

# BOOK REVIEW

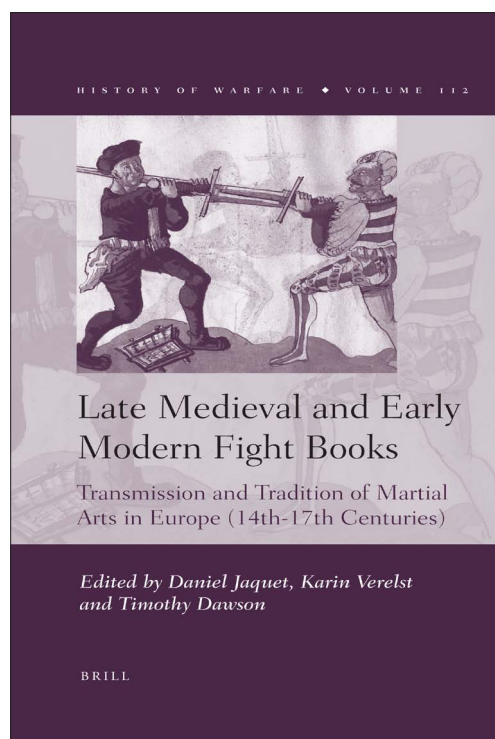
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## Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books

Daniel Jaquet, Karin Verelst and  
Timothy Dawson (eds.)

Brill, 2016

619 pages



As the field of martial arts studies has grown in the last fifteen to twenty years, there has been an upsurge of interest in the traditional martial arts of the late medieval and early modern periods. Unlike Asian martial arts, the practice of these arts has not been transmitted in an unbroken chain from practitioner to practitioner, nor have any national or traditional styles of combat dating to those times survived into the modern era [Clements 1998: 1-3]. As a result, much of the research into these martial arts has been conducted as an attempt first to understand them and then to reconstruct how they were practiced. One prominent direction of inquiry employs surviving textual sources as a key component of the reconstruction process. Perhaps the single most important genre in these attempts are the so-called 'fight books' – instructional texts focusing specifically on armed or unarmed combat.

These 'fight books' have drawn the attention of both academics and non-academics as a vector to understand, interpret, and possibly reconstruct early European martial arts. A first attempt at reconstructing these practices was undertaken near the turn of the 19th century [Peeters 1987], but this wave receded following the First World War. The next major development in the historiography of the fight books, at least in English, was taken up by researchers such as Sydney Angelo and John Clements, who began investigating the fight book tradition with the goal of reconstructing pre-modern combat techniques rather than the material culture of the fight books themselves.

The edited volume *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books: Transmission and Tradition of Martial Arts in Europe (14th-17th Centuries)* represents a natural progression of investigation into the fight books and seeks to broaden the discussion and engage with a scholarly audience. The articles in the collection deal directly with these texts as well as the martial arts and martial cultures associated with them. The volume is the 112th in Brill's *History of Warfare* series and has been edited by Daniel Jaquet, Karin Verelst, and Timothy Dawson. While the content may appeal to a wide range of readers, the high purchase price will limit its circulation to dedicated scholars and academic libraries.

Jaquet et al.'s volume seeks to combine several diverse methods of inquiry into a single volume, while simultaneously maintaining a sufficient level of academic rigor so as to appeal to scholars across a wide range of disciplines. While the collection's title ostensibly focuses on the fight book tradition in Western Europe, the reality is that the volume attempts to advance a dialogue about martial arts through the lens of the fight book tradition. As such, the editors have not constrained submissions to any single school of thought, methodological approach, or academic discipline. Much of the research into the martial arts of Western Europe has come from a collection of

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independent scholars, bloggers, or practitioners of Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) rather than from more traditional academic sources. *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books* gives voice to the contributions that these non-traditional scholars have made to the field of martial arts studies and places them in an academic dialogue.

The editors state that their goal is to start an interdisciplinary conversation on European martial arts generally and fight books specifically. The purpose of *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books* is 'to foster further research in the new field of Historical European Martial Arts Studies by bringing it to a wide international academic audience, to open up sources to historians hitherto unaware of them, as well as to specialists in other fields of cultural and humanist study' [17]. In order to achieve this aim, the collection's articles represent a wide range of study – from linguistics to art history and from history to codicology. Other submissions come from teachers and practitioners of reconstructed European martial arts.

The articles within the volume deal with the material and the context of these fight books by investigating their material culture (manuscripts, collections, transmission history, etc.) as well as the text and images contained therein. The articles within the volume do not intervene in any single scholarly discussion or center on any single theoretical approach. Rather, this volume serves as a venue to combine a multitude of approaches, theories, and disciplines into a single work that outlines the full range of possible conversations about early European martial arts and martial culture.

A significant secondary function of this collection is to grant access to previous research to a broader scholarly community by combining several traditions into an English-language source. The majority of the research into the fight book traditions has been carried out in languages other than English, principally German, and many of the authors in this edited collection provide summaries and critiques of the state of scholarship in these languages. In this way, *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books* serves as an extended review article, outlining the state of the field.

The collection contains contributions from sixteen different scholars and practitioners, a detailed introduction, and a brief conclusion, as well as numerous images, diagrams, and tables. The articles range in length from fifteen pages to nearly eighty (with accompanying notes and appendices). Following the conclusion, the editors include an extensive bibliography of manuscripts and prints that comprise the corpus of medieval and early modern fight books. This is followed by a brief bibliography of important secondary works focusing on medieval martial arts, which serves as a supplement to the bibliographies included in each article.

The body of the book contains three subdivisions: 'Fight Books and Methodological Issues through Disciplinary Lenses'; 'From the Books to the Arts: The Fighting Arts in Context'; and 'Martial Arts, Martial Culture and Case Studies'. Broadly speaking, each section aims to address a specific issue pertinent to the study of fight books and European martial arts. The first section deals head-on with the theoretical approaches to the fight books as well as case studies demonstrating the application of theory. The second section presents a historiographical overview of major works and authors of combat manuals in Germany, Italy, Spain, France, the Low Countries, and the British Isles. The final section presents four case studies which are better understood as examinations of martial culture during the period when the fight books were composed.

As can be expected from any edited volume of this length, there is a considerable amount of variation in the quality and utility of the articles. Perhaps the most useful articles for a general audience are those found in the second section, as these present a historiographical survey of the major existing fight books, their history, and the state of research. These articles speak broadly to the state of research in a limited field and require

little specialist knowledge to decode. At the other extreme of the spectrum, several articles speak narrowly to a single era, text, or disciplinary approach. Many of the articles are of little interest to a non-specialist or to those without specialist knowledge of linguistics, art history, codicology, etc. However, these highly-focused articles fit well within the editors' broader project to engage scholars from different fields and to demonstrate the multiplicity of approaches possible when approaching European martial arts.

This is not to say that there are no editorial flaws that should have been addressed before the volume went to press. While not rampant, there are several typographical or grammatical errors that found their way into the volume, and certain articles are much more prone to errors of this type than others. Furthermore, there is no standard formatting when it comes to translations. Some authors present both the original language and translation in-text while others cite the original language in-text with translations in footnotes or vice-versa. Finally, the editors, in their introduction, discuss the term 'fight book' along with other similar terms (in English and other languages) that have been used to describe a certain form of text. While they assert that the term 'fight book' will be preferred over others, several contributors do not follow this convention. Complications such as these should have been addressed during the editorial process.

In spite of these few flaws, Jaquet et al.'s *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books: Transmission and Tradition of Martial Arts in Europe (14th-17th Centuries)* will likely remain a key text in the field for a number of years. The scope of the collection is broad enough to appeal to a range of academic and non-academic readers with interests in pre-modern European martial arts and martial arts studies. At the same time, the volume adds significant academic quality and rigor to a conversation that has often been restricted to practitioners and those on the fringes of the mainstream academy. *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books* will certainly not be the final word on the topic but it is a notable leap forward in the conversation.

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