



# Medieval Combat in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Author: David Tétard – July 2015

After dreaming of being a medieval knight since I was a teenager, I have actually started in the last few years to be involved in actual hobbies that get me closer to my dream. I think that there's been a lot of development in these hobbies, with new ones actually appearing (or at least becoming more prominent). For example, long standing standard re-enactment has seen HEMA become more and more popular. Alongside that, Full Combat Medieval Combat has grown rapidly in the last few years. The boundaries between these hobbies can be blurred; a few people practice several of these hobbies. By large however, they don't really mix well. More worryingly, some people who practice one sometimes are very judgemental of others (a little bit like in competing cults where there's only one true god and all others believer are all heretics). We are at risk of becoming fundamentalists. Anyway, I believe that all these hobbies contribute together to giving a good picture of what medieval combat really was, the reality probably was a mixture of all of them.

This document is my own attempt to introduce these hobbies to people who are just starting, focussing on the UK. It is aimed at giving (admittedly with very rough brush strokes) an idea of what exists out there so that people who want to join in can do so targeting exactly what hobby to be involved in. I'm sure a lot of people will disagree with me, some for good reasons. I'm happy to be demonstrated be wrong, after all, I haven't spent a lot of time doing in-depth research about this (to my shame but I'm a busy person).

Therefore, my thoughts about these hobbies, in alphabetical order:

## **Full Contact Medieval Combat**

This hobby involves people dressed in medieval looking armour, using medieval-looking weapons, fight each other with full intent (no pulled blows). The aim is usually to throw the opponent to the ground. Fights include one-v-one, five-v-five or more. This is probably the most physical (and probably most dangerous) of all the hobbies treated here. Armours and weapons are not entirely historically accurate because health and safety is badly challenged! Martially, these resemble more a chaotic brawl like the ones we can expect on a medieval battlefield.

*If you are looking for a high adrenaline rush, are not necessarily bothered by historical accuracy, this may be the hobby for you.*



See for example: [Battle of the Nations](#).

### **HEMA (Historical European Martial Arts)**

HEMA does not only cover medieval martial arts. HEMA is the study and practice of historical documents that describe combat techniques used by masters of combat. HEMA is therefore a real martial art, European in origin and the most historically accurate way to use medieval weapons the exact, effective way some were used. It does not mean that all medieval combatants were fighting using these techniques but it is established that some actually did, mainly the wealthy noble class (knight) who could afford being taught by renowned masters. The downside is that this hobby is limited to what was described by historical martial art masters and a lot of weapons are not covered. Also, the oldest manuscript being MS I.33, older techniques (e.g. vikings) are not currently known. Moreover, these treatises tend to focus on one-v-one combat, no group combat and it remains to be seen if these one-v-one techniques can be used in the chaos of the battlefield. Because HEMA focusses on martial techniques, it usually does not involve historically accurate armour, only modern and effective protections (weapons, even if blunt are historically quite accurate).

*If you are looking at learning the martial techniques, the most effective unlimited way to use your medieval weapon, while you do not care about dressing like a knight, this is for you.*

See for example: [British Federation of Historical Swordplay](#).

### **Re-enactment**

Re-enactment is the depiction of historically accurate clothes, armour and weapons, all the way to living history, i.e. every day's life in the targeted period (but I want to focus on combat). Re-enactment aims to provide the public with a picture of what it would be like to travel back in time (usually under the watchful eye of the authenticity officer). The aim is that re-enactors would not be out of place if they travelled back to their period. No gear is used that is not demonstrably very similar to an historical artefact (e.g. from illustrations, from carvings, from museum items). Attention is also paid to have period matching equipment (no 15<sup>th</sup> century helmet with a 11<sup>th</sup> century armour!). In terms of combat, groups try to push accuracy as far as possible while maintaining health and safety. That imposes limitations that make combat usually less realistic than HEMA or Full Contact Medieval Combat (e.g. no thrust to the face is ever allowed, no head shots in some groups, etc.). Also, because of the large changes in arms and armours during the medieval period, groups



tend to focus on a narrow medieval period, meaning that nobody can do “medieval re-enactment” per se, they do “11<sup>th</sup> century re-enactment” or “battle of the roses re-enactment”. It means members of these groups have to settle on one key period of the middle-ages.

*If you want to dress up exactly like a medieval knight, then fight in your attire, with your weapon of choice, in different historical scenarios (big group battles, of knight tournament), live in medieval tent in or near a castle, this hobby is for you.*

See for example: [Historic UK](#).

### **Stage Combat**

Stage combat aims to provide the entertainment industry with people who are trained in combat techniques that we are used to see in films or computer games. The approach is to be safe but use the techniques as realistically as possible, pretending to really want to hurt/kill your opponent.

These techniques however are usually martially completely unsound and using them would usually systematically lead to your own death pretty quickly. It’s all about showmanship. Historical accuracy has no bearing on these groups because you’d be hired by a director who’s artistic director has his own ideas (most of the time completely mistaken) of the way medieval fighters looked.

*If you think you’re the next Errol Flynn, Kevin Costner or Brad Pitt, if you like to stun the public with unrealistic but impressive moves, this is for you.*

See for example: [The British Academy of Stage and Screen Combat](#).