



Daniel Jaquet, Karin Verelst and Timothy Dawson (eds.), *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books : Transmission and Tradition of Martial Arts in Europe (14th–17th centuries)*
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Late medieval and early modern fight books : transmission and tradition of martial arts in Europe (14th–17th centuries) is an attempt to create a comprehensive overview of the study of Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA). Almost two decades removed from the publication of *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe* (Sydney Anglo’s seminal monograph on the topic), this is a most welcome undertaking. HEMA is a growing field and a work such as this is very necessary for it to develop in a productive manner. With the goal of increasing visibility and the focus of scholarly attention, the editors have assembled some of the most well-known voices in HEMA practice and scholarship to contribute chapters to this endeavor. The individual content of most chapters is quite strong and well-researched; where the book struggles is in matters of its identity and intended audience. Indeed, any attempt to properly classify and identify what constitutes HEMA and how to study it is invariably going to encounter similar difficulties.

The book is divided into three sections. The first concerns matters of theory and methodology in the interpretation of historical combat manuals or “Fight Books”. The second section deals with the various backgrounds of four, particular fighting arts (i.e. each of these chapters details the martial traditions of a specific time period and geographical region). The final section is reserved for specific case studies and commentary on martial culture.

As mentioned previously, many of the individual chapters are quite strong. Several of the chapters in the first section effectively caution the readers as to the limitations of the methods described. The authors are careful not to overreach in their conclusions. HEMA, as practiced in the last two decades, has always been a blend of critical reading and physical interpretation, both of which carry their own sets of strengths and weaknesses. The range of chapters presented give multiple approaches without privileging one over another. The chapters in the second portion present a great deal of information, sometimes to their actual detriment. The final third section of chapters provides examples that help to make the theory of the earlier chapters more concrete in terms of context.

Something that the work does not adequately address is the difficulty in deciding what, exactly, constitutes HEMA. It would be extremely challenging, if not impossible, to satisfactorily make that decision without inventing some arbitrary standards. Furthermore, we have suppositions about what the “corpus” of fight books is, or what manual is part of what tradition. Even with a brief *status quaestionis*, the reasoning behind how those suppositions are formed is not always clear. Given the sheer amount of material available, it is a necessity that practitioners of HEMA narrow their focus. But how we make those decisions feels important and also absent from this book. If the work is to help to define what is included in the study of HEMA it would be very beneficial to the discussion for the reasoning behind its decisions to be transparent.

One question that is never answered satisfactorily is that of audience. Although the stated target is “a wider academic readership,” it is uncertain if the work has actually hit its mark. It seems that experienced HEMA practitioners would find many of the overview chapters to be insubstantial. It is also unclear how much use some of the interpretive methodologies described in the first section would be to further other interpretative work. This is not to diminish the efforts of the authors to develop methodologies that work for their own projects, merely a concern about their applicability to other practitioners, let alone the reader with a decided academic bent. The chapters in the second section could all be books in their own right and may be of limited use to serious scholars of those subjects. So novices looking for an overview would likely benefit from those chapters as jumping-off points, but will likely find others (such as those on scientific methodology) somewhat opaque.

Late medieval and early modern fight books: transmission and tradition of martial arts in Europe (14th–17th centuries) is a near panoptic collection of well-researched information on the study of HEMA and it succeeds on many levels, bringing together a diverse group of voices on a variety of subjects. Where it struggles is in bringing those subjects together into a cohesive whole, instead becoming a collection of essays with varying degrees of utility for an unclear audience. These struggles are to be expected when attempting to create a work such as this, particularly in an emerging field and these criticisms should not distract from the necessity of this work. For HEMA to evolve as an area of academic inquiry, books like this need to be published. Otherwise, conversations about the audience, the corpus, and how practitioners can effectively utilize this information will not readily happen.