

CONFERENCE REPORT

MIXING FENCING GROUND AND ACADEMIC FLOOR

A review of three recent conferences with a focus on Historical European Martial Arts studies

Sword: Form and Thought
German Blade Museum, Solingen
19-21 November 2015

The Art That Suits You
Schlossberg Museum, Chemnitz
18-20 February 2016

Shields of the Late Middle Ages
Bavarian National Museum, Munich
4-5 March 2016

REVIEWER

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For the past half decade, increasing attention has been directed towards Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) studies as an emerging field of cross-disciplinary research. Particular focus has been given to written sources of the late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period referred to as 'Fight Books'.¹ A few dedicated conferences and workshops have emerged, alongside specific panels in larger conferences on arms and armour or medieval studies.² This conference report will briefly review three such events held recently in Germany where HEMA were presented both through academic papers and practical demonstrations by 'fighting scholars' (a term coined by Raúl Sánchez García and Dale C. Spencer [2013]), thereby providing a multi-dimensional (scientific and pragmatic) range of perspectives.

One such conference was held on the margins of an exhibition called 'Sword: Form and Thought' at the German Blade Museum in Solingen. This showcased new ideas and approaches on how to study and present swords as dynamic objects to a larger audience. This was held as an international conference, involving scholars, museum curators, researchers from various fields, and experts not only of martial arts but also blacksmithing.³ This three-day symposium included a day dedicated to the practical exchange of martial knowledge. It was actually a follow-up to an earlier conference, held in Freiburg in 2012,⁴ which did not however include an exhibition.

The 22 papers covered a large timeframe (from prehistory to the early modern era, with a heavy focus on medieval swords) as well as a large geographical frame (from Asia to Europe). The work presented could be divided into four thematic subjects: classification and typology, fighting and swordsmanship, metallurgy and production, and symbolism and reception. Many thought-provoking contributions pointed out the need to revise established theories and methods that have in the past been used to study and classify swords. New findings and case studies were presented and led to interesting and deep discussions between experts and scholars.

The papers dealing with fighting and swordsmanship stemmed from experimental archaeology and use-wear analysis [Raphael Hermann's paper 'Bronze Age Combat Experiment: The Swords'], German studies and linguistics [Matthias Johannes Bauer's paper 'Egenolff's Fight Book: Form and Thought, Then and Now'], history and anthropology [Eric Burkart's paper 'How to Handle a Long Sword and How to Use a Fight Book'], and history and material science [my paper 'Analysis of Mechanical Properties and Construction of Three Fencing Swords']. The aforementioned papers attempted to demonstrate details of this field of research from a different point of view, trying to methodologically reshape the boundaries and identity of martial arts studies connected to either fight books or material culture. The proceedings of this conference

1 For some introductory remarks on the development of the field, and issues faced by both researchers and practitioners, see Jaquet and Sorenson [2015].

2 See Jaquet [2013].

3 See Grotkamp-Schepers, Immel, Johansson, and Wetzler [2015] as well as Deutscher, Kaiser, and Wetzler [2015].

4 See Deutscher, Kaiser, and Wetzler [2014].

will appear in a collection entitled *Armour and Weapons* by Boydell and Brewer. Additionally, several events were held during the exhibition which revolved around the demonstration and introduction of European martial arts.

In the context of a wider project of an exhibition on fight books in the Schlossberg Museum, a conference solely dedicated to HEMA studies was organised by Thore Wilkens [Chemnitz, February 18-20, 2016]. This two-day conference was entitled 'Kunst dye dich zyret: Fechten als Mittel persönlicher und institutioneller Repräsentation' ('The Art that Suits You: Fencing as a Means of Personal and Institutional Representation') and it also included half a day of martial exchanges in the gym. During this event eight out of the nine speakers were experienced martial artists. Thore Wilkens opened the conference by presenting on the subject of the goals, methods and limits of 'fight book studies' ['Die Idee kommt aus der Bewegung. Potenzial und Methodik der praktisch perspektivierten Fechtbuchforschung': 'The Idea Come from Movement: Potential and Methodology of Fight Books Studies with a Practical Perspective']. He concluded the event with a case study showing the relevance of the practical orientation of research compared to more classical – indeed, arguably biased – methodologies used in the context of art history studies ['Der Schlüssel zur Kunst. Ergebnisse einer praktisch perspektivierten Analyse der kommentierten ringer kunst': 'The Key Unlocking the Art: Results of an Analysis with Practical Perspective of a Commented Art of Wrestling'].

Uwe Fiedler outlined the importance of this approach for urban history ['Fechtmeister, Schlachtschwertierer, Raufbolde. Relevanzen der Fechtbuchforschung für stadtgeschichtliche Fragestellungen': 'Fencing Master, Executioner, Ruffians: Relevance of Fight Book Studies for Urban History Questions']. Paul Becker reviewed previous research and presented new findings related to two well-known authors of the fifteenth century ['Ausgeschöpft? Zwischen Qualität und Quantität von Quellen zu mittelalterlichen Fechtmeistern. Paulus Kal und Hans Thalhoffer. Ein Vergleich': 'Depleted? Between Quality and Quantity of Sources Related to Medieval Fencing Masters: Paulus Kal and Hans Thalhoffer, A Comparison']. Dierk Hagedorn presented specific techniques from the armoured fencing repertory and reviewed some of the misconceptions about this type of fighting ['Spezialeinsatz mit Mordschlag und Straße der Glieder. Der Kampf im Harnisch in den "Gladiatoria"-Handschriften': 'Specific Engagement with the Mortal Strike and the Road of the Gauntlet: The Fighting in Armour in the "Gladiatoria" Manuscripts'].

Jan Schäfer presented the authorial strategies for personal and institutional representation of the 18th century fencing masters ['Das Fechtbuch als Repräsentationsraum an Fürstenhöfen und Universitäten der Frühen Neuzeit am Beispiel der Werke von Jéann Daniel L'Ange und Jean Jamain de Beaupré': 'The Fight Books as a Means of Representation in the Princely Courts and Early Modern Universities with the Works of Jean Daniel L'Ange and Jean Jamain de Beaupré as Examples']. Moshtagh Khorasani introduced the specificities of wrestling in Iranian History with parallels from contemporaneous practices and perspective with the historical treatises ['Die soziale Stellung des Ringkampfes und Ringer in der iranischen Geschichte. Eine Vergleichsanalyse der persischen Manuskripte über den historischen Ringkampf': 'The Social Status of Wrestlers in Iranian History: A Comparative Analysis of the Persian Manuscripts about Historical Wrestling'].

Matthias Johannes Bauer presented a socio-linguistic and technical analysis of the different printed versions of one 16th century work ['Das Egenolffsche Fechtbuch: Ladenhüter oder Verkaufsschlager?': 'The Fight Book of Egenolff, Unsold Good or Best-Seller?']. Rainer Welle offered a theoretical analysis and confronted a pragmatic point of view of the representation of movement in illustrated fight books ['Vom Standbild zur filmischen Illusion. Das frühneuhochochdeutsche Fechtschrifttum und sein Beitrag zur Visualisierung und Objektivierung internalisierter Bewegungsbilder': 'From Still Picture to Cinematic Illusion: The Early Middle High German Fighting Material and its Contribution to Visualisation and Objectification of the Mental Image of Movement']. Lastly, I proposed a typology as a research tool to classify and analyse Fight Books ['Die Verschriftlichung von Kampfpraxen. Zur Entwicklung einer Typologie von Fechtbüchern, zur näheren Bestimmung der kulturellen

und institutionellen Kontexte': 'The Fighting Praxes Put in Writing: Towards the Establishment of a Typology of Fight Books to Identify Cultural and Institutional Contexts']. Overall, this conference should significantly help to redefine the German research scene in terms of rethinking its limits and potential.

Finally, a two-day international conference entitled 'Schilde des Spätmittelalter' ('Shields of the Late Middle Ages') was held at the Bavarian National Museum (Munich, March 4-5, 2016). This attracted curators and arms/armour scholars as well as HEMA practitioners. It focused mainly on questions related to typology, case studies and representation of various medieval shields, with several contributions dealing with conservation studies, replication and archaeological experiments.

Two contributions were specifically focused on HEMA studies, and a thirty minute annotated demonstration took place. Cornelius Berthold and Ingo Petri ['Passiv oder aktiv? Die Verwendung von Schildern im Kampf': 'Passive or Active? The Handling of Shields in Combat'], two scholars and experienced practitioners, proposed a review of our understanding of the martial principles and contexts of interpretation and experimentation based on both material culture and technical literature (i.e., fight books). Herbert Schmidt ['Der Buckler im Spätmittelalter': 'The Buckler in the Late Middle Ages'], a martial artist and independent researcher, presented his typology of bucklers.⁵ With his HEMA group (Ars Gladii) he also gave a demonstration, surveying the most important material from the Fight Books related to fighting with sword and buckler.

As mentioned above, these three recent events are all developments on earlier pioneering conferences in Germany; moreover, they also echo similar initiatives that have begun to emerge in different areas over the last decade in places such as England, Scotland, Austria, France and Switzerland. The frequency and increasing quality of the German events strongly suggest that HEMA studies are actually gaining recognition and momentum on an academic level. The critical mass of researchers – whether they be academics, martial experts or both – and the increasing number of scientific and amateur publications in the field certainly presage interesting developments on the horizon.

Amongst the important issues this field will have to face in the future is the definition of practice as research.⁶ As showcased by several of the papers reviewed above, the inclusion of demonstrations with scholarly paper serves not only as decorum or public outreach entertainment, but mostly as a support to scientific argumentation – may it be for research on bodily knowledge circulation or on material culture. However, such performances are still perceived merely as 'revival', 're-enactment' or 'entertainment'. More proof of concepts and case studies should appear in publication to help minimise confusion about the scholarly value of experiencing and experimenting within historical martial arts.⁷ As with other fields of martial arts studies, innovative ways of bridging the gap between researcher and practitioner must be found, as well as new approaches on the matter of how to actually publish research on embodied knowledge.

Historical European Martial Arts studies, based on a large corpus of written documentation from the late middle Ages onwards, has mainly been based on classical disciplinary approaches such as history, philology and art history. The latest developments, however, seem to demonstrate that new approaches to these big questions are increasingly cross- and multi-disciplinary (or indeed even what Bowman calls 'anti-disciplinary' [2015]). Through such developments, the field or fields of HEMA are currently being re-invented.

5 For more, see Schmidt [2015].

6 On this issue, see Bowman [2015] and Spatz [2015].

7 See Jaquet [2016].

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