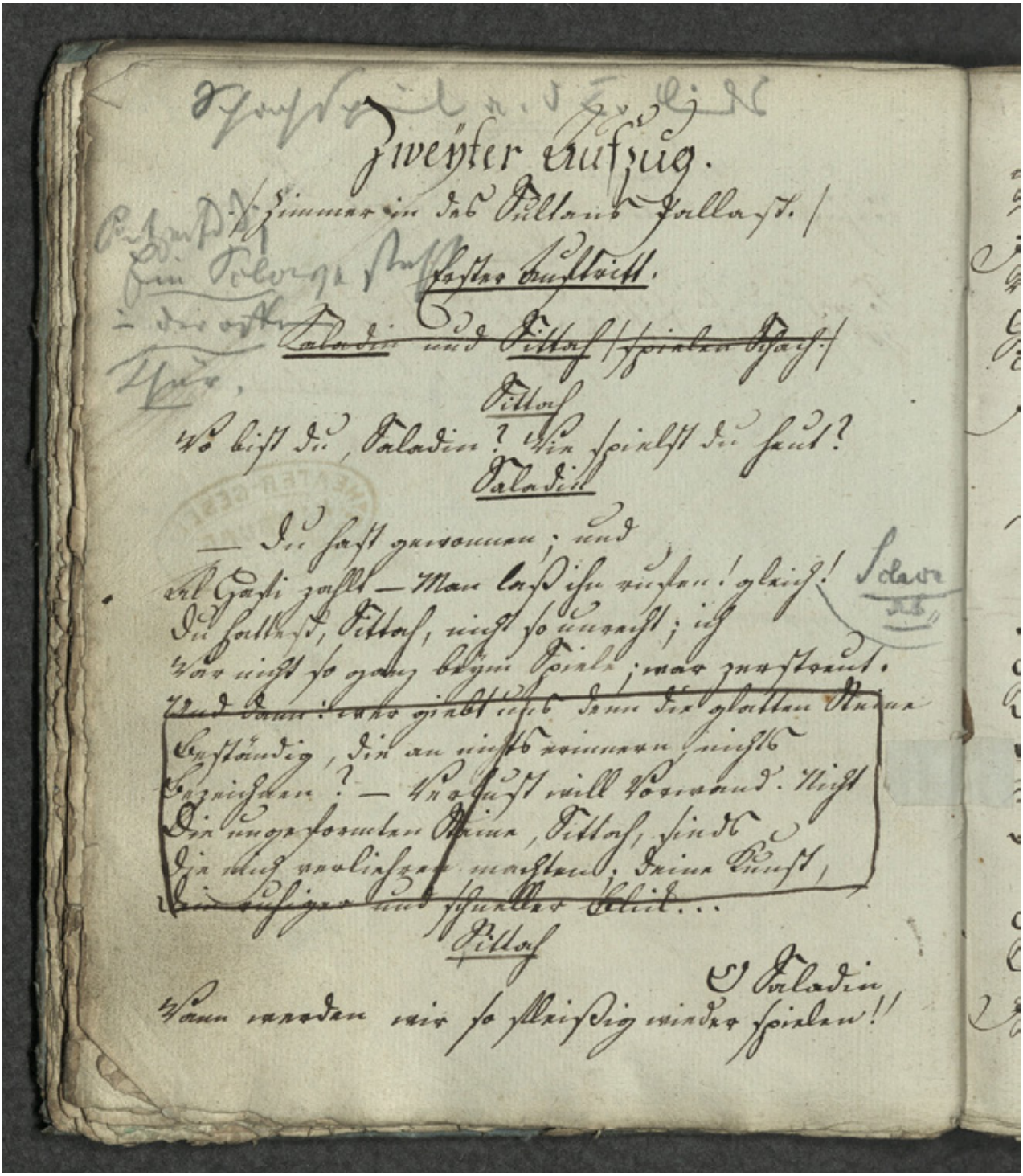
mc N° 20 2023

manuscript cultures

Hamburg | Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures ISSN 1867–9617



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CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF MANUSCRIPT CULTURES
DFG

Publishing Information

SECTION I: MULTILAYERED WRITTEN ARTEFACTS AND THEIR INTERNAL DYNAMICS

Edited by Thies Staack, Janine Droese, and José Maksimczuk

Every volume of *manuscript cultures* has been subjected to a double-blind peer review process and is openly accessible at no cost on the CSMC website <https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/publications/mc.html>. We would like to thank the German Research Foundation (DFG) for its generous support of the Cluster of Excellence EXC 2176 'Understanding Written Artefacts', which has made the printing of this journal volume possible.

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Hamburg, State and University Library Carl von Ossietzky, Theater-Bibliothek: 1988a, fol. 23^{v}. Different changes in a prompt book of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Nathan der Weise, ein Schauspiel in fünf Aufzügen von Lessing für die Bühne gekürzt v. Schiller* ('Nathan the Wise, a play in five acts by Lessing abridged for the stage by [Friedrich] Schiller'); first performance in Hamburg in the present version: 2 December 1803 (according to the playbill) < https://resolver.sub.uni-hamburg.de/kitodo/HANSh3323>. © Public Domain Mark 1.0. See the contribution by Martin Schäfer and Alexander Weinstock in this volume.

Print

Beisner Druck GmbH & Co. KG, Buchholz i. d. Nordheide
Printed in Germany

Druckprodukt
CO_2 kompensiert
klima-druck.de
ID-Nr. 24179850
VDM+
Mehr Informationen zur Berechnungsmethodik, zur Kompensation und dem gewählten Goldstandard-Klimaschutzprojekt finden Sie unter klima-druck.de/ID.

www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de

Funded by
DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
German Research Foundation

ISSN (Print) 1867-9617
ISSN (Online) 2749-1021

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Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC)
Universität Hamburg
Warburgstr. 26
20354 Hamburg
Germany

Article

Marginalised Fighting: Depictions of Sword & Buckler Fencers in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-century CE Manuscript Miniatures from Europe

Cornelius Berthold | Hamburg

Introduction

The illuminated margins of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century European manuscripts abound with depictions of ordinary people in everyday situations and wildlife in its natural environment. Sometimes they also show animals posing as church officials, though, mythical beasts, nudity and even downright obscenity.[1] Modern readers have often rationalised these peculiar and even incomprehensible forms of paracontent[2] as 'fantastic' or 'grotesque',[3] but even when the depicted scenes are more naturalistic, like genre scenes from everyday life in the country,[4] there is still a puzzling lack of connection to the main content of the manuscript sometimes.[5] According to Lucy Freeman Sandler, marginal images first appeared in conjunction with illuminated initial letters and their finials. The margins evolved as a dedicated space from the linking of several initials of this kind as well as line fillers, thus creating a border around the text block.[6] The margins of pages in, for example, psalter manuscripts and chivalric romances, soon became a habitat for the unusual and bizarre, just like in rural or urban life where – as Michael Camille has speculated – the outcasts of society were banned to the periphery, or as with the edges of the known world that were reportedly inhabited by dragons and other monsters.[7] In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, Camille described the medieval worldview as 'rigidly structured and hierarchical', which meant that there was also room for 'ridiculing, overturning and inverting',[8] i.e. for the opposite of everything that was considered good and morally sound, but without necessarily mixing the two opposites.

Fig. 1: Two buckler fighters on top of an initial (E) in a copy of a Navarro-Aragonese version of a book on law made in north-eastern Spain about 1290–1310 using tempera colours and gold leaf. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig XIV 6, fol. 9r.

This is not the place to discuss the possible purposes or functions of marginal images that have been suggested by modern scholars, like offering a carnivalesque counter-world, heralding the humanistic criticism of established institutions

[1] One of the most striking examples for modern eyes can be seen in the lower margin on fol. 160r in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Français 25526, a fourteenth-century copy of the *Roman de la Rose*.

[2] By 'para-content' I mean visual signs 'present in a manuscript in addition to the core-content(s)', as outlined by Ciotti et al. 2018, 1.

[3] Camille 2010, 12. In the early twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux already complained about the disruptive nature of certain types of 'secular' decoration, which has sometimes been understood to refer to marginal imagery as well; see Randall 1966, 3.

[4] One prominent example of this is the famous 'Luttrell Psalter', London, British Library, Add MS 42130, where various agricultural practices are depicted in the lower margins starting on fol. 169v.

[5] Unlike the examples given in this article, a forthcoming PhD dissertation by Karin Becker conducted at the CSMC partly covers marginal illumination that is directly related to the text.

[6] Sandler 1997, 2.

[7] Camille 2010, 14–20.

[8] Camille 2010, 26.

and social hierarchies or even acting as *apotropaia*.[9] I shall focus on one recurring theme instead: people carrying or fighting[10] with swords and bucklers (a buckler being a small shield that was usually round, approximately 25–45 cm in diameter and had a central boss that gave it its name[11]). The prevalence of the motif in manuscripts will be shown and correlated with evidence of the real-world activity of buckler fighting. This brief survey is necessary in order to understand why the cultural practice, which is not usually associated with the European Middle Ages today, left its mark on manuscript production and why manuscripts contain the main body of evidence we have of this activity.

Roughly between 1250 and 1370, sword and buckler fighting became a staple motif in the marginal illumination of European manuscripts made in Britain and Western Continental Europe, on which this article will draw.[12] This era also marks the peak of imaginative marginal illumination in European manuscripts in general.[13] Curiously, while many central (or 'mainline'[14]) images or historiated initials illustrate the text or employ Christological and typological themes, marginal images were frequently used to show everyday scenes or motifs. What could be counted among the indispensable, practical or 'central' activities in the lives of most medieval Europeans – harvesting and hunting, playing games and celebrating – was often reflected on the periphery of an open book, quite often in a playful transformation with beasts taking the roles of humans.

Sword and buckler fighting is a prominent example of this; it mainly presents itself to modern observers as a phenomenon associated with medieval manuscripts, despite a number of textual references to it and a few depictions in (architectural) sculpture[15] and wood carvings. I will argue that its frequent occurrence in different kinds of books, and especially its placement on the edges of the page, proves its popularity and relevance for many people in medieval Europe across social and even religious boundaries. What is more, regardless of all the fantastical creatures and farcicality depicted in marginal imagery, several frequently recurring details drawn by the artists – postures and fighting positions – are also shown in the only surviving treatise on this form of combat, suggesting that they were not created through artistic licence but reflect parts of a functional fighting system. These details cannot only be the result of painters working with models, as they can be observed in manuscripts made in all the regions outlined above and during the entire timeframe;[16] it is more likely that they attest to inspiration taken from the painters' own experience of this martial practice.

Buckler fighters in the marginal imagery of manuscripts

Bucklerists in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century European manuscript painting are mostly human (Fig. 2), but monsters and hybrid creatures can also be seen fighting with a sword and buckler (or using a falchion, club or spear instead of the sword[17]) or simply wearing or holding them (Figs 1 and 3). In the thematic index of her survey of marginal painting in 226 Gothic manuscripts and fragments of various genres,

[9] See Sandler 1997, 28–37 for a summary of the scholarly approaches up to that point. The present article will merely touch upon these issues and tends towards a positivist approach in such cases. Jean Wirth (Wirth 2008) has been partly criticised for having a similar perspective on this subject and for rejecting earlier interpretations of marginal imagery that were 'informed by postmodern theories of verbal and visual communication'; see the review of his book in Caviness 2011.

[10] 'Fighting' is etymologically related to the German word 'fechten', which is used to describe the practice in dedicated German martial-arts manuscripts from the late fourteenth century onwards; cf. Kellett 2012, 34–35. I will also use the English term 'fencing' here, which implies that it was an art of defence that could be learnt systematically.

[11] See, for instance, the Anglo-Norman Dictionary (AND² Online Edition), *s.v.* 'bocler', where both the meaning 'shield'/'buckler' and '[shield] boss' are given.

[12] For an example from Spain, c.1300, see Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig XIV 6 (83.MQ.165), fol. 9^{r} (Fig. 1). An example from Italy, probably Lombardy, *c.*1320, can be found on fol. 193^{r} of New York, The Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.215.

[13] The present article is to some degree inspired by the work of Lilian Randall, who tried to solve the enigma of giant aggressive snails drawn in the margins of Gothic manuscripts; see Randall 1962. Comparable marginal decoration in general and buckler fighters in particular can still be found in the fifteenth century, albeit to a much lesser extent (e.g. in two French Books of Hours now kept in New York: see New York, The Morgan Library & Museum, M.453, fol. 39^{r} and M.919, fol. 33^{r}).

[14] This term is suggested by Sandler 1997, 1.

[15] One example of buckler fighters in stone carving can be found on a corbel in the choir of Uppsala Cathedral. The church was built from the 1270s onwards.

[16] Not that models were not used for individual manuscripts or in certain workshops, but the prevalence of this motif over more than a century cannot be explained by a 'stemma' of models or pure imitation. It is interesting to note that there is, in fact, a surviving model or sketch book with buckler fighters, although it was made in 1370–1380 and therefore at the end of this article's timeframe. It possibly comes from the circle around the Italian painter Tommaso da Modena; see New York, Morgan Library & Museum, II, 2–25.

[17] For the sake of simplicity, I will mainly refer to a sword and buckler and the related martial practice here. Falchions and clubs can be considered replacements for the sword (see Kellett 2012, 43). In contrast, a spear, which is also depicted in conjunction with a buckler, would have been handled in a rather different way. I will briefly discuss the extent to which bucklers and contemporary heater shields (which were larger) can be considered interchangeable below.

Fig. 2: Two buckler fighters in the lower margin of a multiple-text manuscript containing three Arthurian romances in French. London, British Library, Royal MS 14 E III, Northern France, 1315–1325, fol. 140r. Using the terminology employed in the oldest known fight book, Leeds, Royal Armouries, MS I.33, the fencer to the left has adopted the *halpschilt* position ('half-shield'), while the one to the right holds his weapons in the so-called *vidilpoge* ('fiddle bow').

Lilian Randall lists at least 15 examples of buckler usage among apes, knights, men and hybrid creatures.[18] Bucklers were employed when fighting against beasts[19] and human opponents[20] or they were simply held or worn on one's belt or baldric.[21] Many more examples can be found outside Randall's corpus.[22] They are part of both 'naturalistic' depictions and the 'carnivalesque' scenes where common situations are subverted and relations of dominance turned upside down. It is in their nature as weapons that a sword and buckler almost always appear in depictions of armed combat – either in earnest or just playful – regardless of whether the individuals involved are threatening each other, fighting one another or fleeing from combat. The topic of the hunt and its related motifs are evoked, too, as animals like hares and apes are also shown wielding swords and bucklers or facing them in the hands of their opponents (or predators). However, the weapons may also simply be held without any discernible conflict going on, e.g. with the armed man-griffon hybrid growing out of a vine that separates the two text columns in a manuscript copy of Baldwin of Avesnes's chronicle now kept in Arras.[23] As with other motifs employed in manuscript painting, it is often difficult to distinguish between dedicated illustrations of buckler duels and the motif being used as a decorative[24] or structuring device of the *mise-en-page*, such as part of the frame drawn around the written area (Figs 1 and 3), or even employed as line fillers.[25]

The 'Gorleston Psalter', London, British Library, Add MS 49622, made in England between 1310 and 1324, is a good example of just how frequently the sword-and-buckler motif could be used in the margins of a single manuscript.[26] It contains the usual 'bizarre' and 'carnivalesque' motifs mentioned above involving human beings, animals and hybrid creatures. The activity depicted most frequently is the playing of musical instruments, which is not entirely surprising for a psalter manuscript, given that the psalms

[18] Randall was mostly drawing on psalters, books of hours, breviaries and romances; see Randall 1966, 12–13. While the book's index is sorted by categories such as objects, actions and actors, the individual entries are given under the latter, i.e. one needs to look up apes, men, knights, etc. to see where they are depicted as buckler fighters.

[19] Randall 1966, image catalogue nos. 225, 305, 309, 344, 345, 359, 374, 378, 721.

[20] Randall 1966, image catalogue nos. 65, 111, 211, 353, 440 (two men carrying swords and their own heads as bucklers).

[21] Randall 1966, image catalogue nos. 279.

[22] A rather informal but impressively sized collection of more than 120 depictions of buckler fighters has been created by Mickael Vieillard, 'L'épée-Bocle générale/ commune à l'épée bocle ?'. These images are almost exclusively from manuscript painting and only show discernible fighting positions, so they do not include any pictures where the weapons are held in an unspecific way. The collection can be viewed online, see Vieillard (2018).

[23] Arras, Bibliothèque municipale, ms. 863, fol. 132v. A similar decorative use can be found in the top margin of London, British Library, Add MS 47680, fol. 8r and Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig XIV 6, fol. 9r (Fig. 1).

[24] Despite the fact that the terms 'decorative' and 'decoration' disregard other possible functions of these images, I will use them here (just like Shalev-Eyni 2010, 79–83) to distinguish images that are not directly related to a book's content from actual illustrations.

[25] As in the 'Psalter-Hours of Ghuiluys de Boisleux' (New York, The Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.730), which was produced in Arras in the 1240s. It features several buckler fighters as line fillers, e.g. on fols 62v, 68r, 129v, 159v and 161r. Since line fillers can barely be higher than the line spacing, all the motifs, including the bucklerists, were squeezed into elongated positions.

[26] Catalogue data and digital images can be found online at: <www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_49622_fs001r> (accessed on 26 October 2021).

Fig. 3: A sword-and-buckler-wielding centaur 'guards' the outer margin of a page in a French multiple-text manuscript containing several Arthurian romances. Cologny, Fondation Martin Bodmer, Cod. Bodmer 147, France, late thirteenth century, fol. 340r.

were sung and that King David himself – who was believed to have been the author of many of them – is often portrayed with a lyre in his hands.[27] Representations of archery and buckler fighters are only slightly less frequent. The latter are shown on 23 of the 455 pages[28] (the manuscript contains 228 folios in all), which means that bucklerists appear every 20 pages or 10 folios on average. As the psalms do not contain any explicit references to duelling (they do refer to violence and warfare, though, including the use of swords and bows),[29] the inspiration to include them must have come from outside the text. Furthermore, the buckler fighters in the manuscript are frequently hybrid creatures, while 'proper' human beings fighting a duel are only depicted three times (on fols 7v, 69r and 126v).

In the heyday of buckler fighters populating manuscript pages, their iconography shows recurring features, regardless of whether the manuscripts were produced in the British Isles or in Central Europe: while a few fighters in armour do exist, the typical attire is everyday clothing, woollen tunics and hose with an optional linen coif or woollen hood on the person's head. The implied context is therefore not a military but a civilian one, be it in earnest or a training situation. The posture frequently includes the upper body leaning forward, the figure having a straight back[30] and slightly bent knees (if they are bucklerists with human legs, of course). The feet may point outwards in a ballet-like fashion, as is often the case in Gothic art. The depicted ways of holding the weapons in the approach and the actual engagement hint at certain conventions which go beyond artistic requirements. When the blades of the combatants' swords are extended towards the opponent, for instance, the buckler is usually kept close to the sword hand, thereby protecting the rest of the fighter's arm and body.[31] These conventions refer to duels and mostly do not apply to battle scenes or massacres (the latter being another occasion where swords and bucklers are frequently shown).[32]

[27] See Seebass 1973 on the topic of depictions of musicians and the playing of instruments in medieval psalters (and other manuscripts).

[28] London, British Library, Add MS 49622, fols 7v, 10r, 27v, 40r, 46r, 50v, 68v, 69r, 73v, 75r, 80v, 83r, 86v, 99r, 112v, 126v, 137v, 138r, 149v, 162r, 170r, 191r and 210v.

[29] Helsinger 1971, 165–175 argued that depictions of David fighting Goliath were often included on the Beatus page (the beginning of the first psalm) in psalter manuscripts to convey the idea of good fighting evil, and other fighting scenes might have been included for the same reason. The example he gives – fol. 9r of the 'Landgrafenpsalter' (Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek Stuttgart, HB II 24) indeed shows a pair of wrestlers and a buckler fighter attacking a hybrid man on the side of 'evil' (the left), while more peaceful motifs can be found to the right of the initial B. However, even this interpretation is only linked to the 'Book of Psalms' indirectly; it is not an illustration of it.

[30] This posture is briefly mentioned in Konrad von Würzburg's (d. 1287) *Der Trojanische Krieg* ('The Trojan War'): when Hector and Paris train with swords and bucklers, they are described as holding their shields up and bending their bodies behind them (*si buten für die buggeler / dâ hinder stuonden si gebogen*); see Kellett 2012, 40.

[31] I am assuming the combatant is a right-handed person here. Left-handed bucklerists and hybrids do appear in manuscripts occasionally (e.g. London, British Library, Add MS 11639, fol. 38r), but may be the result of a mirrored model used by the illuminator. This seems to be the case with the many knights carrying scabbards on their right in London, British Library, Add MS 47680, fol. 40v and later.

[32] Buckler fighters in a pitched battle are shown in the so-called 'Holkham Bible' which was made around 1330 (London, British Library, Add MS 47682), fol. 40r. The famous English longbowmen of the late middle ages also often carried a sword and a buckler on their side. See the drawings in the 'Pageants of Richard Beauchamps', a 15th-century manuscript (London, British Library, Cotton MS Julius E IV/3, fol. 4r), for example. Buckler fighters involved in massacres or murder are shown in Vienna, Austrian National Library, Han. Cod. 2554, fol. 42v (made in the second quarter of the 13th century); and New York, The Morgan Library and Museum, MS M.933, fol. 33r (made in Italy 1260–70). The latter example is a historiated initial showing the murder of Thomas Beckett.

Fig. 4: Two buckler-fighting illustrations from the 'Codex Manesse', Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. Pal. germ. 848, fols 190^{v} (left) and 204^{r} (right). The shield-strike seen on the left is the only depiction of such a technique outside the MS I.33 fight book. The fighters on the right have obtained the second (right shoulder) and fourth (over the head) guards according to the teachings contained in MS I.33.

Was buckler fighting a mass phenomenon in the Middle Ages?

In order to explain the frequency of the buckler fighter motif on manuscript pages, one not only has to consider the images themselves but what is being depicted, the historical fighting traditions. The sophistication of medieval martial arts has only received a notable share of scholarly attention in the last three decades.[33] Before that, the perspective on this subject was distorted by the nineteenth-century hubris of scholars[34] and popular culture (a phenomenon that still exists today, in fact). Both tend to suggest that medieval fighting was characterised by the use of excessive force, large movements of the weapons and, consequently, obvious signs of exhaustion in the practitioners. Somewhat in contrast, one exemplary surviving text on close combat from the fifteenth century states that alertness, courage and nimbleness make a good fencer.[35]

Fighting systems are likely to have developed very early in the history of physical human conflict, but the origins of buckler fencing in particular are unclear. It has been suggested that this form of combat came to Europe from the Byzantine Empire in the tenth century, but that it could also have evolved in Europe itself.[36] As a matter of fact, it is attested in the late twelfth century when Thomas

[33] See Anglo 2000 and Jaquet, Verelst and Dawson 2016, to cite just two publications of a more general character. Earlier publications from the twentieth century appeared more sporadically and were rather isolated works.

[34] Castle 1885, 5–6, speaks of the 'rough, untutored fighting of the Middle Ages' and assumes that the development of fencing up until his time was not a matter of constant change, but of constant improvement. His bibliography reveals that he did not read a single medieval fight book. There are more favourable and better-founded accounts, however, e.g. by Schmied-Kowarzik and Kufahl 1894, 82–83, and a few in-depth analyses were written in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century.

[35] These characteristics are embodied by parts of animals in a labelled illustration of a hybrid human fighter in one of Paulus Kal's fight books (late fifteenth century): Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 1507, fol. 6^{r}. This ideal fighter has a falcon's eye (in fact, a falcon's entire head), a lion's heart and a hind's feet.

[36] See Dawson 2009 for the former point and Hester 2012 for the latter. On a side note, buckler fighting systems can be found all over Europe, Africa and Asia and up till the twentieth century. For depictions of men with sticks and bucklers from the Middle East in 1470, see Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Arabe 2824, fol. 65^{r}. For early twentieth-century buckler fighting from Georgia, see Amberger 1998, 165–168. Several old Indian martial-arts styles still use bucklers today.

Becket's clerk, William Fitzstephen, describes it as one of the exercises of London's young people on summer feast days.[37] Buckler fencing is also mentioned in various literary works,[38] and the Norwegian 'King's Mirror' (*Konungs skuggsjá*, *c.*1250) advises young courtiers to practise with a normal shield or buckler twice a day if possible.[39] Its popularity among the upper classes is further attested by the two idealised illustrations of minnesingers Johann von Ringgenberg and Heinrich (or Leopold) von Scharpfenberg from the 'Codex Manesse' (*c.*1300–1340), who each fence in normal clothing, wielding swords and bucklers in front of an audience of noble ladies, which suggests a non-lethal context for their practice (Fig. 4).[40] Partly in contrast, the Saxon Mirror describes the discipline in judicial duels which were potentially but not necessarily lethal; the four illustrated fourteenth-century manuscript copies of the famous law book of which I am aware all depict buckler fighters.[41]

The depiction of buckler fighting in Hebrew manuscripts

Manuscripts do not only attest to the existence of buckler fighting; they also suggest that it bridged social and religious boundaries, as exemplified by a lavishly illuminated frontispiece with bucklerists in a composite manuscript containing Jewish theological and prayer texts (Fig. 5).[42] With the exception of four pages from the fifteenth century and some equally young flourished penwork,[43] the manuscript was produced in the Upper Rhine area between 1276 and 1350 and is thus contemporary with most of the other examples cited here.[44] Another specimen is the so-called 'Michael Maḥzor'[45] made in Central Europe in 1258, a *maḥzor* being a prayer book for Jewish high festivals; it shows two buckler fighters on fol. 11r. One of their heads is replaced by a bird's and the other is covered by a simplified great helm, both typical attempts of the time to circumvent the religious prohibition of depicting human beings. Curiously, the image on fol. 4v, which shows a single person with the two weapons, is upside down. This has been interpreted as either the work of a painter ignorant of the Hebrew language who did not know which side was up (which seems rather unlikely) or as a deliberate choice to illustrate a passage in the corresponding Bible text (Esther 9:1) where an attempt to annihilate the Jews was 'turned to the contrary'.[46] However,

Fig. 5: A frontispiece in Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Hebr. 75, Germany, late thirteenth to early fourteenth century, fol. 1v, introducing a prayer text in the composite manuscript. The word in the cartouche says *barukh* ('blessed') and opens the phrase (continued on fol. 2r) 'Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the World'. This is a standard formula introducing prayers, in this case the morning prayer.

[37] Gourde 1943, 15. For a transcription of the Latin original (where buckler fighting is called *parmis duelliorum*), see Riley 1860, 15.

[38] Kellett 2012, 35–41.

[39] Larson 1917, 212–213.

[40] Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. Pal. germ. 848, fols 190v and 204r.

[41] Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. Pal. germ. 164, fols 12r, 16r and later; Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 3.1. Aug.2°, fol. 19v and later; Oldenburg, Landesbibliothek, Cim I 410, fol. 24r and later; Dresden, Staats-, Landes- und Universitätsbibliothek, Mscr. Dresd. M.32, fol. 13r and later.

[42] I am most grateful to Sara Offenberg and Michael Kohs for their help with the examples from Hebrew manuscripts.

[43] Zucker 2005, XLVIII. The penwork was probably executed by Joel ben Simeon, an Ashkenazi scribe and illuminator, see Hindman 2020.

[44] Fingernagel and Gamillscheg 2018, 53. The manuscript (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Hebr. 75) shows the frontispiece on fol. 1v and another hybrid creature with a sword and buckler on fol. 214v.

[45] Now kept at Oxford in two volumes: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Michael 617 and Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS Michael 627.

[46] Offenberg 2018, 136–137. The passage from the *maḥzor* is read on the first Sabbath of the month of Adar. Purim, during which the Book of Esther is read, is the climax of this month.

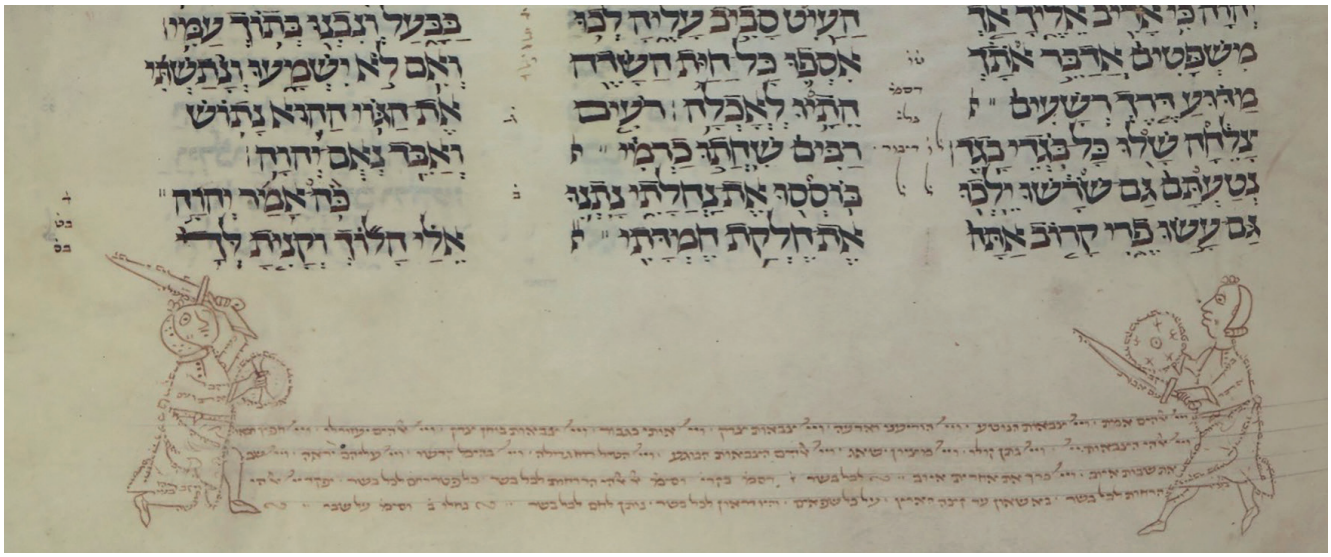

Fig. 6: Two buckler fighters consisting partly of micrography in the bottom margin of a Hebrew Bible. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Hébreu 9, Southern Germany, 1304, fol. 105r.

in most cases it appears as if buckler fighters were simply decorative elements in Jewish manuscripts rather than being illustrations of the actual text or related to it in any other obvious way.[47] The situation may be different for a Hebrew Bible made in Germany in 1304,[48] shortly after the so-called 'Rindfleisch massacres' of 1298. The lower margins of this manuscript occasionally contain micrography, including one opening with a pair of bucklerists in the lower margin of each page (Fig. 6). While the figures adopt similar fighting positions to those in other contemporary manuscripts, their outlines consist of minute writing taken from various sections of the Pentateuch. Sara Offenberg has argued that the images might well have been reactions to the recent pogroms, the buckler fighters representing the violent middle-class mobs that had targeted the Jewish communities in Southern Germany only a few years earlier.[49]

It has been argued that the presence of fighters or actual knights in these manuscripts reflects how the Jewish minority adopted motifs from the activities of the Christian upper classes, in which they were not allowed to participate.[50] It should be borne in mind, though, that Jewish manuscripts from medieval Europe (and elsewhere, for that matter) 'resemble manuscripts of their respective Gentile environments in terms of appearance, […] production techniques, and the configuration of the text, more closely than they do Hebrew manuscripts produced in other geo-cultural zones', as the late Malachi Beit-Arié observed.[51] Therefore, the theme may have been used because it already formed part of the local manuscript (painting) tradition or even because a Christian illuminator was employed.[52] But given that Jews wore arms and were even expected to fight when necessary,[53] it is plausible that Jewish illuminators drew their inspiration from real life, too, just like their Christian counterparts.

[47] This seems to be true of more examples showing (hybrid) buckler fighters: London, British Library, Add MS 11639 (fols 38r, 126v and 219v) and Add MS 22413 (fol. 131r), which is volume two of a three-part *maḥzor*. The first volume shows bucklerists, too: Budapest, Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Kaufmann Collection, MS A384 (fol. 49r). The third part is kept in Oxford: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Michael 619. Bucklerists are also found in a Jewish liturgical manuscript made in Northern Italy around 1350 (Fig. 7): Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8°5214, fol. 82v.

[48] Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Hébreu 9, fols 104v–105r, online at: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10548441n/f217.item> and <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10548441n/f218.item>.

[49] Offenberg 2021, 15–26 and passim. She furthermore suggests a close relation between the bucklerists in Jewish manuscripts and the illustrations found in the oldest known fight book (see below), or at least that there was either 'a common prototype copy or other fencing manuals' (Offenberg 2021, 14; see Offenberg 2021, 10–14 for the whole argument). I am inclined to favour the more comprehensive argument of the present article, namely that buckler fighters were a popular motif in illuminated European manuscripts in the thirteenth and fourteenth century regardless of their religious 'affiliation', not least because the martial practice was ubiquitous and similar in style throughout Central Europe and Britain.

[50] Shalev-Eyni 2010, 90–92. She interprets the buckler fighting scenes (e.g. those from the 'Codex Manesse') as a specialised kind of tournament and not as a broader martial art or social phenomenon.

[51] Beit-Arié 2022, 75.

[52] One such case is described in Frojmovic 2008, 285–290.

[53] Roth 2003, Wenniger 2003 and Offenberg 2021 (the latter with some additional information). The Jewish Quarter in Cologne apparently had an armoury, judging from several excavated maille shirts; see Otten 2018.

Fig. 7: Two sword-and-buckler-wielding hybrid creatures mark the end of a prayer to God (the Half-Kaddish) in a *maḥzor* manuscript for Yom Kippur. Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8°5214, Northern Italy, *c.*1350, fol. 82^{v}.

Depictions of buckler fighters outside of manuscripts

The repertoire of motifs found in marginal manuscript painting can also be found in other medieval European artwork, where it served a similar decorative function. One example is the wooden choir stalls of Cologne Cathedral with their elaborate carvings. They were made around 1310 by a number of artisans from workshops in Cologne, Lorraine and Paris.[54] Apart from a few elaborately decorated partition walls at the end of the stalls, arguably the most interesting carvings are only visible once the seats are lifted up, revealing the misericords underneath the seat boards – small hip supports for the clergy when they need to stand during a service – and the small decorated quatrefoil panels at the back of the stalls just above the floor. A few carvings show religious themes, but many appear to be secular in nature and belong to a repertoire of motifs shared with manuscript painting. They include animals and fantastic beasts,[55] a woman performing a handstand[56] and buckler fighters in at least seven places (Fig. 8). Despite the different materials and techniques used in manuscript painting and woodcarving, the bucklerists of Cologne Cathedral are strikingly similar to their manuscript counterparts, both in terms of their clothing, arms and posture and in their being combined with 'extraordinary' elements, such as the weapons wielded by hybrid creatures and even by a girl in a long gown.[57] However, the greatest similarity may well be their 'marginal' position in spots that are easy to overlook and even in places that were entirely hidden from view by the clergy once they occupied the stalls for the service.

Ora et dimica

Contrary to the ideal according to which 'those who pray' (oratores) were a distinct group from 'those who fight' (bellatores) in medieval European societies – an exception being the knightly orders that gained prominence during the Crusades – Christian clerics engaged in sword fighting as well, in one way or another. There is evidence that they were occasionally inclined to resolve legal disputes by judicial duels, which were also known as ordeals. This does not necessarily mean that they fought themselves, though, as the established practice also allowed them to hire a champion who was subsequently trained over several weeks. Eventually he would represent one of the involved parties and either win for them or lose, thus deciding the case. Rachel Kellett cites two instances from twelfth- and thirteenth-century England where monks would have preferred the ordeal because they considered their court cases tedious and hopeless respectively.[58] In terms of canon law, a judicial duel was most questionable, as can be gathered from one of the most ambitious manuscript projects of all in fourteenth-century England: the monumental but inchoate encyclopaedia entitled *Omne Bonum* in two folio-sized volumes. A senior clerk in London called James le Palmer wrote it on almost 1,100 parchment leaves between 1360 and 1375. The enormous scope of the work is also visible in the 750 historiated initials it contains, even though not all of them could be completed in James' lifetime.[59]

Sword-and-buckler-wielding clerics can be found in three historiated initials drawn during the original production phase, the first in a context that only seems remotely related to fighting: the chapter on apostasy (*Apostata et apostasia*, Fig. 9). The connection is clearer for the other two, which are concerned with clerics' weapons (*Arma clericorum*) and duelling clerics (*Clerici pugnantes in duello*, Fig. 10) respectively.[60] The texts provide insights into the theory and practice of duels and fighting.[61] In *Clerici pugnantes in duello*, James argues vehemently that duels – solely judicial duels, apparently – should be despised as they tempt God to intervene in the affairs of mortals, not to mention that they ultimately amount to committing murder. It is better to lose

[54] For a detailed study on Cologne Cathedral's choir stalls, see Bergmann 1987.

[55] See the quatrefoil panels N II 7, N II 11, N II 15, N I 10, N I 12, N I 8, S II 8 and S I 26 and misericords N I 1, N II 16 and S II 13. The abbreviations to mark the positions of the carvings are those used by Bergmann 1987. Greyscale images of most of them are included in the second volume of her publication. The carvings also include a so-called *Judensau* ('Jews' sow') depiction (on partition wall N C; see Bergmann 1987, vol. 2, 46–48), the most obvious of a small number of strongly anti-Semitic motifs still visible in Cologne Cathedral.

[56] See misericord N II 5. Some very similar depictions in manuscripts can be seen in London, British Library, Add MS 62925 ('The Rutland Psalter', dated *c.*1260), fol. 65^{r} and London, British Library, Add MS 47682 (the 'Holkham Bible'), fol. 21^{v}.

[57] Regarding the girl, see misericord N II 10 (and for fighting women in general, see below in this article). Beasts are shown on quatrefoil panel N I 22 and on misericords N I 16 and N I 5. The remaining bucklerists are shown on misericords N I 4 and N II 10, partition wall SB (the east side) and quatrefoil panels N I 22 and S I 12.

[58] Kellett 2012, 50–53.

[59] Sandler 1996, 13–19. Some of the missing historiated initials were added a few years later, based on the marginal cues left by the manuscript's new owner and probably also inspired by the actual chapter titles; see Sandler 1989.

[60] London, British Library, Royal MS 6 E VI (which forms the first volume, and 6 E VII the second), England, 1360–1375, fols 115^{r}–117^{r}; 137^{r}–138^{v} and 302^{v}–303^{v} respectively.

[61] I would like to thank Till Hennings very much for providing me with detailed summaries of the respective chapters, and thank Gaia Castaldi for transcribing a section from *clerici pugnantes in duello* for me.

Fig. 8: Carvings of (partly fantastic) buckler fighters in the choir stalls of Cologne Cathedral, Germany, *c.* 1310. From left to right and top to bottom: misericords N I 16 (a fighting hybrid creature) and N II 10 (an illustration of virtue, perhaps), quatrefoil S I 12 (a pair of buckler fighters and a dragon).

one's property than regain it by participating in a duel, he states, regardless of whether one makes the challenge or accepts it – self-defence being the only exception, that is, and only if one has a good reputation and is not a notoriously violent person. Even those who are merely involved in organising the duel, like scribes and lawyers, share part of the guilt, he says. James frequently draws on canon law to prove his point. He is particularly strict with clerics, for whom involvement in a duel would be an impediment (*irregularitas*) to their ability to perform the sacraments, aside from the fact that they would run the risk of being considered murderers. This is even the case if they hire a champion to fight in their stead. In the chapter *Arma clericorum*, James is equally austere with regards to which weapons may be worn or used by clerics. While a wide range of opinions are presented, the tendency is to only allow defensive weapons and armour or, if offensive weapons are permitted, then only for self-defence (and only if the attacker himself is armed). James observed with a scowl that almost all clerics were armed in his day and age despite what the canon-law jurists said.

Two of the depictions of clerical bucklerists found in initial letters in the *Omne Bonum* differ from the previous examples by referring to the contents of the respective articles. This is in contrast to most imaginative marginal illumination of the time, which is connected to the main text of a manuscript indirectly at best. Only the 'apostate' cleric who throws away his habit and adopts a recurring sword-and-buckler fighting position has a rather questionable relationship to the article to which he belongs. The choice of motif here suggests that buckler fencing was regarded as a rather disreputable practice – an impression that is, in fact, confirmed by textual sources, including some from James le Palmer's environment in England.[62]

Fig. 9: A cleric throws away his habit and adopts an under-the-arm guard with his sword and buckler in the historiated initial drawn for the chapter on 'Apostates and apostasy' in the *Omne Bonum*. This position is described as the 'first guard' (*prima custodia*) in the oldest fight book, Royal Armouries, MS I.33; see Fig. 11 as well. London, British Library, Royal MS 6 E VI, England, 1360–1375, fol. 115r.

The oldest known 'fight book'

While several 'combat books'[63] from the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance deal with the subject of fighting with swords and bucklers, the particular style that is shown in the many thirteenth- to fourteenth-century manuscript paintings is only described in one treatise from the same era. Incidentally, it is also the oldest known representative of this genre. This untitled and anonymous work is preserved in a manuscript now kept at the Royal Armouries in Leeds. It is commonly known under its former shelf mark of MS I.33.[64] The codex now contains 32 parchment folios, but it used to have more; an unknown number of leaves have been lost over time. The fencing techniques are demonstrated by a priest (*sacerdos*) and his pupil (*scholaris*) according to the glosses, but on the last two pages, the pupil has been replaced by a woman named Walpurgis (Fig. 11) without any explanation of why this happened. Every page contains two horizontal registers for the images, which, with the exception of the first folio, each show a pair of fencers demonstrating certain combat situations and techniques. They were not given a background or border, and the frame lines that designate the space reserved for each image are only faintly visible. Curiously, little or no designated space seems to have

[62] One example from the *Liber Albus*, a London law book written a few decades after James le Palmer's death, is quoted by Offenberg 2021, 25.

[63] These manuals, known as *Fechtbücher* in German, form a highly heterogeneous group of manuscripts (and prints later on), which are all concerned with close combat techniques in one way or another, described with the aid of texts and/or illustrations.

[64] The Royal Armouries still use MS I.33 on their website, even though the more recent shelf marks 'Royal Armouries Record 0033' and 'Fecht1' exist, too. For a brief description and contextualisation of the manuscript as well as a summary of relevant studies, see the introduction in Forgeng 2018, on which I have relied here unless otherwise specified. The first in-depth analysis of the manuscript's iconography, text and its scholarly and cultural context is Cinato and Surprenant 2008. The recently completed PhD dissertation of Antti Ijäs is even more extensive and focuses especially on the language of the text; see Ijäs 2022.

Fig. 10: The historiated initial for the chapter on duelling clerics in the *Omne Bonum*. London, British Library, Royal MS 6 E VI, England, 1360–1375, fol. 302^{v}.

been prepared for adding text. This is one of several clues suggesting that the accompanying Latin explanations and mnemonic verses that describe the highly refined fighting system (with occasional technical terms added in German) were not part of the original plan – at least not to the extent we can see in the book today. The text was inserted above each register and sometimes in the lower margin or to the left or right (in which case it was rotated by 90°). As the illustrations often go beyond their frame lines and thus leave less space for writing between them, the text frequently flushes around the fighters' feet and swords (Fig. 12). The Latin text makes a few references to the images, including a complaint about a 'mistake by the painter' (*vicium pictoris*) on fol. 23^{r}, which prevented the reader from seeing a certain fencing technique. The distribution of text is also quite irregular: some pages are crowded, while others are nearly or completely blank, except for the occasional 'see above' comment when a familiar situation is repeated.[65] This is despite the fact that virtually every page was provided with ruling lines before the glosses were added. If it was ever planned to spread the text evenly over the manuscript, the author(s) of the glosses appear(s) to have been unaware of it or to have disregarded the idea later.

Since painting and texts were dated and localised indiscriminately to late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century Franconia up until recently,[66] some differentiation is necessary here. The style of the illustrations also appears in a manuscript produced in Lower Austria in the middle of the fourteenth century. The Cistercian abbot Ulrich of Lilienfeld hired a professional illustrator to paint some of the pages of his Concordantiae Caritatis (contained in the 'Codex Campililiensis', Lilienfeld, Stiftsbibl., Cod. 151). The human figures painted by this expert craftsman show some similarity to those in MS I.33 in terms of their clothing and vividness.[67] While this gives some indication of the

[65] References to previously covered subject matter, often followed by light annotations, can be found on fols 3^{r}, 5^{v}, 6^{r}, 7^{v}, 13^{v}, 15^{r}, 22^{v} and 24^{v}, for instance.

[66] For a small number of dating suggestions, see Bodemann 2008, 124–126 (cat. no. 38.9.8.).

[67] Roland 2015, 258–259. Roland is reminded of pre-Eyckian realism, a style originating in the Netherlands, but difficult to trace even there (the

spatial and temporal origin of the fight book, the possibility of using externally hired illuminators complicates the matter further, not least because it is unclear how many painters were involved in the production. Nevertheless, it can be stated with some certainty that the illustrations date to around 1330.[68] A close examination of the handwriting reveals that the main hand develops into a typical Cursiva Antiquior over the course of the text, which would date it to the 1350s–1360s and hardly before 1340. Some of the annotations in the text were written in what seems to be a different hand, either as a variant from the main scribe's repertoire or by a different person altogether, but both types were rubricated in the same style and thus appear to be more or less contemporary. The spelling of the terms in an Upper German dialect suggests it may have originated in the north-eastern part of Southern Germany, probably Franconia or even Bohemia.[69] The temporal distance between images and writing adds more weight to the aforementioned hypothesis – that the original plan for producing this manuscript did not include the text, or at least not as much as what was added.

Almost 20 years of recent scholarship have been unable to unlock all the secrets of this fascinating manuscript. For the present paper, I merely wish to point out a few important parallels between its teachings and the roughly contemporary depictions of bucklerists mentioned earlier. The first noticeable similarity is in the fencers' posture: the figures are leaning forward and have a relatively wide stance. Second, the initial body positions (*custodiae*) from which the fight starts can also be found outside this manuscript, confirming the glosses, which state that every fighter adopts them, regardless of how well they have been trained (fol. 1^{r}). Third, in the actual engagement, more often than not the weapons are held in front at shoulder height, the combatants' hands close together. While exceptions to these characteristics certainly exist (as do variations of them), their general similarity is striking, but logical nonetheless: it attests to related martial traditions in Europe at this time, and whenever these traditions were represented in manuscript painting, this was done using similar artistic conventions.

Martial culture in manuscript culture – an attempt to explain the phenomenon

If one considers that clerics were not only involved in book production during the timeframe discussed in this paper, but that some of them even formed part of the martial community, then the frequent occurrence of buckler fighters in manuscript painting can be explained quite plausibly. This is also true of craftsmen and artisans working in secular workshops: fighting practice was not only observable in different parts of society to which illuminators looked for inspiration, but it may often have been part of their own lives as well, much like other kinds of games and sports.[70] Martial culture or a culture of physical exercise, one could argue, left its imprint on the culture of manuscript production, as did other aspects of daily routine. Even if we assume that the artists occasionally mocked or criticised it in their paintings, e.g. by replacing humans with animals or hybrid creatures, they nonetheless reaffirmed its prevalence. Michael Camille has argued in a comparable way that carnivalesque marginal images indirectly strengthened the sacred or virtuous content they tried to ridicule – precisely because they did not entirely replace them in the centre, but 'only' stayed in the margins.[71]

What exactly was buckler fencing, though, and why was it such a widespread phenomenon, as the many illustrations in late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century European manuscripts suggest?[72] It appears to have been embedded in a wide range of martial practices, all of which are frequently

examples of this style he provides are London, British Library, Sloane 3983 and Manchester, John Rylands Library, Ms. 69). The style of the remaining illustrations in Ulrich's manuscript is different, the quality inferior. For digitised images of the *Concordantiae Caritatis*, see <https://manuscripta.at/hs_detail.php?ID=32359>. Stylistically similar paintings, specifically regarding the way the garments were drawn, can be found on fol. 81^{v}, for example.

[68] I am very grateful to Maria Theisen and Martin Roland for their observations and suggestions concerning the style of painting and its dating. Archaeologist Julia Gräf has pointed out that the depicted clothing matches early fourteenth-century fashion conventions; see Gräf 2017, 67–69.

[69] I would like to express my gratitude to Katrin Sturm and Christoph Mackert of Leipzig University's Manuscript Centre for sharing their palaeographic expertise concerning MS I.33 and making some suggestions about its possible origin.

[70] Training and recreational sports were almost inseparable for some members of the fighting classes; see Carter 1992, 29–36 (see p. 18 on the origin of the term 'sports'). It could be argued that when other parts of society took part in martial pastimes, they were emulating the behaviour of the ruling classes. However, their involvement in fighting and fighting practice is just as likely to be the result of the fact that 'endemic warfare permeated society' (p. 128). See Birkhan 2018, 11–54 for a recent attempt at defining gaming and playing in the Middle Ages and a survey of previous definitions.

[71] Camille 2010, 26–31 and 47.

[72] For a collection of sources mentioning buckler fighting and a brief discussion of the reality of the practice, see Cinato 2016, 481–492. When addressing the existence of bucklerists in his monograph on 'drôleries' in marginal manuscript painting, Jean Wirth appears to be uncertain about the precise purpose of sword and buckler fighting. He describes it as a practice neither for nobles (which is debatable, given the evidence listed here) nor for peasants, but rather some form of middle-class activity (for which there is evidence); see Wirth 2008, 210–212.

Fig. 11: The *sacerdos* from the previous pages now faces Walpurgis, a woman wearing aristocratic attire. Both have tucked their garb in a way that would allow them to move around freely when fighting. In the upper register, the priest is standing in an under-the-arm guard (*prima custodia*), which can also be seen in Fig. 9. Leeds, Royal Armouries, MS I.33, Central or South-east Germany, *c.* 1330–1360, fol. 32r.

Fig. 12: Two partially overlapping illustrations and glosses added at a later point, avoiding parts of the illustrations. In the lower register on the left, the priest is attacking from an over-the-head guard (*quarta custodia*), which was frequently used in contemporary depictions of combatants (see Figs 4–7). Leeds, Royal Armouries, MS I.33, Central or South-east Germany, *c.*1330–1360, fol. 26^{v}.

found in manuscript painting, too: archery, javelin throwing, wrestling[73] (probably the most widespread exercise of all, as no equipment was required for it) and armoured combat with large shields as used by the ruling class and military elite for most armed conflicts of the time.[74] The importance of the latter might, in fact, explain the popularity of sword and buckler fighting. Another look at manuscript miniatures reveals that knights and soldiers fighting with triangular shields (or 'heater shields') in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century sometimes used the same *custodiae* as bucklerists.[75] While depictions of similar fighting positions in manuscript painting could be the result of using models, the motifs clearly transcend workshops, regions and times of their making. This is corroborated by other evidence that lends credibility to the hypothesis that buckler fighting served as an alternative form of physical training for unmounted close combat at the time.[76] Buckler fencing thus gained relevance, which made it increasingly popular over the course of the thirteenth century, even though it had existed before – not to mention its usefulness in contexts that did not require full armour or large shields, such as judicial duels or self-defence. The growing number of cases where the motif appears in uniquely produced manuscript illuminations, especially in the margins, attests to this development.

Conclusion

In Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth century, buckler fighting must have been such a ubiquitous activity in many people's lives – including the lives of those producing manuscripts – that it left its imprint not only in dedicated illustrations of the practice, but in decorative and visually structuring elements of the page that did not directly relate to the main text: line fillers, border elements and marginal space. In the real world, it was a popular martial practice with different fields of application, a recurring part of everyday life for many people who either participated in it themselves or watched, and possibly an outlet for the aggressive potential of young men.[77] In manuscript production, it could be used to illustrate themes like conflict and combat, but also rowdiness, skill, martial prowess and recreation.[78] At the same time, it was an everyday experience documented by painters as paracontent to accompany the main text in a manuscript, alongside other common practices and routines that were barely considered worth verbalising. Therefore, such manuscript paintings (and some other artwork of the period) may very well contain the bulk of the evidence that remains of the daily activities of medieval Europeans, which they rarely wrote about. The routines and thoughts central to medieval societies, one could argue, can often be found in the periphery of their manuscripts now. The margins reflect – and sometimes distort – the world in which the illuminators lived; they give us an insight into their minds, their material and physical culture, and their martial knowledge.

Buckler fencing, a practice that is seldom associated with the Middle Ages today, especially in popular culture, is only one part of the mosaic. It emerges as a socio-cultural phenomenon not so much from the single extant treatise dedicated to the subject and describing the style, but rather (and indirectly) from the many marginal depictions in European manuscripts, almost regardless of their main content.

[73] Wrestling is described as the basis of all fighting in a late fourteenth-century multiple-text manuscript on fighting: see Nuremburg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Hs. 3227a, fol. 86^{r}. Mary Carruthers argues that marginal depictions of wrestling 'allud[ed] to the common idea (Biblical as well as classical) of meditation as exercise (*meletē*), and of ascetics as spiritual athletes'; see Carruthers 2008, 323. Regardless of whether this was actually intended, I suspect that wrestling was prominent enough in society in the first place to be considered an appropriate portrayal of 'spiritual' exercise.

[74] Bucklers are depicted in group fighting and even in combat on horseback, but they are certainly not the most prominent type of shield for these martial contexts.

[75] There are two images in two unrelated manuscripts made around 1300 in France, one with a heater-shield fighter in armour and the other with a sword-and-buckler fighter in normal clothing. They are shown in what is virtually the same unusual fighting posture, down to the position of the right thumb on the sword hilt. The armoured fighter is in an image in New York, The Morgan Library & Museum, M.751, fol. 102^{v}; see online: <http://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/page/204/115343>. The unarmoured sword-and-buckler fencer is part of the bottom margin in Boulogne-sur-Mer, Bibliothèque municipale, MS.131, fol. 7^{v}; see online: <https://bvmm.irht.cnrs.fr/mirador/index.php?manifest=https://bvmm.irht.cnrs.fr/iiif/22484/manifest>. I am grateful to Roland Warzecha for pointing me to this example.

[76] See above for the advice given to young courtiers in the 'King's Mirror' to practise with bucklers or large shields. A 1380s English adaptation of the older French romance 'Fierabras' describes how noblemen indulge in various playful activities, some of them training *with swerd bokelere*; quoted in Patterson 2015, 8.

[77] Bans on fencing reflect its popularity, but also the fact that it was a potential source of conflict. See Anglo 2000, 7–9. One example listed there is that of Heidelberg University, which ruled that fencing was prohibited among its students only a few years after its founding in the late fourteenth century.

[78] Hester 2012, 80.

Acknowledgements

The research for this article was funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) as part of Germany's Excellence Strategy – EXC 2176 'Understanding Written Artefacts: Material, Interaction and Transmission in Manuscript Cultures', project no. 390893796. The research was conducted as part of the work performed at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC) at the University of Hamburg. I am indebted to Karin Becker for sharing her expertise in art history with me to improve this article. Those who helped me with specific problems are credited in the appropriate sections.

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ISSN 1867–9617

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