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Reviewed Article:

Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) and Reenactment - Concept, Problems, Approaches in Our Experience

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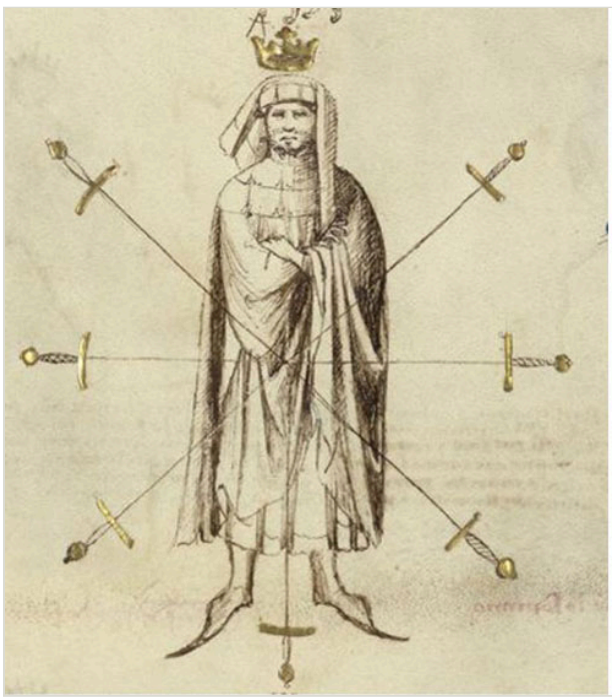

2013 EXARC meeting at Csiki Pihenökert (HU)

Throughout the history of re-enactment and in general efforts to revive or recreate the milieu of bygone ages, the military aspect of lifestyle has always enjoyed a special status-one might even say that the military stand point is a predominant part of many re-enactments.

> The fact that Eastern martial arts have Western equivalents, originating from the Middle Ages, had been practically unnoticed by the public up to the 1990s.

There are several reasons why this is so. First of all, re-enactment itself started with the recreation of battles; the tradition goes back all the way to the Roman Empire (for example the naumachia scene during the opening of the Flavian Amphitheatre)[1] , played a part in medieval tournaments[2] and enjoyed a great popularity in Britain[3] , the United States and Russia in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th[4] , not to mention contemporary grand events in Visby, Grünwald or Gettysburg.

As for its contemporary reception, we must bear in mind that since the end of World War II Western Europe (and, with some sad exceptions and to a lesser extent, its Eastern counterpart) has enjoyed an unprecedented period of peace and prosperity. Generations have been born and have grown up without experiencing the hardships and horrors of war. Whilst this is a very fortunate situation and we all hope that it will remain as such for many years to come, the lack of military conflicts in the continent has led to an increasing interest in the representation of bloodier times in a safe and entertaining environment. No matter if it is a blockbuster movie, a video game or staged combat of a Medieval re-enactment event, for the audience there is a natural inclination to watch various characters displaying martial prowess. That is, beating each other into a pulp in a (mock) fight.

Looking inside the re-enactor community, the motivation is even more obvious. No matter why you are in the business, whether you are genuinely interested in the reconstruction of the past, or if it only serves some sort of escapist sentiment, or purely for the fun; the chance to wield swords, spears and daggers whilst clad in fancy glittering armour, with banners flying high above the ranks of you and your companions represents a temptation that few can or want to resist. In addition to this attraction many are not content with merely having a decent outfit and accessories and putting them on display, but also develop the desire to learn how the weaponry of olden times actually worked and how they were used in combat.

And finally there is one more element of inspiration from museums and other scholarly organisations. As various forms of the reconstruction, including living history and live interpretation, grow in popularity, there is a requirement from the institutes hosting such events that reconstructive entertainment retains an educational element that fits into their pedagogic mission. In other words; the fact that interaction between a museum and its visitors happens in a non-conventional way does not necessarily mean that it lacks quality of interpretation and education.

All these factors point towards the fact that as well as the re-enactors' equipment (or in the case of a live interpretation, conduct) being authentic, the fight scenes should also

demonstrate as much authenticity as possible. To this requirement there is a seemingly axiomatical answer: HEMA, or *Historical European Martial Arts*.

Historical European Martial Arts

As it is widely known, the nations and cultures of the Far East have developed and maintained a fantastically rich tradition of martial arts, which not only flourish in their area of origin, but also have conquered the West, attracting a massive number of people and earning a distinguished place in contemporary popular culture.

It is not too surprising that similar martial arts systems were developed in Europe as well; of these the first written source is dated to the beginning of the 14th century, and up to the end of the Middle Ages there are about 200 more extant fencing books, which (with or without illustrations, in detail or in short verses) explain the various combative solutions applied to wrestling and to the use of a wide range of weapons (sword, dagger, poleaxe, spear, battle-axe et cetera). The sources are predominantly from the southern and central regions of today's Germany, with some additional books or codices written in Northern Italy, France or in the Iberian Peninsula.[5]

However the invention and improvement of firearms during the 15th and 16th centuries rendered these traditions obsolete. For a short while they were still taught as a form of sport in various fencing schools in the second half of the 16th century, but by the beginning of the 17th century they fell out of fashion and were largely forgotten.[6]

The fact that Eastern martial arts have Western equivalents, originating from the Middle Ages, had been practically unnoticed by the public up to the 1990s. Up to this decade there had been only a few scholarly studies on this topic, and a handful of re-prints and facsimile publishing of extant codices, manuscripts or early prints, that describe the various fighting techniques of the Renaissance (or later) periods. The Internet however changed the situation drastically. With museums and libraries making available their collections on their websites in digital, reproducible formats, it has become possible for a great number of amateur/semi-professional researchers to directly access these sources and use them as primary materials for a regular process of reconstruction. In two mere decades the number of individuals, groups, associations and clubs committing themselves to this sort of activity has increased dramatically. Compared to the handful of people dealing with HEMA in the 1990s, today the number is well above ten thousand, with active communities pursuing their own agenda, or in cooperation with national or international umbrella organisations[7] . This boom has not gone unnoticed in other fields of interest, for example companies producing sports gears for Olympic-style fencing are developing separate lines of such products designed for historical fencing. An illustration of how diverse and extended this network of associations is is illustrated in the below picture.

> SAGA, or Schola Artis Gladii et Armorum, is one of the oldest historical re-enactment groups and the first one that started research on historical European martial arts in Hungary. Founded in 2001, its members had been initially engaged in Viking Age re-enactment, then the interest of the group shifted to the Middle Ages and martial arts. From re-enactment or lifestyle reconstruction perspective, we currently focus on two periods: the end of the 12 century (with special attention to the Order of the Hospital) and the beginning of the 15 century. As for martial arts, the group researches a variety of weapons and fencing books. The main focus is on the fighting styles with sword & buckler, longsword and langes messer. The written sources selected are mostly from the period 1390-1540. The group is located in Budapest, holds standard and advanced trainings on a weekly basis and participates in various re-enactment events throughout the year.

Now of course having a fancy name and an intricate logo alone does not make you a renowned and fearsome swordsperson. In order to achieve a sufficient level of expertise one has to conduct one's research in a thorough and systematic manner. While there is no golden path to do this, the method applied should meet the requirements of both scholarly study and that of professional experimentation and documentation. As an example, below is the martial arts reconstruction checklist SAGA uses to approve or falsify the various reconstruction concepts[8] :

1. Does the technique confirm the general principles stated in the book?
2. Does the image look exactly like the technique you are performing? Check the position of legs and arms (both left and right), the position of the thumb, the bent or stretched state of the arm, et cetera.
3. Does the technique follow the text exactly? Is the part which the text emphasises the most important bit of the technique?
4. If the technique seems to be a repetition of another, is there a very good reason or some fundamental difference for that?
5. Can the starting position occur in a real combat situation?
6. Does it work when the starting position and distance is not pre-arranged?
7. Does it work with REAL weapons too?
8. Does the opponent really intend to kill you? Would you die if you did not carry out the technique?
9. Does it work at full speed?
10. Does it work if the opponent is not cooperating? Does it work when the opponent reacts with the most likely reaction in this situation?
11. Are there no obvious countertechniques which are not mentioned in the book?

12. Are you doing it 'just because it is like this in the book' or are you really doing it because it is the most logical response possible?
13. Is the technique simple enough to be used in real combat?
14. Is it safe? Do you expose yourself to a counterattack while performing the technique?
15. Does it kill? Is it really effective? Is the technique capable of inflicting considerable damage?

In short, if all these questions can be answered in a satisfying manner, then the idea of how a certain technique should have looked like is validated and put into use during trainings and demonstrations.

As you may notice, the above method reflects on general experimental principles, but deviates from scholarly methods in one aspect: the source criticism. While in general when studying an ancient text, it is important to take note of the content of the text itself, it is also important to take note of who wrote it and why. In this case we take for granted what is said in the text we are studying. The concept behind this approach is that these manuscripts were composed by a professional expert, by the order of a powerful patron as a user manual of sorts, which leaves little probability that the content had been intentionally compromised by its author. Naturally there can be mistakes (the 'scribe's mistake' or the 'drawer's mistake') in certain work. However, our experience shows that one, these are very low in number and two, if during the research we find a certain description too enigmatic or confusing (which happens quite frequently since the authors, especially in the earlier documents, tended to shroud their message in rhyming verses and other fragmented pieces of texts that tell quite little), the quick temptation to deem it erroneous, leads to a mixed result of historical martial arts and something we learnt in a kendo lesson or saw in the Kingdom of Heavens movie. Consequently, to avoid the slippery slope that ends up in Renaissance Ninjutsu, it is advisable to consider the material we work with authoritative for as long as possible.

Summarizing the above, it is now amply demonstrated that the knowledge on how to re-enact a Late Medieval duel or combat scene is definitely at hand and these can be demonstrated in a way that meets the demand of authenticity. Now the only question left is whether we should indeed use these martial arts during a re-enactment event.

HEMA vs. Re-enactment

The answer is short and simple: no. And the reason behind the answer is equally simple: because it is too dangerous.

If we think about it, there is nothing surprising in this. The sportive elements of these martial arts appear only in the 1550s. Nearly every other text before this date has one and only one very apparent purpose: to teach how to harm other people in the nastiest and most efficient

ways. If our re-construction research has been properly conducted, the technique we use will be naturally enriched with the inherent malevolence of the original system. Consequently using replica weapons (even blunt ones) and period outfits simply puts the participants at too great a risk for the demonstration or show to be feasibly carried out before an audience, especially with minors in its ranks. In short: if you do it properly, someone will get hurt. If you feel it to be safe, then you are doing it the wrong way.

Of course there is a seemingly obvious counter-argument: use armour then. Here however I would like to point out to two things: firstly, even the most expensive and state-of-the-art replica armours have their weak points, just as their medieval/renaissance counterparts had. Wearing armour increases protection, but it even more increases a false sense of security, which will eventually lead to an accident. The question is not whether it happens, but when will it happen. A second argument is that the sources make a very clear distinction between fighting in armour or without it, applying significantly different movements and techniques. So if we want to remain on the side of authenticity and do what is written down, the fact that we are clad in a full set of plate armour will do little good in terms of safety.

A further fact that also discourages us from using actual HEMA techniques is that - as far as I know - nobody makes the effort to do the practice in authentic footwear. Things that work seemingly well while wearing modern shoes with their rubber soles, can quickly get out of hand in slippery, leather-sole, period footwear.

The outlook is however not as grim as it seems. While a full-speed duel scene is definitely out of the question, with certain restrictions, we are still able to stage a presentation of these arts, which have their own educational and entertainment elements as well. Below are those approaches which are considered viable alternatives:

1. Demonstration in modern protective gear and with weapon simulators

As mentioned above, there is now an abundance of products that can be used to protect the wearer from serious injuries. This, combined with weapon simulators (like Federschwerter, fashioned after 15th century finds of training weapons) makes it possible to surpass the usual re-enactor hack-and-slash shows and present something meaningful to the visitors. Of course for this we pay with the loss of an authentic environment, but appearing in non-authentic outfit is a legitimate way of several re-enactment approaches, so this can be applied here properly.

2. Technical demonstration

Another way to present the same knowledge is when the re-enactors themselves are in period outfit, but they focus on the demonstration of certain individual techniques, at reduced speed and with great caution. This, combined with narration, is also a valid method,

although, being a rather educative approach, without particular excitement or tension thrown into the bargain, the audience might find it somewhat boring or dull, so the role of the narrator cannot be underestimated in this scenario.

3. Dramatized technical demonstration

A third way to put the proceeding solution into a dramatised context, which is probably the best and most difficult at the same time, is to find a way to include the concept of education in an authentic scene. Our solution for this is a scene called the 'Dispute of the Fencing Masters'. Here, a troubled young man seeks the help of two renowned sword masters, one being the disciple of the German school, the other the master of the Italian one, so that they teach him to fight in preparation for an upcoming duel. With proper screenplay and a dose of acting skill, this sort of demonstration can be really entertaining, while still retaining the pedagogical values.

1 „He also brought in people on ships, who engaged in a sea-fight there, impersonating the Corcyreans and Corinthians." Cassius Dio: Roman History LXVI. 25.

2 E.g. Philip of Novara in his Estoire describes tournaments imitating the adventures of the Round Table in the 13th century

3 Probably the most famous such event was the Eglinton Derby in 1839, that re-enacted a medieval joust.

4 In Russia there were several staged battles, like those of the siege of Sevastopol, the battle of Borodino or the taking of Azov, but the most memorable is probably the re-enactment of the Storming of the Winter Palace in 1920, which inspired Sergei Eisenstein's movie classic October: Ten Days That Shook the World.

5 A largely comprehensive list of these sources can be found at http://www.middleages.hu/english/martialarts/treatise_database.php

6 This change is probably best illustrated by William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, where old Capulet commands that his longsword be brought forth („What noise is this? Give me my long sword, ho!"), while Tybalt in another scene calls for a rapier („This, by his voice, should be a Montague. Fetch me my rapier, boy").

7 Just a few examples: Federación Española de Esgrima Histórica, British Federation for Historical Swordplay, Fédération Française des Arts Martiaux Historiques Européens, Svenska HEMA-förbundet, Historical European Martial Arts Coalition, HEMA Alliance

8 Developed by Gábor Erényi, the founder of the association. For more please see http://www.middleages.hu/english/martialarts/spov.php

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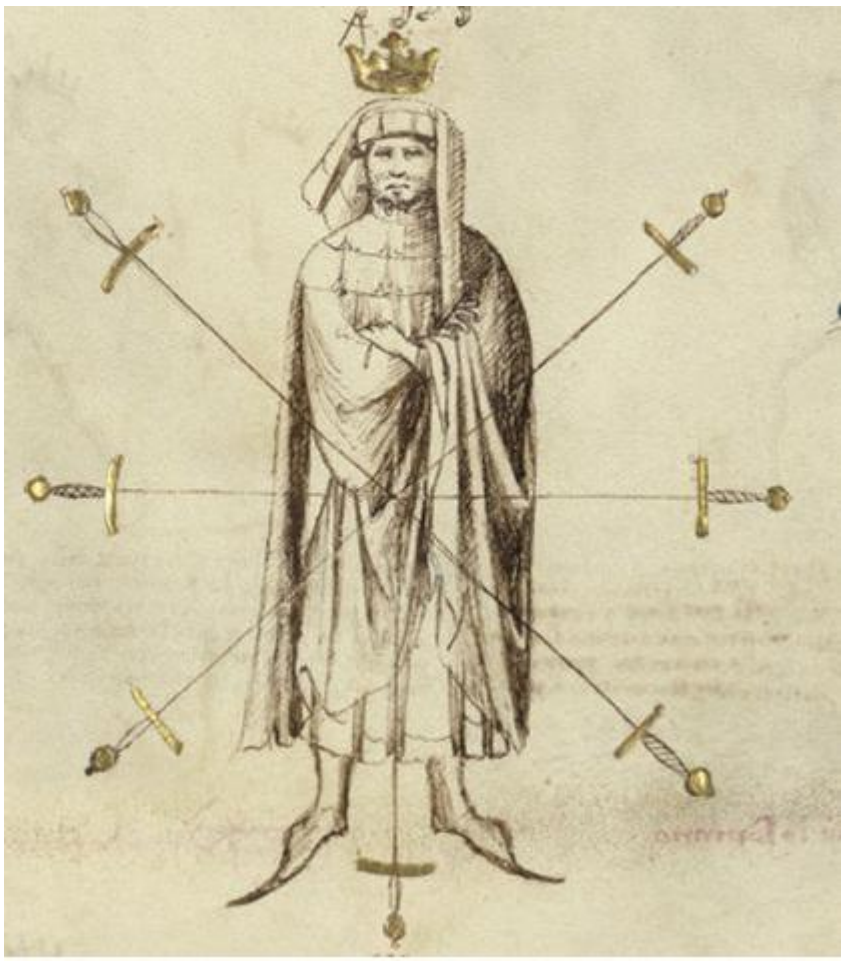

FIG 1. THE SEVEN TYPES OF ATTACK AS DEPICTED IN FIORE DEI LIBERI'S FLOS DUELLATORUM (CCA. 1410).

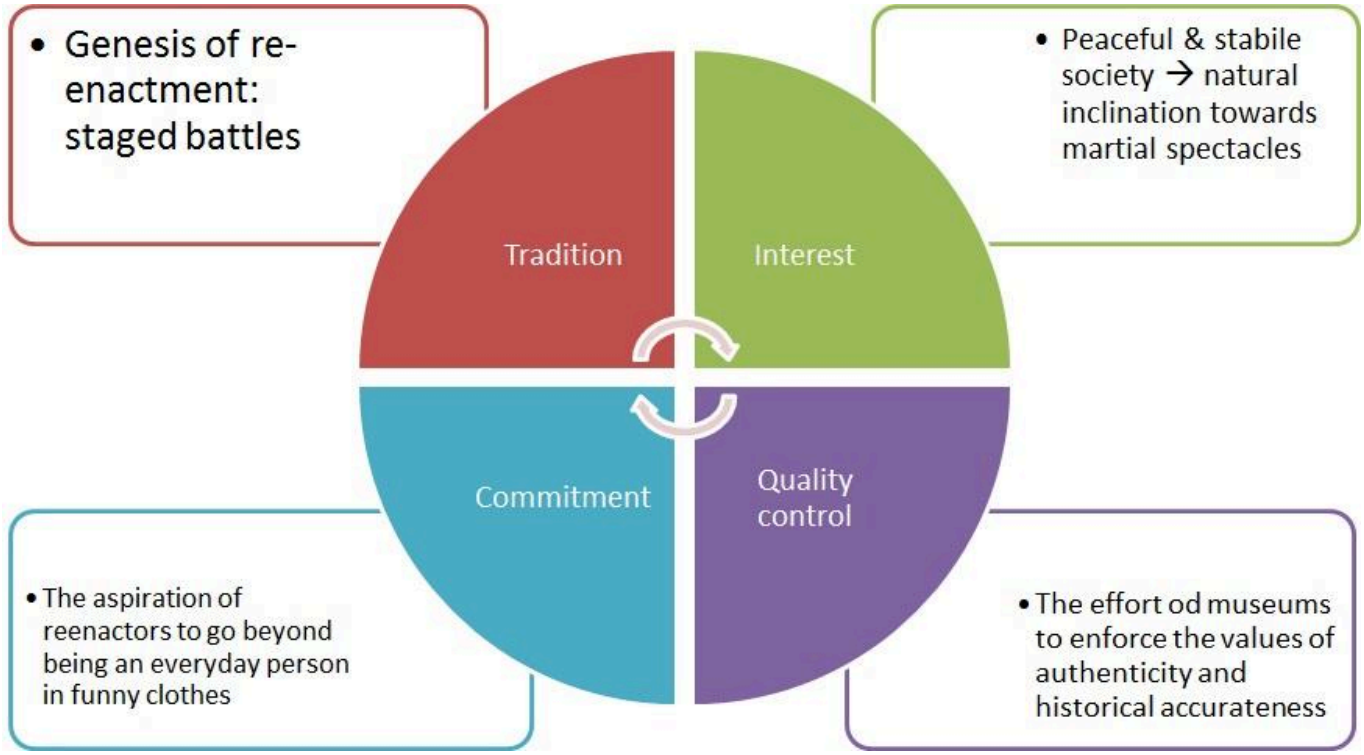

FIG 2. DETERMINING FACTORS AND MOTIVATIONAL ELEMENTS OF COMBATIVE RE-ENACTMENT.

FIG 3. HEMA GROUPS IN CENTRAL EUROPE, AS SHOWN ON THE INTERACTIVE MAP OF HEMA ALLIANCE.