

**Academy of Historical Arts**  
*and the*  
*Historical European Martial Arts Coalition (HEMAC)*



---

**“Interpretive” HEMA Systems**

---

*Author:*  
Keith Farrell

*Version: 01*  
*Date: 10<sup>th</sup> July 2013*

The Academy of Historical Arts is a division within Triquetra Services (Scotland), a charitable organisation registered in Scotland: registration number SC042086.



## Version and Copyright Information

---

*Version: 01*

*Date: 10<sup>th</sup> May 2013*

*Copyright © Keith Farrell, 2013*

*Copyright © Academy of Historical Arts, 2013*

Please respect the copyright and intellectual property of the author(s) of this document. Please contact the organisation if you would like to publish or upload this document anywhere.

# Contents

## Chapters

1	Introduction	4
2	Good reasons for studying interpretive systems	5
3	Bad reasons for studying interpretive systems	9
4	Guidelines and Suggestions	13
5	Conclusion and Questions	17

## 1 Introduction

---

The purpose of this article is to discuss "interpretive" systems of HEMA, and to look at what advantages and disadvantages are associated with such study. For the purposes of this article, the working definition will be as follows.

**Concept:** "interpretive" systems of HEMA

**Definition:** styles and disciplines of any of the many historical European martial arts where we know that a particular weapon or fighting system was used in history, but where there are no (or very few) sources to describe HOW to do the martial art. Due to the lack of sources for a particular system, HEMAists or enthusiasts who try to reconstruct the system need to be much more interpretive and open to ideas, experimentation or alternative sources of information.

Some examples of interpretive systems would be styles such as Highland broadsword and targe (very few sources), warhammer or mace (virtually no sources), pankration (no comprehensive written source to say HOW it was done), and Viking sword and round shield.

Some examples of styles that involve interpretation work but do not meet the definition above for an interpretive style include Liechtenauer's longsword (difficult to interpret, but lots of material and sources available), sword and buckler (again, difficult to interpret, but there are sources to describe how to do it), Italian or Spanish rapier styles (maybe confusing and difficult to understand, but lots of sources), and 18th/19th century sabre styles (lots of sources, not very difficult to interpret). If a discipline is supported with a lot of source material to explain how to fight in that fashion, then it tends to be accepted as "normal" or "mostly normal" within the HEMA community, and so this article will not discuss these systems further.

The purpose of this article is not to say that interpretive systems cannot be reconstructed, nor is the purpose to say that such systems should not be reconstructed. This article is not an attempt to pass judgement on what counts as "good" HEMA or "correct" HEMA, since these concepts are very personal and subjective. If this article can help people to think about what disciplines they study, and the advantages and disadvantages inherent in such study, then this article will have achieved its purpose.

## **2 Good reasons for studying interpretive systems**

---

There are all kinds of benefits and advantages that develop from approaching the study of an interpretive system in the correct fashion. If the approach is sensible, mature and honest, then the people studying the system will develop themselves in valuable ways.

### *Development of fencing/combat skills*

If one studies a martial art, then there must be a goal that involves improvement of one's skill and ability at martial arts. If such a goal is not present then the class becomes little more than a crèche or child-minding service for people who have an interest in historical fighting styles.

If the study of the interpretive system is approached sensibly and in a structured fashion, over time, a certain set of skills and principles will emerge as important to an interpretation of the system. Such principles and skills might be different to what is normally focused upon in more mainstream disciplines, so this is an excellent opportunity to develop these skills in a new and exciting fashion.

For example, when studying an interpretive system such as the longsword style from the Kölner fechtbüch (MS Best.7020), it could be interpreted that many of the sequences involve the establishment or recognition of patterns during an exchange or a series of exchanges, and then taking the necessary steps to break or interrupt the pattern and to take advantage of the resultant openings in the opponent's defence. This is a very valuable skill for martial artists, but it is not a skill that is prioritised in the study of Liechtenauer's longsword system. Yes, the skill and concept is present in that system, but it is not a huge and major component, so most practitioners will spend relatively little time working to improve that specific skill. By studying the interpretive system where this is a prioritised skill and concept, students will develop a skill that can then support further martial arts study.

### *Learning to piece together many different types of sources with proper context*

If there are no sources available that describe precisely how to fight in that system, or very few sources that do not present a comprehensive and cohesive system, then it becomes necessary to look outwith the "normal" HEMA sources. What other information is available? Are there primary accounts written by witnesses of battles or duels? Is there any artwork that depicts the use of the

weapons in a reliable fashion? Are there any diaries or memoirs where an individual talks about the concepts and contexts of the use of the system?

For example, in the study of Highland broadsword and targe, there are only two written sources that discuss the "how to" aspect to any reasonable lengths (Thomas Page and Donald McBane). There is an additional source that shows several illustrations of Highlanders in fighting positions with broadsword and targe (the Pennicuik Sketches). By themselves, these sources do not make a full and comprehensive system, but when supported by other first hand accounts of the Highlanders in action and the archaeological studies of bodies from mass graves at various battles in which the weapons were used, it is possible to piece together a lot of valuable information that can sketch a rough outline of a system and fill in some of the gaps left by missing "how to" sources.

Another example is that of 17th century Polish sabre. There are no Polish manuals from the 17th century that describe how to fight with the sabre, but there is a 19th century manual that writes about how to fight with a sabre in the 17th century style (Starzewski). There are diaries and memoirs (Pasek, Kitowicz) that describe the social context and provide lots of helpful anecdotes. There are random quotes and sayings that can shed light on issues, such as describing what people used which kinds of cuts (Jeziarski). There is the study of the antique sabres themselves, to see what the norms for the weapon would be in different eras. Sources can be analysed for reliability and usefulness, and compared with sources from other countries and/or time periods. The process of investigating all of these different sources of information teaches about different ways that historical information has been preserved, and helps people to realise that information can be found in all kinds of surprising places.

### *Developing a better knowledge of history*

Teaching an interpretive system is the perfect time to introduce a class to a wealth of historical information and context. History and context should appear in any well-developed HEMA curriculum, but it tends not to be the principal focus of the study of more mainstream HEMA systems. Rather, the martial art itself of such systems tend to receive the most attention, and rightly so. Not everyone comes to a martial arts class to learn about history.

However, in an interpretive system, it will often rely heavily on contextual information and other historical sources. The inclusion of such "external" information gives the teacher a great opportunity to

include some of the interesting stories and facts, and also gives the teacher the opportunity to correct misinformation and incorrect beliefs.

For example, in the study of Highland broadsword and targe, it is an excellent opportunity to address the misconceptions surrounding the Jacobite rebellion of 1745-46.

Many people believe that this conflict was a case of "the Scots against the English", where the Scots were fighting for their freedom and the "evil English" were oppressing the Scots. This belief is complete nonsense: the conflict was a rebellion against the government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain. The rebel army involved Scottish Highlanders and Lowlanders, as well as French troops and mercenaries from other countries. The government forces involved Scottish troops in the form of both Highland and Lowland regiments, as well as English regiments and other troops. It was a conflict that pitted Scot against Scot, and was fought between people loyal to the Stuart dynasty and people loyal to the current government of the country.

Since the Highland broadsword and targe was in use in the Jacobite rebellion, since Thomas Page wrote his manual on the subject in the same year as the Battle of Culloden, and since the Pennicuik Sketches illustrate Highlanders at the Battle of Culloden, it is important to address the correct historical information during the study of the system. To attempt a study of Highland broadsword and targe while maintaining that the Jacobite rebellion was a case of the Scots rising up against the oppression of the evil English is blatantly wrong and reeks of romanticism, idealism, and a lack of integrity in the study. But by addressing such historical context and by correcting misconceptions and false beliefs, the study of an interpretive system can result in tremendous benefits to everyone who participates in the course of study.

*Creating new links and ideas to take back to the study of a more "normal" HEMA style*

Simply practicing something differently for a while can help to spark new ideas that can be fed back into the practice of a more mainstream system. When practicing the same thing time and time again, it is very easy to become stuck in a pattern. By practicing something new, it becomes much easier to break the patterns and make new mental connections that hasten the learning process when returning to the mainstream system.

A good example is the footwork in the Ledall manuscript for English

longsword. The terms are named but not defined. Steve Thurston has prepared an excellent article to explain what he believes the different terms mean and how we should understand the footwork in that system.<sup>1</sup> By studying this manuscript and reading Steve's document, it can spark new ideas about how to approach and understand the issue of footwork in the more mainstream German longsword sources.

*Exercising reason and logic, and well as personal skill, discipline and control*

People can play games with their knowledge of sources, especially when they know different styles of fighting. For example, applying the principles and stylistic elements of a particular master when fighting with a weapon that that master would never have taught, or perhaps never even touched! This forces a practitioner to study the source in depth and to summarise the principles and concepts of the system - not a bad exercise in any case.

For example, Keith Myers ran an experiment to see if he could apply the principles of Sir William Hope's smallsword method when fighting in pugilism bouts.<sup>2</sup> Some of the principles transferred cross very easily, other concepts had more issues. In any case, it was an interesting exercise, and Keith learned a lot about Hope by attempting the exercise. Later, he tried a similar experiment: fighting with a longsword using the principles and stylistic elements of Henry Angelo's broadsword and sabre method.<sup>3</sup> Again, some things transferred well, other things less well, but he learned a lot about Angelo's system and priorities as a result of the exercise.

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Thurston, *Deciphering the footwork in Additional Manuscript 39564*, 2013. <http://www.hemac.org/data/DeciphLedallFoot.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://hemaalliance.com/discussion/viewtopic.php?f=20&t=1169>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.fioredeiliberi.org/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=31&t=20130&p=325071#p325071>



### **3 Bad reasons for studying interpretive systems**

---

Although there are several good reasons to study interpretive systems, and many advantages and benefits that can develop as a result, there are also bad reasons to study interpretive systems and many disadvantages that can accompany such study.

#### *Not practicing proper mechanics*

One common problem that plagues the study of interpretive systems is that the mechanics of how to move and how to use the weapon are rarely given the same importance as interpreting technique. As a result, people do not support their motions with the correct form and posture.

Why is this a problem? Well, taking for example a system such as Viking sword and round shield, people often tend to focus on trying to use the shield as an important part of the system, and the sword begins to become less important. Good mechanics would dictate that the hands remain low as much as possible, and that the blade always moves in front of the hand as swiftly as possible when striking forward, so that the chance to receiving a hit to the hand is minimised. But if the focus is on using the shield, people tend to ignore the small details of how to move the sword from a resting position into a striking technique, and this makes the study of the system much more dangerous and less safe for the participants.

Furthermore, if a bladed weapon is part of the system, then the ability to cut through a target with the weapon is very important. Often people who study an interpretive system manage to come up with some quite impressive and interesting things to do with the weapon, but more often than not these techniques would be unable to do any significant damage in reality with a sharp blade. The whole system falls apart and the study time is wasted if the system does not actually work, and fails at this critical test!

#### *Not developing a sensible, comprehensive or cohesive system*

A sensible and complete martial art system should be comprehensive and cohesive. With a workman's toolbox, it needs to be comprehensive, it must have all the tools that the workman will need to do his job and to solve the problems that he is likely to encounter in his work; also, it must be cohesive: the tools must all work together in the right fashion. It would be pointless for a plumber who works with pipes to have a spanner, a screwdriver, an electric drill, a toothbrush and a hairdryer. That would not be a sensible or cohesive toolbox!

In a similar fashion, a martial art system must have enough basic elements to allow practitioners to fight with that system and to use the system without needing to supplement it with other systems. It must have a variety of positions with different characteristics and functions, it must have a variety of attacks and a variety of defences, and it must have a sensible and cohesive set of principles, concepts, emphases and stylistic elements to bring it all together into one sensible and useful system.

Many people who study interpretive systems forget to include some of the necessary elements and focus simply on different ways to attack or defend, or different ways to use a shield or off-hand, and forget to explore the principles and stylistic elements that bring together all the disparate techniques. When building a wall, one needs both bricks and cement to hold the bricks together. If all you have is a pile of bricks without any cement, or with only a little cement, then the best wall that can be built is a precarious structure without any stability, or perhaps only a very small structure that does not do the job properly.

Of course, working on principles and "soft skills" is nowhere near as interesting or as much fun as playing with an exciting new weapon. However, these skills are of even greater importance than any amount of time spent studying or learning techniques, and ignoring these concepts will result in a discipline that has no system and that is a waste of time and effort. Even worse, if students of the discipline learn that a "system" is just a collection of tricks and techniques, then they will not learn about the importance of concepts such as distance, range and timing; they will not learn about feeling strength or weakness, and will not learn how to oppose strength with weakness and vice versa. Students will not learn about the most important aspects of martial arts and their progress as martial artists will be slowed and retarded by their study of an incomplete interpretive system.

### *Copying another system and trying to justify it*

One of the most dishonest and problematic things that can happen in the study of interpretive systems is to copy another system and then try to justify it.

For example, at various times, people have tried to develop a system for Scottish longsword. We know that the Scots in the 14th, 15th and 16th century had two-handed longswords, as various examples survive in museums and collections. However, there are no manuals or sources that describe how such a system may have

worked, and there is not even a good starting point for making educated guesses.

Some people have tried to solve the problem by using an interpretation of Liechtenauer's longsword from German sources, and try to justify it by saying that the four postures of Liechtenauer are simple and common postures that are only reasonable to see in other systems, and that Scottish mercenaries had contact with German soldiers and fighters and so it would only be reasonable that such information would be transmitted and then brought back to Scotland.

Perhaps such assertions could be reasonable, but it is dishonest to copy a system completely and then try to justify that it is in fact something different. Liechtenauer's longsword from the 14th and early 15th century was something different from other, more common styles of fencing in the Holy Roman Empire, different from what was taught by other masters and teachers, and it is entirely unreasonable to assume that people from a completely different part of Europe, with a different cultural context and a different legal environment, would import a secret and abnormal dueling system and then apply it to general battlefield usage.

It is better to approach the development of an interpretive system from scratch, from nothing, and to build it up in an experimental fashion rather than to import a different system, tweak it, and try to defend and justify it.

*Short sightedness; not seeing beyond one's own agenda or conceptions*

Often people already have some idea or conception about how a system might look, or what sorts of techniques it may contain. These conceptions can be influenced by literature or media, or from prior experience with different martial arts or physical activities, they may be based on sound reason, but they are still an influential bias that can colour and affect one's study of an interpretive system.

Very closely related is the reason why the system is being interpreted and developed. For example, if a historical re-enactment group is trying to develop a system of sword and shield combat, then the purpose will be for show rather than martial effectiveness. Furthermore, in the interests of historical authenticity of appearance, people might not be wearing protective gear such as gloves or helmets. As a result, such a system may deliberately avoid strikes to the hands or to the face or head; it then has a huge

built-in deficiency that falls foul of some of the other problems described above. If hits to the hands are not part of the system, then developing correct and sensible mechanics will not happen; if thrusts are not allowed, or if strikes to the head are not allowed, then the system will not be comprehensive and even the cohesiveness of the principles and concepts will be compromised. The end result may well be a good system for the historical re-enactment group, but it will not be a faithful or effective recreation of a historical martial art.

People who have prior experience in a different martial art or discipline often bring a bias to the study of an interpretive discipline. For example, in the study of Highland broadsword and targe, if one has some experience with regimental Scottish broadsword (without the targe) beforehand, then there may be the temptation to adopt a right foot forward stance as the primary method of standing, since that is how it is done in regimental broadsword. Alternatively, one might choose to adopt a left foot forward stance, to differentiate the targe system from the regimental system - this is just as bad, since the previous experience has forced a different way of doing things, and has biased the interpretation!

In a similar fashion, people with experience in a discipline such as kendo or sport fencing will tend to bring a series of biases to the study of an experimental discipline (such as Scottish longsword, for example, or 17th century Polish sabre). Reactions that have become muscle memory in the previously trained system will begin to find their way into the experimental system, and the mental approach from the previous system will begin to influence the mental approach, attitude and focus of the interpretive system.

If one desires to study an interpretive system, then the only honest and fair way to do so is to identify all possible biases and external influences, and to work hard so that these do not colour the interpretation.

## 4 Guidelines and Suggestions

---

There are advantages and disadvantages to studying an interpretive system. Many of the advantages stem from a sensible, structured and skilful approach to developing the interpretation; many of the disadvantages occur when the approach to interpretation is flawed. This article will offer a few guidelines and suggestions to help interpreters approach the issue of developing an interpretation as sensibly and honestly as possible

### *Work to develop sensible mechanics*

If poor mechanics are a hallmark of poor interpretations, and good mechanics that can be explored for the improvement of one's performance in other disciplines is a hallmark of a good interpretive system, then clearly one should strive to develop good and sensible mechanics! Mechanics cover how the body moves, the low level details of how to hold and wield the weapon(s), and how to deliver the strikes in such a fashion that they would work with a real weapon.

There are a few Encased in Steel articles that discuss the concepts of mechanics:

- <http://historical-academy.co.uk/blog/2013/05/03/validating-what-we-do-in-martial-arts/>
- <http://historical-academy.co.uk/blog/2013/03/22/benefits-of-test-cutting/>
- <http://historical-academy.co.uk/blog/2012/05/25/cutting-concepts/>

### *Have a goal, a desired outcome; don't just pick it up and play*

Rather than just picking up a weapon set and playing with it until some tricks and techniques emerge, it is much more sensible to have a structured plan with an end goal. When engaging in academic or industrial research, perhaps to make a new chemical in a lab for example, scientists do not begin the process by picking substances and putting them together at random to see what happens. Instead, they work out what they know already that may help, they work out what they are wanting to achieve, and they detail the process that they intend to follow to achieve that result.

It should be the same with studying an interpretive system. Just

picking up the weapons and sparring with them to see what techniques emerge is, quite frankly, a stupid idea. Instead, work out what you are trying to achieve with the study: are you trying to develop a full and comprehensive martial art, or are you trying to develop a show-fighting system with limitations? Work out what you know already, and what you need to find out to be able to flesh out the source material: are there books that might help, or artwork that might depict the discipline? Are there contextual sources such as diary entries or official reports? Is there any physical evidence such as antique weapons/armour particular to the discipline that can be examined in a museum, or have there been studies performed on skeletons from battles or fights where the discipline was used?

If you set out a sensible structure before even picking up the weapon, then you will have a much greater chance of developing something worthwhile as an end result.

*Pick a skill or an idea, and teach it as you would a normal class*

Interpretive systems should not just be a collection of tricks. There should be principles and concepts, and there should be a way to progress in terms of skill. Therefore it should be possible to structure a normal sort of class to develop a single skill or idea, starting from basic information and movements, then adding complexity throughout the class, until students are doing some very skilful and technique things. A class should not just be a list of cool tricks and new techniques that students have to learn and memorise; students should be able to focus on one or two key ideas and then develop their understanding and physical abilities with these concepts.

One of the most common misconceptions that people hold is that medieval knights had no skill or finesse, that swords and armour were exceptionally heavy and unwieldy, and the method of fighting was brutish and thuggish with knights trying to beat and batter their opponent through sheer strength. That is clearly nonsense, and the medieval fencing treatises describe clear skill progressions to improve a person's fencing skill without having to rely on strength. For example, Liechtenauer described how to use winding techniques, how to feel whether the other person was hard or soft in the bind and how to choose the most correct and useful action to defeat someone who entered into a bind scenario. His advice was not "hit harder", it was "learn to feel, learn to work *Indes* (in the instant), and learn to choose the correct action to take advantage of the situation".

If an interpretive system has no room for skill progression, if it is simply a matter of learning a set of techniques and then performing them better every time, with more speed and more strength, then the system is not far from the situation depicted by that misconception! If there are a finite number of techniques and sequences and the only way to get better at the system is to learn to perform the techniques with more speed and with more strength, then all that is happening is that the combatants will be engaging and trying to use base characteristics to defeat each other.

If the instructor is able to teach a class on a single key idea or skill, and can develop the students' ability to perform that skill or to integrate the idea into their fencing, then that proves that there is room for skill progression and that the system is more than just a collection of tricks. This very exercise will also help to clarify things in the mind of the instructor, leading to a greater and deeper understanding of the system, and an improvement in the interpretation.

*Look at all the historical contextual information that you can, to help inform your interpretation*

Sometimes contextual information can be very helpful, and it can generate some new ideas about the interpretation when other sources lack certain details.

For example, skeletons from the Battle of Wisby in 1361, where sword and shield was a discipline in use, show a lot of wounds and injuries to the leg. The grave evidence clearly points at the fact that leg strikes were a key component of the fighting style in use at that battle. Conversely, skeletons from the Battle of Killiecrankie in 1689, where the Highlanders used broadsword and targe, show that descending blows to the head, neck and shoulder caused most of the injuries. Thus the grave evidence shows that the stylistic elements of fighting with a broadsword and targe are very different to a more medieval style of sword and round shield, and such information can help to inform interpretations of these styles.

Have any studies been performed on mass graves from battles or conflicts where the interpretive system was in use? Are there eyewitness accounts of how people fought with these weapons and what they tried to achieve? Are there memoirs, diary entries or other accounts of such fights? Is there any reliable artwork that depicts people fighting with these weapons? Are there any other forms of contextual information that could be of use for developing an interpretation?

*Make sure people are giving good attacks, otherwise interpreting counters will never work against a good committed attack*

One of the biggest problems that plagues the study of both interpretive systems and documented systems is that when drilling and training specific techniques or sequences, the attacks are not delivered in a meaningful fashion. After all, why bother trying to strike someone properly when you know that he is going to parry it anyway? Such behaviour makes the practice worthless, since the students are no longer learning to defend against proper attacks, nor are they learning to give proper attacks. Counters and techniques that might work against weak or inaccurate attacks often will fail against a well-targeted and committed attack.

The most important part of every drill should be the initial attack. Students should learn how to hit the opponent in a correct fashion, with good mechanics and due attention to technical detail and form and posture. Once the attacks are meaningful, only then can the defences and counters become meaningful or worthwhile.

This does not mean that people have to hit each other really hard or try to hurt each other; it simply means that nonsense and poor technique should never be an acceptable part of training.

If all the training involves a proper and committed attack, then the interpretation of how to defend against such attacks will improve. As a result, the interpretive system will become capable of defending safely and securely, and of course people using the system offensively will be able to launch a proper sort of attack!

*Do not just "plug and play"!*

It cannot be said often enough: do not just pick up the weapons, start sparring, and develop an interpretation from that! It is a terrible approach that is fraught with errors. This will only lead to an incomplete system with glaring holes and a lack of structure.

The misconception of knights as brutes, just swinging wildly and hoping for the best... How is that different from just picking up a weapon and sparring at full speed? Address the misconception, discipline yourself and your students, and study and train the system before you start "playing" with it.



## **5 Conclusion and Questions**

---

Hopefully this article will have provided some insight into the issue of working with interpretive systems. There are many benefits and advantages of studying an interpretive system, and it is a very worthwhile process. However, there are many pitfalls and disadvantages that appear if the approach is not structured and sensible. It is of utmost importance to treat the study of an interpretive system as seriously as the student of a well documented and more mainstream martial art.

### **Questions**

Have you experienced any particular advantages or disadvantages of studying interpretive systems?

Are there any interpretive systems that are easier or more difficult to reconstruct than others?

Do you disagree with any of the statements or advice in the article? If so, please share your thoughts, and please explain why you disagree!