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The typological debates around Le Jeu de la Hache (BnF MS Français 1996) and their stakes for HEMA practice

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Abstract – *Le Jeu de la Hache* displays a fighting-system with the pollaxe in armour, but the weapon is never described with precision, which leads to debates regarding its typology – cutting edge or hammer/raven's beak? Through a semi-quantitative survey, we tried to offer an overview of current HEMA practice around this specific source, with special emphasis on the typological question. Despite the rather narrow scope of the inquiry, some trends emerge. Besides the various choices regarding terminology and sources, we can underline the variety of materials used for the simulators: rubber components («hammer» typology) are leading, but wood and metal are also used, for both typologies. Advantages and disadvantages of each rely on the articulation of safety and realism dimensions, and the dangerousness inherent to this kind of weapon is largely highlighted. Even if most respondents declare not to be familiar with the typological debates amongst historians, it was usually mentioned to them during their practice. Only a minority has taken part in experiments in order to bring some elements of answer, but seldom in a systematic way. Therefore, a praxeological experimental approach could bring up new data, but is not devoid of difficulties, for instance the necessity of wearing armour.

Keywords – pollaxe, typology, survey, simulator, practice, experiment

I. INTRODUCTION

Le Jeu de la Hache (anonymous, Paris, French National Library, ms fr. 1996) occupies in several respects a special place in the corpus of fight books: indeed, it represents the oldest witness in French¹, and is devoted solely to the techniques of the pollaxe in armour, offering the most extensive system for that specific weapon². Recent publications have contributed to narrow its dating to the third quarter of the 15th century³, and at least one aspect of its context of application, linked to chivalric games,

¹ Dupuis, 'The French Fencing Traditions, from the 14th Century to 1630 through Fight Books', p. 354.

² Jaquet, *Combattre en armure à la fin du Moyen Âge*, p. 235.

³ Dupuis and Deluz, 'Le Jeu de La Hache: A Critical Edition and Dating Discussion'.

can be inferred from an exceptionally explicit statement in the prologue: *vous qui estes l'ung des II champions, appellé en champ de bataille soit à oultrance ou aultrement*⁴. However, *Le Jeu de la Hache* is not free from ambiguities: the manuscript, unfinished, lacks illustrations⁵, and the weapon used for the techniques disclosed is at no point described in a precise manner, opening the way for a typological debate among the scientific community.

After a brief presentation of these discussions, based on historical sources and historians' interpretations, this article will address the consequences of the debates in the process of recreation of old martial gestures. Indeed, the relationship between source and practice is central in Historical European Martial Arts and constitutes, by its position of guarantee regarding the link to history, a strong identity and definitory dimension⁶. The uncertainty contained in *Le Jeu de la Hache* raises one aspect of this connection, more specifically the need to make choices in front of non-obvious historical information, which is one of the topics that the 2016 conference in Morges aimed to address. Thus, to what extent are the debates between historians regarding the typology of the weapon reflected in the choices of simulators for the practice of HEMA according to the manuscript of *Le Jeu de la Hache*? What are the models (typology, size, material, mechanical properties, etc.) chosen by the practitioners, and why? Can we identify trends depending on the type of activity (technical work, demonstration, sparring, etc.)?

Those questions will be discussed from the results of a survey conducted within HEMA groups and associations, in order to obtain a – non-exhaustive – overview of the practice of *Le Jeu de la Hache* in HEMA. Details regarding the survey – typology, questions, progress, sample, inputs and limits – will be presented in section III (Methodology), while the results will be discussed in section IV (Results and discussion). We will also consider, theoretically and as an opening, what an experimental praxeological approach could bring to the elements provided by the traditional sources: how do the respondents situate themselves with regards to this dimension? what would be the precedents, the contributions and the limits? These are the goals of the present article: it does not, in any way, intend to provide an unambiguous and definitive answer to the debates evoked, nor to evaluate or monitor the practices in terms of “correctness” or “incorrectness”.

⁴ Anonyme, *Le Jeu de la Hache* (ed. Dupuis and Deluz), p. 34.

⁵ Although the layout suggests that nearly thirty were planned. See for instance Dupuis and Deluz, ‘Le Jeu de La Hache’, p. 15.

⁶ Tuaillon Demésy, ‘Pratiquer les AMHE aujourd’hui : entre reconstitution, expérimentation et innovation’; From the same author, see also *La re-création du passé: enjeux identitaires et mémoriels*.

II. SCIENTIFIC DEBATES ABOUT *LE JEU DE LA HACHE*

Le Jeu de la Hache – the abbreviated name under which the manuscript is mostly known – or *La Doctrine et l'industrie du noble jeu de la hache et la maniere de battaillier* – its official, institutional name – is, alongside many other witnesses of the fight books corpus, a historical source that constitutes the basis of a contemporary physical practice, giving it a specific dimension. This pragmatic aspect seems in fact to have originated the renewed interest towards this specific source after centuries of relative indifference, in parallel with the development of HEMA in the end of the 1990s. The first major publication is the work of S. Anglo, in 1991, which dedicated an article to *Le Jeu de la Hache*, as well as a transcription and an English translation⁷, which have been recently amended⁸. He addresses the question of the type of weapon by underlining that no mention is made of a cutting edge or *taillant*, while the terms of *mail* (hammer) and *bec-de-faucon* (falcon beak, a kind of curved hook) are present. As he points out, “these features do not constitute an axe in the modern sense of the word but rather form what is often termed a ‘pole-hammer’ or ‘bec de faucon’”, despite the “axe” appellation, and similarly to what can be seen in the text and images of manuscripts from Fiore dei Liberi or Hans Talhoffer ⁹.

This representation is not shared by C. Raynaud, which dedicated a chapter of her monograph on the axe (tool and weapon) to the play of the axe and the eponymous manuscript. From her point of view, *hache* and *bec-de-faucon* are never mingled in French (and French speaking) sources and iconography, reflecting the lesser spread of the second typology in this geographic region, and the axe mentioned in *Le Jeu de la Hache* would therefore possess a traditional cutting edge (*taillant*)¹⁰. Moreover, she points out several sources which clearly manifest a differentiation between the two typologies, for instance in this Burgundian chronicle: “*nous avons veu que le chevalier qui cy est venu aporte un becq de faucon en lieu de haches et nous semble qu’il y a grant différence* » (we have seen that the knight that came here brought a *bec de faucon* instead of an axe, and it seems to us that there is a great difference)¹¹. However, despite what such a specific example seems to imply, historical sources, whether narratives or iconographic, do not allow for a precise and consistent distinction between the typologies.

During the last years, new publications have contributed to enhance the discussion in several aspects. F. Cognot recalls the multiplicity and complexity of forms taken by the pollaxe during the 14th and 15th century (reflected by the diverse archaeological artefacts), arguing that despite contemporary controversies, the *bec de faucon* was indeed

⁷ Anglo, ‘Le Jeu de La Hache’; reissued in *Masters of Medieval and Renaissance Martial Arts*.

⁸ Dupuis and Deluz, ‘Le Jeu de La Hache’.

⁹ Anglo, ‘Le Jeu de La Hache’, pp. 113–14.

¹⁰ Raynaud, « *A La Hache!* », p. 504.

¹¹ Lefèvre de Saint-Rémy, quoted in Raynaud, « *A la Hache!* », p. 534. English translation by the author.

considered as an axe at that period¹². D. Jaquet analyses more broadly the corpus for armoured combat, and notes that representations in fight books exhibit beaks (hooks) on a more frequent basis than cutting edges, but with occurrences of both typologies in the same image¹³. O. Dupuis underlines the overlap of the questions of typology and chronology: “The best source of dating could be the fact that the weapon used in the technical treatise has no cutting edge but only a hammer and a spike as discussed before. It seems that until the mid-15th century, a clear distinction is still made between these two forms [...]. This could argue for a composition in the second half of the 15th century”. Indeed, in 1465, both typologies seem to be assimilated without problem under the denomination of “axe” in an inventory of the artillery of Blois¹⁴. The question of the characteristics of the weapon used in *Le Jeu de la Hache* remains therefore marked by ambiguity, which, as we will see, has consequences regarding its practice.

III. METHODOLOGY

In order to obtain an overview of the practice of *Le Jeu de la Hache* within HEMA community, and analyse its positioning regarding the debates mentioned above, a semi-quantitative survey has been conducted in the form of an online questionnaire shared through social networks between October and November 2016, in French and in English. Due to the unprecedented dimension of such a survey, as well as to this specific format, which implies a reduced size and lack of representativeness of the sample, it is to be considered as an exploratory step, providing a canvass of analysis tracks, but not claiming to answer them comprehensively or permanently. Our hope is that this first insight will in the future allow the author or other researchers to implement a more detailed enquiry, building on the inputs and limitations of the present study.

The survey comprises between 1 and 19 questions, depending on the respondent’s answers. Whenever possible, the open question format was chosen, because it allows a great latitude for respondents, who on the one hand are encouraged to provide long and precise answers, and on the other hand are not influenced by a stricter canvass as to what their answers should contain. Particularly in the case of a preliminary survey, this allows to analyse which elements respondents spontaneously chose to highlight, and how they express them, rather than imposing topics in which they may not feel involved. Even in the case of a closed question (multiple choice or yes/no question), an area was provided for comment and explanations regarding the answer given (for instance “Please explain as precisely as possible”). Of course, open questions also come with their share of drawbacks and difficulties: besides the natural inclination to give

¹² Cognot, *L’armement médiéval : les armes blanches dans les collections bourguignonnes. Xe - XVe siècles*, pp. 586–89.

¹³ Jaquet, *Combattre en armure*, pp. 325–26.

¹⁴ Raynaud, *A La Hache!*, p. 535.

short answers even when allowed and encouraged to provide detailed ones, it is of course more difficult to generalize on the basis of answers that often do not address the same points¹⁵. This limit can be overcome in subsequent studies through the use of complementary methods, for instance quantitative survey over a larger scale and qualitative interviews with selected practitioners¹⁶.

The survey starts with a decisive preliminary question – “Do you practice the poleaxe according to the BnF ms fr. 1996 (*Le Jeu de la Hache*)?” – with a close choice of answer (yes/no) that impacts the course of the survey. Indeed, the goal being to provide an overview of a specific practice, the rest of the questions do not apply to people who answered “no” to this question. They are therefore immediately redirected to the end of the survey, with an explanation of the situation, acknowledgements, and the possibility to provide an email address to be kept informed of the results. The following questions are divided in two sections, the first one about their practice – years of practice from *Le Jeu de la Hache*, investment in transmission, sources of the practice, name given to the weapon, choice of simulator, etc. –; the second one focused on the scientific debates regarding the typology of the axe – consciousness, summary of the perception, confrontation to this question during the practice, involvement in experiments to bring some elements of answer to this issue. Personal details (name, surname, email address) are optional, and the anonymity of the answers quoted in this article is guaranteed. As mentioned, almost every question includes a space for free expression, and explanations are also provided about the debates for respondents who declared not being familiar with them.

Especially as a typological and terminological debate is at stake, it is important to clarify and explain the choice of words used in the survey. Over the questions, the term used to refer to the weapon is consistently “poleaxe” in English¹⁷ and “hache d’armes” in French: however, in order to limit the way this choice may influence respondents, these words appear only once – in the first question – before practitioners are invited to provide their own terminology. For the same reason, generic terms (“weapon”, “simulator”) and periphrasis like “the weapon addressed in *Le Jeu de la Hache*” are used, keeping at a descriptive level when it comes to specify the weapon’s head, for instance “the ‘cutting edge’ version”.

¹⁵ Combessie, *La méthode en sociologie*, pp. 42–44.

¹⁶ Such a crossing of methods is notably applied to the study of HEMA and living history in Tuaillon Demésy, *La re-création du passé*, pp. 27–28.

¹⁷ This differs from our own preferred term, “pollaxe”, but “poleaxe” seemed, at least from our French-speaking point of view, to be of more general apprehension, and less jargonistic.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results have been collected on a sample of 37 respondents, 11 in the French version and 26 in the English version. This small number is due to the short time limit between the announcement of the conference topic and the presentation of the results. Even if the survey could have been extended in the beginning of 2017, we made the choice to stick to the results presented in Morges.

IV.1. Overview of the practice

From 37 respondents, 17 have provided a negative answer to the preliminary question, stating that they do not practice the pollaxe according to *Le Jeu de la Hache*. This represents almost 50% of the total sample: in spite of the limited generalisation potential, it seems to indicate a marginal practice, especially if we compare it with other HEMA disciplines. Among those, a majority also declares to practice the pollaxe according to other historical sources, mentioning for instance German or Italian fight books: this parameter needs to be acknowledged because it is likely to influence the way they deal with *Le Jeu de la Hache*, due to mnemonic processes. This issue has not been addressed in the survey, but may well be the subject of further research. No results about other HEMA practices of the respondents have been collected, but those obtained by A. Tuaillon Demésy in the French context show that longsword, emblematic weapon of the Middle Ages, comes first, followed by dagger and wrestling. She also underlines that accessibility of the material (simulator, protections, etc.) can play a role in the choice of the practice¹⁸. This marginal dimension is also felt among those (N=20)¹⁹ who claim to practice the pollaxe according to *Le Jeu de la Hache*: they underline reduced frequency, intermittent practice “due to lack of training partners”, or even temporal distance between the time of the survey and the time of the practice (“Have not practiced for about 7 years”).

Seven countries are represented in the survey: France (N=5), Switzerland (N=4), UK (N=3), the Netherlands (N=3), USA (N=2), Sweden (N=1) and New-Zealand (N=1), as well as a dozen of HEMA clubs (some respondents announce several, others none). This geographical spread of the results shows on the one hand the possibilities of social networks, reaching quickly but unevenly practitioners all over the world, but also, one can argue, the founding effect of English translations, the first of which dating back to 1991, which allowed the practice to outstrip French-speaking areas.

Respondents are quite experimented in HEMA, but the results are very polarized: more than 50% (N=12) declare “10 years or more” of practice, while only 4 have between 1

¹⁸ Tuaillon Demésy, ‘Faire revivre les duels des XVe et XVIe siècles’, p. 129.

¹⁹ In the analysis, the letter N is used for the number of members in the sample or sub-sample addressed. The (arithmetic) mean is the sum of the values of the variable divided by the number of the sample, and the median is the number that divides the sample in two equal parts (50% of the sample answering under that value and 50% above).

and 3 years of experience, and none between 5 and 7 (mean = 8,2, median = 10). The average experience in the practice of *Le Jeu de la Hache* is 5 years (mean = 4,85; median = 5), a result also quite polarized, as 50% declare 3 year or less, and 25% 10 years or more. However, these results do not take into account the length of the practice, but just when it started: except in one case where the respondent specified their answer (10 years or more, but “[I] have not practiced for about 7 years, so I have practiced it (a little) for about 3 years or so”), it is not possible to draw decisive conclusion on the experience level. Moreover, no questions have been asked about the rhythm of practice (number of sessions per week and duration for instance), an interesting point that has been raised during the discussion following the presentation in Morges, and that could contribute to better comprehend the practice.

Finally, most respondents (N=13) claim to be involved in the transmission of knowledge linked to this practice, a dimension particularly relevant in HEMA²⁰. When it comes to specify the modalities of this transmission process, answers vary greatly, but several categories can be identified: conduct of regular training sessions, punctual workshops (for instance in the context of HEMA events), public presentations or initiations; involvement in conferences, translations, article writing (not specified if scientific or vulgarisation), or even works carried out in the context of studies or profession (Master, PhD). Three related dimensions emerge in order to categorize those activities: communication, audience, and method. The first axis addresses the way the activity is conducted, either through practice (like a workshop or training session), oral communication (conference), or written media (articles, thesis, etc.). The second differentiates the intended audience for the transmission activity: familiar with the topic (HEMA or scientific community), or neophyte, while the third dimension, method, gathers scientific approach on the one hand and vulgarization on the other.

IV.2. Disputes over terminology

In the same way as the historical sources, the scientific publications, or the manufacturers of HEMA-related products and simulators, a persistent terminology blur is manifested in the survey, by the answers to the question “Which name(s) do you give to the weapon used?”. Most respondents give only one (mean = 1,9, median = 1), but some mention up to five, in one case marking the difference between “typing” and “speech”. Answers have been provided in several languages, a few in German (*Streitaxt*, *Mordaxt*), Swedish (*Pålyxa*) or Dutch (*Halberdier*), but the clear majority in French and English, allowing for further analysis (figure 1). Out of 13 people giving one or several English names, most mention one of the two almost eponymous appellations (one respondent mentions both), *pollaxe* (or *poll-axe*, *poll axe*) (40%) and *poleaxe* (30%), which insist on the two main components of the weapon, respectively the head (*poll*) and the

²⁰ Tuaillon Demésy, *La re-création du passé*, pp. 99–131.

shaft (*pole*)²¹. The generic term of *axe* is highlighted in 15% of the English names given, but interestingly never appears alone, while other marginal denominations are provided one time (5% each): *battleaxe*, *ravenbeak*, *Lucern hammer*, the last two denomination hinting clearly to a hammer/beak typology.

Eight respondents have provided a total of 7 different names in French, a slightly bigger diversity than in English (6). The most frequent appellation is *hache d'armes* (or *hache d'arme*) (29%), but with only one occurrence more than the two following (22% each), *hache noble* and the generic *hache*, which this time represents the only answer of one respondent. Four names have been mentioned only once (7% each), and never on their own: *hache de pas*, referring to the context of application (*pas d'armes*, a chivalric game), *hache bourguignonne*, implying a geographical origin/specificity (Burgundy), *bec de corbin*, the equivalent of the English term *ravenbeak*, and *simulateur* (simulator), presented by the respondent themselves as the “official [French?] federal denomination for practice weapons, whatever the type”.

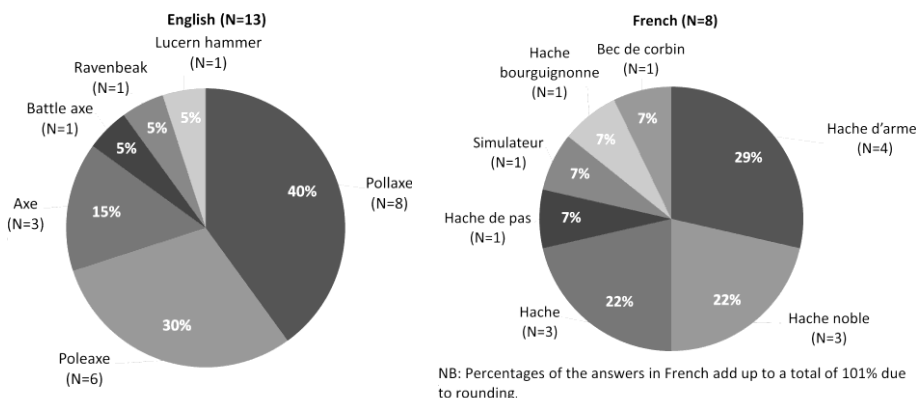


Fig. 1: Answers provided to the question “Which name(s) do you give to the weapon used?”, in French and English. Diagram of the author.

The main observation that can be made from the survey results, besides the variety of terminology used, is its disputed status. Indeed, even if the respondents have not been asked to justify their choice of name(s), two of them clearly took position against one or several denomination(s). One, in French, says “especially not *hache noble*” (“surtout pas *hache noble*”), a term quite spread in the French-speaking HEMA community, and also well-represented in the survey (second most provided answer in French). The other, in English, are more explicit about their position: “I try to shy away from modern, anachronistic terms such as *lucerne* and *poll-hammer*”. *Lucern(e) hammer* is mentioned once in the survey, however, *poll hammer* is not mentioned at all. It is interesting to note that this appellation is quite common for instance in manufacturers of weapon

²¹ Cognot, *L'armement médiéval*, p. 584.

reproductions or HEMA simulators, applied to the hammer/beak typology, as will be addressed in section IV.4.

IV.3. Choice of sources

The relation to historical sources is central to the contemporary practice of HEMA. However, the very nature of the latter does not necessarily make them immediately available to all, and several resources coexist, echoing the various steps of the process: transcription, translation, interpretation (experimentation)²². In the survey, respondents had the choice between several non-exclusive possibilities (multiple choice question): original text, modern translation (online or published), interpretation of someone from their practice group, interpretation of someone outside their practice group (for instance online videos), or other. The following chart (figure 2) shows the general results. We can observe that the original text comes first (12 answers, 32%), but if the two types of translation²³ are put together (8 answers, 21% each), it becomes the main source of practice. Interpretation by someone from or outside the practice group, which represent a various degree of mediation, are almost never invoked alone, and represent each 4 answers (10%). Finally, a few respondents (3 answers, 8%) also mention other sources for the practice, in one case creating connections between the technical text and narrative ones (15th century chronicles), and most indicate having a pollaxe practice based on other fight books, for instance Fiore dei Liberi, Hans Talhoffer, Paulus Kal, anonymous Bolognese, etc.

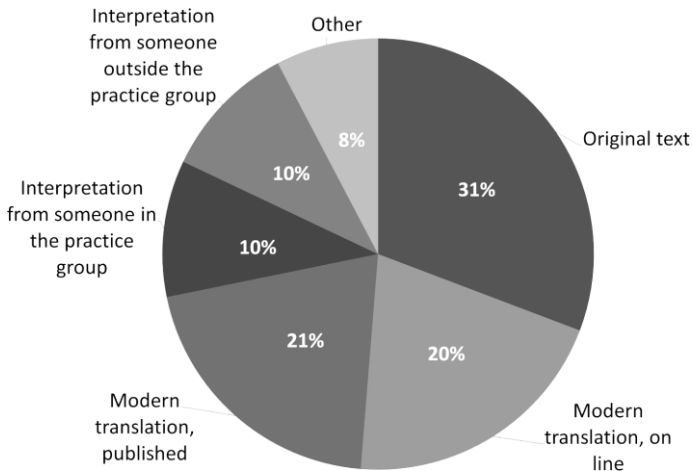


Fig 2: Answers provided to the question "On what kind of sources do you found your practice? Several answers possible" in French and English. Diagram of the author.

²² Tuaillon Demésy, 'Faire revivre les duels', p. 123.

²³ Reflecting the state of research on the corpus, with few scientific editions but many works from the community, especially on the Internet. Jaquet, *Combattre en armure*, p. 10, 25-26.

The language mostly mentioned for the translation is English, often Anglo's work²⁴, which underlines its major role for the knowledge of this source within HEMA community. Many different modern French translations (several authors) are quoted, as well as, more marginally, one in Swedish: these answers correspond to the geographic origin of the respondents, but the author's investigations on the web show that other translations exist²⁵, and it would be interesting to analyse in which conditions they are executed (i.e. based on the original text or another translation) and used. Personal works are also often highlighted, reflecting the implication in transmission already discussed.

More than half of the answers (60%, 12 out of 20) contain several possibilities in the given list (mean = 1,95, median =2), with a few respondents providing 3 or more. When there is only one, modern translations are the majority, representing 62,5% with 5 of 8 people (3 for a published translation, 2 for an online translation). Just two respondents claim to found their practice solely on the original text – logically, they happen to be French speakers, and answered the survey in that language. Most French speakers mention also both resources (original text and modern French translations), while non-French speakers rely more on translations and interpretations. Several websites have been cited as reference, for instance Wiktenauer (several answers) and Youtube (one answer, but one can infer that more use it, as some mention simply “videos” without elaborating).

Eight respondents in total (40%) do not mention at all the original text, and in one case there is no mention at all of any kind of textual reference (original or translation), only “interpretation of someone from your practice group”: interestingly enough, this answer is accompanied by the following statement: “no idea, trainer does the research”. This kind of answer is exceptional in the survey, but seems to illustrate a more widespread passive practice of HEMA, where the trainer is seen as the mediator between the historical sources and the practitioner, who comes to sessions to receive a teaching and does not get involved with the sources²⁶. In our opinion, this is linked to the marginality of the practice, expressed by the high percentages of respondents who do not practice *Le Jeu de la Hache* and did not exceed the preliminary question, as well as by all those who did not even started the survey for the same reason. In this aspect, it reflects a kind of opportunism in HEMA practice: if the trainer is interested in some sources and offers them during the session, the practitioner will – almost by chance – discover them, otherwise not.

IV.4. Variety of simulators

The material dimension of living history practices was at the heart of Morges conference, with consideration to clothing as well as weapon simulators. In order to get

²⁴ Anglo, 'Le Jeu de La Hache', 1991 and 2008.

²⁵ At least in German and Italian.

²⁶ This evolution is analyzed for instance in Tuailon Demésy, 'Pratiquer les AMHE aujourd'hui'.

an overview of the practice of *Le Jeu de la Hache* in HEMA, as well as to tackle the typological question, it is therefore important to understand the kind of simulators used, as well as the relationship that practitioners have with them.

Once again, what comes out is a great diversity. Mentions of the shaft are seldom as most respondents focus on describing the head: when they are mentioned, they appear to be in wood (various species: hardwood, ash, rattan), and of varying length (one mention of 150 cm, one of 200 cm, one of “different sizes depending on the practitioners”). Heads come in several materials: rubber represents 41% of answers, before wood (26%), metal (22%) and other materials (11%) that can be fiberglass, PVC, foam, etc. Other possibilities do exist: internet investigations show for instance leather simulators (with manufacturing advices). Some respondents specify also when their simulator is home-made (in one case a neutralised, “rubberised” steel weapon), while other give a manufacturer’s name, but a few cases are ambiguous.

Rubber simulators, most widespread, also seem to be the most standardized, which is not a coincidence and underlines to our view the importance of availability when it comes to the choice of a simulator. Answers show two recurring firm names (and their retailers): their products are very similar in appearance, with several rubber pieces to be assembled on a wooden shaft, and correspond to the hammer/bec-de-faucon typology (with various names, from “polehammer” to “hache noble”). However, this domination may evolve in the next years, as a new type of rubber pollaxe simulator appeared on the HEMA market in the last months, this time with a cutting edge. HEMA is still a new practice, and specific material is slowly developing, which is not without influence, as practitioners faced with a greater diversity of easily acquired simulators will base their choices on other criteria.

Hammer/bec-de-faucon typology seems also to represent most the wooden simulators evoked in the survey, but only few respondents detailed this point, in one case by providing pictures. However, internet investigation also discloses models with a cutting edge. Often based on specific archaeological pieces (the Wallace Collection is mentioned several times), metal simulators logically reflect both typologies, and offer an overall greater variety: for obvious reasons, they are mostly referred to as “blunt”. A few more respondents mention wood over metal (7 to 6, representing 26 and 22% of answers); moreover, it is worth noting that this latter material is never mentioned alone – in one case the respondent mentions a metal weapon and a “rubberised” one –, while wood or rubber constitute the sole answer of many respondents (11 out of 20, the remaining 9 giving 2 answers).

Pros and cons of the different simulators logically reflect their material variety. A recurring concern is of course security. As Tuaillon Demésy points out, violence and corporal risk must be controlled, under penalty of socially discrediting the practice²⁷. This is, one can assume, the main reason why metal weapons are not mentioned alone:

²⁷ Tuaillon Demésy, ‘Faire revivre les duels’, p. 127.

even lacking a sharp edge or a pointy end, the very nature of a polearm (concentrating kinetic energy in the head) makes its blows particularly strong. It is therefore not conceivable to use metal simulators for the practice of the pollaxe in the same way than for longsword for instance²⁸. Respondents express various concerns about this inherent dangerousness, some underlining for instance that “the wooden or rubber simulator stays VERY dangerous and forbids a full-speed practice”, or that the impact on a fencing mask is still very hard. There is specific stress on the necessity of a robust defensive equipment (armour), the only thing able to compensate and allow a safe practice: “No danger or inconvenience with the rubber simulators (as long as you are fully armoured)”.

The necessity to deal with security forces practitioners to make compromises and concessions as for the physical properties of the simulators, moving away from their historical counterparts. Many underline problems regarding the weight or the balance of a rubber or wooden simulators, that will for instance allow quicker movements than a weapon with a heavier metallic head. Moreover, rubber presents the inconvenient of “sticking” with the other simulator or the armour, and hooking can be difficult; while wooden heads can splinter – just like the shafts. For this reason, metal simulators keep all their importance when it comes to “get[ting] a feel for the real weapon”, a dimension evoked by several respondents. They can be used for technical work, or possibly low-speed sparring with a trusted opponent, while other materials allow a more dynamic or less protected practice: “Steel for technique. Synthetic for light gear sparring”. What emerges from the answers is therefore a distinct practice according to the material, but some respondents also underline the impact of availability (for instance if one goes to teach in another place, one has to adapt to provided simulators). Finally, it is important to notice the subjective dimension of the advantages and disadvantages mentioned, as the same simulator can get radically opposed appreciations from distinct respondents.

IV.5. Awareness of the scientific debates

As we have seen, the question of the weapon’s morphology in *Le Jeu de la Hache* has raised and still raises debates within the scientific community. How do HEMA practitioners position themselves on this issue? The survey asked first, in a very general way, if respondents were familiar with it: if no, a small explanation was provided; if yes, they had to summarize the debates, giving names if possible. Only 40% (8 respondents) declared to be familiar with the debates, but without providing a very detailed account (only one mentioned Raynaud and Anglo). It is hard to establish if this is a consequence of a lack of knowledge, or just a choice for ease of answer, but the second possibility seems likely. A more detailed possibility could have been to ask them specifically if they know such or such author and their position on the issue, but this seemed too

²⁸ This limit is underlined for instance in Jaquet, *Combattre en armure*, vol. 2, p. 316.

judgemental and would probably not have been well received, even though the aim of the survey is not to categorise “those who know” from the other.

However, the interesting aspect comes out when this result is crossed with the answers to the following question: “During your practice, to what extend have you been confronted to this question?”. Possible answers were “not at all” (8 answers, 40%), “in a theoretical way (reference to the debate)” (8 answers, 40%), and “in a practical way (integration of the issue in an exercise)” (4 answers, 20%). By combining the variants for “yes”, and as it is not necessarily the same respondents that answered “no” to the two questions, we end up with four categories regarding the awareness of the debates and their integration in the practice (figure 3): 1) people who answered “no” to both questions (7 people, 35%); 2) people who answered “yes” to both questions (7 people, 35%), 3) people who answered “no” to the first question and “yes” to the second (5 people, 25%), and finally one respondent who answered “yes” to the first question and “no” to the second (5%). While the two first categories can be considered as “coherent”, it is the third one that is particularly interesting. Indeed, it consists of people who spontaneously declared not being aware of debates among historians; however, once provided with the summary, they nonetheless consider that this point has repercussions on their practice, to some extend. This points to some kind of gap between the scientific and the practitioners’ spheres, which face the same issues but address them differently and mostly in isolation. On the whole, only 35% of the respondents (7 people out of 20) seem to have no awareness at all concerning those typological debates, neither theoretically, nor practically.

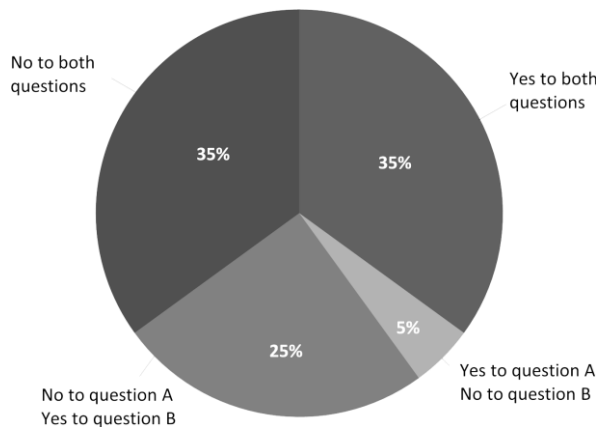


Figure 3. Combination of the answers for the questions: “Are you familiar with the debates about the shape of the weapon addressed in Le Jeu de la Hache?” (A) and “During your practice, to what extend have you been confronted to this question?” (B). Diagram of the author.

IV.6. Justification of the practice

As mentioned, the choice for open answers in the survey surges from the will to provide respondents with a free space to express themselves, in order to analyse which dimensions they put forward – consciously or not. On that respect, an interesting aspect emerging from the answers is how eager respondents are to justify their own practice. It is manifested in terminology, as mentioned, but also in the choice of a simulator (“nylon simulators have no advantages compared to wooden ones”). More specifically, they also feel the need to indicate their “side” in the typological debates, even though it was not required: some even dodge the detailing part and provide their point of view instead (“false debates actually”). Most of the time, opinions are in favour of the hammer/beak typology (*bec de faucon*), and two axis of justification emerge recurrently: on the one hand, respondents evoke *Le Jeu de la Hache* itself – “the text clearly refers to a *bec de faucon*”, a term that indeed occurs seven times –; on the other hand, just like Anglo, they refer to other fight books that contain pollaxe techniques, in other languages, and in which illustrations associate such a typology with the denomination of “axe” (*azza* in Italian or *Axt* in German). Rather than historians’ works and interpretations, it is therefore worth noting that practitioners who engage in the debate claim to rely on the historical sources – once again underlining the specific position that those latter enjoy within HEMA self-definition.

IV.7. Commitment in experiments

Finally, the last aspect that the survey aims to address concerns the practice and potential of an experimental approach, when it comes to bringing some possible answers to the typology question. As seen regarding the previous question, 40% of the respondents never came across this question within their practice; they accordingly claim that they have never led or taken part in experimentations on that topic. As for the others, twice as many respondents claim to have addressed this question in a theoretical way than in a practical way. Half of them never took part in experiments, which is also coherent: on the whole, 12 answers (60%) show no implication whatsoever in experimental approaches. The minority who on the contrary claims to have engaged in such experiments mostly did it on a repeated way (answer “yes, several times”). It is difficult to draw a comparison between their various experiments, because the elements they chose to highlight in the detail section greatly vary. Some describe the process they undertook, for instance “We tested the different hooks of the two weapons, especially on a blow to the knee”; while others rather mention some of the results (such technique is easier with such typology, etc.). What emerges is in general a test of all or some techniques from *Le Jeu de la Hache*, with both hammer/beak and cutting edge typology in order to compare them, as well as, on a more inductive way, considerations emerging from sparring sessions (which weapon is faster, easy to handle, etc.). Two respondents get to the conclusion that the specific typology does not actually matter: they rather insist on the role played by what the text calls the *croix* (cross), the

angle formed by the intersection of the metallic head – whatever its shape – and the shaft.

The survey therefore shows some manifestations of an approach by gesture analysis. However, the scope of such tests remains restricted, because in addition to their small extent, they seem to represent a performative approach rather than actual experiments. As Jaquet points out, the difference between the two denominations lies in their degree of formalization, as the experiment requires a stricter definition, especially regarding its methods: data evaluation, formulation of hypothesis (deductive approach), purposes, etc.²⁹ No such quantified and repeatable data seem to emerge from the answers, that cannot be generalized by the crossing of their conclusions due to their lack of formality and their great diversity. However, it does not mean that such experiments do not exist (on *Le Jeu de la Hache*), and furthermore, it shows the attraction and potential of such a praxeological approach applied to typological issues.

Bases are led, but to move from a performative to an experimental approach requires the control of many parameters. We will only focus briefly on one of those, as it surges from the survey: armour, whose relevance was mentioned by many respondents. On the one hand, one of them described that they “have worked through most of *Le Jeu* with both an axe and a hammer-headed weapon, while in full armour”; on the other hand, another mentioned that “however [they] did not perform any tests against plate armour”. These two answers show at the same time the contrast between the various performative approaches, and their limitations. Indeed, *Le Jeu de la Hache* is a combat system in armour, and this data is of tremendous importance, as the body habitus associated with it differs greatly from the usual 21st century body habitus. This fundamental epistemological consideration lies at the heart of experimentation, as the latter “depends on the bodily conditions of the person performing it”³⁰. This may seem self-evident, but it is important to recall it, because it highlights a range of practices and contingencies that precede the experimental approach, to make it capable of providing scientific data.

V. CONCLUSION

On the whole, the survey held between October and November 2016 managed to provide some overview of the practice of *Le Jeu de la Hache* in HEMA, as well as to address some issues raised by the Morges conference. More specifically, it allowed to underline choices and strategies made by practitioners when faced with an historical source that is subject to debates. Despite its reduced scope, it sets the basis for further

²⁹ Jaquet, *Combattre en armure*, pp. 460–61.

³⁰ “L’expérimentation dépend des conditions corporelles de celui qui s’y livre”, Jaquet, ‘Entre jeux de mains et jeux de mots.’, p. 14. English translation by the author.

investigation that could contribute to specify some aspects and underline their evolution.

The results show that *Le Jeu de la Hache* remains a marginal practice, but has quite a wide geographical extension, probably due to early translations in English. Indeed, practitioners mostly rely on some kind of modern adaptation of the text, but often in cooperation with the original middle French text. Terminology is disputed among respondents, reflecting the vagueness and multiplicity of denominations over the pollaxe. Simulators come in a great variety of shapes, sizes and material, on a quite fragmented and dynamic marketplace. What emerges is the difficulty to articulate the axis of security with the one of realism, forcing practitioners to make choices, sometimes by using various simulators for distinct practices (for instance technical work or free play).

Despite often claiming not to be aware of the typological debates among historians regarding the shape of the weapon in *Le Jeu de la Hache*, most respondents seem to have addressed this issue one way or another during their practice, which reveals little connection between the two spheres. Maybe this dimension could be improved in the future, in an interdisciplinary perspective, so that all actors can benefit from the others' inputs. HEMA practitioners manifest however a clear attachment to historical sources, that they often refer to as a justification of their practice.

Finally, the idea of an experimental approach to bring elements of answer to typological issues is highlighted by a few respondents: there is interest and potential, but it remains for now in the scope of the performative. A thorough effort on formalising the approach into proper experiments could lead to interesting results, provided that the numerous influencing factors – for instance wearing an armour – are taken into account.

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