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Martial Arts Studies in Germany –
Defining and Crossing Disciplinary Bondaries

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The “researcher” status in Historical European Martial Arts communities of practitioners

1 Introduction

This last decade has witnessed a relative growth of the communities of Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) practitioners on an international level¹. The development of these activities is reaching a critical mass, leading to the constitution of umbrella organisations² and public outreach through national and international media, with a focus on the practice of medieval longsword competitions³. Although these activities are defined within the communities themselves, no overall general consensus over the governance of practices (including definition and objectives) is usually reached, even if one can easily delineate a fair number of shared best practices, allowing international cooperation and even, competition.

Three main directions seem to drive these activities aiming at practicing martial arts from the Antiquity to World War II from European provenance or European sphere of influence: 1) Martial sport/martial arts, 2) Academic research, 3) Reviving/recreating martial heritage (Jaquet & Sorenson, 2015). Such a vast spectrum of activities leads to the emergence of several points of tension between the actors. Amongst those, the first one is certainly the issue of conceptions of martial sports (or combat sports) versus those of martial arts. It resonates with issues at the core of the DVS Kommission “Kampfkunst und Kampfsport”, but shifting those in the perspective of the past (Wetzler, 2014; 2015), especially since these activities tend to revive, restore or reconstruct historical realities mainly out of the study of documents, mostly without studying their contextualisation or questioning their accuracy or representativeness. Therefore, most of the debate is moreover blurred by representation of the modern-day concepts of martial sports retrograded in the past (or “a” past). This situation is interesting because these communities appear to rely on the actors “researching” the past or to their own understanding of published research on the matter.

¹ Preliminary results of this research project have been presented in lectures both to the communities of practitioners (Dreynevent – International HEMA gathering, Vienna, 2015) and to academics (International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, 2015). N.B. all masculine pronouns in this article concern both genders. Acknowledgment: A. Tuailon-Demésy collaborated to the conception of the questionnaire and the analysis of the answers. I thank A. Tuailon-Demésy and S. Wetzler for their valuable advices and comments during the redaction of the paper.

² As of today, 12 European countries have established national federations for Historical European Martial Arts (although only one has gained governmental recognition so far). In 2014, an international federation was constituted (International Federation for Historical European Martial Arts). Growing communities can be observed also notably in the United States, Russia and Japan.

³ The development of national and international competition was covered by the national and international media. For example, see Bishop (2014).

This fact is also related to another shared opinion amongst the communities, best put as the following claim: “there is no (modern-day) master” of historical European martial arts. The martial tradition of these arts (disciplines) has been interrupted throughout history, or substantially modified by the “invention” of modern sports in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Then, if there were a “master”, it would be books, the original masters’ historical writings⁴. This claim, interesting in itself as example of reception of models from Asian martial culture, coloured by occidental sport federation guidelines and best practices, is actually fostering the “researcher” as the gatekeeper of martial traditions.

The ideal researcher, knowledge holder with amazing skills in both theoretical (academic) and practical (martial) areas, is then recognised by his peers and by the communities of practitioners in which he may act as a trainer. The status of researcher would then be in the highest sphere of the communities, since he serves as reference point for both the guidance of the best practices and the mediation of the martial knowledge, which is only accessible in their original form for trained historians, knowledgeable in ancient languages. Paradoxically, one can observe at the same time several reserves from the communities toward the researcher or the research produced. For example: doubts to the martial qualities of the researcher, since his intellectual skills may not match the expected physical abilities or martial experience needed to serve as a “mediator” of historical European martial arts. Another reserve is also present, but usually neglected by most of the practitioners or enthusiasts: the limits of working with documentary evidence to reconstruct a bodily knowledge (Müller, 1992; Burkart, 2014), even mistrust to the accuracy of several sources due to the phenomenon of corruption of the text itself and the nature of the lost technical lexis, rendering the content disputable or mostly inaccessible for a modern-day reader (Bauer, 2014). Last mentioned is the need for establishment of methodologies in reconstructing HEMA and distinction between experiencing and experimenting (Jaquet, 2016; Jaquet & Sorenson, 2015).

Obviously, the common definition of research in academic circles and the position of the researcher according to its professional status within Academia⁵ are shifted into a specific understanding of the communities of practitioners. Who are those researchers, what is their background (both martial and intellectual) and how do they position themselves towards the communities (both martial and academic)?

2 Method

In order to gain insights from the communities themselves, we conducted a questionnaire addressed to recognised (established?) researchers, but openly accessible to anyone considering himself as such. Published in December 2014, 150 researchers participated until January 2015. This participation proves to be fairly rep-

⁴ For a general introduction on those technical sources, see Anglo (2000) and Boffa (2014).

⁵ That is an affiliated scholar fully or partially paid to research in its discipline.

representative of the different international communities⁶ and is therefore acceptable in order to consider these data valuable for analysis in the context of our inquiry.

The questionnaire was elaborated by the author under guidance of a sport sociologist with expertise in the study of HEMA communities⁷. The main objective was to establish a profile, with a focus on the martial and academic background. Secondary goals comprise issues of recognition within the communities, roles in mediating the research and the martial knowledge acquired, and the definition of research itself.

Built in standard statistical tools were used to treat the data, most of the questions being answered with a defined sample of possible answers, except for two open-ended questions (concerning definition and purpose of HEMA research).

3 Results

Raw data from statistic analysis of the answers to the multiple choice or forced choice questions is presented in the appendix. Objective analyses of selected results are presented thematically below.

3.1 *The profile of the HEMA researcher*

The HEMA researcher is a male (female 5%) aged 37 years (min. 19; max. 54). He holds a bachelor degree from a discipline unrelated to HEMA studies and he is not currently affiliated with any scientific institution. He actively trains HEMA with an average experience of 14 years (min. 1; max. 37). He teaches HEMA on a local or national level. He is trained or has an average experience of 6 years in other martial sports or arts (most mentioned: Judo and Olympic fencing). He does not publish his research, but shares it with a targeted audience (HEMA practitioners, through workshops, regular teaching or online self-publication on dedicated forums or websites with unstable URL, mostly without peer-review or editorial processes⁸). His main occupation is not the research and teaching of HEMA (only 6% presented themselves as professionals on this occupation; the most mentioned main occupation is related to information and communication technology).

⁶ Though the limitation of the language barrier (survey in English) must be taken in account. According to the data, the following countries are represented: Austria, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, Mexico, Netherland, Poland, Serbia, Scotland, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdoms, United States. See question D1 in Appendix.

⁷ Audrey Tuailon Demésy (University of Franche-Comté). See the bibliography for her work related to HEMA communities. I am thankful for her guidance and support for this project.

⁸ See Appendix, question C2-C4. 59.1% of the participants are to be considered “unpublished researcher” (one increase the percentage to 79.9% if self-publication on print on demand platform is included). Only 9.4% of the researcher claim to target an international academic audience.

3.2 Definition of research and its purpose

The multiple choices question C1 provides no distinctive categories towards core elements defining research in HEMA studies. Most of the answers proposed were included in the choices of the majority of the participants (most chosen: e. Technical interpretation of source material - 94.6%; less chosen: g. Research in knowledge transmission - 74.5%). This resonates with the analysis of the open-ended questions C5 and 6, inquiring about definition and purposes of research, which shows conflicting views and lack of established or recognised methods or objectives. More than 65% of the participants considered that the main goal of research is the practice itself (reconstruction of lost martial arts as accurately as possible). Following this mainstream, research consists of finding, transcribing, translating sources (Fight Books), in order to interpret them, and rendering those available to the communities of practitioners. Some of the latter (ca. 30%) insisted on the need for “publication” (that is circulation of documents not necessarily published on paper or electronically on stable URL with editorial process) to allow review by peers and eventually reproducibility of the studies; while others (ca. 20%) clearly stated that the output of the research should be a syllabus for teaching martial arts “as close as possible as the historical documents allows” (that is to the own understanding and interpretation of the latter). A minority of the participants (ca. 25%) shared opposing views by defining research in a more classical fashion (gathering of sources, inducing postulates, deducing hypothesis, testing hypothesis, analysing and evaluating results), as well as the need for publication, but with no clear patterns about methods, disciplinary approaches or inquiry types. Some of the latter (10%) clearly advocated against practical tests or stand against considering modern-day reconstruction as “historically accurate”.

4 Discussion

Research in martial arts (as well as study of) should include both theoretical and practical components. Unsurprisingly, some argue for the separation of the two concepts, some for their essential complementarity, and others advocate for the prevalence of one upon the other, depending on their own area of expertise or on their type of inquiry. Research in communities of HEMA practitioners appears to touch mainly upon practical areas.

From an academic perspective, it is therefore to be distinguished from standards of fundamental research, because of its methods, its inquiry types and its diffusion. More generally, “martial studies”, as a concept, is considered as an emerging field of studies (Farrer & Whalen-Brige, 2011), mostly interdisciplinary and diffracted over several disciplinary subsets; some even argued for its specific “antidisciplinary” character (Bowman, 2015a; 2015b). Is HEMA studies specific and worthy of academic attention, as claimed by a fair number of the participants?

4.1 Professional scholars and “HEMA” researchers: a love and hate relationship

The communities of HEMA practitioners *per se* do not exist without research, since there is no existing living tradition to rely upon. It is conducted either for personal purposes (instructors) or for a targeted audience (practitioners/other researchers). Most of the researchers do seem to apply academic disciplinary approaches and methods in their investigation, from amateurish mimicry with disputable results to actual fundamental research with relevant results beyond the needs of the communities of practitioners. 64% of the participants of the questionnaire did include, in their open-ended definition of research, the need for contextualisation of the practices and its technical knowledge production (technical literature), as well as for the investigation of its materiality or its motor skills.

17.4% of the participants claimed to be currently affiliated to an academic or patrimonial institution. However, by searching for complementary information on dubious cases, it appeared that only 9.1% of them can be considered professional scholars (fully or partially paid to do research)⁹. Research however does not “belong” to Academia. Individuals (with or without an academic education) whose main occupation is not research and teaching at an academic (or patrimonial) institution can produce valuable research results. The quality of these endeavours can only be evaluated when published on paper (usually by a scholarly publishing houses or scientific journals) or electronically with a stable URL (indexed and distributed with Digital Object Identifier). The usual way of communicating research results in the communities of HEMA researchers is, however, direct transmission (workshop or lecture) or indirect forms of publication including: self-published documents, blog posts or contribution to wiki-like platforms, eventually paper publication by a non-scholarly publishing house without peer-review processes (see C2/3). Therefore, professional scholars have the tendency to either disregard research results produced by the communities of practitioners, or even to criticise them in a general fashion¹⁰.

4.2 Recognition and outreach of the HEMA researcher

Although the access to the status is formalised in some communities of practitioners with co-optation based on the presentation of research outputs to peers or practitioners, most of the researchers appear to be self-proclaimed. Most of these researchers (83%) stated that they are recognised as such by their local or national

⁹ Individuals affiliated with institution, but not having a status justifying research position were therefore put to the side. For example, a part time guide in a museum cannot claim producing research at the same level as a research and teaching collaborator in a University. PhD candidates or PhD holders without current affiliation were also not taken into account.

¹⁰ For example, Boffa (2014:) considers the review of these productions as unworthy for research purposes. Welle (2014:11-12, note 29) heavily criticises this kind of research. To be noted, Welle is a published scholar, currently not affiliated with any academic institution. He is therefore a good example of an independent scholar producing high level research results in appropriate media. He also has obvious practical knowledge of these arts, even if he does not claim it (like other scholars, for example, F. Cinato or J.F. Forgeng).

communities, and few of them foresee forms of recognition or acknowledgement of their work by academic circles. Even among them, there is no clear pattern of recognition¹¹. Question C5 asked to name researchers in HEMA studies. The participants named 96 different researchers; only 40% of the latter gathered more than two mentions. The first professional scholar appeared in twelfth position (mentioned 13 times)¹². Three reasons can be implied behind this lack of recognition: First, the definition of research (and therefore researcher) is unclear even by the very actors of HEMA “research”. Second, the communities are growing, but with clear boundaries limiting communication between them due to language barrier, limitation to the transmission of research output (unpublished, mainly transmitted through workshops). Third, unlike the essence of academic research, its main purpose is not the common augmentation of knowledge, shared through standardised publication media, but rather the personal (or limited to a defined group) augmentation of knowledge for unclear purposes – but according to C6/7, related to the development of modern-day HEMA activity.

4.3 *Tacit knowledge, historicised body and martial skills*

99.3% of the participants consider themselves as HEMA practitioners, 92.6% of the latter practice regularly (subjective information with no pragmatic relevance). If the majority had previous experience in other martial arts/sports, 38.2% did not. Therefore a considerable number of individuals are actually persuaded that HEMA can be reconstructed without previous martial experience as an actual martial art (or as a combat sport) out of the interpretation of historical documents, which are for the most part hardly accessible for untrained historian or linguist as mentioned in the introduction. 35.6% of the participants in their definition of HEMA research even argued against implementing other martial experience or best practice from combat sports to fill the gap left by the tacit knowledge needed to revive, restore or reconstruct the martial skills explicitly written down or depicted by the sources (for tacit/explicit knowledge see Burkart, 2014; Jaquet 2016). Trespassing methodological caveat and disregarding limits of such an approach, a large number of practitioners and researchers alike seem to apply disputable theoretical knowledge acquired by reading original sources translated in modern language to practical application with inadequate tools and lack of physical training. Put differently, serious critique from both martial expertise and academic education can be formulated against widespread HEMA activities. A self-taught martial art from badly translated historical documents cannot produce a martial artist who is able to enter international competition without standards – or other forms of measurement of skills –, especially if the

¹¹ R. Norling, the editor of a well-read blog (HROARR: <http://hroarr.com>, accessed 01.11.15) instituted in 2013 a “Hema research award” where peers nominate independently valuable researchers among themselves. The oldest international group of researchers is an informal organisation founded in 2001 (HEMAC: <http://hemac.org>, accessed 01.11.15), existing, as many others, mainly through a private mailing list and forums.

¹² With the exception of the author of this article, who was named 37 times. I disregarded that data considered as biased since its name figured on the header of the questionnaire.

learning curve is unstandardized and limited in time. Of course this is open for debate, however the argument towards the “historical accuracy” of such practices can be easily refuted if only empirical methods have been applied to reach this goal. Replicating a historicised body and its potential sensorimotor knowledge in a modern-day society is an unmanageable task, but well conducted experimentation based on a relevant sample of sources with proper methodology can allow quantification or observation of performance, at least theoretically¹³.

5 Conclusion

The main purpose of this article was to understand and evaluate the meanings behind the term “research” in the communities of HEMA practitioners and to gain information about the actors of the research. One of the first issues to be tackled is actually the too loose definition of HEMA itself (outside of the scope of this paper). Interestingly enough, without clearly mentioning it in their open-ended definition of research, most of the participants considered the study of the technical literature as a core element of HEMA studies (C3). This is relegating all martial arts tradition before 1300 – dating of the first Fight Book – to the side. Each type of investigation is shaped by the type of sources studied, the method employed to analyse it and to evaluate the results. Previous martial art disciplines are not neglected, but appear to be less mainstreamed than the study of the late medieval longsword or early modern and modern single sword systems, based mainly on Fight Books (but encompassing the complementary analysis of other type of sources, see C3).

The heterogeneous consensuses on the definition of HEMA research emerging from the analysis of the survey tend to shift most of the defined approaches of research away from academic fundamental research criteria. This is not due to the fact that most of the researchers are not professional scholars (whose main occupations are research and teaching at academic or patrimonial institutions), but because of its aims, diffusion and lack of shared methodologies or inquiry types. Nonetheless, like dance studies, experimental archaeology, use-wear analysis or musicology, the HEMA studies, as emerging field of research, are not only worthy of academic attention, but would also need both theoretical and practical knowledge, implying a close collaboration between scholars and martial experts.

The love and hate relationship between HEMA scholars and HEMA researchers should be dimmed, and the first step to doing so would be to allow each party to understand the other one’s best practices, needs and expectations. Further studies are needed to better understand the current “institutionalisation”¹⁴ of HEMA activities and the role and function of the researcher in them. Nevertheless, this survey

¹³ For a discussion of benefits and limits of experimentation in the study of ancient martial arts and weapons culture, see Jaquet & Baptiste (2016). For an example of experimentation aiming at quantifying motor skills for a better understanding of postulated tacit knowledge, see Jaquet et al. (2016).

¹⁴ Considered crucial in the study of any martial art by Bowman (2015a) and feared by many actors and decision makers of the communities of HEMA practitioners.

and its analysis do not pretend to educate neither the scholar nor the researcher, but they advocate against useless generalised critiques issued against one another. The potential of fruitful collaboration between researchers from the communities of practitioners and the professional scholars are beneficial for both parties and might lead to the establishment of a specific and independent field of research.

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Appendix: Data of the survey

Unless specified otherwise in brackets, the questions were forced choice questions. Data are presented in percentage when applicable.

A. Martial background

A1. Do you define yourself as a HEMA practitioner?

Yes: 99.3%; No: 0.7%

A2. (if yes) Are you practicing HEMA ...

Regularly (at least one training per week): 92.6%; occasionally: 7.4%

A3. (if yes) How many years of practice?

14 yrs (min. 1, max. 37)

A4. (if yes) Do you teach HEMA in a group?

Yes: 89.9%; No: 10.1%

A5. (if yes) Have you taught abroad?

Yes: 48%; No: 52%

A6. Other martial art experience?

Yes: 71.8%; No: 38.2%. The list of combat sports and martial arts (classified as categories) includes (in order of the most practiced by number of mentions):

Japanese martial arts (Judo, Aikido, Karate)	46
Olympic Fencing	23
Boxing (incl. kick boxing and savate)	15
Chinese martial arts (Wing Chun, Kung Fu, Wushu, Tai chi chuan)	14
Bladed Japanese martial arts (Kendo, Kenjutsu and Iaijutsu)	13
MMA and other styles (incl. Capoeira, Yoseikan Budo, Jiu jitsu, Krav Maga)	12
Other (Shooting, archery, horse riding, quarterstaff)	4
Russian martial arts (Sambo and Systema)	4
Wrestling (traditional or Greco-Roman)	3

B. Education background

B1. Your highest level of qualification?

a. None	2.7 %
b. High school qualification	11.4 %

c. Bachelor degree (or equivalent)	32.9 %
d. Master degree (or equivalent)	31.5 %
e. Doctorate degree	14.1 %
Other	7.4 %

B2. In which field or discipline?

Humanities: 34.2%; Natural Sciences: 51.1%; Profession-oriented: 24.2%

B3. Was the work in your degree performed in connection with HEMA studies?

Yes, directly (main source): 15.4%; Yes, indirectly (secondary source): 10.7%; No 73.8%

B4. (if applicable) Current institutional affiliation (University, Museum, etc.) with actual position.

17.4% claimed a current affiliation

C. Research in HEMA studies - what does that mean to you?

C1. According to you, research in HEMA or HEMA studies would include the following topics or approaches (multiple choice)

a. Transcription of the source material (Fight Books and secondary sources)	89.3 %
b. Edition of the source material ("edition" is transcription according to academic standards, with codicological and philological studies, establishment of technical glossary, etc.)	83.9 %
c. Translation of the source material	89.9 %
d. Comparative studies of Fight Books (philology or interpretation of technical repertoire)	91.9 %
e. Technical interpretation of source material (establishing technical glossary, interpreting techniques, etc.)	94.6 %
f. Research on the original authors and their audience	89.9 %
g. Research in knowledge transmission	74.5 %
h. Research in praxeology of interpersonal violence/martial exchanges (duels, competition, normative combats, and so on)	87.9 %
i. Research on material culture related to the praxis of interpersonal violence/martial exchanges	79.2 %
j. Research on physiology/proficiency/biomechanics of historical techniques interpreted today	85.2 %
Other	12.8 %

C2. How do you personally render your research to make it available to the general public, other researchers or HEMA practitioners? (multiple choice)

a. By teaching HEMA on a local level (one-off, irregular club training session)	39.6 %
b. By teaching HEMA on a local level (regular club training session)	81.9 %
c. By teaching HEMA on a national level (seminars, workshops)	62.4 %
d. By teaching HEMA on an international level (seminars, workshops)	42.3 %
e. By giving a lecture or presentation on video media (YouTube, Vimeo, or other video platforms)	25.5 %
f. By giving a lecture or presentation for a HEMA audience at an event	40.9 %
g. By giving a lecture or presentation for a public audience	51.7 %
h. By giving a demonstration with presentation for a public audience at a small event	59.7 %
i. By giving a demonstration with presentation for a public audience at a large exhibition	40.9 %
j. By lecturing at academic events (conference, symposium, lecture on invitation)	28.2 %
k. By self-publishing rough content without professional editing or peer-review (such as forum posts, informal blog articles with little bibliography or referencing)	47.7 %
l. By self-publishing good content on public platforms (Wiktenauer, formal blog articles supported with good bibliography and referencing)	28.2 %
m. By self-publishing quality content without professional editing or peer-review (research paper self-published as pdf on website, research document self-published and printed through print-on-demand services)	32.9 %
n. By publishing on paper or electronically, through a publishing house or journal/magazine, with professional editing, without peer-review	23.5 %
o. By publishing on paper or electronically, through a scholarly publishing house or academic journal, with both professional editing and peer-review	23.5 %

C3. In which of the following category would you place yourself?

a. Unpublished researcher (blog articles, forum posts, videos would not count as "publication")	59.1 %
b. Published researcher (without peer-review)	20.8 %
c. Scholar (published researcher by scholarly publishing house or journal - with peer review)	12.8 %
d. Affiliated scholar (published researcher with a current academic affiliation)	7.4 %

C4. By which of the following audience(s) do you think you are personally recognised as researcher with an expertise regarding HEMA studies?

a. Local or national community of HEMA practitioners	82.6 %
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b. International community of HEMA practitioners	45.6 %
c. Local or national academic community	24.2 %
d. International academic community	9.4 %

C5. Can you name some individuals you would suggest are researchers in HEMA studies?

96 different researchers were named, only 40% of the latter had more than 3 mentions. The first name (the author) is to be discarded, because it is biased since he was the author of the survey and his name was mentioned. The top 18 is presented in the table below with the number of mentions, as abbreviated names with the country.

D.J. (CH)	44	T.W. (DE)	17	J.-L.F. (US)	13
R.N. (SE)	34	P.-A. C. (FR)	16	O.D. (FR)	12
D.H. (DE)	23	M.E. (UK)	15	K.M. (US)	12
M.G. (BE)	19	K.F. (UK)	15	R.v.N. (NL)	12
G.W. (FI)	18	P.T. (UK)	14	C.T. (US)	11
F.C. (FR)	17	R.W. (DE)	14	P.-H.B. (FR)	10

C6. What would be your definition of HEMA research?

Open-ended (see results)

C7. (optional) What would be the purpose of HEMA research?

94% of participation. Open-ended (see results)

D. Personalia

The survey enabled anonymity. The answer to this section was facultative, however 88.8% (D1: 91.2%, D2: 92.1%, D3: 83.3%) of the participants did reply.

D1. Age

Average: 37 (min. 19, max. 61).

D2. Nationality

24 different nationalities. No relevant majority.

Austria, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, Mexico, Netherland, Poland, Serbia, Scotland, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdoms, United States.

D3. Main profession (current)

Categories were made according to the ISCO (International Standard Classification of Occupations), except for the unemployed/student/freelance and HEMA teaching, which forms specific categories.

Information and communication technology	18.1%
Unemployed/student/freelancer	13.4%
Teaching (school, education)	8.1%
Research and Teaching (University)	6%
HEMA	6%
Undefined	6%
Culture (museum, library, institute)	4%
Service and sales	4%
Clerical support	3.4%
Artist	3.4%
Edition, translation	3.4%
Health and care	2.7%
Law enforcement	2.7%
Craftman	2.7%
Manager (service)	2%
Designer	2%
Legal	1.4%
Finances	1.3%
Sport	1.3%

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