

# European Fight Books 1305-1630: Classification, typology and comparison between manuscripts and prints.

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**Abstract** – No bibliometric or analytic studies of the fight books have been conducted and few reference publications offer analyses of the genre as a whole. Moreover, the existing bibliographies all have their own limitations and do not allow for an investigation of the larger corpus. This contribution applies a typology developed by the author to the corpus of those fight books created between 1305 and 1630, for a total of 187 sources (manuscript and print). It also updates the bibliography published in 2016 for the same chronological framework.

The author's typology allows for a study, based on objective criteria, of the corpus and the genre alike. It analyses the impact of the development of printing technology on the production of knowledge about the art of fighting, as well as the main characteristics of the fight book genre. The limits of any bibliometric study and implementation of a typology are due, on the one hand, to the conservation of the primary sources compared to the documented corpus, and on the other to the extent of scientific investigation conducted into each element. Such limits are flagged and discussed in order to offer a proper classification of the fight books' production prior to the Thirty Years War, where major changes affected books about fighting in Europe.

**Keywords** – Fight Books, Europe, Manuscript, Print, Typology

## I. INTRODUCTION

Interest in European fight books has grown significantly over the past twenty years. Although it remains a niche area, much is left to be done to bring its study in line with scientific standards seen in other fields: the desiderata for research in this field has been outlined by Daniel Jaquet.<sup>1</sup> Aside from an inconsistent use of methodologies as the result of different disciplinary approaches not connected with one another, reference works on primary sources are also lacking. Neither existing bibliographies nor editions offer a systematic overview or allow for comparative analysis. Furthermore, existing bibliographies are limited either by language or timespan, with the majority of these being

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<sup>1</sup> Jaquet, Verelst and Dawson, 'Conclusion', pp. 597-600.



biased.<sup>2</sup> To date, no research has managed to encompass the entirety of sources dated to between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries, a corpus containing over 3,000 primary sources in manuscripts and prints in all major European languages. As far as published scientific editions are concerned, only a few sources – mainly German fight books from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in addition to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century editions – have been edited.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, most of the research work necessary to properly identify each fight book and its position within the corpus (authorial attribution, provenance study, stemmata codicum, iconographical and codicological description) still remains incomplete.

This corpus is heterogeneous in both format and content, and the genre itself (technical literature about embodied knowledge) represents several critical issues for its classification and interpretation. Information about bodily knowledge navigates between text and image, building textual and iconographical traditions over time and in different languages. Moreover, within their own line of filiation, both text and images may be changed, re-arranged, or re-invented with time. As Sydney Anglo puts it, the copies of fight books result in a “bibliographic snowball”.<sup>4</sup> This effect has led to misidentification, misattribution, or major alteration of the content within the study of sub-traditions of text and images over time. The limits of established disciplinary approaches in philology or iconology are quickly reached by this specific genre.

Jaquet has developed a typology for the study of the corpus which allows researchers to classify sources according to both format and content by using objective criteria.<sup>5</sup> He has so far applied it to different case studies. This article applies the typology to a larger corpus of 187 sources produced between 1305 and 1630. It allows for bibliometric and comparative analyses within the corpus, whilst also updating the bibliographic information of the list published in 2016 for the same chronological framework.<sup>6</sup>

## II. SCOPE, METHODS AND LIMITS

The corpus is based on a definition of fight books published in 2016.<sup>7</sup> Such an approach removes other books about fighting such as tournament books, war books, duelling

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<sup>2</sup> Boffa, *Les manuels de combat*; Jaquet, Verelst and Dawson, ‘Conclusion’. For reviews on the benefits and limits of the bibliography of German Fight Books by Leng, see Bauer, ‘Rezension von Katalog der deutschsprachigen illustrierten Handschriften des Mittelalters’ and Welle, ‘Ordnung als Prinzip’.

<sup>3</sup> Leng, ‘Text und Bild in deutschsprachigen illustrierten Fechthandschriften des Mittelalters’, pp. 211-12.

<sup>4</sup> Anglo, *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> Jaquet, *Combattre en armure à la fin du Moyen Âge*; Jaquet, *Combattre au Moyen Âge*; Jaquet, ‘Martial Arts by the Book’.

<sup>6</sup> Jaquet, Verelst and Dawson, *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*, pp. 603-10.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Fight Books, *Fechtbücher*, then, is the terminus technicus used to indicate a vast and heterogeneous collection of manuscripts and printed books, destined to transmit on paper (or parchment) in a

books, or other genres often wrongly included in the corpus. The proposed typology firstly sorts the fight book into manuscript or print. There are some sources that could be considered as incunabula but these are few and all very close to the definition of print. As such incunabula is not a category here. The second part of the process distinguishes between physical formats based on codicological descriptions, identifying them as a book, compilation, or miscellany. This serves to demonstrate whether the object is one single codicological object (book); if it is a compilation of different codicological units but of the same genre (compilation); or if it is a congregation of different codicological units bound together at the time of the production or later, or of works from different genres copied by the same hand (miscellany). The typology next examines the media, or combination of media, used to record fencing knowledge, whether this is text, image, or a combination of the two. For cases where a source is composed mainly of one media but with elements of the second it is categorised as “(mainly) text” or “(mainly) images”. This approach finally considers the content: is the fight book about a single discipline, several separated disciplines (mix), or does it contain a system including different disciplines guided by the same principles throughout (system)? One could, of course, finetune these categories but they are sufficient for the purpose of the inquiry. Organising primary sources according to this process, based on the aforementioned objective criteria, allows for the identification of the action of writing used for the production of fight books, which itself is threefold:

- Inscription, or the documenting of practice without evident didactic intent;
- Description, or the documenting of practice with evidence of didactic intent;
- Codification, or the documenting of practice with encryption.<sup>8</sup>

Even though the methodology is sound this inquiry is based on incomplete information: most of the fundamental research still has to be done for more than two thirds of the corpus. Moreover, the identification of the action of writing also necessitates additional research on the authorial project (i.e. the context of the production, the intended audience, and the author): this is also lacking for most of the primary sources.

When it comes to provenance it is always more difficult to pinpoint the geographical location of a manuscript's production rather than that of a printed book. I have therefore proposed a map of the publication of only the printed fight books. Additional data could be added when sufficient research is done regarding the production of the manuscript corpus. All data used in this inquiry comes from published bibliographies (referred to in the bibliography) and studies which allow for the revision of biased information found in earlier bibliographies.

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systematized way a highly complex system of gestures or bodily actions, often, but not always, involving the use of weapons of different sorts. [...]”, Verelst, Jaquet and Dawson, *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Jaquet, ‘Martial Arts by the Book’.

Lastly, regarding the timeframe of the inquiry, I have chosen the first fight book for the start and 1630 for the ending. 1630 is a turning point in European history as it relates to the Thirty Years' War, which marks major cultural, social, economic, and technological changes in the conduct of warfare and the related martial culture. A new genre also appears at this time regarding the handling of weapons and martial knowledge: the military drill manual. These sources are different from fight books since they are concerned with the manipulation of weapons in the context of training soldiers in formation (even if some also include information regarding personal fighting techniques, albeit not in the same fashion as the fight books do). The drill manuals begin to appear in the early seventeenth century and lead to the military manuals of the nineteenth century. Fight books continue to be produced throughout the period until today. This periodisation is thus chosen to reduce the corpus to a manageable number of primary sources (187) but could easily be extended to further the inquiry.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

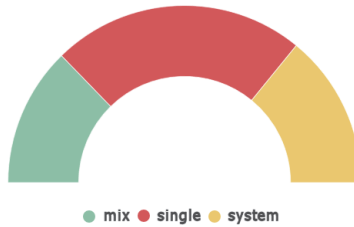
The corpus of extant primary sources produced between 1305 and 1630 contains 109 manuscripts and 78 prints. This number is based on each conserved manuscript and on each edition of any printed fight book; the number of different preserved examples of each edition is not taken into account. It is, of course, not representative of all documented fight books: many have not survived, are kept in private collections, or were lost during conservation. For example, several Spanish fight books are mentioned by contemporary or later sources but are no longer extant.<sup>9</sup>

Fig. 1 shows the results of applying the proposed criteria to this corpus (mixing manuscript and print), allowing for an overview. Regarding format, we clearly see that the majority of the fight books are books (meaning single codicological units), even though more than a third of the corpus are collections or miscellanies. The type of media they use to communicate knowledge and the type of content they describe are almost evenly distributed throughout the corpus. Two slight majorities, however, can nonetheless be outlined: the fight books are mainly composed of a mix of media (text and image) and are mainly concerned with a single martial discipline.

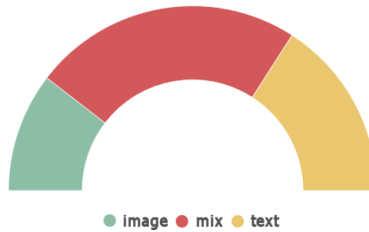
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<sup>9</sup> Ortíz, 'The Destreza Verdadera: A Global Phenomenon'.

### Repartition of type of content



### Repartition of type of media



### Repartition of type format



Fig. 1: Overview of the application of the typology to the corpus

Figures 2 and 3 show the separate results of the manuscript and print corpora. Two additional diagrams have been added to these sets. The first mixes the types of format with the media, and the second displays the main martial disciplines according to the original sub-categories found in late medieval fight books. The wrestling category has only been applied to those books which are entirely dedicated to wrestling since this discipline is also included, to a certain extent, in all others. Some authors insist on differentiating wrestling books (*Ringbücher*) from fight books (*Fechtbücher*).<sup>10</sup> This is inadequate and comes from the late nineteenth-century historiography willing to – in the wake of the Olympic movement and the development of modern sport classification – differentiate between unarmed (or empty-handed) disciplines and fighting with weapons. Following this

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<sup>10</sup> Leng (ed.), *Katalog der deutschsprachigen illustrierten Handschriften des Mittelalters*.

reasoning to the end, we then should then name any sub-type of fight books with a different name: this would not be productive or help scientific investigation of the corpus.

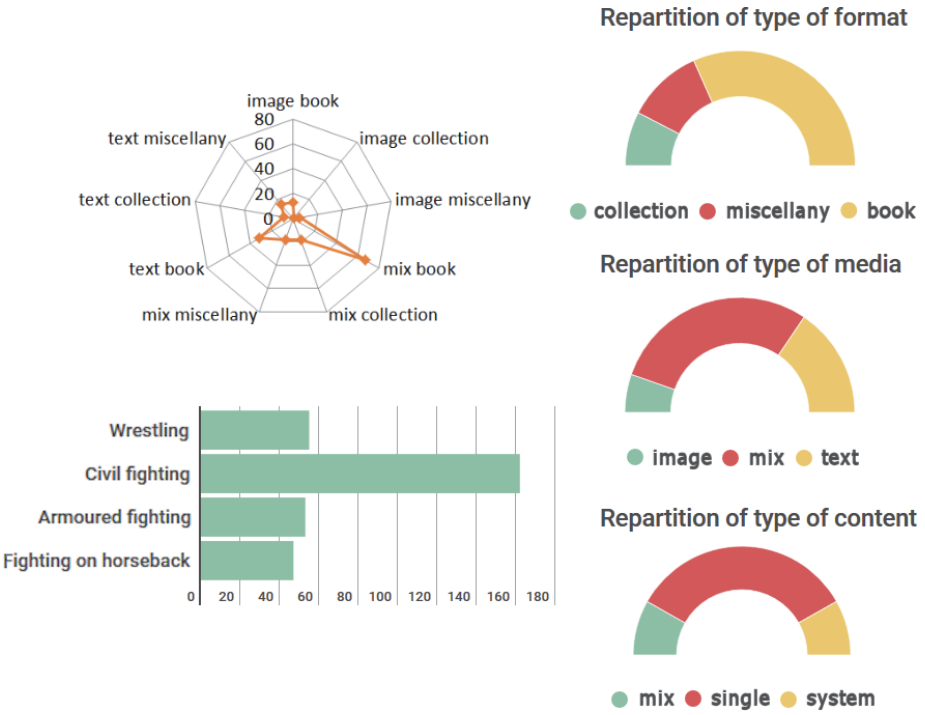


Fig. 2: Results of the typology on the manuscript corpus, with additional queries on types and repartition of martial disciplines.

The most common type of fight book in the manuscript corpus is a book (single codicological unit) about a single martial discipline composed of text and image (mix). The number of both collections and miscellanies are substantial but represent a minority, a little over a third. The fight books composed solely of images (so called “image catalogues”) are less frequent than those that only use text, which comprise over a third. The most common discipline is civil fighting (fighting without armour) although other fighting disciplines are well represented.

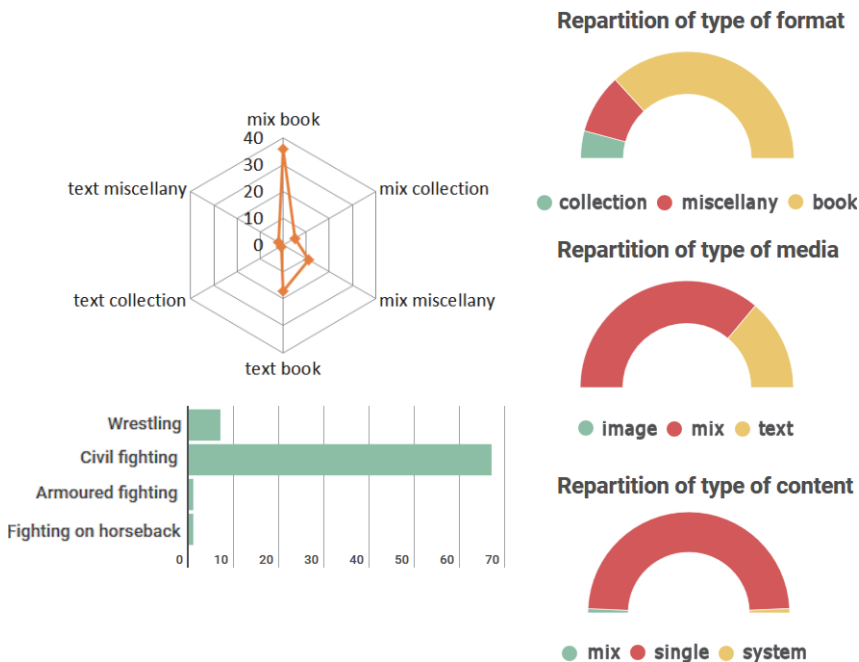


Fig. 3: Results of the typology on the print corpus, with additional queries on types and repartition of martial disciplines.

Major changes occurred to the corpus with the new media of printing although the most common printed fight book is, as with manuscripts, a book (single codicological unit) composed of text and images that describes a single martial discipline. Collections and miscellanies, however, almost completely disappear. Aside from a few exceptions,<sup>11</sup> the rare examples have been bound together in a later phase of conservation, not during production. The use of images alone disappears,<sup>12</sup> and the fight books concerned with systems or a mix of martial disciplines also fade away. This is mainly due to the new technology of printing and the accompanying changes to knowledge consumption habits which occurred as a result of widespread printed books. Over the course of the sixteenth century the interest in texts on fighting on horseback and armoured fighting wanes behind civil fighting. This mirrors the changes occurring in weapons technology and the resulting impact on martial culture (and warfare).

The invention of printing had an impact on the production of fight books but did not replace the production of manuscripts completely. Some authors even chose this format over printing. For example, Giovanni Antonio Lovino argues in the dedicatory inscription

<sup>11</sup> Such as the Egenolff fight books, see Bauer, *'Der Allen Fechter gründtliche Kunst' – Das Frankfurter oder Egenolffsche Fechtbuch*.

<sup>12</sup> One example of an anthology of printed images exists: anonymous [Maarten van Heemskerck], *Fechter & Ringer*, Amsterdam: Dirck Coornhert, 1552.

of his fight book – offered to the king of France – that the manuscript is more suitable to display the art of fighting on paper as it is unique, easier to adorn with rich decoration, and of far more value for a princely gift.<sup>13</sup> Several types of manuscripts also survived: preparatory copies of the author for printing, handwritten copies of printed fight books, or notes belonging to students or masters. All of the latter represent the more interesting sources for the investigation into the production of knowledge about the art of fighting. The manuscript corpus as it pertains to the period between the publication of the first printed fight book (the wrestling book printed by Hans Wurm in 1507<sup>14</sup>) and the end of the inquiry (1630) represents 61 items (of a total of 109). One of the major changes due to the printed format is the absence of image catalogues (which were probably too expensive to produce and badly suited to transmitting embodied knowledge). The other major changes are more due to cultural and technological shifts, including the almost complete disappearance of fighting techniques in armour on foot or on horseback after the mid-sixteenth century (except for later copies of fifteenth-century materials).

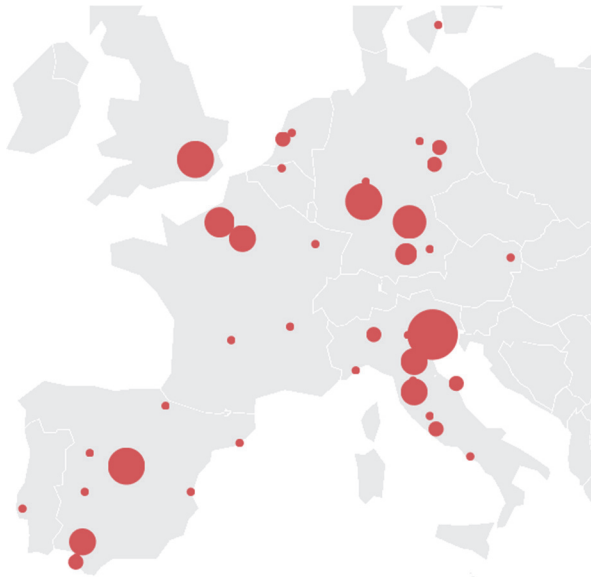
Language distribution across the corpus includes Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Spanish, and Portuguese. The most frequent language is German. Geographic provenance of each printed fight book is displayed in fig. 4, based on the colophons. The manuscript production is not included in this inquiry as most of the codicological inquiries and fundamental research has yet to be carried out.

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<sup>13</sup> G. A. Lovino, *Trattato sul maneggio delle armi e della spada*, 1570-80. Paris, BNF, Ms Italien 959. For details about the fight books, see Lauvernay, ‘Bienheureux Roi qui seul une si grande oeuvre a lu’.

<sup>14</sup> Anonymous, s.t. [Landshuter Ringbuch], Landshut: Hans Wurm, s.d. [1507]. Anglo (*The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, p. 46) wrongly mentions the Pauernfeyndt fight book (1516) as the first printed fight book. He also mentions Hans Wurm wrestling book as being printed in the 1490s (p. 187), based on nineteenth century fencing bibliographies. This information has been revised by Rainer Leng (ed.) in his bibliography (38.10), quoted by Bauer ‘Economising Early Prints on Fight Books by Multiple Using Movable Half Page Woodcuts’, p. 99.





Amsterdam	1	Lyon	1	Rouen	4
Antwerp	1	Madrid	2	Salamanca	1
Augsburg	4	Magdeburg	SanlucardeB.	1	1
Bologna	3	Marburg	1	Sevilla	3
Cadiz	1	Milano	2	Siena	1
Copenhagen	1	Modena	1	Strasbourg	1
Frankfurt am Main	5	Nancy	1	Valencia	1
Landshut	1	Naples	1	Venice	12
Leiden	1	Nurnberg	5	Verona	1
Leipzig	2	Paris	4	Vienna	1
Loano	1	Padova	2	Viterbe	1
London	5	Rome	2	Wittenberg	2

Fig. 4: Map of Europe with cities where fight books were printed (1493-1630). Chart of the author.

The largest number of printed fight books in the period under investigation come from Venice. As suggested by Bauer, fight books were printed in towns meeting two criteria: the flourishing of printing activities and the presence of fencing activities.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, towns such as Frankfurt am Main and Venice come first in the list.

<sup>15</sup> Bauer, *Der Allten Fechter gründliche Kunst' – Das Frankfurter oder Egenolffsche Fechtbuch*, p. 83.

## IV. CONCLUSION

The most common type of fight book, according to the surviving documents between 1305 and 1630, is a book (single codicological unit) mixing text and images in discussing civil fighting disciplines.

Fight books continued to be produced after the Thirty Years' War alongside the similar, albeit different, military drill manuals. Current research reference works for both researchers and practitioners include more than 3,000 references, and new documents are being discovered yearly due to the increased interest of both scholars and martial arts practitioners.<sup>16</sup> The application of the typology outlined in this article is applicable to the whole corpus but it would, however, deliver more useful data if contextualised over a selected period of history. The next major change after the Thirty Years' War is the Industrial Revolution, itself followed by the Olympic Movement and the mechanical warfare of the world wars which completely changed the picture of fight book production.

## V. BIBLIOGRAPHY

### V.1. Primary sources

Nota Bene on the bibliography. The manuscripts are listed according to the place of conservation, followed by the mention of author, title and dates. When manuscripts bear no original titles, alternative titles are mentioned within brackets. Additional datings are adapted according to the latest state of research. The prints are listed chronologically with shortened titles, and later editions or translations are listed under the first publication with increments.

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<sup>16</sup> Jaquet, Tzouriadis and Tuailon-Demésy, *Historical European Martial Arts*, pp. 12-13

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