

Some Observations on the Zornhau
by
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to examine various fifteenth-century *Fechtbücher* ("fight books") in order to come to a definitive understanding of how the *Zornhau* ("wrath cut") was intended to be used.

BACKGROUND

While at first glance the *Zornhau* may seem the simplest of the five *Meisterhauen* ("master strokes") of Johannes Liechtenauer's art, in fact there exists a fundamental disagreement today regarding how it should correctly be employed.

The *Zornhau* is a diagonal stroke from above with the long edge of the sword; it is called the "strike of wrath" because it is the cut an angry man is most likely to use. It can be used in one of two ways: It can either be used to strike first at an opponent who must either displace or be struck, or it can be used to counter another *Zornhau*. The former version is referred to as acting in the *Vor* ("before") and the latter as acting in the *Nach* ("after"), referring to the two states of initiative described by the German masters. The use of the *Zornhau* in the *Vor* is not in dispute, but its use in the *Nach* is. All of the references in this paper should be assumed to refer to a *Zornhau* in the *Nach* except where noted.

Several groups currently studying the *Kunst des Fechtens* ("the art of fighting"; a common term for medieval German martial arts) believe that the *Zornhau* in the *Nach* is performed as a single-time cut with opposition, as many of the other *Meisterhauen* (e.g., the *Zwerchhau*) are. A single-time cut with opposition is a cut which displaces an incoming attack and strikes the attacker in one motion with

both swords bound together. One of the primary groups who adhere to this notion is the Association for Renaissance Martial Arts (ARMA); their arguments can be read on their web page: <www.haca.com>. They are not the only group taking this position, however, their position is sufficiently similar to others that they can stand for the rest.

This position is based upon two principal arguments: First, that the other four *Meisterhauen* can be used as single-time cuts with opposition, and that it therefore makes sense that the *Zornhau* should be useable thus as well. Second, that the various *Fechtbücher* which describe the *Zornhau* can be interpreted to mean that it should be performed as a single-time cut.

This paper will attempt to show that the interpretation posited by ARMA and other such organizations is wrong. It will demonstrate that the *Zornhau* is never used as a single-time cut with opposition, and that when in the *Nach* it is correctly used to displace a cut from above by cutting into the attacking sword to displace it and not to cut the attacker.

SOURCES

This paper will rely upon five sources for its arguments: The *Fechtbuch* of Sigmund Ringeck from about 1440; the *Fechtbuch* of Peter von Danzig from about 1450; two late-fifteenth-century *Fechtbücher* by Paulus Kal (one in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek and the other in the Universitätsbibliothek Bologna); and the anonymous sixteenth-century *Goliath Fechtbuch*. These five books represent roughly one hundred years of interpretive development of the *Kunst des Fechtens*, and each gives a very slightly different light on the problem un-

der discussion. By comparing and contrasting their different inputs it will be possible to develop a clear interpretation of this problem.

THE ZORNHAU

Let us begin by examining the texts that describe the *Zornhau*:

When your adversary strikes at you from his right side with an Oberhau [any cut from above—HTK], then hit with a Zornhau from your right shoulder against it. Strike with your true edge and in your strong. When he is weak at the sword then thrust into his face along his blade. (Ringeck fol. 19r)

The Zornhau breaks all cuts from above with the point and is nothing but a bad peasant's strike. Do it as follows: When you come to him in the Zufechten [the beginning phase of a fight—HTK] and he strikes at you from his right side to the head, strike from your right side from above without displacing with the strong of your sword. If he is then soft at the sword, thrust straight along the sword to his face or to the chest. (von Danzig fol. 13r)

The Zornhau counters all high strikes with the point. And it is indeed nothing other than a bad peasant strike. Deploy it thus: when you come to him in the Zufechten, if he strikes to you from his right side high to the head, then also strike from high on your right [note in the margin: In the weak on the sword], wrathfully displacing him on his sword. If he is then weak on the sword, then aim to shoot ahead with the point and stab to his face, or attack the chest between the arms. (Goliath fol. 11r)

In essence, each of these texts describes an identical action. The attacker

strikes with a cut from above to the defender's head. The defender then strikes a *Zornhau* against it to displace the attack. All agree with this so far—the question is how the defender performs his cut.

Those who believe that the *Zornhau* is a single-time cut with opposition believe that the defender should aim the edge of his sword at his opponent's head, striking him there while his edge displaces the incoming attack. A careful reading of the last sentence of each of the three texts, however, refutes that notion.

Each of the three texts says that if, after the defender has displaced the attacker's cut, he notices that the attacker is soft in the bind, then the defender should remain in the bind (i.e., keep his sword against his opponent's sword) and thrust his point forward into the attacker.



Figure 1: A *Zornhau* performed in the Vor.

Consider figure 1 above: It shows a *Zornhau* being used to strike an opponent's head. In this case the person being struck did not attack first, but here we are looking at the geometry of the technique, and for that this picture will serve. Figure

1 shows that if the defender uses a *Zornhau* to displace an incoming attack and strike the attacker in a single action then the defender's point will, necessarily, be past the attacker's face or chest. It must be if the defender is to actually strike the attacker. Since each of the texts describing the *Zornhau* says that if the attacker is soft in the bind after the displacement the defender should remain in the bind and thrust into the attacker, and since the defender's point must be in *front* of the attacker in order to thrust into him, this seems clear proof that the *Zornhau* is intended to be struck to the attacking sword and not to the attacker.



Figure 2: BSB edition of Paulus Kal fol. 59r showing the *Zornhau*.

For further proof of this assertion we turn to Paulus Kal's *Fechtbücher*. In figure 2 above Kal himself is shown on the left executing the *Zornhau*. The accompanying text is rather vague, saying only "The *Zornhau* threatens him with the point." The picture, however, is quite clear: Kal's point is *obviously* in front of and aimed at the attacker's face. Nor is this merely an artifact of a clumsy artist:

In figure 3 below the exact same orientation is shown; again, the defender's point is in front of the attacker's face.



Figure 3: Bologna edition of Paulus Kal fol. 15r showing the *Zornhau*.

Thus, both books clearly show the *Zornhau* being struck to the attacker's sword in order to prepare for the following thrust, and not to his head as those who assert that the *Zornhau* is a single-time cut claim.

What, then, of the claim that the *Zornhau* must be a single-time cut with opposition because it is a *Meisterhau*, and all the other *Meisterhauen* are?

Peter von Danzig's statement about the *Zornhau* is telling. He says that it is "nothing but a bad peasant's strike" (von Danzig fol. 13r). This is hardly the way a sophisticated, elegant single-time cut with opposition—the apex of the *Kunst des Fechtens*—would be described. Rather, von Danzig's words suggest that the *Zornhau* is included among the *Meisterhauen* because it is such a com-

mon and universal technique that it must be taught. Also, a careful examination of the plays of the *Zornhau* will show that the masters used it as a way to introduce many of the tactical concepts of their art in a simplified format. That, alone, would justify its inclusion among the *Meisterhauen*.

Moreover, not all *Meisterhauen* are necessarily single-time cuts: The *Krumphau* can be one when it is used to attack the hands:

This is how you should strike the Krumphau at the hands. When he attacks you from his right side with an Oberhau or Unterhau [a strike from below –HTK], jump out of the strike with your right foot towards his left side and strike with crossed hands against his hands using the point. (Ringeck ff. 24v-25r)

However, the *Krumphau* is not always done so; indeed, the more advanced version used to counter the attack of an expert is specifically described as a double-time technique (i.e., displace then cut):

If you want to weaken a master, then while he strikes an Oberhau from his right side strike a Krumphau with crossed hands against his sword. When you strike him with the Krumphau against his sword immediately strike upwards from the sword against his head with the short edge. (Ringeck fol. 25v)

If, then, as this shows, the *Krumphau* is not always a single-time technique, then why must the *Zornhau* necessarily be one just because it is included among the *Meisterhauen*? Logic dictates that this need not be the case.

How, then, is the *Zornhau* to be executed in the *Nach*? Ringeck says:

When your adversary strikes at you from his right side with an Oberhau, then hit with a Zornhau from your right shoulder against it. Strike with your true edge and in your strong. When he is weak at the sword then thrust into his face along his blade. (Ringeck fol. 19r)

This is very clear: Ringeck says that if the attacker launches a cut from above from his right side aimed at the defender's head, then the defender should strike likewise from his right shoulder (meaning from the guard *vom Tag*, or "from the roof"). The defender is abjured to displace with his true (long) edge, and to do so with the strong of his sword (i.e., the portion from the cross to the middle of the blade). As Paulus Kal shows, the displacement should be done in such a way that the defender's point ends in position to thrust into the attacker's face (or chest, as *Goliath* suggests). Done correctly, the thrust from the *Zornhau* is so logical and smooth that it is almost, for practical purposes, a single-time technique.

The only point still to be understood is found in von Danzig's instructions. He says:

When you come to him in the Zufechten and he strikes at you from his right side to the head, strike from your right side from above without displacing with the strong of your sword. (von Danzig fol. 13r)

The instruction to strike "without displacing" can seem very confusing; after all, the whole point is to displace the incoming attack. If all of the other sources were to be ignored this might almost seem to suggest that the *Zornhau*

really was intended to be a single-time cut and not a displacement, however, the other evidence has been shown to be too compelling for this to be the case. What, then, can it mean?

The answer lies in the German notions of initiative and timing. If the defender focuses too much on striking the attacker's sword he might be tempted to ignore the real goal: putting his sword into position for the follow-up thrust. What von Danzig is really saying is that the defender should simply cut down into the position for the thrust—a position called *Langenort* ("long point"; see *Goliath* fol. 60r)—and that this action will automatically displace the cut. Ringeck says something very similar when he says to ignore the enemy's attack and simply perform techniques as if the enemy were standing still (Ringeck fol. 23r).

Moreover, to do the *Zornhau* correctly, the defender should strike first and only step after his hands have started to move; this is called "following the blow" (Ringeck fol. 12r) and is a central concept of the *Kunst des Fechtens*.

In the *Zufechten* the attacker and defender are far enough apart that each must take a step to strike the other. When the attacker makes this step to use the *Zornhau*, he is, therefore, necessarily making a slower motion than the defender's displacement since the displacement can start before the defender even starts to move his foot. Thus, von Danzig says to cut "without displacing"; in other words,

in a perfect application of the technique, the defender will actually begin to assume *Langenort* before the blades clash together in the bind. As a result, rather than actively cutting down to displace the attack, the defender is really cutting down into *Langenort*, with the displacement just being a natural result of that movement—a subtle but clear distinction.

So the sequence of the *Zornhau* would go this way: The attacker and defender enter the *Zufechten* and assume the guard *vom Tag*. The attacker seizes the initiative and attacks with a *Zornhau*. The defender starts his own *Zornhau* to move his hands forward into *Langenort*. The attacker's sword strikes the defender's sword just as he assumes *Langenort*. The defender attempts to thrust along the attacker's blade; if the attacker is soft in the bind the thrust goes home and the fight is over.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the *Zornhau* in the hopes of understanding how it is used in the *Nach*. By carefully examining the geometry of the engagement and matching that to the instructions in the various *Fechtbücher* it has become clear that the *Zornhau* in the *Nach* is a cut down to the attacker's sword to displace, to be followed by a thrust directly forward along his sword to finish the engagement. From this it should be clear that the *Zornhau* is not used as a single-time cut with opposi-

THE ZORNHAU

These pictures will demonstrate the *Zornhau* based on the analysis in the preceding essay.

The attacker (on the left) and the defender (on the right) assume *vom Tag* in the *Zufechten* (top picture).

The attacker passes forward with a *Zornhau* at the defender's head. The defender counters by striking his own *Zornhau* down into *Langenort*, almost incidentally displacing the attacker's cut, and ending with his point aimed at the attacker's face (middle picture).

The defender then extends his hands straight forward to thrust his point into the attacker's face along his blade (bottom picture).



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