

judgement on this matter at the moment, it has to be admitted that this observation justifies a closer look at the social group which stood behind the development and dissemination of the *Fechtschulen* – i.e. fencing masters.

The social standing of martial arts professionals – in the oldest German sources referred to as "fighters" (*kempen*), and later as "fencers" (*schirmer* or *fechter*) – has been researched since the early 20th century. These studies were initiated by comparing professional fighters with jugglers and acrobats (*Spielleute*)[35] and tracking their activity in legal documents.[36] More recent contributions extended the investigation to urban texts, literature, and iconography.[37] Generalising, it may be concluded that scholars agree that little is known about the life of professional fencers prior to the sudden proliferation of the *Fechtschulen* at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries. The available sources indicate, however, that at least until the 1400s martial arts experts offering their skills for hire were considered 'devoid of rights' (*rehtlos*).[38] By exposing their bodies to harm and providing entertainment in exchange for financial gratification, the fencers put themselves in a position analogous to prestidigitators and prostitutes, which forced them to live their lives at the outskirts of the social order, as "loose people" (*lose Leute*) or rovers (*fahrende Volk*) travelling from one patron to another.[39] It seems that it was this very marginalisation that resulted in almost complete absence of fencing masters in the historical record from the period.

In the face of the above, the sudden burst of the urban *Fechtschulen* in the second half of the 15th century suggests a significant shift regarding the social perception of professional fencers. The "schools" organised by them – be it contests or public teaching events – started to be tolerated by urban authorities[40] or even actively supported.[41] This process was capstoned by the privilege issued

[35] A. Schaer, *Die altdeutschen Fechter und Spielleute: Ein Beitrag zur Deutschen Culturgeschichte*, Bremen 1901; M. Wierschin, *Meister Johann Liechtenauers Kunst des Fechtens*, München 1965.

[36] H.P. Hils, *op. cit.*, pp. 207–250; this publication also discusses and synthesises previous studies.

[37] M. Coesfeld, *Lohnkempen im Spätmittelalter Soziale Außenseiter als Tragsäulen der Rechtspraxis*, "Soziologie Magazin" 2013, vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 54–66; D. Jaquet, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

[38] According to the "Sachsenspiegel" (I.38 §1): *Kemphen und iriu kint*, *spilliute und alle die eneliche geborn sint* (...), *die sint alle rehtlos* ("fighters, children, jugglers, and bastards (...) they have no rights"), after: D. Jaquet, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

[39] M. Coesfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

[40] O. Dupuis, *A fifteenth-century fencing tournament*..., p. 76.

[41] K. Gajdziński, *op. cit.*, p. 26; D. Jaquet, *op. cit.*, p. 60; B.A. Tlusty, *Martial Identity*..., p. 552.

by Emperor Frederick III in Nuremberg in 1487 which founded the Brotherhood of St. Mark (*Marxbrüder*) – the first pan-German fraternity of fencing masters.[42] This document granted the brotherhood self-government as well as a monopoly to teach fencing for money, organise the *Fechtschulen*, and certify "masters of the sword" (*meister des swerts*).[43] Simultaneously, *Marxbrüder's* internal regulations stated that before taking the master's examination in Frankfurt-am-Main (the fraternity's headquarters), each candidate had to pass a preliminary test under the eyes of a local master and then go through a probation period two or three years long. During this apprenticeship, the candidate was expected to participate in and organise *Fechtschulen*.[44] This *de facto* meant that the *Marxbrüder* had not only the right but also the obligation to propagate urban fencing contests.[45] This state of affairs – the necessity to travel and the right to earn money from *Fechtschulen* (by winning prizes or benefitting from admission fees collected from participants and spectators) – rendered "masters of the sword" very efficient at and vividly interested in spreading martial arts among German burghers. Moreover, for the first time since the Germanic period the social standing of professional fencers was elevated from marginalised outcasts to respected craftsmen.[46]

Studies conducted so far indicate that professional fighters practiced their trade in a variety of ways. First of all, martial pageants would have been a part of different celebrations at least since the 14th century (Tab. 1: Frankfurt-am-Main). Martial arts masters may have also served as bodyguards, soldiers, assassins, or instructors at aristocratic courts[47] and in towns.[48] However, perhaps

[42] *Ibidem*, p. 555.

[43] 1487 – Privileg Kaiser Friedrichs III. Für die Meister des Schwerts, Institut für Stadtgeschichte Frankfurt am Main, Rep. 7 (Ugb A 69) No. 1, compiled by W. Ueberschär, D. Burger.

[44] B.A. Tlusty, *Martial Identity*..., p. 550.

[45] M. Talaga, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

[46] B.A. Tlusty, *Martial Identity*..., p. 550.

[47] Hiring non-noble fencing masters at aristocratic courts is attested already in the 14th century. For instance, in 1385 Joseph Schirmer of Würzburg, a Jew, was employed by Archbishop Adolf von Nassau-Wiesbaden and tasked with teaching fencing for an agreed pay, *vide*: Würzburg, Staatsarchiv Mainzer Ingrossaturbücher, Band 10 StA Wü, MIB 10 fol. 332 [01]. I would like to express my gratitude to Ondřej Vodička from the Masaryk Institute and the Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences for making this source available.

[48] A good example in this regard is provided by Peter Switzer, a fencing master whose story has been discussed in detail in D. Jaquet, *op. cit.*

the most important of their potential tasks was to train those who, due to judicial procedures, were forced to fight a duel (*duellum*) or to act as substitutes in such combat for those who could not fight in person.[49] The fact that such legally sanctioned duels were often called simply "a fight" (*kempe*, *kempfe*)[50] may strengthen their connection with the *kempen* ('fighters') mentioned in the 'Mirror of the Saxons' – they should then be considered professional teachers or champions specialising in judicial combat. At the current stage of research, such a view seems justified with regard to the early Middle Ages. It remains unclear, however, whether the judicial duel was still practiced in Germany in the later period. As pointed out by Arielle Elema, despite *duellum* being mentioned in subsequent updated versions of urban digests of laws, accounts about actually conducted duels cease to appear in the 13th century.[51] The only exceptions in that regard are Swabia and Franconia, where cases were reported as late as the first half of the 15th century.[52] Interestingly, in that period both regions cooperated closely on political and military levels within the so-called Southern-German League of Towns (*Süddeutsche Städtebundt*) and developed their own characteristic variations on the judicial duel. They made use of long elaborate shields and swords (Swabia) or clubs (Franconia) whose detailed depictions appeared in one of the oldest extant fencing treatises from Germany – the so-called *Fechtbuch* by Master Hans Talhoffer, a burgher from Swabia.[53] The above observation is significant for the hypothesis proposed here because it suggests certain distinctness of these two lands in terms of their martial culture as compared to other German provinces. If we add to it the fact that Swabia had the warlike Swiss as its direct neighbours, as well as the Czechs and the Hungarians, also often hostile, this borderland may appear as a *sui generis* "cradle of warriors." It is also worth noting that the oldest currently known German fencing treatises come from this region, including the anonymous "Nuremberg Codex 3227a" (dated to

[49] *Ibidem*, p. 56.

[50] Which has its analogies in other languages influenced by the Germanic culture, e.g. Italian *campio*, French *champ clos*, or *campum* in Medieval Latin, *cf.* M. Coesfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

[51] A. Elema, *Tradition, Innovation, Re-enactment: Hans Talhoffer's Unusual Weapons*, "Acta Periodica Duellatorum" 2019, vol. 7, No. 1, p. 6.

[52] *Ibidem*, pp. 6–9.

[53] *Ibidem*, pp. 9–17. It is worth noting here that there are clues suggesting that Talhoffer may have been an early representative of the Brotherhood of Saint Mark, *vide*: B.A. Tlusty, *Martial Identity*..., p. 555.

ca. 1400)[54] and several manuscripts of Hans Talhoffer (created in the years 1443–1467) and Paulus Kal (ca. 1470).[55] In this context, it would be logical that the custom of the *Fechtschulen*, perhaps adopted from the Swiss,[56] found its earliest German seedbed in Nuremberg (Tab. 1).[57] Similarly, it would become clear why this very town[58] was selected as the place of issue of the privilege (1487) for the first fraternity of fencing masters – the Brotherhood of St. Mark (*Marxbrüder*) – or why the task of assembling the first imperial army based on the Landsknechts (1488) was entrusted to the Swabian League. The already developed martial culture rendered this region an attractive recruitment base for the future reformed army, while the emperor's support for activity of fencing masters could raise this potential even further.

Maximilian's gambit and closing remarks

If we assume, as hinted by the above-described circumstances, that the granting of privilege to the *Marxbrüder* was a deliberate step aimed at raising the military potential of German towns in hopes of harnessing them for the reform of the Army of the Empire, then two more questions must follow. Firstly, who was behind this idea – Frederick III or Maximilian I? Many historians believe that Frederick III showed little initiative as a ruler and especially since the 1470s relied on his son in many matters, including military affairs. Albert Winkler puts it as follows:

[54] O. Vodička, *Origin of the Oldest German Fencing Manual Compilation (GNM Hs. 3227a)*, "Waffen- und Kostumkunde" 2019, vol. 61, No. 1, pp. 87–108.

[55] D. Hagedorn, *German Fechtbücher from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, [in:] *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*, eds. D. Jaquet, K. Verelst, T. Dawson, Leiden–Boston 2016, p. 259.

[56] Apart from the arguments given earlier, this hypothesis is additionally corroborated by the fact that one of the first captains (*hauptman*) of the Brotherhood of St. Mark, serving in the years 1498–1500, was Master Peter Switzer, an active animator of fencing culture in Switzerland, *vide*: D. Jaquet, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

[57] An analogical reasoning could explain why the fencing culture in France and the Netherlands, at least as old and well-developed as the Swiss (*cf.* B. Gevaert, R. van Noort, *op. cit.* and Dupuis, *The French Fencing*...), did not exert such an influence – perhaps the western German lands offered an unfavourable cultural substrate for this kind of practices?

[58] The fact that the headquarters of the *Marxbrüder* was located in Frankfurt-am-Main should presumably be seen as a step aimed at facilitating expansion of the brotherhood to the rest of the Empire – situated more centrally, Frankfurt offered greater possibilities in that regard than Nuremberg.

> In the 1480s Maximilian increasingly made his presence felt in Austrian politics. When his father Frederick III, always considered a weak ruler, became increasingly debilitated with age, Maximilian worked to expand Habsburg power. Problems beset the family's holdings including raids from the Turks, a feud with the Hungarian monarchy, and the fact that Bavaria was increasingly hostile. Additionally, Sigismund Habsburg tried to take the Austrian Tirol from Frederick's control in 1487. Maximilian realized he must have an active, powerful army to resist such internal and external threats.[59]

Besides that, it bears mentioning briefly that Maximilian I himself was very keen on martial arts and made his personal prowess an important element of imperial propaganda.[60] *Weisskunig*, an autobiographical poem created with the direct involvement of the monarch, describes and illustrates the training he received under the tutelage of a fencing master (Fig. 1). The visual layer of this depiction references the urban fencing culture known from the *Fechtschulen* iconography (Fig. 2), whereas the literary ambitions of the emperor attested elsewhere witness his familiarity with the jargon characteristic of German fencing treatises from the 16th century and documents left by the *Marxbrüder*.[61] On top of that, Albrecht Dürer, hired by the emperor to embellish this monumental work,[62] left a draftbook (1512) full of realistic images of fencers and wrestlers as well as related descriptive notes on combat techniques which find close analogies in the corpus of pragmatic martial literature of the period.[63] Therefore, it seems plausible that it was Maximilian who designed and successfully implemented this quite visionary endeavour in which the knowledge and energy of the previously-marginalised social group – martial arts masters from the south-eastern borderland of the Empire – were used to promote a new "martial identity" among German burghers and, indirectly, fuel his ambitious military reform.

Finally, the second question: How did the fencing masters of urban provenance acquire the martial *know-how* previously carefully guarded by the German *ministeriales* and aristocracy?

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[59] A. Winkler, *The Swabian War of 1499: 500 years since Switzerland's last war of independence*, "Swiss-American Historical Society Review" 1999, vol. 35, No. 3, p. 6.

[60] The latest and in-depth analysis of this aspect of Maximilian's reign has been performed by Nathalie Margaret Anderson, *The Tournament and its Role in the Court Culture of Emperor Maximilian I (1459–1519)*, doctoral dissertation, Leeds 2017, pp. 236–241.

[61] A. Schultz, *Einleitung*, [in:] *Der Wiesskunig*, ed. A. Schultz, Wien 1888, p. VIII.

[62] *Ibidem*, p. 41.

[63] F. Dörnhöffer, *Albrecht Dürers Fechtbuch*, Wien 1910; *cf*. McClelland, *op*. *cit*., p. 47.

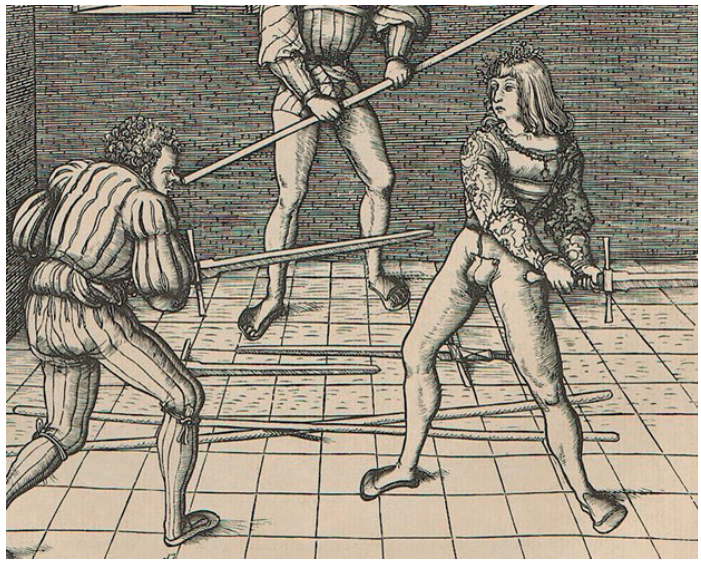

Fig. 1. Young Maximilian learns how to fight with a long sword without armour (*ploß zu fechten*). Visible are blunt training swords with characteristic blades widening near the cross-guard and an instructor holding a staff and presiding over the exercise. Source: *Der Wiesskunig*, ed. A. Schultz, Wien 1888, p. 100, DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.5732#0005

Fig. 2. Fencing practice at the University of Tübingen. Visible are the characteristic training swords and an instructor with a staff. Source: L. Ditzinger, *Illustrissimi Wirtembergici Ducali Novi Collegii Quod Tubingae qua situm qua studia qua exercitia Accurata Delineato*, sine loco 1626, http://diglib.hab.de/drucke/57-1-pol-3s/start.htm?image=00013 (access: 9 I 2021)

The fact that members of the *Marxbrüder* presented themselves, with no irony, as the carriers of the "knightly art of fencing" (*ritterliche kunst des fechtens*) suggests that they perceived some continuity between their own practice and the martial lore of the older military nobility which was already fading into the past at the end of the 15th century.[64] Perhaps an important clue comes from another curious coincidence – between the development of the urban martial arts movement in Germany and the emergence of the tradition of *Meistergesang*. Both phenomena unfolded as part of the urban culture but referenced the knightly and courtly past, which they tried to emulate by means of a careful reading of the manuscripts commemorating it.[65] Due to limited space, a closer examination of the last hypothesis falls beyond the scope of this paper. Similarly, reconstructing biographies of particular fencing masters and their role as mediators between aristocratic courts and urban communities promises valuable discoveries and will certainly require further inquiry.[66]

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[64] M. Talaga, *op. cit.*, pp. 167–168.

[65] An insightful study of the practice of *Meistergesang* and its ties to the earlier tradition of *Sangspruchdichtung*, as well as the role of manuscripts in transition from the one to the other, was offered by Michael Baldzuhn, *The companies of Meistergesang in Germany*, [in:] *The Reach of the Republic of Letters. Literary and Learned Societies in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. A. van Dixhoorn, S.S. Sutch, Leiden–Boston 2008.

[66] An interesting step in that direction has been made in a recent work by James Acutt, *Swords, Science, and Society: German Martial Arts in the Middle Ages*, Glasgow 2019.

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