

An ancient art, a long absence

Boxing was well known in the ancient era, and it has been popular in Europe since the 1700s, so why does it seem to have gone missing in the Middle Ages?

By William S. Ernoehazy Jr., M.D.

The modern sport of boxing is held to have its origins in the ancient world. Carvings and sculptures show evidence of fist-fights in Sumeria, Thebes and the Minoan city-state dating back to at least 1500 B.C.

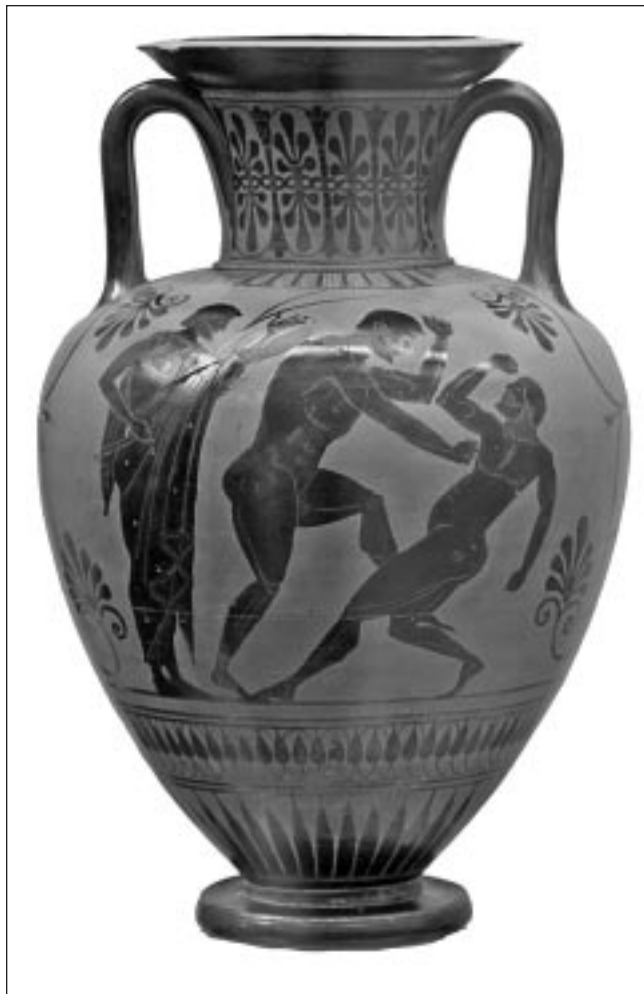
In the *Odyssey*, Homer describes a match between Odysseus and a hapless opponent:

“Poor Iros felt a new fit of shaking take his knees.

“But the yard-boys pushed him out. Now both contenders put their hands up. Royal Odysseus pondered if he should hit him with all he had and drop the man dead on the spot, or only spar, with force enough to knock him down.

“Better that way, he thought — a gentle blow, else he might give himself away.

“The two were at close quarters now, and Iros lunged hitting the shoulder. Then Odysseus hooked him under the ear and shattered his jaw bone so bright red blood came bubbling from his



Bare-fisted boxers with referee, on a Greek neck amphora from about 500 BC, in the collection of the Glyptothek, in Munich.

mouth as down he pitched into the dust, bleating, kicking against the dust, his teeth stove in.”

In “The Secret History of the Sword,” pp. 141-142, Amberger argues that Homer’s portrayal implies the presence of a sophisticated boxing art. Odysseus not only demonstrates the ability to choose between combat and “sparring,” but throws the blow at a location that’s rich in nerves, a target well known to contemporary martial artists.

Classical Greek and Roman cultures were as interested in boxing as their Homeric predecessors. In the 23rd Olympiad, held in 688 B.C., boxing was added to the list of games.

Following Homer, Virgil’s *Aeneid* (Book V) describes an epic boxing match between Trojan and Italian champions. Poliakoff cites Plutarch’s high opinion of the art: “... he drew the same connections between combat sport and hand-to-hand fighting that Lucian and Philostratos

did, adding that the Spartans lost the battle of Leuktra to the Thebans because the Thebans were better practiced at the palaestra.”

For all its ancient popularity, however, pugilism seems to have disappeared from the Western world with the fall of the Roman Empire. Modern boxing is generally agreed to have re-emerged in England, with prize fights held in the Royal Theatre of London at the end of the 17th century; one James Figg first claimed the title of English boxing champion in 1719.

Some historians hold Nicholaes Petter’s “Clear Education in the Magnificent Art of Wrestling,” written in 1647, to be the first treatise on modern boxing. Though Petter’s title speaks of “wrestling,” the text describes an entirely different manner of fight:

“As it is usual, and mainly among the Dutch, where there is any sort of quarrel or discord between people that has risen so high that a physical fight follows, that they punch each other on the chest and use the heavier fist punches later on during the fight, we have decided to start off with the chest punches, those being the actual beginning to start the fight: later we shall discuss all grips in order.”

Unarmed combat, without boxing

If the currently accepted history of pugilism is correct, how could such a martial art disappear so thoroughly, and then re-emerge hundreds of years later? The popularity of boxing in the ancient world is clearly attested to in classical literature. And once boxing resurfaced at the end of the 17th century, it regained popularity in a remarkably short time.

Boxing is now so thoroughly entrenched in contemporary popular cul-

ture that it seems impossible that fist-fighting could have been absent from European history for centuries. Was pugilism truly absent from Europe in the Middle Ages? If so, why?



The Codex Wallerstein devotes 67 plates to close-quarters combat, yet only two show techniques which might be boxing-type punches. This one, plate 66R, shows a punch to the victim’s solar plexus, but note that even as the punch is used, it’s combined with an elbow lock of the victim’s other arm.

Until recently, conventional wisdom held that there were no unarmed combat systems in medieval Europe. In fact, it was believed that there was no systematic study of personal combat in the Middle Ages of any sort. The dominance of the mounted knight required weapons designed to batter armor (and the wearer); sword, ax, mace, lance and polearm were the weapons of choice in such a world.

In an unlettered world, it was thought, skill in such brute-force weapons was learned by laborious rep-

etition at a pell and practiced in the small melees that were the predecessors of the tournaments of the High Middle Ages. The notion that there might have been such a thing as “Western martial arts” would have been dismissed out of hand.

This view of medieval history is no longer defensible. In recent years, historians have uncovered dozens of manuals of personal combat, dating back at least to the beginning of the 14th century. These manuscripts first caught the attention of historical recreators because of their sophisticated approach to fighting with the sword, both in armor and in civil dress.

Further study made it clear, moreover, that the two main schools of fight in Europe, the German *fechtkunst* of Johannes Liechtenauer and the Italian tradition that started with Fiore dei Liberi, taught numerous techniques of unarmed, empty-handed combat as integral parts of the systems.

German traditions: The Fechtkunst of Liechtenauer

It’s not clear how much unarmed combat Liechtenauer (founder of the German system known as the *Kunst des Fechtens*, or the *Fechtkunst*) taught to his select group of

students in the 1350s. Liechtenauer’s teaching rhymes, or *merkeverse*, might seem at a casual reading to speak solely of the longsword.

Careful review of the *merkeverse* shows, however, that although the details are obscured, Liechtenauer thought hand-to-hand combat to be important in his system. The very first *Merkeverse* reads “ringet gutt fasset gleefen/sper schwert vnnd messer manlich bederben” (“Wrestle well and wield lance, spear, sword and knife manfully”). The *merkeverse* “von

durchlaufen” has “Durchlauch laß hangen mit dem knopf greyff wilt du rangen,” or “Run through, let hang with the pommel and take hold if you want to grapple.”

Lichtenauer’s successors took heed. The earliest commentaries and glosses on the merkeverse all discuss close-quarters, empty-handed combat as a necessary part of sword work. Peter von Danzig’s fechtbuch devotes two entire sections (VIII, XIII) to unarmed fight, as well as sections on dagger (IX, XI) which also involve hand work. Sigmund Ringeck also has several sections specifically to grappling and striking (Ringeck 201–285).

Teachers whose expertise was in unarmed fight, such as Ott Jud, either had their insights integrated into others’ systems (von Danzig, section XIII) or wrote fechtbücher of their own which focused on the hand-to-hand aspects of the art (von Auerswald). As late as 1570, Meyer’s fechtbuch gives instruction in close-quarters grappling, in the section on “dolch,” or dagger (Dolch I–xv).

The reader should note that in the German tradition, masters who followed Liechtenauer were at pains to build on the concepts and strategies set forth in the original merkeverse. The kunst des fechtens taught by Meyer and Sutor at the end of the 16th century uses Liechtenauer’s basic terminology and philosophy of fight, even as the later masters incorporate new weapons (such as the rapier and the long fighting knife, or messer) and new tactical insights.

The “Flower of Battle”: Fiore dei Liberi and Italian fight

In Italy, the oldest surviving written treatise on personal combat is the “Flower of Battle” (“Fior di Battaglia”

in Italian, “Flos Duellatorum” in Latin) written by Fiore dei Liberi around 1410. Historical facts about Fiore’s life are difficult to establish. Statements found in the introduction of the Getty version indicate that Fiore was widely traveled:

“E lo ditto Fiore sia imprese le ditte

In English:

“And the said Fiore learned these things from many German masters

“And from many Italians in the many provinces and the largest cities, at great expense

“And by the grace of God from many masters and scholars.

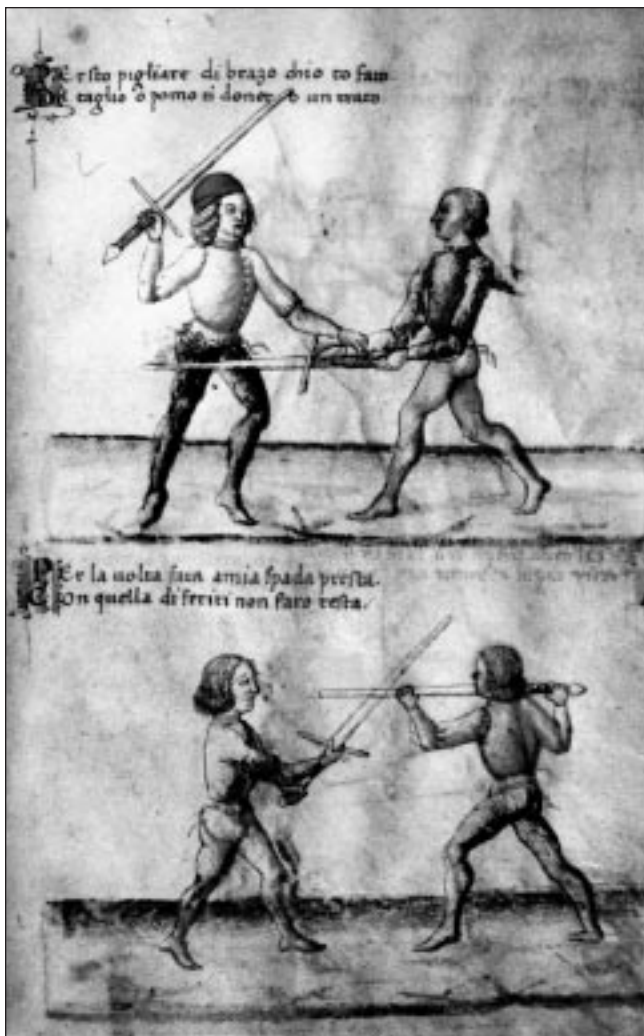
“And in the courts of great gentlemen, princes, dukes, marquises and counts, knights and squires he learned much of this art...”

Though this passage offers the intriguing possibility that Fiore might have studied with Liechtenauer or one of his immediate circle of students, neither textual analysis nor contemporary records have so far yielded convincing evidence for this proposition.

Like Liechtenauer, Fiore first became known to contemporary historians as a master of the longsword, yet, also like his German counterpart, Fiore teaches close-quarters fight as well. In fact, Fiore makes extensive reference to unarmed combat at the beginning of his work.

All three known versions of Fiore’s teachings, the Getty manuscript Ludwig xv 13, the Morgan Library manuscript M.383, and the Pisani-Dossi (or Novati) manuscript, show both hand-to-hand combat and sword work. Indeed, the Getty and Pisani-Dossi versions both begin with sections on abrazare (wrestling), before proceeding to dagger and sword combat.

The medieval Italian school of defense is more accurately described as a tradition, or a family of schools. Unlike the German fechtkunst, where successive masters were careful to be seen as building on Liechtenauer’s foundations, the Italian masters who followed Fiore did not restrict themselves to glosses, transcriptions and simple expansions. Instead, these masters offered distinctive views



Vadi’s “Arte Gladiatoria” (ca. 1485) shows grappling at the sword arm in the very first set of drawings in which the figures actually cross blades (Verso 17 – Recto 18). Almost every subsequent drawing shows some kind of grappling or throwing as a part of the portrayed action, even in armored combat.

chose da molti magistri todeschi

“E di molti Italiani in piu prouincie et in molte citade cum grandissima e

“E per la gracia di dio da tanti magistri e Scolari.

“E in corte di grandi Signori principi duchi Marchesi e conti chauallieri e

“Schudieri in tanto a impresa questa Arte...”

on fight; they explored different approaches to tactics, timing and distance and changed their terminology at need.

Even so, their debt to Fiore is clearly seen in their treatment of close-quarters fight. Vadi's "Arte Gladiatoria" (ca. 1485) shows grappling at the sword arm in the very first set of drawings in which the figures actually cross blades (Verso 17 – Recto 18). Almost every subsequent drawing shows some kind of grappling or throwing as a part of the portrayed action, even in armored fight (Recto 25, Recto 27, Verso 27).

And even as the Italians set the longsword aside and taught single-handed sword as their weapon of choice, they did not abandon the teaching of close-quarters work. Achille Marozzo's influential "Arte dell' Armi" of 1568 (itself a reworking of the acclaimed "Opera Nova" of 1536) covers a range of brutally efficient unarmed defenses against dagger attacks (186–205).

Coming to grips: Unarmed combat in medieval Europe

The rediscovery of unarmed combat in German and Italian fight manuals of the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries leads naturally to questions about the role of fisticuffs. A casual student of history, with contemporary assumptions about the use of punches in fighting, might well assume that pugilism was part and parcel of these schools, and that the "loss" of these unarmed combat systems was the reason for the loss of pugilism.

The first objection to this notion, of course, is that these systems were not abruptly "lost" as the 17th century dawned. Sutor's manual, written ca. 1612, shows close-quarters work mixed in with sword work (17–19, 60, 70). Paschen's treatise of 1659 covers unarmed fight exclusively. It can hardly be argued that these schools of fight were

lost arts in the late 1600s, when pugilism resurfaced as a separate discipline.

There is a more substantive objection, however. Study of the manuals of fight from this period, whether Italian or German, leads to a remarkable conclusion. The close-quarters combat of



If combatants have come to close distance, the pommel strike is a natural choice when armed with the longsword (Codex Wallerstein, plate 13R). This motion, in turn, translates smoothly to the overhand stabbing motion taught to the student of these arts when using the dagger.

the Italian and German schools was a grappling style of fight, designed to swiftly control the weapon-arm and cripple or kill the opponent outright. Strikes were generally used to make favorable openings for grips, throws and joint-breaking actions, not as the primary weapons of the systems.

Furthermore, the techniques which are characterized as "strikes" in these texts are not classic bare-knuckle punches. Kicks, slaps, open palm strikes, eye gouges, hammering blows with the top or bottom of the fist; these are used instead. The boxer's punch is all but absent. Pugilism was not lost with the rest of the medieval combat

arts; it was never a part of them.

Examples abound. Talhoffer's fechtbuch of 1467 devotes 30 plates to hand-to-hand combat, none of which demonstrates a punch (plates 191–221).

The medieval Codex Wallerstein has 67 plates devoted to close-quarters combat, both unarmed and hand against sword or knife. Only two plates show techniques which might be boxing-type punches: 64R, which shows what might be a punch being set aside by the opponent's arm sweep, and (more definitively) 66R, where a punch is shown to the victim's solar plexus. (Note that even as the punch is used, it's combined with an enveloping elbow lock of the victim's other arm.)

The von Auerswald fechtbuch of 1539, which is devoted specifically to hand-to-hand fight, shows only one figure in which a fighter might be delivering a punch — and the victim's other wrist is about to be broken by the joint lock which has the arm torqued against the fighter's chest (plate 4).

Ringeck describes only one punch in his section on strikes; interestingly, it also targets the upper belly (235), although Ringeck calls for the other hand to hold the victim's belt, as opposed to using a joint lock.

Italian manuals of defense show the same pattern. The Pisani-Dossi edition of the "Flos Duellatorum" has 22 illustrations of wrestling techniques and 81 pictures of close-quarters combat with daggers. None of these plates show anything resembling a fist positioned to throw a boxer's punch. On the contrary, the free hand, the one not making the joint lock or grapple, is, when the combatant is unarmed, held as if it was gripping the dagger, in a hammering position.

Vadi's "Arte Gladiatoria" follows in kind. In the pages that show either

hand-to-hand fight or grappling against a weapon (Verso 17 – Verso 23, Recto 25 – Verso 27, Verso 29 – Verso 37, Verso 39 – Recto 42), no punches are seen. Several illustrations, however, show a hand raised in the same position seen in the Pisani-Dossi manuscript; Recto and Verso 23 show good examples.

Nothing like a punch appears in the close-quarters sections of Marozzo's "Arte dell' Armi" (186-205).

A striking lack: Speculations

The evidence is clear. Medieval and Renaissance systems of close-quarters combat did not contain well-developed fist-fighting techniques. In fact, they hardly used punches at all.

We know of no European manual of fight (either medieval or Renaissance) which explicitly rejects the use of fisticuffs, much less of any text which discusses such rejection at length. However, the available works describe certain fundamental assumptions, common to both medieval combat traditions, which are of interest.

First, and foremost, hand-to-hand combat in medieval Northern European fight was not, as a rule, taught in isolation. Empty-handed methods of defense were taught as a means to an end.

These techniques were used to stop an armed opponent when the defender was without a weapon, or to seize advantage when two armed opponents found themselves *corps a corps*. At that range, the defender must immediately control the opponent's weapon hand, and must follow with an action that effectively ends the fight. Failure to do so can be lethal.

There is neither time, nor room, for techniques that are not decisive. Grappling stops the weapon hand at once; joint locks almost immediately topple opponents to the ground, or destroy the target joint. A single boxer's punch, by comparison, cannot be relied on to stop a fight outright.

Closely allied to this principle is the insistence found in both German and Italian traditions that their combat techniques should be useful for all manners of fight, armored or not. A

comparison of armored and unarmored grappling techniques found in the Codex Wallerstein demonstrates this principle (plates 85-95L).

It doesn't take an expert in martial arts to see that punching a man in armor is likely to have little effect. Joint locks, on the other hand, can be gruesomely effective against opponents in armor.

The nature of the weapons used in these fighting systems also is likely to have played a role in the absence of fisticuffs. When holding a longsword, the blade naturally tends to be nearly at a right angle to the hands; there are no "push-longswords."

The rediscovery of fight manuals of the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries leads naturally to questions about the role of fisticuffs.

As a result, if combatants have come to *corps a corps*, the pommel strike is a natural choice when armed with the longsword (Codex Wallerstein, plates 12L, 13R). This motion, in turn, translates smoothly to the overhand stabbing motion taught to the student of these arts when using the dagger.

The dagger play found in both German and Italian manuals emphasizes the "ice pick" or "hammer" grip, which also orients the blade at near 90-degree angles to the grip. ("Flos Duellatorum" section 2; Talhoffer 170-190).

Even underhanded stabbing strikes tend to come from the upper surface of the gripping hand, in a flattened arc, rather than from a linear inline thrust. (Talhoffer 170, 172, 177, 180).

It isn't surprising, then, to see that when hand strikes are used in medieval fight, they tend to be the same kind of hammering blows that the fighter trained in with his weapons. Note, too, that the use of the "hammer blow" also follows naturally from the position the arms take when countering an oppo-

nent's attempts to grapple: arms bent at the elbows, hands up.

Boxing's return

Interestingly, nearly every factor which appears to have led away from boxing's use in medieval combat systems can be argued to have contributed, in later years, to the resurgence of pugilism. Fist-fighting re-emerged in the late 1600s as an entertainment in London, and was an art in and of itself; it was not generally studied as a response to the tactical needs of the 17th-century swordsman.

Further, by the late 1600s, the thrust had become the preferred means of injuring an opponent in dueling, driving the evolution of the civilian sword toward thinner thrust-only blades, a trend that culminated in the needle-sharp smallswords of the late 17th and the 18th centuries. It's tempting to theorize that just as the thrust became dominant in sword work because of its economy of movement and speed of delivery, the boxing punch became the favored weapon in unarmed prize fights.

The interplay of various influences in the evolution of European fighting sports certainly merits further study, but the fundamental relationship of pugilism and medieval European close-quarters combat is now clear.

Though well known in the classical world, the art of boxing as understood today had no place in the combat systems of medieval and Renaissance Europe. Close quarters, hand-to-hand techniques formed an essential part of both major European traditions, but those techniques were predominantly grappling, wrestling and joint-control techniques. Such strikes as were used tended to follow the same body mechanics as the weapon strokes of the varied systems.

Pugilism appears not to have been suited to the world of the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries; its time would come later.

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