

# The Importance of Studying Historical Treatises

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The subject of Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) has so far been addressed only marginally both in the literature and in the Western martial arts community. Their traditions disappeared long ago and in contrast to the Eastern martial arts, with the sole exception of wrestling, HEMA cannot be reconstructed solely on the basis of any of today's modern combatative sport. The *Fechtschulen* and *Fechtmeisterei* no longer exist, and there are no individuals analogous to the Eastern sensei who could teach students how to fight with a sword, cutlass or halberd. The only reasonable option for HEMA reconstruction is the research and study of *Fechtbücher* (fighting treatises) and applying the knowledge contained therein in practice.

## Background

The reconstruction of HEMA has its roots in the 18th century interest in the ideas of knighthood and nobility. Historic books by famous authors such as Sir Walter Scott and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, inspired the English nobles to organise a tournament in Eglinton in the year 1839, where the participants could try their skills in combat. The re-enactment groups who mainly deal with the romantic aspects of knighthood have recently undergone another renaissance. However instead of basing their activities on the academic sources, they frequently rely on stereotypical visions of the Middle Ages including the manner of wielding weapons. Their cause is noble but their dis-interest of studying and applying available historical sources to their activities has resulted in a less than serious recreation of the period and their mostly playful orientation has led them to a dead-end as far as the martial arts are concerned.

Apparently the first attempts at reconstruction were made as early as the 1890s when Sir Egerton Castle and Sir Captain Alfred Hutton (among others) presented their analysis of "ancient weapons" to the general public. The author does not possess an exact account of the events in question, yet from both Castle's and Hutton's works one can tell that the "first steps" in HEMA reconstruction were riddled with errors and misconceptions. The events are described in more detail in articles by John Clements "[Historical Fencing Studies - The British Legacy](#)" and Tony Wolf's "[The Grand Assault at Arms](#)".

The interest in HEMA has existed for more than a century, however, interest and development has accelerated with the advent of the Internet over the past twenty-five years which has brought together a world-wide collection of researchers (scholars, hobbyists and practitioners). Before the Internet, individual groups or "reconstructors", historians and archaeologists were virtually unknown to the wider public and worked on their own or locally in their particular community. Nowadays groups like [Academy of European Medieval Martial Arts](#), [Chicago Swordplay Guild](#), [The Exiles](#), [CMTA](#), [Association for Renaissance Martial Arts](#) and others have many active members and communicate with each other with regularity. HEMA reconstruction has become a goal for many researchers, practitioners, hobbyists and scholars. The various groups have approached the subject from different orientations and mostly independently until the recent availability of the Internet. The mutual and frequent contacts have resulted in the application of consistent academic methods across the organizations and therefore, enhanced the success of the reconstruction of viable Historical European Martial Arts.

## Difficulties of Reconstruction

Generally there are two accepted methods used for the reconstruction of tools and the manner of their usage. The first is to analyse the available sources and attempt to reconstruct the subject such as the case with medieval musical instruments, there were no known pieces that have survived that could be played. The second method is to use a surviving piece in an environment which resembles as close as possible, the original. This approach was used to determine the power of an arrow shot with a longbow.

Both methods have their advantages and disadvantages, which should be discussed in the context of the HEMA. The analysis of the historical sources provides a theoretical knowledge on how the weapon could have been used in the period of study. However, after the historical sources are examined, many questions remain and therefore the experimental method comes into play. As with dancing manuals, the student of the art must apply the knowledge gained to practice. The most extreme variant of this method is when one has no historical sources, and only has the artifact to study in order to guess its possible usage. Following this is the need for the testing phase where one will create an environment resembling the original as closely as possible and determine the viability of the study results.

With respect to HEMA, creating an environment to test the results of the study of the historical treatises is almost impossible. The weapons were originally used to maim and kill well-skilled opponents in a life-threatening situation. For obvious reasons the experimental method can only be an approximation, which may have an impact on the outcome. The lack of sources is the reason for a natural tendency among researchers to look for analogies in using a tool among other similar and well-known objects. This often leads to many misunderstandings and to the cardinal error which is often made by amateur researchers: adapting the tool to the method. Most of the errors committed in the early stages of reconstruction fall into this category. It is a truism to say that such analysis can hardly lead to the right conclusions.

Along with the amount of knowledge accumulated and learned to date, there is growing awareness of the manner of using certain tools or weapons. One can check various techniques, and slowly gain comprehension about the way in which it was done in the past. By using the original surviving pieces or their most accurate replicas one may find answers which are not revealed in the sources. Often it is the fundamental information, like the speed and force of a sword cut. Only by joining the two methods: analysis and experiment, one can learn about the whole of historical European martial arts.

## Drawbacks of Treatises

The medieval combat treatises primarily addressed the nobility, and later on, important city statesmen and burghers. Johannes Liechtenauer leaves no doubt as to whom he speaks, beginning his verses with: "*Young knight learn to love the God and honour the ladies and your fame will grow.*"<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the anonymous author of the French treatise "Le Jeu de la Hache" writes: "*And for this, let every man, noble of body and courage, naturally desire to exercise [...] principally in the noble feat of arms.*"<sup>2</sup> Fiore dei Liberi in his prologue mentions that he would not like his art to be spread amongst people who "*would not use it properly.*"<sup>3</sup> His follower, Filippo Vadi, takes it even further: "*...never, by no means, this art and doctrine should fall in the hands of unrefined and low born men.*"<sup>4</sup>

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1 The author used the translation of selected parts of Hango Döbringer's treatise by Grzegorz Zabinski.

2 The translation of "[Le Jeu De La Hache](#)" by Dr. Sydney Anglo.

3 The translation of Fiore dei Liberi's "Flos Duellatorum" by Royal Armouries in Leeds.

4 The translation of Filippo Vadi's treatise prologue by [Luca Porzio](#).

This elitism is the main argument against the treatises, but there are facts which counter this argument: the masters possessed the awareness of the existence both of the lower classes and their own ways of fighting. Fiore mentions: "[...] *Kings, Princes, Counts, generals, earls and clergy people are qualified for the duels.*", Vadi says: "*For this reason I rightly tell you that they [the low born men] are in every way alien to this science, while the opposite is true, in my opinion, for anybody of perspicacious talent and lovely limbs, as are courtesans, scholars, barons, princes, dukes and kings.*" The author of "Le Jeu..." adds: "[...] *the Axe-play is honourable and profitable for the preservation of a body noble or non-noble.*"

Surely, the lower classes were looked down upon, which is confirmed by many various quotations, for example in Vadi: "*...Heaven did not generate these men [low born], unrefined and without wit or skill, and without any agility, but they were rather generated as unreasonable animals, only able to bear burdens and to do vile and unrefined works.*" or in von Danzig calling the Zornhaw "*a bad peasant blow*"<sup>5</sup>, because this was the way in which an unskilled peasant would attack. Similarly the Liechtenauer's scorn for the masters of lower standing (and lesser skill) can be seen in him calling them *leychmeistere* - the dance masters. However it can be sure that the lower classes practised their own forms of the martial arts, probably more sport-like than the upper classes. Interestingly both in the literature and in the chronicles one can find remarks about the commoners beating the knights in wrestling, although sometimes it is clearly just a rhetorical figure, symbol or a metaphor. The existence of martial arts similar to the Eastern kobudo can be also confirmed in Paulus Hector Mair's treatise which contains a section on combat with a sickle and a flail which initially were simple peasant tools.

Undoubtedly both the costs of creating the treatise and common illiteracy were probably the main reasons why during the Middle Ages books weren't written for the lower classes. During this period, the oral tradition fulfilled the very important role of maintaining and passing on knowledge and tradition, therefore, one can suspect that the lower classes gained their knowledge in this practical manner. It does not mean that the people who took part in battles were unskilled. Certainly even the "lowly" *leychmeistere* could teach something to the commoners, and as we learn from many other sources, sword and buckler was quite a popular weapon also of the lower classes.<sup>6</sup>

The lower classes rarely duelled amongst themselves, however, they were periodically called to arms for larger skirmishes and battles. In combat with many opponents the tactics is much more important than the number of techniques known. Most probably in the process of learning to fight, the number of techniques had less importance than the ability to use them in real combat<sup>7</sup>.

Another drawback of the treatises is that there are only 2 surviving pieces from the 14th century, and none earlier. If one wants to reconstruct the 11th or 12th century sword and shield combat, there is a need to extrapolate techniques found in sources from as late as the Renaissance period. Most interestingly, Medieval treatises do not deal with sword and shield at all (only the buckler and the large German duelling shields or thin knight's shields used mainly for duelling). Dr. Sydney Anglo proposes that the medieval fechtbücher could in fact be treated as the advent of the Renaissance period. However one should note that the techniques contained therein were used during the 14th and 15th centuries therefore calling them "Renaissance Martial Arts" is probably not entirely on the mark. However the distinction between the martial arts of the Middle Ages and those of the Renaissance can be difficult at best since most of the schools continued and evolved through the 15th-16th centuries.

The next problem with treatises is of another kind. Every master describes the techniques in his own particular way. For example even the pupils of Johannes Liechtenauer present a different

5 The translation of selected pieces of Peter von Danzig by Grzegorz Zabinsky.

6 See eg. Chaucer description of the Miller.

7 This subject has been addressed in a wider scope by J. Clements in his article "One against many", and Mark Bertrand in his article "[Tactical swordsmanship](#)".

interpretation of his verses, as it can be seen in treatises by Hango Döbringer, Peter von Danzig and Sigmund Ringeck. When one adds to it possible errors of the scribe (for example, switching the descriptions of illustrations in the Codex Wallerstein or adding verses on the margins as in Döbringer), or artwork which occasionally doesn't match the text, new vocabulary, sometimes vague and even cryptic descriptions (Talhoffer), quite illegible handwriting (Paulus Hector Mair), lack of the rules of orthography, the state of some surviving pieces (so-called Solothurner's Fechtbuch), and finally the notion that most of them were never intended to be viewed as manuals but rather a form of self-presentation or discussion, one can see that the deciphering of the treatise becomes a very challenging task.

In the end, one should add that the Medieval masters fully comprehended both the complexity of their art: "normal">...this art is so complicated that can hardly be remembered without the help of books or treatises..." (says Fiore dei Liberi), and the limitations of the books: "A man cannot explain combat as clearly by speaking and writing as he can teach and show with the hands." (concludes Döbringer).

### Other Possible Sources<sup>8</sup>

Other possible sources can include the chronicles. However the accuracy of the narrative sources was very much criticised by Sydney Anglo in his book "**Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe**". He quoted the descriptions of two fights: the duel between Anthony Woodville and Bastard of Burgundy (1467) given by four various witnesses, and another duel between Bayard and Alonzo de Sotomayore (1503) described by three various people<sup>9</sup>. The differences between the actual relations results in a low confidence on the chronicles as primary sources in the reconstruction of HEMA. The romances and chanson de geste will be dealt with separately. Some details of using various weapons can be found even in Nordic Sagas<sup>10</sup>. The descriptions of feats of arms however are much too exaggerated and heroic. The blows given by combatants can cut a man in half along with his horse<sup>11</sup>. The descriptions often lack any details about the manner and techniques employed during fighting. The author of romance was usually more interested in the effect inflicted upon the reader than exact depictions of combat. However sometimes an occasional valid conclusion could be made when compared to other sources - such as cutting at the opponent's legs often found in Sagas and confirmed later by Medieval archaeological finds.

Up until recently (and unfortunately sometimes even still) the significance of contemporary illuminations and artwork has been very much underrated. The prevailing opinion that the art lacked realism is hopefully losing ground. It turns out that very often those depictions seem very similar to the ones found in the treatises. Closer examination of these numerous albeit often ignored sources can help to place the martial arts in the proper social and cultural context.

One final possible source may be the forensics material from excavations of battlefields such as Towton and Wisby. They reveal fascinating information about injuries from the contemporary weapons and in connection with the analysis of treatises they can be very helpful in the reconstruction of the actual combat. The only drawbacks are that forensic information is limited to revealing only the bone injuries and therefore, one can never be sure of the actual situation or incident when and how the wounds were received. The principle example in this regard is the skull which appeared to receive three shots with crossbow bolts which brought forward much speculation. It is unfortunate that such rich finds as Wisby and Towton are quite rare.

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8 The subject of other possible sources for reconstruction of Medieval Martial Arts has been dealt in detail in the book by Dr Sydney Anglo "Martial Arts in the Renaissance Europe".

9 Anglo Sydney, "Martial Arts in the Renaissance Europe", pp. 18-20.

10 Oakeshott Ewartt, "Archaeology of Weapons".

11 see eg. Chanson de Roland.

As one can see, reliance solely on secondary sources is not prudent. They may supply social and cultural context but do not specify the exact weapons handling techniques. What is found in the texts, illustrations and excavations must be considered in the context of the treatises. The opposite is also true - the Fechtbücher must be studied within the proper cultural context so as to not to draw incorrect conclusions<sup>12</sup>.

### Available Treatises

The direct instructions in the form of fighting treatises started to appear at the end of the 13th century. The oldest known surviving piece is the I.33 Manuscript held in [Royal Armouries](#) in Leeds, which describes combat with sword and buckler. The work of brothers Del Serpente, which has still not been found, dates at the same period of time, however Dr. Anglo doubts its existence. It seems that those two books are somewhat unique in their own time, because the next surviving manuscript is dated at 1389 and was written by a priest, Hango Döbringer, a pupil to Johannes Liechtenauer and is mainly a discussion between the author and *leychmeistere*<sup>13</sup>.

The end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th centuries were the times when masters systematised the martial arts: Johannes Liechtenauer (long sword and wrestling), Andrew Legnitzer (spear), Ott Jud (wrestling) and Fiore dei Liberi (a complete fighting system). From among them Liechtenauer seems to be especially important, since from him comes the German tradition of the longsword combat tradition widely copied almost verbatim and developed in the 15th century treatises of Peter von Danzig, Sigmund Ringeck, and in the later anonymous "Goliath" and Jörg Wilhalm finishing at Joachim Meyer who however changed it considerably. This tradition has been described in detail in a few academic works<sup>14</sup>. Fiore dei Liberi appears to be a father of the Italian tradition which starts with his "Flos Duellatorum" (3 different editions known) and is continued by Filippo Vadi and later on by Achille Marozzo ("Opera Nova") and Manciolino. This tradition awaits more detailed examination.

Other notable 15th century sources include: "Gladiatoria" which deals with armoured combat, possibly containing Liechtenauer's advice on the topic, and the French "Le Jeu de la Hache", which describes the way to fight with a pole-axe. Lecküchners treatise on messer seems to contain the widest spectrum of techniques with this weapon. Hans Talhoffer, although containing Ott's wrestling and interesting pole-axe and dagger sections appears to be overrated, being very cryptic. Unfortunately this treatise is the most exploited and is often used as a sole source which leads to many misunderstandings in HEMA reconstruction.

Other sources include: Codex Wallerstein, Hans Czynner, Paulus Kal (rival to Talhoffer), Sigmund Schinning (contains unorthodox Liechtenauer glosa). There exist also some French sources which have not yet been fully investigated. Also two English manuscripts: Harleian and Additional MS 39564 have proven to be very difficult to translate into modern English and to interpret. Recently, new findings include a new short German manuscript which appears not to follow Liechtenauer's tradition.

From among the Renaissance manuscripts the continuation of medieval traditions can be found in an anonymous treatise entitled "Goliath", Jörg Wilhalm, Achille Marozzo and Manciolino as mentioned earlier. According to Dr. Anglo, Pietro Monte (the very end of the 15th century), a Spanish master, described medieval techniques. Also Silver's "Brief Instruction on my Paradoxes of

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12 For the possible mistakes one can make while interpreting manuscripts without their cultural context see Christopher Amberger's article "[Playing by the Rules](#)".

13 Master Johannes Liechtenauer used this term to denote swordsmen who deal only with shows, not the real swordfighting.

14 Among them the most important ones include Hans-Peter Hils "Meister Johann Liechtenauers Kunst des langen Schwertes" and Martin Wierschin "Meister Johann Liechtenauers Kunst des Fechtens".

Defence" contains some valuable advice and its sword and buckler has distinctive connections to the I.33. Albrecht Dürer - a famous painter - deals with medieval combat too. Worth noticing is the 1200 page long compilation made by Paulus Hector Mair, a burgher obsessed with the martial arts. Those works listed comprise most of the publicly available HEMA sources for the medieval period. A wider description of medieval fighting treatises can be found in articles by S. Matthew Galas "[Setting the Record Straight: The Art of the Sword in Medieval Europe](#)" and "Kindred Spirits"<sup>15</sup>. German treatises were described in detail by Hans-Peter Hils in his work "Meister Johann Liechtenauers Kunst des langen Schwertes".

As one can see, the number of sources is extensive. Some of them instruct students from the start (Liberi) and others contain only some selection of mostly advanced techniques (Codex Wallerstein) which can be properly interpreted only with the help of other sources. Each of them should be looked at in detail and interpreted in order to better understand the way of handling weapons.

### **Closing Remarks**

The ideal toward which each serious student of HEMA should strive is to read and comprehend at least a few of the most important treatises, handle original surviving weapons, fight with various partners using excellent weapons replica, and take part in larger skirmishes. So far the sources are mostly hard to obtain, written in Latin, Old German or Old French, which are rather unknown to people not dealing with history or philology. This situation is hopefully changing for the better because of the growing interest in the manuscripts and awareness of the existence of Western Martial Arts. More interpretations and translations are appearing, both in the form of online libraries and published as books. However the weapon replicas often are still nowhere near the quality of the originals and handling the originals is restricted to relatively few practitioners and researchers. Reconstruction is a challenging task which demands much time and effort which not many can afford. However lack of time should not be an excuse to dismiss the sources in favour of "pure" experimental methods. Given the present knowledge of the HEMA, one can claim that without the sources, this method rarely succeeds on its own merit. Regardless of their drawbacks (true or suspected elitism, limited number of techniques, bad condition and possible randomness of the surviving pieces), the treatises are the only plausible source. HEMA were so complex and diverse that there are no real serious alternatives to studying the Fechtbücher.

In time, perhaps there will appear European schools of martial arts, and people attending these will learn the techniques from the "second hand", although the instructor (or "master") should legitimize himself with a deep knowledge of the subject. Only then will the western martial arts community be able to credibly speak about the true Historical European Martial Arts. The road is long and hard before that state is achieved.

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