



**Gevaert, Bert, *Te Wapen! Europa's vergeten krijgskunsten* (Leuven, Davidsfonds, 2016)**

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Over the last couple of decades, the popularity of historical European martial arts is growing worldwide. In Belgium and the Netherlands, at least for the past 10 years, the community of H.E.M.A.-practitioners greatly expanded and the arts were promoted in several areas through the efforts of dedicated people. Bert Gevaert, author of present work, is one of those people. I've seen him evolve from a passionate enthusiast with the sword (or "gladiophile", as he often calls it himself), to a researcher of various H.E.M.A. aspects.

Writing a book on H.E.M.A. was one of the goals Gevaert already had in mind for some years. In 2015 he finally translated his thoughts into words on paper and composed the first Dutch reference work on the historical European martial arts. It's written in a clear and pleasant style and turned out to be a beautiful hardcover of 318 pages, illustrated with no less than 200 photos, including many from historical fencing books.

From the foreword on, Gevaert manifests himself as a true storyteller by discussing a demo fight in a style worthy of a historical novel. The connoisseur will be able to identify certain techniques in this description and the inexperienced reader gets a first image of historically justifiable sensation.

After citing some personal reasons for writing his book, some general points are adduced in the introduction: known prejudices are addressed, problems of reconstruction are discussed and the reevaluation of the European martial arts is commended.

The methodology of the author and the structure of the book are also explained in detail in the introduction. The various sources of research are discussed: alongside normative and informative literature, specific areas of research such as paleo-pathology and experimental archeology are given equivalent attention. Fencing masters and manuscripts pass before the reader's eye for a first time and various aspects of the European sword are looked into: symbolism, features, typology, etc. Apart from this, Gevaert also discusses the place of the martial arts in their historical culture and class society.

The arts and their masters are chronologically and geographically defined and accommodated. The book covers the period from 1320 to 1630 and the chapters are, as a logical consequence, divided from the 14th to the 17th century.

The first chapter is called: "the 14th century: writing for insiders". The scant information we have on the first fencing masters is gathered and questioned there. Secondly, the

specific art of fighting with sword and shield is discussed according to various sources: the early medieval French literature, the Scandinavian epic and of course the I.33 manuscript. Well-known elements of this work on sword and buckler open a door to discuss the use of martial arts by clerics and the attitude of the Church towards violence. Finally, the 14th century would not be treated without introducing the great Liechtenauer as founder of the German arts. He is therefore viewed from multiple perspectives and the application of his doctrine is interpreted in the context of duel and battlefield.

The second chapter is titled: “the 15th century: reign in armour”. In this chapter, the Italian masters Fiore dei Liberi and Filippo di Vadi get their well-deserved attention and from the German tradition there’s Hans Talhoffer and Paulus Kal who receive sufficient tribute. This in addition to the direct ‘heirs’ of Liechtenauer. To make it more complete, “Die Blume des kampfes”, the “Gladiatoria group”, the “Codex Wallerstein” and the English fight books are presented as well.

Following the masters of the longsword, Hans Lecküchner appears as authority of the long knife and “Le jeu de la hache” as major source for combat with poleaxe. After a brief presentation on the “Bem Cavalgar”, by the hand of Portuguese King Edward I, the list of historical masters is concluded with Pietro Monte, of who is rightly pointed out that he still doesn’t get the attention he deserves.

As the title of the chapter expresses, the steel plate armour is extensively discussed as 15th century combat equipment. Both forging, price, aesthetics, disadvantages and persistent myths are examined. Additionally, general principles of fighting in armour are covered, together with the different forms: on foot and on horseback, for fun or in earnest.

“The sixteenth century: fighting with honor.” In this third chapter Gevaert talks about the last manuscripts (including Goliath, folios from a Dutch fight book and Dürer’s MS 26-232) and the first printed fight manuals (including Pauernfeyndt and Egenolph). Great attention goes to Paul Hector Mair and his achievements. Joachim Meyer too is awarded with a couple of pages, and after an introduction on the rapier and a discussion of the Bolognese school, many notorious figures get reviewed throughout the chapter: Giovanni de 'Medici, Camillo Agrippa, Camillo Palladini, Henry Saint Didier, Giacomo Di Grassi, Vincentio Saviolo and Georg Silver. The 16th century wouldn’t be the 16th century without talking about la verdadera destreza, the montante, the masters of defense, the marxbrüder and the federfechter. All these get covered. An additional focus went out to fighting to the highest bleeding wound, mensur and theatrical fighting (fencing duels in Shakespeare). The chapter concludes with a detailed discussion of the duel. Besides general principles of duelling, Gevaert talks about the duel of honour in Italy, France, England, the Holy Roman Empire and the Netherlands.

The final chapter, “the 17th century: play for pleasure”, again summarizes the life and work of some renowned masters: Nicoletto Giganti, Salvator Fabris, Capo Ferro and Gérard Thibault. The latter, and fencing in the Dutch republic in general, enjoy special

attention. In addition to the phenomenon “Thibault”, his *Académie de l'Espée* and *album amicorum* are looked into.

As member of the St. Michael's guild in Bruges, Gevaert is the best person to talk at length about the Flemish fencing guilds. Among others he discusses their origin, development and internal organization.

In addition to the subdivision of the book in time periods, different specific subjects are discussed separately. These “loose” threads provide an interesting variation per chapter. They include subjects like female warriors, terrible injuries, strange weaponry, extraordinary historical figures and famous duellists as for example Descartes and the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe.

In the epilogue, the evolution and decline of historical fencing is looked into, with attention for its rediscovery in the 19th century. The history of edged weapons is also considered from socio-economic point of view.

Finally Gevaert shares his view on the future of historical European martial arts. He puts forward several disciplines whose research can be useful for the current revival. Amongst those: art history, history (archival research), languages and literature, law, osteology....

On a practical level the importance of local and international umbrella organizations are cited, with the Belgian SBSN and international IFHEMA as examples. Different proposals are made that are worth considering with regard to the evolution of tournaments and the promotion of HEMA to a wider audience.

Those who are interested in picking up H.E.M.A. after reading the book, are provided with a list of H.E.M.A. associations in Belgium, a list of known manufacturers and dealers of weapons and equipment and an list of some online sites with useful information (including Hroarr, Wiktenauer and other known sources). For the understanding of both the inexperienced reader and practitioner, a general list of German swordsmanship terminology is included as well.

This reference book is clearly and deliberately written for a wider audience than the academic world. Yet, Gevaert wrote as objective as possible and provided endnotes per chapter and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources at the end of the book. This allows the interested reader to do some further reading or start some research.

Although historical criticism was not applied, Gevaert does not omit to put certain theories in question (this in the text and in endnotes). Propositions that are uncertain for the author are brought with caution. Although such a work is never quite complete, Gevaert has delivered a creditable performance.