

# The Flail of Paulus Hector Mair:

Sixteenth Century German Peasant Weapons from *De Arte Athletica*



A new translation and interpretation by

Yzra eben Astruc (mka Rachel Barkley)  
and  
Wistric Oftun (mka Owen Townes)

## Introduction

The majority of Germanic martial arts from the thirteenth century through the sixteenth century falls into the Liechtenauer Tradition. This system descended through teacher-student lineages and *fechtschuls* (fighting schools) from Johannes Liechtenauer. Liechtenauer was a fencing master of the thirteenth century who employed rhyming couplets as mnemonic devices for the aid of his students. He never, to the best of recorded knowledge, wrote down his teachings. Instead, later generations of students documented what they had learned.

The earliest extant record is the (Hanko) Dobringer Codex (Germanisches Nationalmuseum 3227a), a manuscript written in the late 1300s which records details of Liechtenauer's life and teachings. From the Dobringer Codex, the Liechtenauer Tradition can be traced through over twenty available manuscripts from the sixteenth century through the seventeenth. During this time it expanded from teachings centered around the use of the longsword to applying Liechtenauer's principles to all combat forms, from grappling to armored polearm combat. The Liechtenauer Tradition was so dominant that in the sixteenth century the Marxbruders, formed from the contemporary generation of Liechtenauer students, was the official fencing guild throughout Germany and controlled certification of fencing masters and operation of fencing schools. One student at the *fechtschul* in Augsburg was a civil servant named Paulus Hector Mair.

When approaching Mair's work, it is worthwhile to remember that he, unique among martial arts authors of his time, was not a master. It was not his intent to publish a manual that would convince wealthy lords to be his patron or students to follow his teachings ~~and come to his school~~. He was a documentarian. He was fascinated by what he was learning, wished to preserve the teachings for posterity, and was uniquely positioned to do so.

Mair was born in Augsburg in 1517 to a family of wealthy burghers. Their power and influence led Mair to a position in the city government. By age twenty-four he was the city's treasurer. By age twenty-nine he was also the city's Master of Rations. He held both titles until his death in 1579.

During his life, he used his family's wealth and, pointedly, portions of the city's treasury) to create *De Arte Athletica*, a two tome compendium of all knowledge of combat. With two fencing masters as models and experts and at least one illustrator, he recorded thorough instructions on the use of long staff and short staff, pole axe, halberd, pole hammer, long and short spear, longsword, short sword, *dussack*, grappling, dagger, mixed weapons, and mounted combat. Most interesting to me, though, was his unique description and illustration of systematized combat with peasant weapons, including scythe, sickle, flail, and "peasant club" (illustrated as a tree branch).

A disgruntled underling revealed his embezzlement to the authorities, and he was hanged for the crime on December 10, 1579, at the age of 62. While his crimes and dishonor must certainly have hurt his family and his city, there is something admirable about an obsession not driven by ego, but by pure love of knowledge.

### **The Inclusion of Peasant Weapons**

Most other texts of the Liechtenauer tradition center around judicial dueling, the most likely situation where students would be called upon to engage in personal combat. However, combat with the flail is absent from all but a handful of these manuals, and in this handful is illustrated with one or two plates only<sup>1</sup>. Only *De Arte Athletica* thoroughly explores peasant weapons. Why, then, did peasants need to know how to use their tools as weapons?

The modified peasant flail had previously been a weapon of war: In the fourteenth and fifteenth century, Hussite armies included masses of peasant footmen carrying studded version of the farm implement<sup>2</sup>. Into the sixteenth century, the *Bundschuh* movement (a series of peasant revolts) and the subsequent German Peasant War of the 1520s, which occurred during Mair's first decade of life, helped insure the use of flail on the battlefield remained a vital part of the German peasant's skillset.

Also, as suggested by Brian Hunt, author of "Paulus Hector Mair: Peasant Staff and Flail", training peasants to fight may have included the assumption that brawling with farm implements will happen (as shown in a few paintings of the time) and self-defense in such situations would be desirable.

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<sup>1</sup> Jakob Sutor von Baden devotes one plate to the flail. Hans Talhoffer devotes two, compared to the dozen he devotes to the combat between a man and woman.

<sup>2</sup> See Trumbull.

## The Weapon



The use of flails for threshing grain, depicted in the Luttrell Psalter

The flail-as-farm-implement is used to separate the wheat germ from the chaff. It is a staff about the height of a man, usually with another stick attached to the staff at one end by a hinge. The flail in Mair's illustrations is different in that, instead of a second stick, it has a weighted and spiked leather "sock."

The instructions in the plays that follow refer to the head of the weapon (the weighted sock), the staff, and the "butt-end," the equivalent of a butt-end on an SCA polearm.

Our simulated 16<sup>th</sup> century peasant flails progressed through three versions. The first, a four-foot staff with a three foot piece of pool noodle tied on to one end, proved too short to adequately perform the techniques. Also the knots tended to slip or come undone, providing an additional hazard of being whipped by rope instead of struck by soft foam.

We developed the second version by replacing the short staff with a six foot staff, and mounting the rope to the staff with an eye-bolt. This version performed much better, and was adequate for studying the form. Unfortunately the eye-bolt was a potential injury risk, and the flail head lacked sufficient mass to perform as a period flail would.

The current version uses a canvas sock strapped to the end of the staff, weighted at the end with a ½ lb. bean bag, and filled mostly with the pool noodle. This version has the advantage of looking period while adding enough distal weight to perform in a realistic manner. Future modifications may include reducing the mass of the flail-head and shielding it with foam to provide a more pleasant impact when blocks are missed. Otherwise, the simulator has a period appearance and period performance, and is almost a satisfactory tool for the study of the art.

## Gripping the Flail

Mair documents three different ways to grip the staff of the flail, the use of which are dictated by the action in play.

The first illustrated is the “Wide Grip,” with the hands at either ends of the staff. It is most commonly seen as a starting position from which to initiate blows, though some blows at close-measure are also delivered with a wide grip. Two variants of this grip are illustrated, one in which only the staff is held by the upper hand, the other (in the first play) in which the flail-head is also held against the staff by the upper hand. This first play variant is useful for controlling the head for one’s own safety: the opening action is an offside strike which, were the flail-head not under control, would risk a blow to the back of the attacker’s head. Also, the first play illustrates the use of this to make one’s action faster: with the mass of the flail-head close to the staff, the weapon behaves like a short staff without a counter-weight dragging on the action.

The second grip shown is a “Medium Grip.” This is much like the grip used on a spear: the left hand is at the butt-end of the staff, the right is in the middle of it. It is used as a guard and to deliver blows at medium range.

The third grip shown is the “Long Grip,” with both hands close to the butt-end of the staff. This is not very useful as a guard, but is useful for delivering blows from maximum range. It can be thought of as the equivalent of Liechtenauer’s “Long Point.”

In almost all plates, the combatants are shown with an “over-under” grip of the staff, the palms facing opposite directions. In only four instances are combatants shown with an “over-over” grip.

Two of these, the left-hand figure in Plate 5 and the left-hand figure in Plate 6, are almost certainly an error in the art (or a result of the model’s fatigue leading to switching hand position while posing). To arrive in the position illustrated would require a starting guard so uncomfortable and unmanageable as to be useless. The third, the right-hand figure in Plate 7, also seems to be an artistic error, as there is no indication of the use of the unusual grip (which also has the left hand higher up the staff than the right hand) in the text description of the guard.

The other instance (Plate 6) is much more likely to be a true use of the over-over grip. Switching to the over-over grip in this action provides a swift, powerful blow to the opponent while at extremely close range. It is essentially a hockey-style cross-check.

The last action of the hands worth noting is the “exchange,” seen in Plate 1, in which the bottom hand slides up the shaft and the upper hand grips below it, to enable a butt-strike at close range.

## Guards with the Flail

Throughout Mair's manual he uses, mostly, the standard suite of guards from the Liechtenauer system. While we will address these shortly, there is one guard he documents which is unique to the flail system: *Die Wag*, "The Scales." This is formed on the left or right side, with the flail-head down (resting on the ground) and the butt-end straight up. Almost all blocks end in this position. It seems that the downward acceleration due to gravity helps to drive and power the block, while the ground absorbs the momentum of the head allowing the fighter to deliver a counter-attack more readily.

In addition to The Scales, we also see three more guards from the Liechtenauer tradition:

*Vom Tag*, "High Guard," something very much like *Pflug*, "The Plow," and the *Langort*, "Long Point," discussed above with regards to the Long Grip.

*Vom Tag* is formed by holding the staff over a shoulder, angled anywhere between nearly straight up and nearly horizontal with the flail-head far out behind the fighter (Plate 2 provides illustrations of both options). All of these are used as starting guards at far measure, where the fighters have sufficient time to counter an incoming attack. While the actions from these guards are long in development, they are assisted by gravity and are the most forceful the fighter can throw.

*Pflug* is formed with a medium grip, with the butt-end at waist level and the flail-head extended towards the opponent (see Plate 3 for an illustration). The guard provides a good balance of defense (it easily transitions to The Scales) and offense (with a step or upper body rotation, it can cock and deliver a fairly powerful blow).

*Nebenhut*, "Tail Guard," is formed by holding the staff low and to the side, with the staff-head behind the fighter. It is not actually illustrated in the flail section, though it is used throughout all other weapons forms in the Liechtenauer tradition. I mention it here because its use fits with the text of one of the plays as an alternate starting guard to *Vom Tag*. If used, it would avail itself of mid- and low-line attacks, though the mass of the flail-head would make descending high strikes more unwieldy.

From the masters of the Liechtenauer tradition, and illustrations throughout *De Arte Athletica*, most guards are formed with the weight predominantly on the forward foot. This assists power generation (with a step through) in many of the plays in the flail section. For the flail, the stance is illustrated as wider than a usual fencing stance, and with less bend in the knees. However, observations on the stance derived from the illustration must always be taken with a grain of salt: in the occasional action, the illustrated stance does not permit the action described in the text (e.g. the weight is on the forward foot, but the forward foot moves to initiate the action). As with the grips on the staff, this seems to be a result of artistic error or incorrect posture on the part of the models.

## Footwork

As with most of the power-generation based techniques in western martial arts, and especially those of the Liechtenauer tradition, the primary step for closing distance is the passing step, where the rear-ward foot moves in front of the lead foot, and the body rotates. This body rotation helps drive the blow with the flail, and a passing step often is performed in conjunction with the blow.

The other “step” used is actually two steps in combination, and is called the “Triangle Step.” It appears throughout the German masters, and is used as short hand for stepping to an offside angle to deliver an attack followed by stepping out of measure. The opening step is a pass to the opponent’s side (when stepping to the inside. When stepping to the outside the opening step is a step forward with the lead foot). From this new angle on the opponent, the blow is delivered, and the rear foot is brought behind the lead foot to re-establish a guard oriented towards the opponent.

## Offense and Defense

Throughout, I have used the German terms for three blows as short-hand for their description. In most cases, this is interpretive, as no single label is applied in the Latin text:

The *Oberhau* is a descending blow, delivered from high to low.

The *Mittelhau* is a lateral blow.

The *Unterhau* is a rising strike, from low to high.

Each can be delivered from left to right, or right to left. In the interpretation I have used the terms “offside” (for the left-to-right) and “onside” (for the right-to-left).

In addition to these blows, thrusts can be delivered with the butt-end of the staff.

In contrast to most fencers’ experience with static, blocking parries, the blocking parry is rarely used in the fight with the flail. With a little consideration the reason begins to become clear: a block that connected with the staff, or the portion of the flail-head close to the staff, would still risk the end of the flail-head wrapping around and striking the fighter. When these static blocks are used, they are targeted specifically against the head of the opponent’s flail.

Instead, deflections are the primary line of defense: incoming blows are pushed from below to deflect them over the fighter, or from above to deflect them into the ground. The majority of these deflections are performed with the butt-end, so that the head remains free for a counter attack.

### **Notes on the Translation and Illustrations**

The plates that follow are from the 1542 edition (*Munchen codex icon 393*) version of *De Arte Athletica*, using images hosted on the Bayerische Staats Bibliothek website. The museum makes the images available for public access and academic, non-commercial use.

The translation contained in this document is by Rachel Barkley, known in the SCA as Yzra eben Astruc. The translation is based on a transcription of the Latin in the *Munchen Codex* by Saskia Roselaar, hosted on [wiktenauer.com](http://wiktenauer.com).

Assistance was provided in confirming the translations and interpretations contained herein by Rory Cullen, known in the SCA as Aedh Ua Ruairc, who spent many Wednesday and Sunday afternoons getting hit with a flail for the purposes of art and learning.



# ICTVS DVO SUPERIORES TRIBVLI



**A**d eum habitū hoc modo te compones in congressu, pedem sinistrum praefiges, tribulum iuxta partem inferiorem manu sinistra capias, manu dextra tribuli partem dependentem eū fuste coniunctim arripias, ex eo igitur habitu latus aduersarij capitis dextrū quasiato. Idem uero si hostis moliatur, te sinistrū itidem opponente, tribuli partem posteriorem manu sinistra tenente, dextra uero propendentem fusti adiunctam, tu parte modo praedicta uersum latus tuū sinistrum eius conatū repellito, inde aut manus sinistra in locū dextre subalatur, atq; pede dextro insequutus, brachiū hostis sinistrū parte tribuli posteriori pulsabis. Sin autem aduersarius habitu contra te eodem fuerit usus, fustem tribuli in latus dextrū defleces, eaq; forma eū repellito: Hoc peracto in triangulum concedas, et si caput eius flagelli parte dependenti conculseris, ab eo retrorsum recedas.

*Translation by Rachel Barkley*

### **Plate 1: Two Upper Strokes of the Flail**

According to this stance, you will position yourself in this manner in the fight. You will fix<sup>[1]</sup> forward the left foot. You will grasp the flail around the lower part with the left hand. You will seize the hanging part of the flail together with the flail-body with the right. From this position, strike the right side of your adversary's head.

If your enemy attempts the same blow, with you positioning the left foot in the same way and with the left hand gripping the lower part of the flail and clutching the hanging of the flail-head with the right, then with the part of the flail mentioned beforehand<sup>[2]</sup> repel his attack you turning him to your left flank. After that, the left hand is to go in the place of the right and you, pursuing him with your right foot, will attack the left limb of the enemy with the lower part of the flail.

If however the adversary has used the same position against you, you will deflect the head of the flail against the right flank and repel him by this form: You will pass over a triangle<sup>[3]</sup> by completing it, and if you will have struck his head with the hanging part of the flail you should withdraw backwards from him.

#### **Notes:**

[1]Here *praefiges* is translated as “fix.” Instances of *praepones* in the text are translated as “place.” The difference seems to be that a “fixed” foot will not be the first to move, whereas a “placed” foot will.

[2]Here *praedicta* is translated as “mentioned beforehand” and refers to the immediately referred to part in all instances except one, in Plate 8.

[3]*In triangulum concedos*, or “step in a triangle.”

*Interpretation by Owen Townes*

**Setup:**

**Agente & Patiente**

High Guard with wide grip, holding flail heads, left feet forward and planted

**Play:**

**Agente**

Offside *Oberhau* (Descending high blow) to Patiente's head

**Patiente**

Catch the strike with flail-head (still held), deflect over head and down to the ground, ending in left-side Scales (flail-head down, staff vertical next to body)

Exchange hands

Pass right foot forward and strike with butt-end

**Agente**

Raise back hand to form Scales guard and deflect Patiente's attack to right side

Step in a triangle to strike head and withdraw

**Observations:**

During our work on this play, the first question we sought to answer was "Why grasp the head?" It's a technique peculiar to this particular play. So, we executed both roles with and without the head grasped, and the reason became clear: grasping the head enables Agente to strike to the offside from high guard without risking striking himself in the head during the swing. Patiente's grip on the head enables him to block with the upper part of the staff rather than the lower (as is seen in most of the plays).

The sided-ness of Agente's triangle step to end the fight is not specified. We attempted both, and it seems that a triangle step to the left is the best option as a triangle step to the right requires an awkward cross-over and does not offer the same power generation.

The default to Scales guard for defense is already illustrated here in Agente's reaction, and, again, the utility of this guard in defense was readily apparent once we began to work through the plays. Following a downward blow, with all of the momentum it imparts to the flail-head, it's much easier to simply raise the staff and block with it, leaving the head on the ground, than to try to move that much weight at the end of the six foot staff.

Also demonstrated in this play is the significant preference of deflections over static blocks. Patiente's initial response seems awkward and dangerous at first as it involves a well-

timed catch from behind of the incoming strike, leveraging it up and all the way down, but the alternative, intercepting the strike and stopping it, risks the flail-head wrapping around to connect to Patient's head. Throughout the instructions, only a handful of static blocks are seen, and almost all are performed at long range where it is possible to oppose the staff to the incoming flail-head rather than the incoming staff.



# ICTVS SUPERVS CONTRA HABITVM AVERSIONIS



**I**n congressu contra hostem ea ratione, subsequenti scilicet, te accommodabis. pedem sinistrum praeponas, tribulum iuxta partem superiorem manu dextra contineas, sinistra uero inferiore, atque ex ea forma parte tribuli propendente aduersarii caput pulsato. Sin autem ratione consimili superne te aggressus fuerit hostis, contra eum pedem itidem sinistrum praefigente, manu sinistra tribulum iuxta locum inferiorem continentem, dextra uero medio applicata, dextro insequutus eum repellas uersus latus tuum dextrum, porro statim sinistro itidem consequitor dextrum corporis aduersarii latus parte tribuli dependente conuulsato. Hoste autem idem usurpante, retrorsum pede loco concedes, et cum tribuli parte propendente auertes in latus dextrum, celeriter uero ex eo habitu in triangulum concedas, et si latus eius dextrum pulsaris, ab aduersario te retrorsum conferas.

*Translation by Rachel Barkley*

### **Flail 2: High Strike against a Deflecting Position**

In the fight against your enemy by this practice, that is to say imitating what is here[1], you will adjust yourself such that you will put forward the left foot, you will hold the flail near the upper part with the right hand, the lower part with the left, and from this position strike at the head of your adversary with the hanging part of the flail[2].

If, however, the enemy will have attacked[3] you from above in a similar manner by the same reckoning[4], you fixing the left foot against the enemy in the same manner as before, holding the flail near the lower part with the left and with the right having been applied to the middle portion, you, moving forward with the right foot and turning him to your right flank, will repel him. Forthwith immediately with the left foot in the same manner as before, strike the right flank of the body of your enemy with the hanging part of the flail.

When the enemy is using the same technique, you will withdraw backwards with the left foot and you will turn him aside to the right flank with the hanging part of the flail[5]. Quickly from this position you will move in a triangle if you have struck the right side of him, you will withdraw yourself backwards from the enemy.

#### **Notes:**

[1]“Imitating what is here” appears throughout, and is intended to mean to stand as illustrated.

[2]The direction of the blow is not included here, however the instruction below — “Attacked you from above in a similar manner” — indicates a vertical strike to the head.

[3]*Adgressus* - can also mean “move toward.”

[4]“By the same reckoning” from *ratione consimili*, and can generally be ignored as it appears with the redundant instruction “in a similar manner” throughout.

[5]Ownership of “the hanging part of the flail” is not identified. It is generally difficult to block with the head (except when held, as in Plate 1) and this may indicate a static block against Patiente’s flail head.

*Interpretation by Owen Townes*

**Setup:**

**Agente&Patiente:**

High guard, medium grip, left foot forward

**Play:**

**Agente**

Onside strike to Patiente's head

**Patiente**

Pass forward with right foot,  
slide left hand up staff,  
deflecting the blow to the right side with the butt-end,  
into Scales

Pass left foot forward,  
deliver an offside strike

**Agente**

Step back with left foot,  
block to right side (see Notes above)

Step in a triangle to left side,  
deliver an offside strike,  
withdraw

**Observations:**

In the previous play Patiente's opening counter was a deflection of the blow with the grasped head of the staff. This has the first example of the deflection of the blow with the end of the staff, which is the more common defense. It requires the movement of the left hand away from the end of the staff, the interception-from-behind of the incoming flail-head, and the deflection of it over the head and down to the ground. As with the first play, and with most of these plays, the timing is tricky, but acquires a dance-like grace and coordination when executed correctly.

Patiente's response with an off-side develops two additional defenses: The first, that the staff ends up between Patiente and Agente's weapon, and laid across Agente's flail, rather than parallel to it. This serves as a block any short strike attempt. The second defensive advantage here is that the butt-end can be brought down on top of Agente's staff to lock it against Patiente's leg or body and immobilize it.

Agente's counter, stepping back, frees his flail-head. And here, again, is the issue with the un-owned flail-head of the text. The first possibility, of blocking Patient's flail-head, would require a static block with the staff for the block to be formed on the right side (as instructed). The second possibility, blocking with Agente's flail-head, would require a deflection that entirely absorbs and counters Patient's angular momentum, which would seem even more difficult with a hinged weapon.



# CONTACTVS EX PRIMO CONGRESSV DVO PER FLAGELLA



**H**VNC in modum te componas, locū pedem præfiges, manu sinistram tribuli partem posteriorem in habitu primi contactus tenebis, dextrā uero medietati si applicaris, latus capitis aduersarij dextrū pulsabis. Verum si habitu eodem contra te usus fuerit hostis, dextrū præponentem, tribuli medietum dextra continentem, manuq; sinistra inferiorem, tū tribulo tuo eius ictui obuiabis, atq; tribuli hastam aduersarij si contigeris, ictum eius eo habitu repellas uersus tuū latus sinistrū. Verū insequutus confesim pede sinistro, corporis aduersarij latus dextrū acriter tundes. Sed si is eadem ratione te fuerit adgressus, tum tribuli parte dependente eius ictū repelles in latus sinistrū, interim uero si in latus hostis sinistrū pede dextro concesseris, caput eius quassabis ea parte tribuli, qua frumenta teruntur, atq; ex eo habitu retrorsum ibis.

*Translation by Rachel Barkley*

**Flail 3: Two Contacts[1] from the First Fight[2] With Flails**

You will place yourself in this manner. You will fix forward the left foot, you in the position of first contact will hold the lower part of the flail with the left hand. If you apply force in the middle using the right hand, you will strike the right flank of your adversary's head.

If your enemy has used the same position against you who are holding forward your right foot and gripping the middle of your flail with the right hand and the lower end with the left, you will meet his blow with your flail, and if you will have touched the flail-body of your enemy's flail, you will repel his strike turning him to your left flank from this position. Then immediately, you following with your left foot, you will beat sharply the right flank of your enemy's body.

But if he by the same reckoning will have attacked you, then you will repel his attack against the left flank with the hanging part of the flail. Meanwhile, if you should pass over to the left flank of your enemy with the right foot, you will strike his head with that part of the flail by which grain is threshed and from this position you will withdraw backwards.

**Notes:**

[1] *Contactus* – literally translates as “Contacts” or “touches.” Could be a synonym for “strike,” but doesn't seem to be used as such throughout the rest of the plates.

[2] *Primo Congressu* – literally “First Encounter,” but is unclear if this is a reference to plate 1 (meaning this play would serve as an optional continuance from Patient's bind with the head) or some other idiomatic use of the “First Play” as a mnemonic object (as is seen in other manuals).

*Interpretation by Owen Townes*

**Setup:**

**Agente:**

Left foot forward  
Middle grip  
Bound on the inside

**Patiente:**

Right foot forward,  
Middle grip,  
Bound on the inside

**Play:**

**Agente:**

Disengage down  
Offside *Oberhau*

**Patiente:**

Catch Agente's head or staff mid-disengage,  
Deflect low and to left-side Scales  
Pass left foot forward  
Offside *Mittelhau* (horizontal strike)

**Agente:**

Deflect above head and over into left-side Scales  
Pass forward and to the right  
Onside *Oberhau*  
Withdraw

**Observations:**

The opening position seems to be an instance of “The Speaking Window” found in German longsword techniques, generally reached when two blows (or a strike and a static block) arrive against each other and end up with weapons crossed. This may well be not so much the start of an encounter, as a second step in an encounter that began with two High Guards initiating downward diagonal strikes (*Oberhau*) simultaneously. This interpretation would also provide explanation for why one fighter has their left foot forward: from the positions in Plate 1, a pass

back with the right foot by Agente would be necessary to open measure for the block to be successful (otherwise Agente would receive Patienté's blow on his body or head).

The ambiguity around the nature of the starting position and the instruction to "apply force in the middle using the right hand" make interpretation of the action difficult. This could refer merely to holding the staff in the middle, though it does not seem consistent with the "if... then" logical construction. Directionality of the force is not described, but if the interpretation of this as an alternate resolution of Plate 1 is correct, pushing down or pulling back on the middle of the staff in the bind would slip out of the bind and effectively disengage, setting up the offside strike to the right side of Patienté's head. We concluded that the best fit for the instruction was a disengage underneath Patienté's flail which progresses to an offside strike to the head, instead of a disengage upward followed by a second downward blow. This has the appeal of a minimal use of energy and time.

In Patienté's counter, the part of the flail used for the defense is not specified, and the manner in which it intercepts Agente's action is also unclear, but in our practice a downward block of the disengage with the upper portion of the staff or the flail-head itself seems best to fit the description and provide opportunity for the counter described.



# ICTVS FORMA. QVA CAPVT ADPETITVR CONTRA AVERSIONIS HABITVM

4



**I**n congressu contra hostem eo modo te adaptare necesse est, dextrum pedem praeponas, manu utraq. tribuli partem inferiorem contineas, atq. ex eo habitu latus capitis aduersarij locum concutias. Sin autem is te eo pacto fuerit adgressus, sinistru praefigentem, dextramq. medio tribuli applicaris, posteriori eiusdem parti sinistra, atq. in libramine composita, constituteris, sinistru pedem referes, et ictu aduersarij uersus tuu latus sinistru tribuli fus se repellas, at confestim sinistro pede intro si processeris, dextrum capitis eius latus pulsato. Verum si idem contra te molietur, tu in latus dextru hostis ictum auertes, interea aut loco rursu insequutus, latus capitis aduersarij sinistru si qualisaris, ab hoste recedere memento.

*Translation by Rachel Barkley*

**Flail 4: A Blow by Which the Head is Attacked against a Deflecting Position[1]**

It is necessary that you take this manner against your enemy in the fight. You will put forward the right foot, you should grip the lower end of the flail with both hands and from this position you should strike the left flank of your adversary's head.

If however he pursues you, planting forward the left foot, from this position, you should grip the flail in the middle with the right hand, the left hand posterior to the same part and standing properly in Scales[2], you will have stood correctly, you will bring backwards the left foot and you will repel the blow of your adversary, you turning him to your left flank with the body of your flail[3], and immediately if you will have gone forward to the inside with the left foot, strike the right flank of his head.

If he attempts the same thing against you, then you will turn away the blow of your enemy against the right side, meanwhile you, pursuing him again with the left, if you will have struck the left flank of your adversary's head, remember to retreat from the enemy.

**Notes:**

[1] The Scales.

[2] Mair uses *In Libramine*, literally in the manner of a scale.

[3] The staff, as opposed to the flail-head.

*Interpretation by Owen Townes*

**Setup:**

**Agente:**

Long grip, right foot forward, no guard specified

**Patiente:**

Medium grip, left foot forward, Scales guard

**Play:**

**Agente:**

Onside *Oberhau*

**Patiente:**

Pass back with left foot,  
Deflect strike to left side with haft into Scales  
Step in with left foot,  
Deliver an offside *Oberhau*

**Agente:**

Deflect to right side in Scales,  
Pass left foot forward,  
Onside *Oberhau*

**Observations:**

In practice, this play has served as the best introduction to the weapon, with its lack of complexity in guard, strike, or footwork.





# ICTVS SVPERVS EX FLAGELLO



**QVVM** Rite hoc habitu uti uolueris, dextrū pedem ppones, dextrā manū medio tribuli applicabis, sinistrā parti eius posteriori, et ex eodem habitu sinistrū pedem, quem aduersarius preposuit, tribuli parte dependenti tundes. Sed hostis si idem fuerit molitus, locū pedem referes, at confes sim eundem contra aduersarium intro dirigito, eiusq. tribuli partem dependente si pede calcaris, ictus ipius irritus fiet. Verū celeriter ex eo habitu sublato tribulo caput hostis quassabis, Vel humerū ex latere dextro, hoc tñ ita fiat, ut brachiū tua cancellentur. Sin aut aduersarius te eo modo fuerit adgressus, sinistrog. pede tribuli partem propendentem conculcarit, tū dextra manu rursus hastulam tribuli arripe, pedem dextrū refer, tribuloq. fortiter uersū te attracto, eius ictum euades: Sed rursus eodem introgressus celeriter, hastula seu tribuli fuste locū brachiū hostis si concusseris, ab eo recedere licebit retrorsum.

*Translation by Rachel Barkley*

**Plate 5: High Strike from the Flail**

Rightly here you will have wished to use this position. You will plant forward the right foot, you will apply the right hand in the middle of the flail, the left hand on the lower end, and from this position you will strike with the hanging part of the flail the left foot which your enemy has placed forward.

But if your opponent has attempted to do the same, you will draw back the left foot and immediately direct the same foot inside against the enemy, and if you will have[1] stepped on the hanging part of his flail with your foot, that blow of his will become useless. Quickly from this position with the flail raised you will strike the head of your enemy or the shoulder from the right flank, so thence let it be that blow so that your arms are crossed over.

If your enemy attacks you in that very manner, and he has trampled on the hanging part of the flail with the left foot, seize the body of your flail again with the right hand[2], pull back the right foot, and strongly with the flail having been dragged back, you will evade his blow. But quickly if you will have, pursuing again with the same manner, struck either the flail body[3] or the left arm of your enemy with the body of the flail, from here it is permitted to retreat backwards.

**Notes:**

[1] “If you will have” is an approximation of an odd verb form used frequently by Mair.

[2] There is no instruction to release the body of the flail with the right hand preceding this. It may just be a “grip more firmly.”

[3] The butt-end in this case.

*Interpretation by Owen Townes*

**Setup:**

**Agente:**

Medium grip, right foot forward, no guard specified

**Patiente:**

Left foot forward, nothing else specified

**Play:**

**Agente:**

Onside *Unterhau* (low strike) to Patiente's left foot

**Patiente:**

Withdraw left foot without passing it back

Return it back onto Agente's flail-head

Offside *Oberhau*

**Agente:**

Withdraw right foot and body to void, pulling strongly on staff to dislodge

Pass right foot forward and strike Patiente's left arm or body with butt-end in thrusting or slashing motion

**Observations:**

The on-sided-ness of the opening *Unterhau* is based on the illustration and mechanical ease, though the text is actually silent regarding from which side the strike is delivered in this instance. If Agente's blow is truly directed at Patiente's foot, it should come to rest close to where the foot was, most of its force being downward into the ground, and a quick return of Patiente's foot will land on top of the flail head.

Both parties rely on voids for defense. Up to this point we've seen defense via blocking and deflection only. Again, while Mair does not delve into theory there is clearly a necessary mastery of tempo and measure to defend oneself according to this form.

This illustration shows the first of the instances of the over-over grip. In this case, with a blow starting high, the required hand position to conclude as illustrated is awkward and exposes the left arm to a strike. My interpretation is this resulted from the model shifting his grip due to fatigue.





# RATIO SVPERNI ICTVS. CONTRA MEDIVM.

6



**AD** Huius generis pugna ita te accommodes, locum pedem pponito, manu utraq tribuli system contineto ex latere tuo dextro contra hostem, ex eo igitur habitu, partem tribuli propendentem de latere hostis sinistro dextrum uersus ex medio ictu quasiando ilia diriges. Sed si is te eadem ratione aggressus fuerit dextrum pponentem, tribulo contra aduersarium leuato manu utraq, tum deorsum system inclina bis, eiusq ictum si uersu latus tuum dextrum auerteris, caput hostis parte tribuli propendenti tundes. Verum si idem aduersarius moliat, sinistram reftes pedem, tribuloq tuo sublato in latus sinistrum eius ictum repelles, eodemq rursus intro procedes, latus sinistrum colli hostilis concuties, atq ex eo habitu ab aduersario recedas.

*Translation by Rachel Barkley*

**Flail 6: Reckoning of a High Blow against the Middle**

You will accustom yourself to a fight of this kind: Put forward the left foot, grasp the body of the flail with both hands from your right flank against your enemy, from this position thence you will direct the hanging part of the flail against the left flank of your enemy, you turning from the middle the blow by striking the intestines.[1]

But if he will have attacked you by the same reckoning, you putting your right foot forward, lift the flail with both hands against your adversary, then you will turn the flail-body downwards, and if, you having turned his blow to your right flank, will have avoided the blow of his, you will strike the head of the enemy with the hanging part of the flail.

If your adversary will attempt the same, you will draw back the left foot, and you will repel the blow of his on the left flank with your flail raised, and you will proceed again with the same, you will strike the left flank of the enemy's neck, and you will withdraw from this position.

**Notes:**

[1] *Quassando Ilia* - literally striking the intestines with a gut-level blow. This blow makes use of the flexibility of the flail head to land on the left side of the opponent's body and wrap-around to finish the blow on the right.

*Interpretation by Owen Townes*

**Setup:**

**Agente:**

Left foot forward

Medium grip

High guard to right side or Tail guard to right side

**Patiente:**

Right foot forward,  
middle grip,  
high guard

**Play:**

**Agente:**

Onside *Mittelhau*

**Patiente:**

Deflect with staff to right-side Scales  
Switch to over-over grip  
Onside *Oberhau*

**Agente:**

Step back with left foot

Block with left-side Scales

Step in with left foot, deliver onside *Oberhau* and withdraw

**Observations:**

The description of Agente's opening guard likely means a high guard on the right side, but, since the instruction is to hold the flail "from your right flank," it could also mean a "tail guard" position, with the head back and low, staff parallel to the ground. An opening strike to the head would have to go through high guard to arrive, making the use of the tail guard pointless. But given the play opens with a *Mittelhau*, either opening guard is usable. High guard provides gravity to assist the opening strike, but requires more effort to hold up than the tail guard. Tail shifts easily to Scales as well.

The use of the static block by Agente in the re-counter shows one of the few exceptions to the preference for deflection. The step backward with the left foot increases the likelihood that the incoming flail-head can be blocked (as the staff is now where Agente's head was, and

therefore where Patiente's flail-head expects to be) and also voids the left side away from the strike.

The illustration here shows Patiente holding the staff with an over-over grip. Unlike Plate 5's illustration of an over-over grip, this seems to be a valid technique: the resulting blow to Agente's head becomes a powerful cross-check instead of a blow that describes 3/4ths of a vertical circle to strike.



# HABITVS SVPERNI ICTVS CONTRA INFERIOREM.

7



**I**N hoc genus certaminis ratione, que mox depingetur, ea corpus tuum compones. pedem sinistrum prefigas, tribulum in libramine contineas contra hostem, ita ut fustis in manu utraq terre sit propensus, ac ex hoc habitu pedem sinistrum, quem aduersarius preposuit, parte tribuli pensili concutias. Sed si is idem contra usurparit, locum retrorsum referas, eaq ratione eius ictu si uitaris rursus pede predicto intro procedas, dorsumq aduersary pensili parte tribuli quassabis, hoste in libra contra te consistente. Sin uero te eadem ratione adgreditur, pedem sinistru referes, atq flagello ictum eius in latus dextrum corporis tui repellas. Verum si id confeceris, celeriter loeuo rursus intro progressus latus dextrum corporis aduersary pulsato. Sed hostis si id remouerit, in triangulum concedas, atq si caput eius parte tribuli pensili concusseris, ab eo recedere licebit.

*Translation by Rachel Barkley*

**Flail 7: The Position of a High Blow Against a Low One**

You will position your body in this kind of competition by reasoning which will soon be described[1]. You will fix forward the left foot, you will grasp the flail in Scales against the enemy so that the flail-body is inclined toward the earth in both hands, and from this position you will strike with the hanging part of the flail the left foot which your enemy has presented.

But if he attacks you in the same manner, you will pull back the left foot again and if you are avoiding again his blow you will proceed on the side with the aforementioned foot,[2] and you will strike your adversary's back with the hanging part of the flail, the enemy standing in Scales against you.

If he attacks you by the same reckoning, you will pull back the left foot and repel his strike against the right flank of your body with the flail. If you will have completed this, quickly progressing inward with the left foot again, strike your adversary's right flank. But if the enemy moves again to this, you will move in a triangle and if you have struck your enemy with the hanging part of the flail, it is permitted to withdraw from him.

**Notes:**

[1] Essentially, as with all first sentences in these plates, he's saying "Start off standing like this, I'll tell you why later."

[2]"Proceed on the side" is not entirely clear, but seems to mean stepping back in with the aforementioned (left) foot. This is supported by the illustration.

*Interpretation by Owen Townes*

**Setup:**

**Agente&Patiente:**

Left foot forward, Right side Scales

**Play:**

**Agente:**

Onside *Unterhau* to Patiente's left foot

**Patiente:**

Withdraw left foot,

Deliver an *Oberhau* to Agente's back with return of left foot

**Agente:**

Step back with left foot

Deflect to right-side Scales

Step in with left foot, deliver an offside *Mittelhau*

**Patiente:**

Displaces the blow to right-side Scales

**Agente:**

Triangle step to right and *Oberhau*

**Observations:**

The opening is nearly identical to Flail 5, except that the left foot is forward and a guard is specified. As the left foot does not move, the low, sweeping blow at Patiente's left foot means that Agente's body will end up bent over the left hip, a rather awkward position that provides the opening for Patiente's counter. The description of Patiente's counter also suggests that Agente is to immediately draw back into The Scales guard. While Mair does not specify the sidedness of the guard, it is almost, if not completely, always on the side opposite the forward foot. Since the left foot is forward the staff is to the right side. Agente's recovery to this guard is a long process which leaves his back open for Patiente's strike as he brings his flail across the line of retreat.

No opening guard is specified for Patiente. Either a high guard with left foot forward, or a Scales on the right side would work for this counter.

In Flail 7 and Flail 8, we see briefly-described contra-counters from Patiente. We have interpreted this instance as a withdrawing to Scales on the right side.





# DVO SVPERNI ICTVS

8



**Q**VVM Rite predicto iam habitu uti uolueris, pedem dextrum prepones, medium tribuli fustem dextra arripies, et sinistram parti eiusdem posteriori si adplicaris, brachium hostis sinistru parte pensili pulsato. Sed si is te eodem modo fuerit adgressus, dextru similiter preponentem, commemoratoq habitu flagellum tenente, Verum sinistra partem posteriore pectori tuo adiuncta, tum tribuli fuste repelles uersus latus tuu sinistru, interim uero ex ea habitus ratione latus colli eius sinistrum feriendo quassabis. Aduersario aut eodem modo contra te utente, ic tum in latus itidem sinistru remoueto, post si passu gemino in triangulum concesseris, latus corporis hostilis dextru acriter ferias parte pensili. Sin autem eu ictu excusserit, partem tribuli posteriore capitis eius lateri sinistro infliges, atq ab hos te recedes.

*Translation by Rachel Barkley*

### **Flail 8: Two High Blows**

Here you will wish to use now the following position properly. You will place forward the right foot and you will grasp the body of the flail in the middle with the right hand, and you will apply the left hand to the posterior part. Strike the left arm of the enemy with the hanging part of the flail.

But if he has attacked you in the same manner, be mindful of holding your flail similar to your feet, placing forward the right hand[1]. Then you will repel him with the body of the flail, turning your left flank with the left hand bound toward your breast at the posterior end. Meanwhile by this reckoning you will strike the left side of the neck.

Should your adversary attack in the same against you, remove the left flank from his blow. Afterwards if you will have moved in a triangle with a double step,[2] attack fiercely the right flank of the enemy's body with the hanging part. If however he has struck[3] that blow, you will strike against the left side of his head with the lower part of the flail and you will retreat from your opponent.

#### **Notes:**

[1]The instruction could simply imply holding the right hand (and foot) forward, which would indicate a middle guard. A broader interpretation, still in keeping with the illustration, is to have the right hand more forward, in a wide grip and middle guard, and therefore also the right foot more forward, in a deeper stance.

[3]This instruction is unclear and could be interpreted as "two triangle steps."

[4]Deflected.

*Interpretation by Owen Townes*

**Setup:**

**Agente&Patiente:**

Right foot forward

Medium grip

Middle guard

**Play:**

**Agente:**

Onside *Oberhau* to Patiente's left arm

**Patiente:**

Block to left side with staff

Rotate left side away from the blow to void

Onside *Oberhau* (to throat)

**Agente:**

Block to left side with staff

Rotate left side away from the blow to void

Triangle step to left to push through his staff

Triangle step to left again and deliver an Offside *Mittelhau*

**Patiente:**

Deflect into right-side Scales

**Agente:**

Butt spike to head and withdraw

**Observations:**

Both defensive counters in this play involve static blocks, in contrast to most of the rest of the plays with the flail. Two things make this possible:

In the first action, the strike is at the left arm, not deep into the body, and has sufficient downward, rather than inward direction, that the static block can still deflect it far enough off-line for it to miss

In both actions, the target "turns" or "removes" the left flank, voiding away from the incoming shot by rotating and bending the torso. No accompanying footwork is indicated, though in other mass weapon settings it's general practice to step "behind" a static block. Doing so would not significantly hinder the following actions for either Agente or Patiente in this case. Also, in the second block (Patiente's) the instructions and illustration could suggest a bracing of the flail against the body for extra resistance in the bind, though this is not certain.

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