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Fighting with the Longsword: Modern-day HEMA Practices

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Abstract – This article is based on the talk presented on 27th November 2016 in the course of the *Journées d'études sur le costume et les simulateurs d'armes dans les pratiques d'arts martiaux anciens*. The talk itself involved practical demonstrations and interaction with other presentations given at the event; this article does not purport to be a transcript of the presentation, but elaborates on the key themes of the presentation: The objectives of HEMA as a modern practice, and their relationship to what we know about the historical practice of the European martial arts in the Middle Ages, including physical fitness, fencing techniques and tactical awareness, based on the *Fechtbücher* extant. A key element of the discussion involved a comparison between the objectives of and drivers behind historical and modern tournament rule-sets.

Keywords – Historical European Martial Arts, *Fechtbuch*, Middle Ages, Longsword, Sport, Competition

I. INTRODUCTION

The talk on which this paper is based was one of three in a segment on the practical application of historical techniques and the relevance of material culture in Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA). The form of this paper cannot reproduce the dynamic demonstration of practice presented during the event; we shall therefore focus on elements of the talk more amenable to a written format.

The opinions expressed here are those of the authors; we do not speak for the event organisers or the HEMA community.

II. OBJECTIVES OF MODERN HEMA

II.1. Martial Art v. Martial Sport

In the HEMA community, there is considerable discussion, controversy and soul-searching about the issue of martial art v. martial sport. In this paper, we do not propose to enter into this discussion; we intend to focus on the practice of modern

longsword fencing. “Art” and “sport” are used interchangeably and without ascribing a fixed definition to either of the terms.

Historically, the sources distinguish between *Blossfechten* (i.e. fighting without protection), *Harnischfechten* (fighting in armour) and *Rossfechten* (mounted fighting). This paper will deal only with *Blossfechten*, the most common practice today.

II.2. Drivers

The distinguishing feature of HEMA is that there is no extant authoritative tradition of fencing practice; practitioners seek to distil the techniques from historical manuscripts and printed works produced roughly in the time from around 1400 to the 17th C (for longsword). Interpretations of technique vary by source used and the personality of the modern interpreter. This makes for a wide bandwidth of “schools”; however, it is common ground for most schools that the validity of an interpretation is tested in tournament conditions.

Training for any martial art, today as historically, focuses on three key aspects: physical fitness, technical fitness and mental fitness. Considering that the goal of reconstruction generally is to reproduce a movement style or technical skills, our goal is to achieve an as large as possible data set of fencers attempting to apply techniques in non-cooperative environments.

In our conception, enlarging the data set, and hence (hopefully) making conclusions based on the data set academically more persuasive, requires a large and diverse body of fencers, both male and female, and coming from a variety of back-grounds, be that academic, other martial arts, other sports, historical reconstruction/experimental archaeology, and others. To attract such a body, HEMA must be accessible to modern audiences, the equipment needs to be affordable and functional (and attractive), and training practices need to be socially acceptable.

The larger the reservoir of fencers, the more good fencers there will be, and the more diverse the ideas, the availability of infrastructure, and the incentive for trainers to focus on the art. And, ultimately, public recognition and support.

This dynamic is one of the main drivers of HEMA, creating a self-reinforcing cycle improving both the size and quality of the data.

II.3. Equipment

Considerable research has gone into recreating longswords and fencing *Federn*¹ that emulate historical objects found in museums. Other than the weapon, HEMA uses

¹ A *Feder* is a training blade for longsword fencing, with blunt edges and a blunted tip, but otherwise in the dimensions (blade ca. 100 cm, overall length ca. 135 cm), weight (ca. 1,400 g) and balance of a longsword; historical *Federn* are extant from the 16th and 17th C, and *Fechtbücher* such as that of Joachim Meyer show practitioners using *Federn* in Meyer's *salle*; Forging, *Art of Combat*, *passim*.

modern gear, mostly for reasons of safety, and also the previously referenced necessity for affordability and marketability regarding modern audiences. Practitioners acknowledge and are aware that historical clothing and shoes can and do inform the interpretation of the historical sources. Early experiences with such historical clothing and shoes led the community to search out similar functioning modern equipment; e.g. modern HEMA fencing jackets tend to use medieval tailoring tricks for greater shoulder mobility, and the need for flexible soles has caused many fencers to take up boxing or wrestling shoes to mimic soft leather soles.

HEMA is a young discipline, but over the last decade, a number of suppliers have begun to produce equipment specifically intended for HEMA, especially gloves, gambesons (fencing jackets) and miscellaneous protective gear.² Organisers of high-profile tournaments are at pains to specify the minimum protective gear required, and the adequacy of the gear is inspected before a fighter is admitted to a tournament.³

III. FIGHTING FIT

III.1. Physical Fitness

Physical fitness focuses on boosting the individual's strength, stamina, speed, and agility. It is most likely in this area that modern practitioners greatly differ from their period counterparts. It is clear from many pictorial and literary accounts that physical training was integral to training for fencing, with great emphasis on the throwing of stones as well as wrestling and gymnastics.⁴ Modern practitioners tend to either ignore the issue or favour modern training methods such as Olympic weights or calisthenics.

The rise in tournaments however has driven competitors towards greater fitness. Opinions within the community are divided as to whether this is a good thing; some consider it a "sportification", some view it as positive considering the emphasis on physical fitness in medieval literature.

² Other than the mask and shoes, Olympic fencing gear is not adequate for HEMA. Olympic fencing blades are very light and cannot impart a strong blow; the key risk is a stab from a broken blade, which is a minor risk in longsword. Due to the weight of the blade and the techniques used, a longsword blow – even with a blunt blade – can easily cause concussion to an unprotected head or break minor bones such as the fingers, or joints such as knees or elbow.

³ See e.g. <<http://swordfish.ghfs.se/equipment-requirements/>> [queried 15 May 2017].

⁴ Georg von Ehingen: "... springen, ringen, werfen, fechten, rennen der pferd und genetten..." (p. 19).



Figure 1 – The Swiss in Einsiedeln waiting for their pay after the Burgundian Wars, late 1480s - Luzern, *Korporation Luzern: Eidgenössische Chronik des Luzerners Diebold Schilling* (Luzerner Schilling), p. 557 (www.e-codices.unifr.ch)

III.2. Technical Fitness

This is obviously the primary aspect that comes to mind; wielding historical weapons requires specific techniques, and techniques can be further differentiated by reference to the situation in which they are meant to be applied: whether in the context of friendly training in a *salle*, in a judicial duel, a tournament, a battle, or self-defence.⁵

It is the general opinion of the community that the *Fechtbücher* on which the various instructors build their interpretations do not show basic fencing – the basic skills presumably would have been acquired informally in the course of growing up in a society where everyone was, and was expected to be, armed and capable of elementary self-defence. The *Fechtbücher* elaborate advanced techniques, sometimes with the flavour of a trick or gimmick, in others as part of a structured and advancing curriculum.⁶

A hotly debated point of contention in the HEMA community is whether today's tournament fencers have attained a level of skill where they are able to correctly use advanced techniques in a bout. No doubt there is much dismal fencing on display, but in the authors' view and experience, there are ever more instances where a fencer correctly assessed the tactical situation in order to apply the correct advanced technique, and was able to do so effectively (in the sense of landing a clean hit) in terms of technical execution, speed and force.⁷ The definition of "advanced technique", it must be noted, is highly variable, but here is used as shorthand for an exchange of several blows where both fencers use specifically named techniques from a manual in an attack-counter-counter format, or technically difficult single intention attacks.

Anne-Caroline Le Coultre and Mathijs Roelofsen of Unil'AMHE (University of Lausanne) as well as Jack Gassmann of *Artes Certaminis* (Gais AR) were on the floor of the lecture hall to explain and demonstrate various techniques, supplemented by illustrations from historical fencing manuals and shots from recent tournaments showing specific techniques in action. As is made evident by the pictures shown below, this part cannot sensibly be replicated here – we appreciate that the depictions are likely baffling to the uninitiate. Nothing can replace guided practice. However, during the sparring presentation, the fencers did display interpretations of techniques such as *Absetzen*, *Schielbau*, *Zwerchbau* and *Sturzbau* with success and relative ease.

⁵ See e.g. Terminiello, *Gaiani*; Chandler, *Autobiographies*, describes and analyses the violent altercations Benvenuto Cellini got into, as well as the much more cautious ones of Bartholomäus Sastrow from Stralsund, as a mirror of the reality of civilian use of arms in the 16th C.

⁶ The 3rd International HEMA Gathering in St. Cergue, Switzerland, in January 2017, organised by GAGSchola from Geneva, focussed on this complex. This raises the question of the role played by *Fechtbücher* in the transmission process, addressed for instance in Jaquet, *Combattre En Armure*, pp. 79-124.

⁷ See Kristian Ruokonen, "There is no technique in tournaments" – Kristian Ruokonen's video response (17 April 2017, <https://www.reddit.com/r/wma/comments/65uqex/theres_no_technique_in_tournaments_kristian/> [queried 15 May 2017]).



Figure 2 - Winding action and a good example of kit - note the thin-soled boxing shoes.
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Figure 3 - A Krumpfau to the hands from right onto left.
© Thomas Arthur Naylor, used with permission



Figure 4 - Auswinden from left against right.
 © Thomas Arthur Naylor, used with permission

III.3. Mental Fitness

This third pillar of our reconstruction efforts is by essence of a more esoteric nature and less easy to judge, but is nevertheless crucial to the correct application and reconstruction of technique. Apart from the general martial sport skills of mental endurance, pain resistance and calmness under pressure, the crucial prerequisite in the correct application of any technique is correct decision making and “tool use” appropriate to the specific technique. The subject of developing mental fitness for HEMA fencers is a relatively new one and rarely directly touched upon, with some notable exceptions, such as Göteborg Historiska Fäktskola, who run a training session on overcoming fear responses.⁸

⁸ Giovanni Amatuccio, a historian and practitioner in another art, archery, has looked at one of a competitor’s banes, that is “choking” in competition, and what historical Arab and Eastern manuals had to say about that: *idem*, *Target Panic*. Similarly, with respect to jousting, Dom Duarte, pp. 119-123.

III.4. Fencing as Tactical Training?

While not immediately evident, the fight books do not just communicate technical training, but tactical training as well.⁹ The pre-Renaissance witnesses mainly take a very abstract approach to the tactics and strategies of combat, presenting allegorical concepts linked to Aristotle or medieval bestiary sciences rather than explicit advice. On a personal note, the authors have begun to question to what extent these concepts had a broader application than just the one-on-one fencing situation, especially considering the medieval philosophical tenet of the microcosm or the social advancement dimensions of fighting skills.¹⁰

Two cases in point are the *Zettel* and Fiore de' Liberi's "Seven Swords" illustration.

III.4.1. The *Zettel*

The *Zettel* is commonly attributed to Johannes Liechtenauer and famously recites the five concepts *stark* / *schwach* (strong / weak), *vor* / *nach* (before / after), and *indes* – translating *indes* entails interpreting the meaning.¹¹

The meaning of the five concepts is a hotly debated matter in HEMA circles and there is no canonical interpretation. In our view, the concepts can be displayed as follows,

Stark
Vor *Indes* *Nach*
Schwach

so that *indes* is understood as standing between both of the conceptual pairs *vor* / *nach* and *stark* / *schwach*. If they are understood as tactical concepts, *vor* / *nach* would refer to the military tactical concept of initiative¹² – the person in the *vor* has the initiative, the person in the *nach* does not; *stark* would refer to advance, *schwach* to give ground. It is

⁹ This seems to have been the view of the value of fencing as tactical military preparation in the early 19th C: v. Bismark, p. 59.

¹⁰ See e.g. Gassmann, *Honour and Fighting*: Joachim Meyer's 1570 *Gründliche Beschreibung der Kunst des Fechtens*, a sophisticated multi-weapon treatise, may be dedicated to his noble patron, but is directed at the young burgher gentleman; the *Vorrede an den Leser* says that an individual who has learnt the art of proper fencing: "may be thought able to direct others, and particularly the youth, and thereby be of service" – Forgeng, *The Art of Combat*, p. 42.

¹¹ "*Vor und nach dy zway ding / Sind aller kunst ain vrsprunck / Sweb vnd sterck / Inndes / Das wort do mit mit merck / So magstu lernen / Mit kunst arbeitsen vnd weren*" in MS 1449 / Codex 44.A.8 of the Biblioteca dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei e Corsiniana (Pseudo-Peter von Danzig), f. 3v, quoted after Peter von Danzig, pp. 6-8. See also Wiktenauer <http://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Page:Cod.44.A.8_003v.jpg> [queried 15 May 2017].

¹² "Initiative" in the sense of having freedom of action and forcing the opponent to react, but restricting the opponent's options; Clausewitz, Book 6, Chapter 30: *Verteidigung eines Kriegstheaters, wenn keine Entscheidung gesucht wird* (Defence of a theatre of war when no decision is sought).

entirely possible for a fighter to be both *vor* and *schwach*, e.g. if that fighter is deliberately retreating in order to lure the other fighter into a course of action that will allow the first fighter to apply a specific technique – the retreating fighter has the initiative because they are determining the other fighter’s actions.

Indes is an opportune moment either manipulated or naturally occurring which one can use to reverse the dynamic of the fight or deliver a blow safely – the system is in balance, all possibilities are open. The goal of the *Zettel* is to raise awareness in the fencer for this moment of balance, which is at the same time a moment of opportunity. It is a highly dynamic set of concepts, as windows of opportunity are open only briefly, and tactical success is predicated on recognising the opportunity and being able to exploit it both in terms of speed of reaction and technical execution.¹³

III.4.2. Fiore’s “Seven Swords”

Rather than focus on the central figure and the seven swords,¹⁴ we draw attention to the four animals surrounding the figure: (i) the lynx, for *prudencia* or *avisamento*, wielding a compass; (ii) the elephant, for *fortitudo* or *fortezza*, bearing a castle; (iii) the tiger, for *celeritas* or *prestezza*, carrying an arrow; and (iv) the lion, for *audacia* or *ardimento*, holding a heart.

¹³ Compare this with Clausewitz’ Book 3, Chapter 18, entitled *Spannung und Ruhe – Das dynamische Gesetz des Krieges* (Tension and Rest – The Dynamic Law of War): ...alles, was wir über das Verhältnis von Angriff und Verteidigung und über die Vollziehung dieses doppelseitigen Aktes zu sagen haben, sich auf den Zustand der Krise bezieht, in welchem sich die Kräfte während der Spannung und Bewegung befinden. (all that we can say about the relationship between attack and defence and about the consummation of this mutual act refers to the state of crisis [i.e. decision], in which the forces are suspended between tension and movement).

¹⁴ See Pisani-Dossi MS 17a and MS Ludwig XV 13 32r in the J. Paul Getty Museum (Wiktenauer <http://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Fiore_de%27i_Liberi> [queried 15 May 2017]; the Latin terms appear in the Pisani-Dossi, the Italian terms in the Getty.

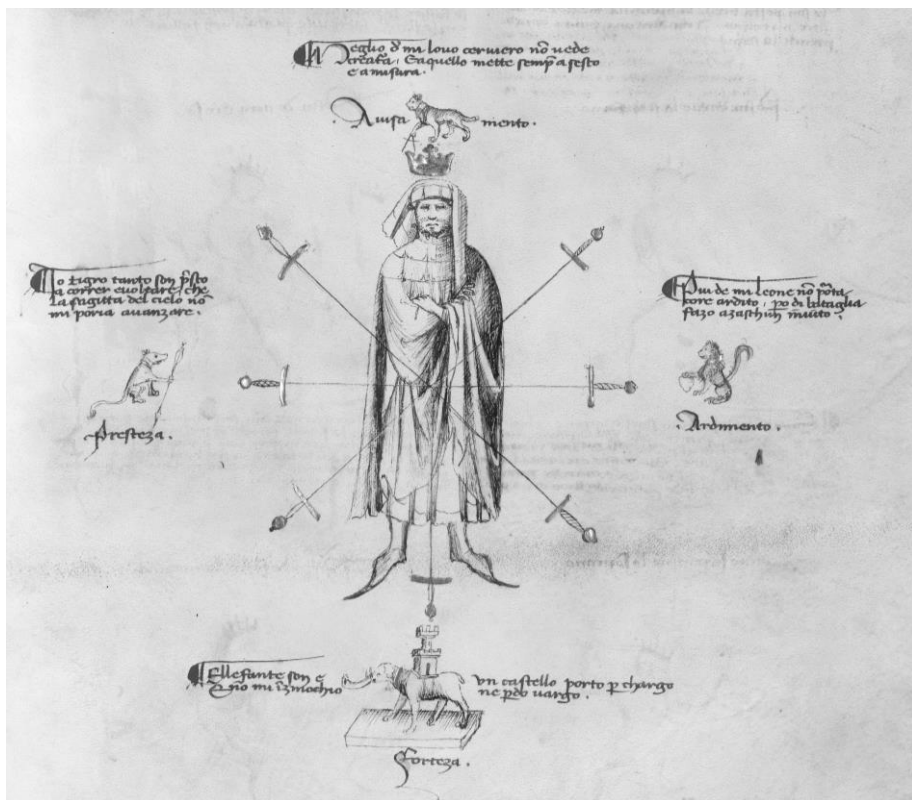


Figure 5 – The “Seven Swords” from the Getty’s MS Ludwig XV 13, fol. 32

Digital Image Courtesy of the Getty’s Open Content Program

Animal symbolism was very common in the middle ages, but a review of the bestiaries of the time does not really help us further:

- The lynx is seen in the shape of a wolf, but with spots like a leopard; its urine turns into a precious stone, and its eyesight so keen that it can see through walls.¹⁵
- The main attributes of the elephant are its size, age, memory, and its strength, which enables it to carry a castle on its back; it supposedly has no leg joints so once fallen cannot get up. Its main enemy is the dragon.¹⁶
- The tiger’s main attributes are his strength and superior speed – a horseman cannot outrun a tiger, and needs to resort to stratagems to escape. The name “tigris” is said to derive from the Persian word for “arrow”.¹⁷

¹⁵ <<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beat135.htm>> [queried 15 May 2017].

¹⁶ <<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beat77.htm>> [queried 15 May 2017]; in London the guild of the Worshipful Company of Cutlers features an elephant and castle on their coat of arms.

- The lion is obviously the king of beasts, and as such is most closely associated with symbols of the Christ. It is slow to anger and kills only out of necessity.¹⁸

If the animal symbolism does not really help much, what about the devices and key words?

- *Prudentia* is derived from *pro-videntia*, or foresight, anticipation. The lynx is represented with a compass, an instrument of study and science, of discernment and of course of distance. The symbol is placed at the head of the person, indicating the rational aspect of skill.¹⁹
- *Fortitudo* can be understood in several ways; initially, it means “strength, courage, fortitude”. But the symbolism of the elephant bearing a castle suggests a more basic meaning, in the sense of steadfastness, grounding. The positioning of the symbol at the feet of the figure could emphasise the importance of a stable stance, so critical to wrestling, and by extension expand the meaning to “secure your base”.²⁰
- *Celeritas* means speed; but the choice of the tiger suggests a certain quality to the speed. In some cases the tiger is presented holding a lightning bolt, an object with obvious connotations of a fast, devastating and unexpected blow. The additional flavour of *celeritas* is “facility, wit” – an ability to react, rapidly apply a skill, and to apply it competently, confidently and with assurance. The symbol is on the right hand of the figure, typically the primary sword arm.²¹
- *Audacia* translates as “audaciousness, daring” – as the Roman proverb says: *Audaces fortuna invat*.²² It is the necessary courage to seize an opportunity. The image is placed to the left of the figure, on the side of his heart, indicating the instinctive, not *ratio*-mediated element of the skill; supporting this, the lion also holds a heart in his paw.²³

While the *Zettel*'s concepts are more dynamic, referring to the constantly shifting fight situation as a factor of time, Fiore's concepts are more static: Skills to be learnt and

¹⁷ <<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beat131.htm>> [queried 15 May 2017].

¹⁸ <<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beat78.htm>> [queried 15 May 2017].

¹⁹ See Clausewitz, Book 3, Chapter 15: *Geometrisches Element* (On the Geometric Element). The geometrical element of course also evokes the lines and circles seen in Joachim Meyer's diagrams, but particularly prominent in the fight books of the *verdadera destreza* and the hapless Gérard Thibault: Majár/Várhelyi, *Thibault*.

²⁰ See Clausewitz, Book 3, Chapter 7: *Beharrlichkeit* (On Perseverance) or the importance of securing your base, Book 5, Chapter 15, *Operationsbasis* (Base of Operations).

²¹ See Clausewitz, Book 3, Chapter 10: *Die List* (On Cunning).

²² Fortune favours the daring.

²³ See Clausewitz, Book 3, Chapter 6: *Die Kühnheit* (On Daring) and Chapter 9: *Die Überraschung* (On Surprise).

practiced. In the technical part of the treatises, this difference can be seen as well: the Liechtenauer-based German system’s terminology tends to be temporally descriptive, focusing on timing, while Fiore’s system describes the fight in terms distance, i.e. of close or long play. Of course, this is merely a matter of emphasis – the two traditions reference both.

The tactical training feature may also explain an “unrealistic” element of the *Fechtbücher* – the principle of same-weapon contests. While a fighter in war is unlikely to be faced with a single opponent with precisely the same weapon and protection, the equality of weapons (like the same set of figures on the chess board) condenses the training effect on the *tactical*, rather than technical, aspects of the fight.

IV. MODERN TOURNAMENT COMPETITION AND HISTORICAL RULE SETS

IV.1. Modern Longsword²⁴ Tournament Competition Rule Sets

For the purpose this paper, we shall refer to the rule sets applied in the typical modern tournament as “sportive rule sets”.²⁵ As their distinguishing feature, these rule sets, as opposed to the rules applying (mostly) to Olympic fencing, include most but not necessarily all of the following:

- Target area is the whole body;
- Movement is on the plane, not just back and forth;
- A scoring hit needs to be palpable – a mere touch, glance, or “kiss to the mask” as a rule does not count (and occasionally differentiated by strike with the edge (good) or the flat (bad));
- First touch alone does not win, the action is not over until completion of the “tempo”, and a successful after-blow (a counter-strike within one or two movements of the first contestant’s strike landing) is fully or partially weighted – i.e. a “clean hit” is an action where the attacker successfully lands a palpable hit and the other fencer cannot retaliate in the fencing tempo or the retaliation is parried;

²⁴ In addition to longsword, there are tournaments in other weapons such as rapier, sabre, small-sword, *langes Messer*, dussack, dagger, wrestling and others; the principles outlined here broadly apply to those tournament rule sets as well, with variations.

²⁵ “Sportive” is a loaded term within the HEMA community, but here shall be used to denote a HEMA tournament rule set as opposed to a historical one.

HEMA tournaments experiment with different rule sets – participants are regularly advised to familiarise themselves with changes and the applicable rule set is published in time for the tournament registration; see e.g. Longpoint (< www.fightlongpoint.com >, queried 15 May 2017) or Swordfish (< swordfish.ghfs.se >, queried 15 May 2017).

- There is no right-of-way rule – double hits are penalised or fully weighted;
- Scoring is weighted by target (head, torso, extremities), type of hit (strike, thrust, cut) and/or technique (level of control); and
- Disarms, grasping the opponent’s blade, pommel strikes, half-swording, grappling and other close-quarter contact are accepted as tactically correct and not penalised – some rule sets stop the bout when the transition to close-quarter combat is indicated, some only stop after the first throw, still others allow punches and kicks as non-scoring set-ups to soften up the opponent for a grapple or strike with the sword.

Refereeing is complex; high-level tournaments require four linespeople, a referee in the ring managing the bout, a time-keeper and an umpire at the desk recording all the events and point awards.

A typical tournament bout is limited by time, by points, or both: a bout might last e.g. three minutes or end when one fighter reaches a certain number of points, or a bout ends at the earlier of the time limit, the maximum point level or a point advantage on the opponent.

There is no canonical competition rule set – different tournament organisers seek to promote desirable outcomes through adaptations in the rules. It needs to also be borne in mind that longsword is just one of the many historical weapons treated in the *Fechtbücher*, and not all of them are amenable to a (safe) competition.

IV.2. Historical Rule Sets

IV.2.1. Franco-Belgian²⁶

The Franco-Belgian rule set applies to a king-of-the-hill type of tournament: One of the fighters starts as “king”, and the “king” is challenged by the other participants one by one. If the challenger lands a clean hit on the “king”, they take the “king’s” place.

The challenger’s hit has to be clean – if the “king” lands a double hit or an after-blow, the challenger loses the bout and the “king” remains. Each of the challengers has three “lives”, and when all “lives” are used up, the remaining “king” wins the tournament.

As a further element of friction, the hit must be landed with the flat and the target area is progressively reduced. Initially, the target area consists of head, torso above the belt, and arms above the elbows. The blades are rubbed with chalk or magnesium, in order to leave a mark on the struck opponent. When a hit is landed, the target area going forward on both challenger and “king” is limited to the area above the level of the hit. Obviously, very quickly, the target area will be limited to the crown of the head.

²⁶ This rule set was developed by Matt Galas as a common denominator between the various rule sets of individual guilds in Northern France (Paris, Lille) and Belgium (Ghent, Bruges, Brussels, Antwerp) from at least the 1540s until the late 1700s.

IV.2.2. *Codex Guelph*²⁷

This rule set sets out a *Gang* system; each fighter has five strikes, and when the first fighter has landed five strikes, the *Gang* ends. A “strike” is defined as a fighter’s blade hitting the opponent’s blade or the opponent. The *Gang* is not interrupted if one of the fighters is hit; the hits are simply counted, and at the end of the *Gang*, the fighter with the most hits wins.

The challenge of the rule set is the following: If one fighter lands a clean hit with the first strike, all that fighter need do is to parry the remaining four strikes in order to win the *Gang*. So the other fighter will need to avoid the first fighter’s blade and seek to land a clean hit without parry.

IV.2.3. Manciolino²⁸

Manciolino proposes weighted scoring for sparring bouts, but an at first blush counter-intuitive one: Hits to the head count three points, hits to the arms, torso and legs one point, and hits to the feet two points; hits to the hands garner no points. Manciolino argues that the clean hit to the feet is technically so challenging that it should be rewarded.

This is in direct contrast to Manciolino’s recommendations for the serious fight – in those situations, he recommends attempting strikes to the opponent’s hands by preference.

IV.3. Evaluation

The common feature of these selected historical rule sets is their artificiality – there is no effort to imitate a “realistic” fight. The masters who formulated these rule sets lived in times when the sword was still a current weapon, and fights risking life and limb were, if not a daily occurrence, still a real risk, whether by way of self-defence, duel or war.

In our view, our ancestors’ concern was to incentivise fighters to favour technique and tactics, and they must have believed that their rule sets, each in its own way, promoted these goals. They were certainly expert enough to be able to evaluate both the practical needs of their pupils and the training required to get them there.

We also need to bear in mind that at the time these rule sets were created, fencing in a *salle*, school or club was practiced by burghers who had a day-time job, often one which involved working with their hands. Neither they nor the fencing master could afford the

²⁷ This rule set was developed by Szabolcs Waldmann from research on city fencing rules, and presented at Swordfish in 2011.

²⁸ Interpreted from Manciolino’s *Opera nova*, pp. 3-7.

loss of e.g. an eye,²⁹ hence the common prohibition of thrusts and the requirement to strike with the flat in the Franco-Belgian rule set, or broken fingers, which explains the hands being off-limits in both the Franco-Belgian and Manciolino's rule set.³⁰

IV.4. Summary

Like historical fencing masters and event organisers, modern tournament organisers seek to minimise injury. Mostly, this is done by requiring specified protection, especially for the hands, head, torso and joints, and by giving umpires discretion on when to stop a bout and/or injunctions against the use of excessive or gratuitous force. However, some HEMA clubs have adopted and adapted elements of the historical rule sets as a means to control injury risk and promote technique: the Hallebardiers of the Sint Michielsgilde in Bruges, founded 1444, who also presented at the conference, use their traditional rule set (and of course appropriate training) to replace the heavy protection typical for HEMA tournaments.³¹

The question of goals of tournaments as well as their rule sets is a much-discussed one³². The rules will always shape the fencing, so it is in effect impossible to create a neutral playing ground. Generally, the stated objectives of modern rule sets fall into two categories: simulating a “real fight” within the context of the tradition, or to give a show of beautiful historical techniques.

Emulating “real combat” is in the view of many, and also in the authors' experience, impossible in a safe manner,³³ as the abstraction of an amicable competition by definition introduces artefacts that estrange it from a deadly encounter.

²⁹ The Lucerne city archives hold a privy council deliberation on the consequences of a 1489 fencing training accident, which in the event was resolved extra-judicially: *Die Rechtsquellen des Kantons Luzern*, Part I: *Stadtrechte*, Vol. 3: *Stadt und Territorialstaat Luzern, Satzungen, Eidbuch, Stadtrechtbuch und andere normative Quellen (1461-1489)*, Konrad Wanner (Ed.) (Basel: Schwabe, 2005), p. 369.

³⁰ In many a *Fechtschule*, i.e. fencing tournaments in the context of a princely wedding or other grand occasion, the winner was the fighter who could land the highest *Blume*, or bleeding wound – Jaquet, *Fightschools*, p. 59. A laceration to the scalp bleeds in a gratifyingly spectacular fashion, but is relatively harmless.

³¹ The Bruges rule set is one of the templates for the Franco-Belgian rule set discussed above in Part IV.2.1; see also their website <<http://www.hallebardiers.be/onze-wapens/langzwaard/praktische-info/>> [queried 30 May 2017] and Martens, *Fence Naked*.

³² See e.g. Martens, *Fence Naked*; James Roberts, *Rethinking the HEMA tournament and the social contract* (22 October 2015, <<http://armoury.co.za/rethinking-the-hema-tournament-and-the-social-contract/>> [queried 15 May 2017]; or Keith Farrell, *Trying to simulate a real fight* (24 April 2017, <<http://www.keithfarrell.net/blog/2017/04/trying-simulate-real-fight/>> [queried 15 May 2017]).

³³ Tuailleon Demésy, *Faire Revivre Les Duels*, p. 127 underlines notably the necessity to control and limit the violence, unlike in the historical practices.

If the goal is realism, then the inevitable, unavoidable and logical conclusion of this objective is that the ultimate touchstone of skill is the fight of two *Blossfechter* (unprotected protagonists) with sharp blades.³⁴

Those who promote subjective “good historical technique” are more common, but also raise an issue: How do we judge what is historical, and what is good technique? The danger lies in emphasising a preconceived concept of technique to the point that it creates an overly narrow form, a development similar to that of Olympic fencing or of Capoeira.

Ultimately, a tournament bout represents training with a non-cooperative partner under additional pressure and high motivation towards success, and is by those means a necessary ingredient to the process of evaluating HEMA reconstruction efforts, while putting heavy demands on physical fitness. It is hard to deny that those are the most basic elements of a physical application of these arts.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The efforts of HEMA (in the context of this article German and Italian longsword based on fight books of the 15th century) focus on reconstructing combat techniques from period manuscripts written on the subject, and evaluating said reconstructions with as large a pool of fencers as possible, in a non-cooperative competitive setting under high pressure. Since each individual fencer represents a data point, HEMA facilitates making the discipline as accessible as possible to modern practitioners, and to promote occasions where fencers can meet to fence each other. This enlarges our data pool and allows us to make corrections to interpretations.

This focus on accessibility to modern audiences has led to the adoption of modern clothing and aesthetics, as well as more modern safety standards, while striving to replicate the function if not the form of medieval garments. Academic researchers are uncomfortable with this casual loss of purity.³⁵

In our view, the results of this conference show that HEMA has so far been successful in our endeavour, in that modern clothing has only a minor impact on practice;³⁶ so while modern clothing undeniably leads to a loss of authenticity, this effect is small and outweighed by the explosive expansion of the data-set of experiences and interpretations made available. The HEMA experience is, we would argue, opening

34 This is the premise of Michael Edelson’s *The Talboffer Society* (n.p.: CreateSpace, 2016).

35 See e.g. Jaquet/Sørensen, *HEMA*, p. 20; while the authors acknowledge the academic position, academic research is not (yet) able to provide definitive answers regarding the application and target audiences of the *Fechtbücher* (*ibid.*, pp. 9-14 and *passim*, or Deacon, *Prologues*), so leaving the practitioner unsure about what to aim for.

36 See the presentations of Etienne von Gunten and Julia Gräf given at the conference.

perspectives on historical fighting that are unexpected and that a purist approach would likely not have revealed. And even if we may never realise an authentic recreation of historical fencing,³⁷ HEMA has, in a fun and hands-on way, helped broaden the public's appreciation for a more balanced, a less dark, barbarian and primitive view of the Middle Ages.³⁸

Ultimately, HEMA is an activity *sui generis* – it is not academic research or experimental archaeology.³⁹ Whether or not HEMA yields academically relevant results is a question to be asked by academic specialists, applied to a specific hypothesis and tested with the tools of the academic discipline. This will remain possible so long as HEMA as a practice remains committed to the *Fechtbücher* as source, inspiration and touchstone for its reconstructions.

The areas of reconstruction divide themselves broadly into three branches common to any martial art: physical conditioning; technical skills; and mental conditioning.

Physical conditioning is a weak spot in reconstruction efforts, with practitioners tending towards modern methods as these are readily available.

The refinement of technical skills has been successful, as great strides have been made in reconstructing the techniques and applying them in non-cooperative settings.

The mental conditioning aspect is one that is emerging, and being explored to a greater degree as the technical skill of the fencing increases. The fight books are proving to have surprising depth in their understanding of tactical as well as (arguably) strategic concepts. Our experience with those strategic and tactical concepts leads us to question whether the *Fechtbücher* had a wider connection to other strategic and tactical contexts, such as politics and small unit warfare.

The rule sets of competitions present unique challenges, which are unavoidable, but they are none the less necessary for the evaluation of reconstructions. An examination of historical rule sets leads us to the conclusion that rather than trying to eliminate artefacts created by safety concerns and the competition setting, the historical tournaments embraced the abstractions in ways that created tactically and strategically demanding competitions, placing mental conditioning above the other two aspects.

³⁷ See Burkart, *Limits of Understanding*, esp. the discussion on pp. 23-27.

³⁸ Deacon, *Prologues*, pp. 86-87.

³⁹ Burkart, *Limits of Understanding*, p. 24 classifies it as “Practice as Research”.

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