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Taking the initiative: the technical and tactical structure of I.33

Royal Armouries Manuscript I.33 is unique in the annals of European fencing treatises in its separation of the positions used into “custodia” which means “ward” or “guard”, and “obsessio”, variously translated as “counter” or “besetment” (the Latin term means “siege” or “blockade”, Forgeng page 150)¹. It is clear from even the first reading of the manuscript that there is an essential tactical distinction between the two, and moreover one physical position can be at times one or the other. The situation is made somewhat more complicated by “schutzen” (“protection”), which is at times an obsessio, and at times a parry.

The purpose of this article is to define these terms in the light of how they are used in the fencing sequences that comprise the treatise, and in the process demonstrate the tactical nuances that they embody. Before we can do that, we must first establish how these positions are created, and hence the mechanical actions that lead us into the tactical situation. As the treatise begins, “*Dimicatio est diversarum plagarum ordinatio*”, fencing is diverse blows put in order (Forgeng has it as “Combat is the disposition of various blows”): in other words, when we order the various blows, we get a fencing system (as opposed to random combat). This is a profound statement, in that it encompasses the fundamental goal of all martial arts: to take the chaos of combat and create order from it, so it can be learned, mastered, and subordinated to the will of the trained combatant. The author goes on to say “and it is divided into seven parts, as here”, and proceeds to illustrate the seven wards of this system: under-arm, right shoulder, left shoulder, above the head, right side, chest, and point extended (“longpoint”). These names refer to the position of the sword relative to the fencer’s body (the position of the buckler varies somewhat, but is always in front of the sword hand). If we run through these guards in order, we actually get the sign of the cross: from the starting point, low on the left, we go right, left, up, down, and back up the middle. This is a very easy mnemonic for a Christian culture, and unsurprising when we consider the clerical nature of the participants, the Priest and his scholar. And as we make this sign, we find the sword swinging through the primary cutting angles, and ending with a thrust.

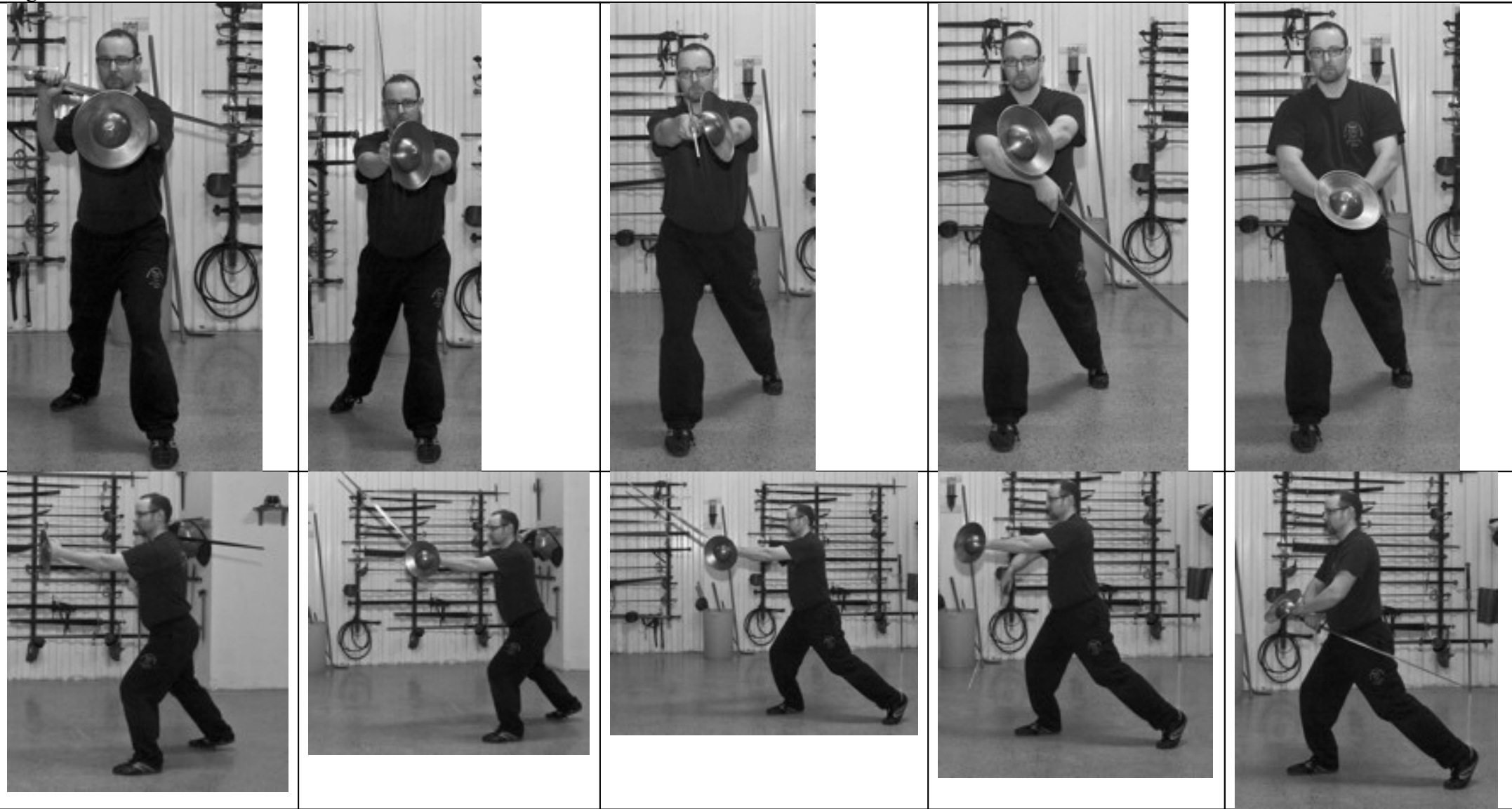
So, the guards frame the blows: transition between first ward (under-arm) and second ward (right shoulder) gives a rising blow with the true edge, from left to right, which transitions through the position called “krucke”.

¹ I am using *The Medieval Art of Swordsmanship*, by Dr. Forgeng, as my primary source. When referring to Dr. Forgeng’s commentary I use the page numbers for the book; when referring to the treatise itself, I use the leaf numbers of the original manuscript.

Fig. 1: 1st to 2nd through krucke



Go back from second to first, and you have a descending blow from right to left, which transitions through halpshilt (“halfshield”) and seventh ward.
Fig 2: 2nd to 1st via halfshield and 7th



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Third ward (left shoulder) to fifth (right side), gives a descending blow from left to right, also via halpshilt:

Fig 3: 3rd to 5th

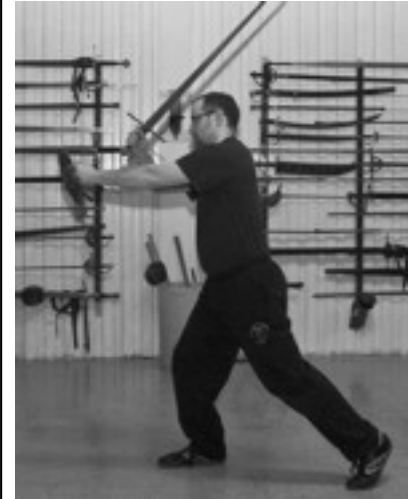


Incidentally, we know that halpshilt can be arrived at from second ward and third ward, because it is shown in the treatise coming from those wards as a response to a threat from first ward (Forgeng page 144) and priest's special longpoint (Forgeng page 114), respectively. It is only common sense to notice that continuing the motion past halpshilt gives you the blow.

And returning from fifth to third through 7th gives the rising blow from the right, with the false edge through halfshield:

Fig 4: 5th to 3rd





And with the true edge, through the position sometimes called shutzen, sometimes the very strange and very rare obsessio:





From fourth ward (above the head) we can do either of the blows from second and third, and of course chop straight down into seventh (again through halfshield).

Fig 5: 4th to 7th



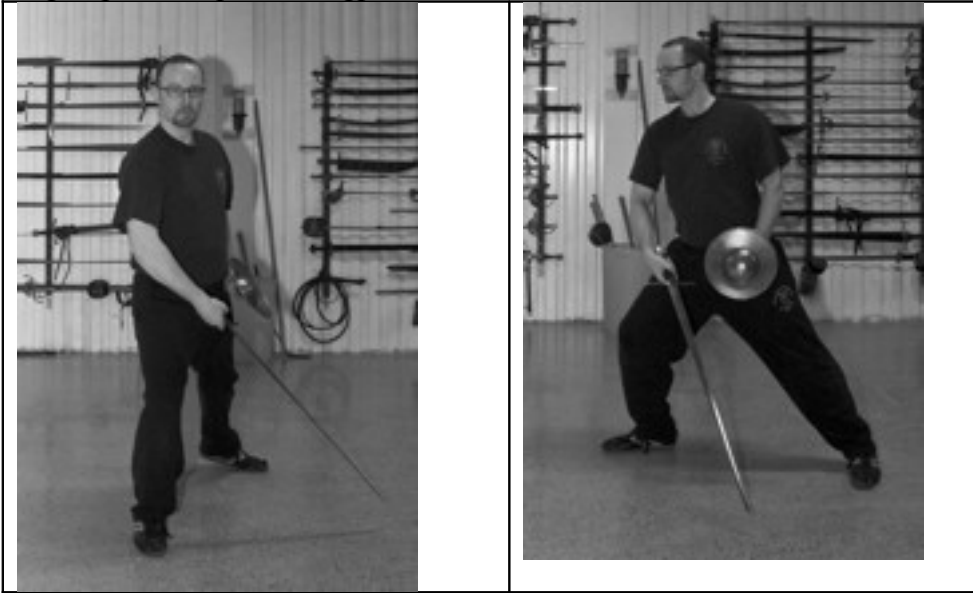
From sixth ward, we thrust directly, with the palm up and the buckler crossed over to the right. This thrust is angled to the right, to get around the opponent's weapons (as we see in the response from 5th ward against halpshilt on page 130)

Fig 6 6th to stichslach



Three of the guards have variations shown: first ward can be held with the false edge leading, creating priest's special longpoint ("specificata custodia sacerdotis que nuncupatur Langort", the Priest's "special guard, which is called longpoint"):

Fig 7: priest's special longpoint



The relationship of this guard to First ward should be obvious: the sword is in about the same place, and the actions taken from here are directly related to those from First. Why it is called a longpoint, I don't know. My current guess is that it offers a very fast thrust (as shown on page 49, *Forgeng* p117), while preventing the bind that would normally be used immediately against an offered point (see for instance the plays of seventh ward, pp 34-37).

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Finally, first ward is varied by holding it across the right leg (the rare opposition from which “those things follow that have been seen before in the section on the First Guard”, Forgeng page 132).

Fig 8: rare opposition



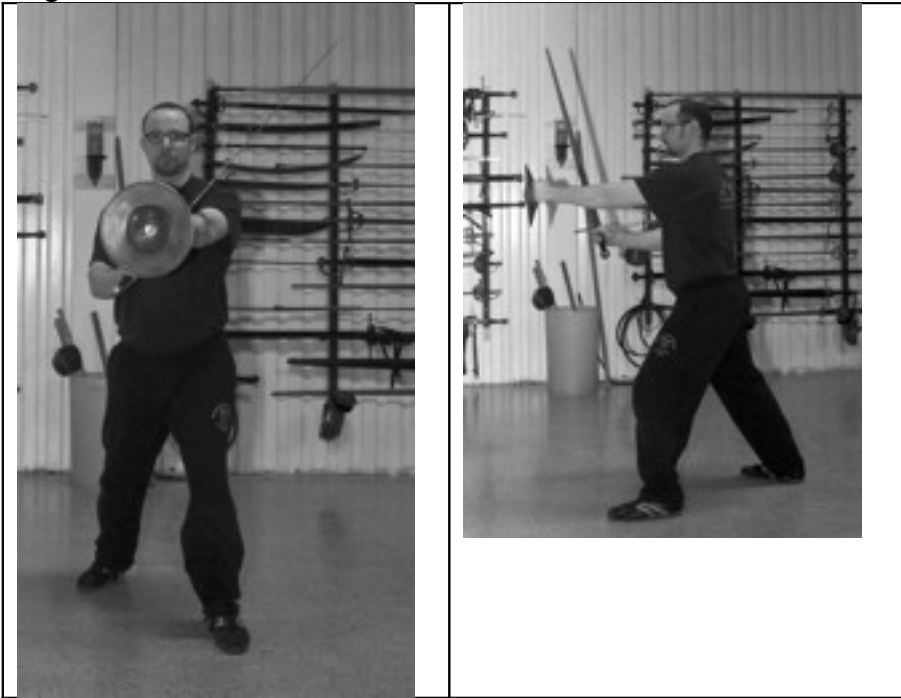
Second ward is varied by being held more casually, by the character Walpurgis on page 63 (Forgeng 145), where it is called “specificata custodia secunda sacerdotis”, or “priest’s special Second Guard”:

Fig 9: Walpurgis



And third ward is held similarly casually, with the sword held like the bow of a violin, hence “vidilpoge”, “fiddlebow”.

Fig. 10: Fiddlebow.



If we turn now to the obsessio positions, we have already seen longpoint, krucke and halpshilt in the paths of the main blows; all that remain are schutzen (page 17, Forging 53), and the “valde aliena obsessio ... & valde rara”, the “very strange and very rare” obsessio.

Schutzen opposes second ward: it is clearly intended to “protect” the one opposing from the threat of a descending forehand blow from the warder. In other words, to allow entry into measure while closing off the warder’s most powerful likely response. It is then matched by itself, leaving the state of play equal (either party can continue from there “though the one who adopted the opposition is the first one ready for it”).

Fig 11: schutzen



Then we have the “very strange and very rare” position

Fig 12: “very strange and very rare”



The key to this position is in the picture above it on the page, where a nearly identical position is shown as the end-point of a blow to the head following an overbind to the right: i.e. a rising blow from right to left. As it is aimed at the head, not the shoulder, it must actually follow a curve, up and then left, making in effect a cross-blow from the right. This is exactly what the warder in second ward has also done against schutzen, and sure enough the positions shown are extremely similar (see pages 17 and 49 for the original images).

Fig 13: schutzen, response from 2nd, strike from bind, and very rare and strange.

So, if all the positions are the beginning, middle or end of a blow, then what is the fundamental distinction between custodia and obsessio? To answer this question, let us look at the first fencing sequence in the book (and the only one that is repeated at intervals throughout), first ward beset by halpshilt on page 3. It is of course possible to look at this picture and decide that these two fencers have just agreed to start their play from this set-up, in much the same way as I was taught foil

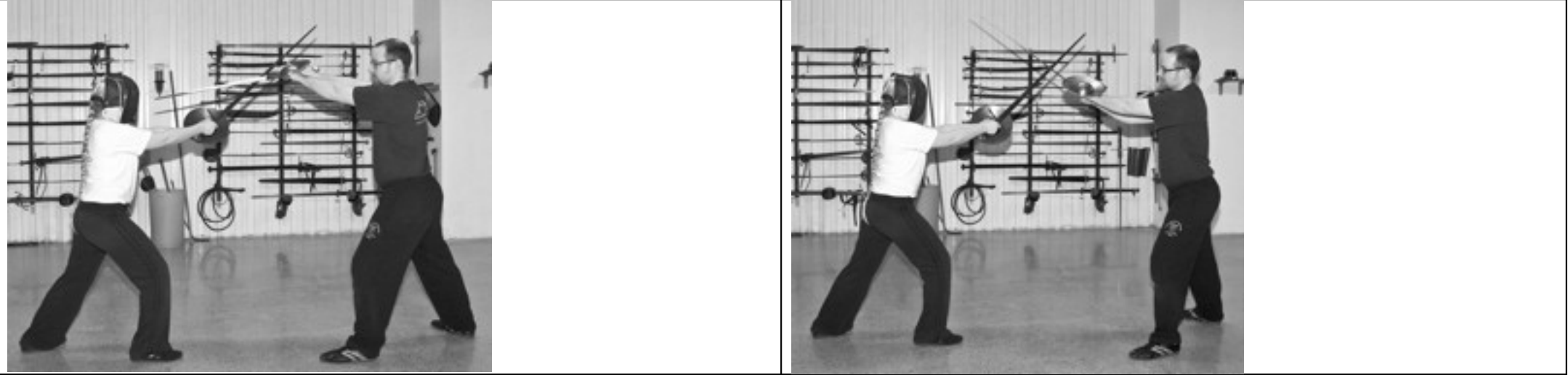
fencing, where we would usually begin from an engagement in sixte. Possible but vanishingly unlikely, as if the play begins from here, the besetter in halfshield is much closer to the warder's head than the warder's sword is from the threatening blade; the chances of the warder not being hit immediately are very slim. The term *obsessio* implies a threat, but not a direct attack; in many instances including this play, the author instructs the besetter to attack if the one in the custodia "by delaying omits all his defences" (page 22, *Forgeng* 63). So the *obsessio* forces the one in guard to act, without exposing the besetter to the risk of committing to a direct attack. Later in the treatise we see the *obsessio* halfshilt done from third ward and the Priest's special second ward; it makes sense then that halfshilt is adopted from a high ward, stepping almost into measure, with a clear threat to the head. Note that the point is not all the way forward, this would create an *obsessio* of longpoint, as we see on pages 12-15 (*Forgeng* 42 to 49). The priest notes that this is a common opposition, but treats it differently to halfshilt. Against longpoint we are instructed to "bind above or below" (12); against halfshilt, in every instance except when it is used against 2nd ward (20-21) and 5th ward (pp 55-56) we are instructed to "fall under the sword and shield" ("*cade sub gladium quoque scutum*"). This is shown or stated as being done in the following instances: from first ward on pages 5 and 16, from 3rd ward on page 26 (shown but not stated), from first ward again on page 30 (shown but not stated), from priest's special longpoint on pages 46 and 48, from the rare opposition on pages 57 and 58, from priest's special longpoint again on page 59 (implied), and again from first ward on page 63 (implied). The only cases where we do not fall under against halfshilt are from second and fifth wards; so it is reasonable to generalise then that from right-side guards we do not fall under, from left-side guards we do.

So what is falling under? We know it is done from the left side, and we know it is countered by an overbind to the right (from the perspective of the binder, i.e. the one in halfshilt). On pages 5 and 26 it looks like either a descending blow to the obsessor's sword hand, or perhaps a thrust to the face. On page 16 it is clearly a bind to the right while thrusting to the face. On page 30, it looks like a threat of a thrust to the face that has been parried. On page 46 it is clearly a bind near the tip of the obsessor's sword. On page 48 it looks like another failed thrust (and is referred to as "*sacerdos ponit se ad scolarum*", "the Priest sets to the Student"). On page 58 it looks like a thrust to the face. Only on pages 16 and 58 is the falling under the end of the sequence; in all other cases, it is bound down. This suggests to me that all the other images show fallings under that have been prevented from concluding. Page 16, seems to show us an entry with a true edge bind of the opponent's sword, and a thrust to the face, and page 58, a false-edge bind and a thrust to the face.

Falling does not necessarily imply a descent; in later German manuals, it is used to denote a passing step; you can "fall into a high ward". The common denominator for all the fallings under seems to be an entry, literally under the sword and shield of the opposer. At no time does the Priest determine the target or even the function of the falling under, other than that it prevents the opposer from striking directly. In most cases (all except page 5) there is clearly a crossing of the swords with one edge or the other (hence a bind), and the ideal strike seems to be the thrust. So, I execute the falling under as a rising blow to the incoming halfshilt, that arrives as the opponent enters the *obsessio* position, and strikes or threatens with the point in the obsessor's face. I do it with the true edge from first ward, and the false from priest's special longpoint and the rare opposition, because these positions offer that edge without turning the hand. If the obsessor is not prepared to bind immediately, he will be hit in the face as he enters measure.

If we consider also that right side wards are usually held left foot forwards, and that to get under and outside halfshilt we have to step to the left, the fact that we get there from fifth ward without passing, but do pass from the left side wards, it would appear that "falling" = "make a passing step" and "under the sword and shield" = "to the outside of the incoming *obsessio*, which is an action from above".

Fig 14: falling under, photo

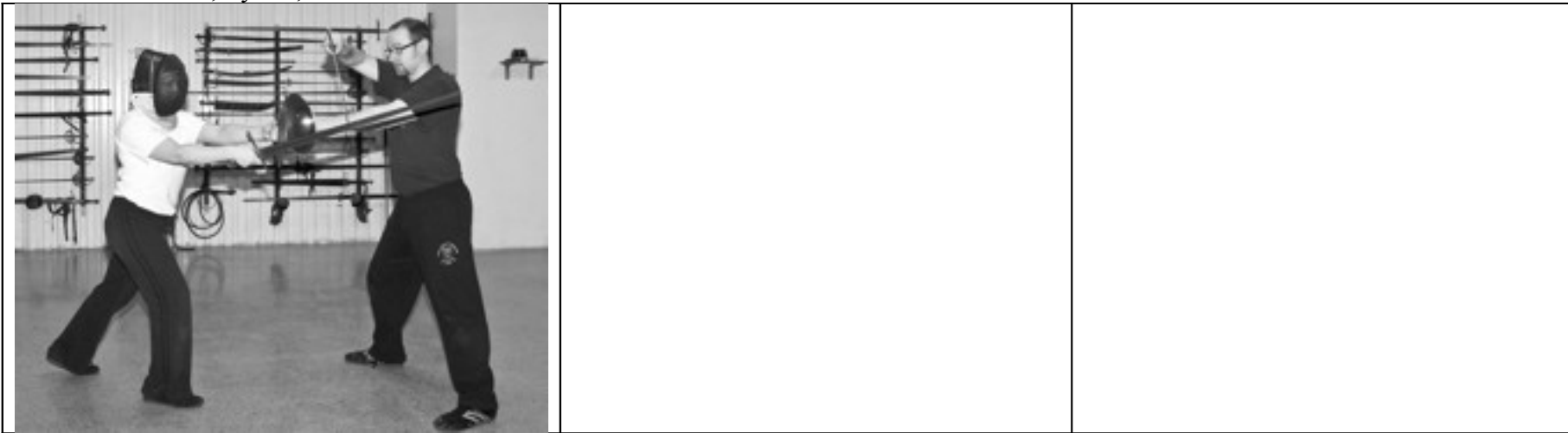


The point of the obsessio was of course to draw a response: the falling under is simply the most aggressive secure response from the ward. It nonetheless offers the obsessor the opportunity to bind and secure the incoming blade, which he does with an overbind to the right in every case, whereupon he immediately enters with a step and a shiltslach, striking the warder's buckler and sword down, passing control of the warder's sword from the obsessor's sword to his buckler, leaving him free to safely strike the head. The function of the obsessio is therefore to draw out the opponent's sword safely, so that his weapons may be secured, allowing a safe entry. The response to the obsessio must of course take this into account, and we are given three responses to the overbind to the right: the durchtrit ("tread through"), the mutacio gladii ("change of swords") and the wrapping with the warder's sword arm, which is described but does not have a technical name. I do all of these with a yielding action of the sword, allowing the point to drop as it is bound down, but keeping the hands high, pushing the buckler forwards from underneath, and going from there to any one of the options depending on distance.

Fig 15: I waited in first ward; Maaret entered with halfshield from second ward; I fell under (with the true edge), she binds, enters, and strikes



And as she binds, I yield,



and strike (*durchtrit*), bind her sword down before striking (*mutacio gladium*), or wrap her weapons:



This forms the core tactical progression of the system: one patiently waiting in guard, the other the agent for change applying pressure to the guard to draw out his weapons, so that they may be bound. This may be observed at work in every case that we have an obsessio opposing a ward. There are two main variants of the obsessio: the schutzen, and the counter-guard, which does not offer an immediate threat. Schutzen is taken against guards that offer the threat of an already chambered powerful strike; it is only shown against second ward, which makes sense as that is by far the most obvious chambering of a good downright blow. It is, in effect, pre-parrying the blow, allowing a much safer entry into measure. As with the other besetments, it draws an action on the blade, specifically an engagement or bind. (cf page 62 priest’s special longpoint versus 4th ward, page 63, krucke versus priest’s special 2nd ward)

The counterguard is found when a guard is used as a besetment. This occurs when first ward is beset by itself, as is stated on page 3 (but never shown directly); when fourth guard is opposed by first ward (page 29), drawing the obsessio halpshilt from the one in fourth; when third ward is beset by priest’s special longpoint (page 51), when fourth ward is beset by priest’s special longpoint (page 52); when fifth ward is beset by priest’s special longpoint (page 53); when fourth ward is again beset by priest’s special longpoint (page 59 and again on page 61); and on page 63 where first ward is beset by priest’s special second ward (aka Walpurgis’ ward). Note that in every case, the original obsessio, the counterguard, is answered by a besetment, or a schutzen. If the one beset does not act in time, the besetter enters with an attack. The counterguard is therefore a way of entering into measure with the threat of a potential blow, but allowing the one in guard the option of counter-besetting, with an obsessio or a schutzen. It may help to clarify the possibilities if we set out one of these sequences. This one comes from pages 63 and 64, with all the plays mentioned in the text spelled out step by step. Where the author writes “and from this situation there arise all those things that are discussed concerning the first guard” I have referred back to pages 5 to 7 to fill out the sequence.

Agent	Patient
	First ward
Steps towards patient, adopting priest’s special second ward	

	Does nothing
Enters with halpshilt	
	Does nothing
Strikes (shown on page 22)	

Agent	Patient
	First ward
Steps towards patient, adopting priest's special second ward	
	Does nothing
Enters with halpshilt	
	Falls under, strikes (shown on page 16)

Agent	Patient
	First ward
Steps towards patient, adopting priest's special second ward	
	Does nothing
Enters with halpshilt	
	Falls under
Overbinds to the right, shiltslach	

Agent	Patient
	First ward
Steps towards patient, adopting priest's special second ward	
	Does nothing
Enters with halpshilt	
	Falls under
Overbinds to the right, shiltslach	
	Counters with mutacio, durchtrit or right arm wrap

Note that all these sequences are from the text regarding the first illustration on page 63, including the instruction to repeat all that came before in the plays of first ward. We haven't yet got to the proper response to the obsessio, priest's special second ward.

Agent	Patient
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	First ward
Steps towards patient, adopting priest's special second ward	
	Enters with schutzen, here a krucke-like position
Does nothing	
	Presumably enters with a thrust: not shown or stated, but implied.

Agent	Patient
	First ward
Steps towards patient, adopting priest's special second ward	
	Enters with schutzen, here a krucke-like position
Overbinds, shiltslach.	

There is no reason to suppose that this overbind from priest's special second ward cannot be countered the same way as it was in the first sequence above, so this sequence can reasonably be extended to the Patient's counter.

Agent	Patient
	First ward
Steps towards patient, adopting priest's special second ward	
	Enters with schutzen, here a krucke-like position
Overbinds, shiltslach.	
	Counters with durchtrit, mutacio, or wrap

It is worth noting that the obsessios that are responded to with the opponent's counter-obsessio are all refused positions, in which the sword is held back and down. The entry into measure is therefore an invitation to the original warder to counter-beset. In the case of second ward, in which the sword is chambered for a particularly quick and powerful blow, the entering obsessio closes the line of the warder's attack, and so is called a "protection", schutzen. We can now look at the last sequence of the treatise as a variation on the first: instead of waiting for Walpurgis to enter with halpshilt, the priest seizes the initiative by entering, lifting the hands to protect the head *with the same physical action as the falling under, in a different tactical context*. In other words, he does exactly the same thing as he would against halpshilt, but pre-emptively. This forces her to bind immediately, preventing her from going directly for his head, and though she can continue from the bind with the shiltslach as illustrated, it is obvious that the priest has a durchtrit, mutacio or wrap ready.

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So, there we have it. There is nothing obscure or difficult about this system, neither is the book hard to read (especially since Dr. Forgeng translated it). This manuscript is a clear and complete representation of a system, which is built from the interplay of custodia and obsessio: all actions are framed by natural, comfortable positions, and are contained in an elegant and comprehensive tactical framework.

Guy Windsor
Helsinki, February 2008

With thanks to Topi Mikkola for taking the photos, and Maaret Sirkkala for besetting.