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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 at the 2016 in the course of Journées d'études sur le costume et les simulations dans les pratiques d'arts martiaux. The article 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 only summarizes the key themes of the presentation: The objectives of HEMA as a martial practice, and their relationship to what we know about the historical martial arts of the European martial arts in the Middle Ages, including physical fitness, weapon techniques and tactical awareness, based on historical sources. A key element of the discussion involved a comparison between the objectives 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 application of historical techniques and the relevance of material culture to the European Martial Arts (HEMA). The form of this paper cannot reproduce the demonstration of practice presented during the event; we shall therefore focus on the 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 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 searching about the issue of martial art v. martial sport. In this paper we propose to enter into this discussion; we intend to focus on the practical

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

Historically, the sources distinguish between *Blossfechten* (i.e. fighting with *Harnischfechten* (fighting in armour) and *Rosssfechten* (mounted fighting) deal only with *Blossfechten*, the most common practice today.

II.2 Drivers

The distinguishing feature of HEMA is that there is no extant authoritative 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 century (longsword). Interpretations of technique vary by source used and the person interpreting. This makes for a wide bandwidth of “schools”; however, there is a common ground for most schools that the validity of an interpretation is based on 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 recreation is generally to reproduce a movement style or technical skills, our goal is to create as large a dataset of fencers attempting to apply techniques in non-cooperative environments.

In our conception, enlarging the data set, and hence (hopefully) making it more 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 backgrounds: academic, other martial arts, other sports, historical reconstruction/experimental archaeology, and others. To attract such a body, HEMA must be accessible to a wide range of audiences, the equipment needs to be affordable and functional (and a variety of 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 training in the art. And, ultimately, public recognition and support.

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

II.3 Equipment

Considerable research has gone into recreating longswords¹ and fencing equipment to emulate historical objects found in museums. Other than the weapon,

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

modern gear, mostly for reasons of safety, and also the previously referenced concerns for affordability and marketability regarding modern audiences. Practitioners acknowledge and are aware that historical clothing and shoes can aid in a better interpretation of the historical sources. Early experiences with such historical clothing and shoes led the community to search out similar functioning modern equivalents. Modern HEMA fencing jackets tend to use medieval tailoring tricks for greater mobility, and the need for flexible soles has caused many fencers to take up wrestling shoes to mimic soft leather soles.

HEMA is a young discipline, but over the last decade, a number of people have begun to produce equipment specifically intended for HEMA, especially gloves, gambesons (fencing jackets) and miscellaneous protective gear.² Out of these, 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.

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 historical counterparts. It is clear from many pictorial and literary accounts that physical fitness was integral to training for fencing, with great emphasis on the throwing of the body as well as wrestling and gymnastics.³ Modern practitioners tend to either ignore the historical emphasis or favour modern training methods such as Olympic weights or calisthenics.

The rise in tournaments however has driven competitors towards greater physical 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. Fencing blades are very light and cannot impart a strong blow; the key risk is a stab wound to the hand by the blade, which is a minor risk in longsword. Due to the weight of the blade used, a longsword blow – even with a blunt blade – can easily cause concussion to the 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 2014].

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



Figure 1 - The Swiss in Einsiedeln waiting for their pay after the Burgundian Wars, 1480s - Luzern, Korporation Luzern: *Eidgenössische Chronik des Luzerner 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 requires specific techniques, and techniques can be further differentiated by the situation in which they are meant to be applied: whether in the context of training in a *salle*, in a judicial duel, a tournament, a battle, or self-defence.

It is the general opinion of the community that the *Fechtbücher* on which instructors build their interpretations do not show basic fencing – the 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 self-defence. The *Fechtbücher* elaborate advanced techniques, sometimes focusing on a trick or gimmick, in others as part of a structured and advancing curriculum.

A hotly debated point of contention in the HEMA community is whether tournament fencers have attained a level of skill where they are able to perform advanced techniques in a bout. No doubt there is much dismal fencing on offer. In the authors' view and experience, there are ever more instances of fencers who have 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). The definition of "advanced technique", it must be noted, is highly variable, but here is used as shorthand for an exchange of blows where both fencers use specifically named techniques from a manual, in a counter-counter format, or technically difficult single intention attacks.

Anne-Caroline Coultre and Mathijs Roelofsen of Unil'AMH (University of Lausanne) as well as Jack Gassmann of *Artes Certaminis* (Gais AR) were on 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, this part cannot sensibly be replicated here – we appreciate that the depicted is baffling to the uninitiate. Nothing can replace guided practice. However, in sparring presentation, the fencers did display interpretations of techniques such as *Absetzen*, *Schielhau*, *Zwerchhau* and *Sturzhau* with success and relative ease.

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

⁶ The 3rd International HEMA Gathering in St. Cergue, Switzerland, in January 2017, was hosted 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's *Armure*, pp. 79-124.

⁷ See Kristian Ruokonen, "There is no technique in tournaments" – Kristian Ruokonen, 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 boots
 © Thomas Arthur Naylor, used with permission



Figure 3 - A Krumphau 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, less easy to judge, but is nevertheless crucial to the correct application and reconstruction of technique. Apart from the general martial sport skills of endurance, pain resistance and calmness under pressure, the crucial prerequisite for the correct application of any technique is correct decision making and “tool use” appropriate to the specific technique. The subject of developing mental fitness in HEMA fencers is a relatively new one and rarely directly touched upon, with notable exceptions, such as Göteborg Historiska Fäktskola, who run a training program on overcoming fear responses.

⁸ Giovanni Amatuuccio, a historian and practitioner in another art, archery, has long been a competitor's bane, that is “choking” in competition, and what historical Archery manuals had to say about that: *idem*, *Target Panic*. Similarly, with respect to jousting, see pp. 119-123.

III.4 Fencing as Tactical Training?

While not immediately evident, the fight books do not just communicate training, but tactical training. The early-Renaissance witnesses mainly take a very abstract approach to the tactics and strategies of combat, presenting allegories 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 have a broader application than just the one-on-one fencing situation, especially in the medieval philosophical context of the microcosm or the social advancement dimensions of fighting skills.

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

III.4.1 The Zettel

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

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

	<i>Stark</i>	
<i>Vor</i>	<i>Indes</i>	<i>Nach</i>
	<i>Schwach</i>	

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

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

¹⁰ See e.g. Gassmann, *Honour and Fighting*: Joachim Meyer's 1570 *Gründtliche Beschreibung des Fechtens*, a sophisticated multi-weapon treatise, may be dedicated to his son, which 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 his own, and thereby be of service" – Forgeng, *The Art of Combat*, p. 42.

¹¹ "Vor und nach dy zway ding / Sind aller kunst ain vrsprunck / Swech vnd sterck / Ist mit merck / So magstu lernen / Mit kunst arbaitten vnd weren" in MS 1449 / Codex 44.4.A.8_003v.jpg > [queried 15 May 2017].

¹² "Initiative" in the sense of having freedom of action and forcing the opponent to restrict the opponent's options; Clausewitz, Book 6, Chapter 30: *Verteidigung im Angriff, 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 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, as they are determining the other fighter's actions.

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

III.4.2 Fiore's "Seven Swords"

Rather than focus on the central figure and the ~~seven swords~~ ^{seventeen swords}, attention to the four animals surrounding the figure: (i) the lynx, for *prudencia* or *avisamento* or *compass*; (ii) the elephant, for *fortitudo* or *forteza*, bearing a castle; (iii) the unicorn, for *presteza*, carrying an arrow; and (iv) the lion, for *audacia* or *ardimento*,

¹³ Compare this with Clausewitz' Book 3, Chapter 18, entitled *Spannung und Ruhe im Gesetz des Krieges* (Tension and Rest – The Dynamic Law of War): ...alles, was wir von Angriff und Verteidigung und über die Vollziehung dieses doppelseitigen Aktes im Zustand der Krise bezieht, in welchem sich die Kräfte während der Spannung und Ruhe befinden, we can say about the relationship between attack and defence and about the constant nature of this mutual act refers to the state of crisis [i.e. decision], in which the force of movement (between tension and movement).

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

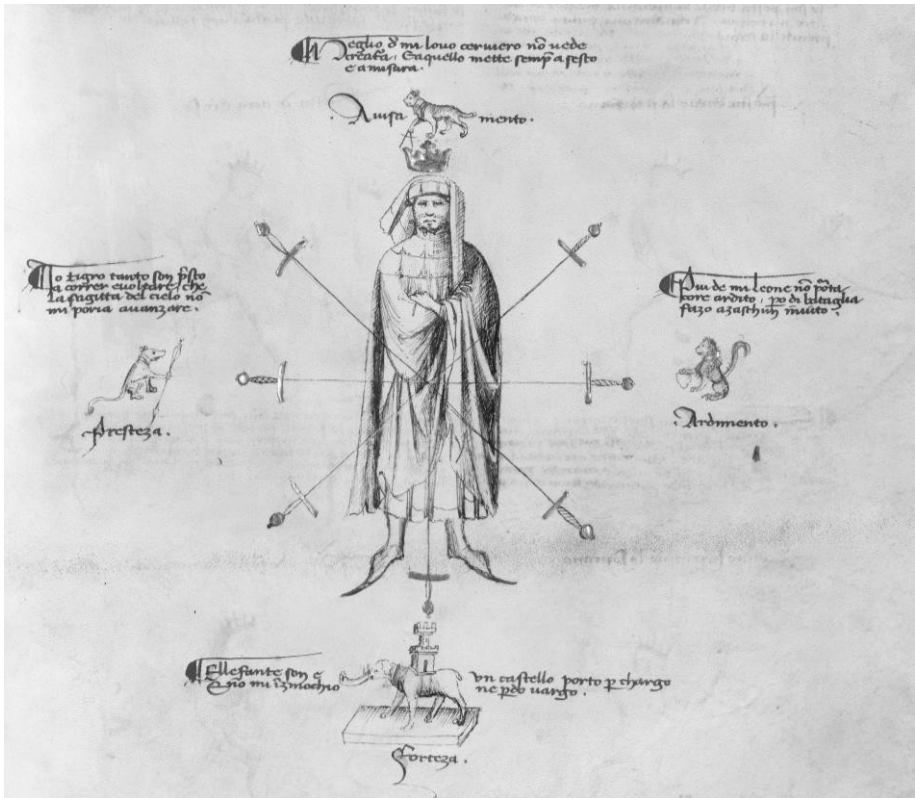


Figure 5 - The "Seven Swords" from the Getty's MS Ludwig XV 13, fol. 32
Digital Image Courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program

Animal symbolism was very common in the middle ages, but a review of the 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; it turns into a precious stone, and its eyesight so keen that it can see through walls.⁵
- 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 legs when once fallen cannot get up. Its main enemy is the dragon.
- The tiger's main attributes are his strength and superior speed – a horse cannot outrun a tiger, and needs to resort to stratagems to escape. The word "*tigris*" is said to derive from the Persian word for "arrow".

¹⁵ <<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast135.htm>> [queried 15 May 2017].

¹⁶ <<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast77.htm>> [queried 15 May 2017]; in London the gild 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 with symbols of the Christ. It is slow to anger and kills only¹⁸ out of n

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

- *Prudentia* is derived from *pro-videntia*, or foresight, anticipation represented with a compassan instrument of study and science of discernment and of course of distance. The symbol is placed at the person, indicating the rational aspect of skill.
- *Fortitudo* can be understood in several ways; initially, it means courage/fortitude. But the symbolism of the elephant bearing a castle suggests a more basic meaning, in the sense of steadfastness, ground positioning of the symbol at the feet of the figure could emphasize importance of a stable stance, so critical to wrestling, and by extension the meaning to “secure your base”.
- *Celeritas* means speed; but the choice of the tiger suggests a certain the speed. In some cases the tiger is presented holding a light object with obvious connotations of a fast, devastating and unexpected. The additional flavour of *celeritas* is “facility, wit” – an ability to readily 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.
- *Audacia* translates as “audaciousness, daring” – as the Roman *Audaces fortuna²² iuvat* 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 an instinctive, not *ratio*-mediated element of the skill; supporting this, the figure holds a heart in his²³ paw.

While the *Zettel*’s concepts are more dynamic, referring to the constantly changing situation as a factor of time, Fiore’s concepts are more static: Skills

¹⁷ <<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast131.htm>> [queried 15 May 2017].

¹⁸ <<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast78.htm>> [queried 15 May 2017].

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

²⁰ See Clausewitz, Book 3, Chapter 7: *Beharrlichkeit* (On Perseverance) or the 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 the Liechtenauer-based German system's terminology tends to be temporally focused on timing, while Fiore's system describes the fight in terms of close or long play. Of course, this is merely a matter of emphasis – the two treatises reference both.

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

IV. MODERN TOURNAMENT COMPETITION AND HISTORICAL FENCING RULE SETS

IV.1 Modern Longsword Tournament Competition Rule Sets

For the purpose of this paper, we shall refer to the rule sets applied in the typical modern tournament as “sportive rule sets”.²⁴ Their distinguishing feature, these rule sets, as opposed to the rules applying (mostly) to Olympic fencing, include modifications that do 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 “mask” as a rule does not count (and occasionally differentiated by strike to 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 allowed – i.e. a “clean hit” is an action where the attacker successfully lands a hit and the other fencer cannot retaliate in the fencing tempo or the hit is parried;

²⁴ In addition to longsword, there are tournaments in other weapons such as rapier, sword, *langes Messer*, dussack, dagger, wrestling and others; the principles of the system 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 refer to the modern HEMA tournament rule set as opposed to a historical one.

HEMA tournaments experiment with different rule sets – participants are required to familiarise themselves with changes and the applicable rule set is published in 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 (cut, thrust, cut) and/or technique (level of control); and
- Disarmsgrasping the opponent's blade, pommel strikes half-swording, grappling and other close-quarter contact are accepted as tactically sound – 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 before a grapple or strike with the sword.

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

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

There is no canonical competition rule set – different tournament organizers promote desirable outcomes through adaptations in the rules. It needs to be kept 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-Belgian

The Franco-Belgian rule set applies to a king-of-the-hill type of tournament where one fighter 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 illegal hit, the challenger loses the bout and the “king” remains. Each of the challengers has a certain number of “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 and arms above the elbows. The blades are rubbed with chalk or magnesium to leave a mark on the struck opponent. When a hit is landed, the 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 rule sets of individual guilds in Northern France (Paris, Lille) and Belgium (Ghent, Brussels, Antwerp) from at least the 1540s until the late 1700s.

IV.2.2 Codex Guelfh

This rule set sets out a *Gang* system; each fighter has five strikes, and if a fighter has landed five strikes, the *Gang* ends. A “strike” is defined as a fight hitting the opponent’s blade or the opponent. The *Gang* is not interrupted if a fighter 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 on 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 land a clean hit without parry.

IV.2.3 Manciolino

Manciolino proposes weighted scoring for sparring bouts, but an at first blunty and intuitive one: Hits to the head count three points, hits to the arms, torso and legs count 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 situation, where 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 and 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 death were, if not a daily occurrence, still a real risk, whether by way of self-defence or war.

In our view, our ancestors’ concern was to incentivise fighters to favour technical tactics, and they must have believed that their rule sets, each in its own way, served these goals. They were certainly expert enough to be able to evaluate both the 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 the *salle*, school or club was practiced by burghers who had a day-time job, often involved working with their hands. Neither they nor the fencing master could

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

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

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

IV.4 Summary

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

The question of goals of tournaments as well as their rule sets is a complex one.³⁰ The rules will always shape the fencing, so it is in effect impossible to have 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 preserve beautiful historical techniques.

Emulating “real combat” is in the view of many, and also in the authors' experience, impossible in a safe manner. The abstraction of an amicable competition 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 fencing training accident, which in the event was resolved extra-judicially: *Die Kantons Luzern, Part I: Stadtrechte; Vol. 3: Stadt und Territorialstaat Luzern. Stadtrechtbuch und andere normative Quellen (1461-1489)*, Konrad Wanner (2005), p. 369.

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

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

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

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

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

Those who promote subjective “good historical technique” are more common and 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 detriment of what creates an overly narrow form, a development similar to that of Olympic fencing and Capoeira.

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

V. CONCLUSIONS

The efforts of HEMA (in the context of this article German and Italian HEMA) based on fight books of the 15th century focus on reconstructing combat technique from period manuscripts written on the subject, and evaluating said reconstructions with as large a pool of fencers as possible, in a non-cooperative competition under high pressure. Since each individual fencer represents a data point, this facilitates making the discipline as accessible as possible to modern practitioners and promotes occasions where fencers can meet to fence each other. This enlarges the 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, which do not replicate the function if not the form of medieval garments. Academic researchers are uncomfortable with this casual loss³⁵ of purity.

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 minor³⁶ impact on the experience, while modern clothing undeniably leads to a loss of authenticity, this effect is outweighed by the explosive expansion of the data-set of experiences and interpretations made available. The HEMA experience is, we would argue,

³⁴ This is the premise of Michael Edelson's *The Talhoffer Society* (n.p.: CreateSpace).

³⁵ See e.g. Jaquet/Sørensen, *HEMA*, p. 20; while the authors acknowledge the academic nature of the research, academic research is not (yet) able to provide definitive answers regarding the target audiences of the *Fechtbücher* (*ibid.*, pp. 9-14 and *passim*, or Deacon, *Prologue*), 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 likely not have revealed. And even if we may never realise an authentic reconstruction of historical fencing, HEMA has, in a fun and hands-on way, helped broaden the appreciation for a more balanced, a less dark, barbarian and primitive Middle Ages.

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

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

Physical conditioning is a weak spot in reconstruction efforts, with practitioners turning 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 degree as the technical skill of the fencing increases. The fight books of the Middle Ages have surprising depth in their understanding of tactical as well as (at times) strategic concepts. Our experience with those strategic and tactical concepts leads us to wonder whether the *Fechtbücher* had a wider connection to other strategic and tactical concepts such as politics and small unit warfare.

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

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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