

**Justine McLean, *To Train a Militia: the Experience of Public Training in Classical Greece and the Early Modern Holy Roman Empire***

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**Introduction and Research Aims:**

The purpose of this paper is to explore classical Greek martial training, and our evidence for it, through a comparative lens from the early modern world, particularly the Holy Roman Empire (HRE). This experiential and comparative approach is primarily concerned with the common anxieties of training from the perspective of the individual that can be teased out from the sources and comparisons. There are many sources that have been used to construct a martial culture of ancient Greece (or at least Athens/Sparta), but we lack martial arts treatises apart from one each on wrestling and Pankration.<sup>1</sup> The study of the martial culture and combat training of the medieval/ early modern world has seen significant research output in recent years, in no small part due to the Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA)

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<sup>1</sup> Ijäs 2020

movement.<sup>2</sup> This paper is not just a (very short and incomplete) comparative history of these phenomenon but will also include an experiential and phenomenological component to ‘back up’ the comparisons with, as I have taken part in many similar training/ demonstration activities to those done in the HRE and Classical past, and will use this to investigate that experience from the individual’s perspective. Of course, I am very far removed from their time and culture, but as will be argued, certain important parts of the experience are likely consistent. If HEMA treatises, experiential analysis and Classical sources all match up, it should tell us something about the experience of training with arms in the Classical world. This experiential analysis alongside comparing a small selection of period sources will demonstrate several key anxieties to martial training that likely define part of that experience in the Classical and Early Modern world.

In order to perform a fruitful comparison, it is important that the points of reference are comparable in the first place. Their respective military systems, both operated in a world of mercenaries, professional soldiers and militias, and both had a decidedly public face to some of (but certainly not all) their military (or militarily adjacent) training.<sup>3</sup> In particular the paper will focus on training for skill at arms, but many other forms of (often indirect) training existed, such as hunting,<sup>4</sup> sports,<sup>5</sup> and dancing.<sup>6</sup> But it is also important to know that the situations they trained for are also at

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<sup>2</sup> Marsden 2016: Preface

<sup>3</sup> Tlusty 2011: 189ff; Wheeler 1982

<sup>4</sup> Wees 2004: 91; Swinny 2015

<sup>5</sup> Wees 2004: 92; Schwartz 2013: 46; Tlusty 2011: 195

<sup>6</sup> Schwartz 2013: 49-53; Tlusty 2011: 195 210 217-21

least broadly comparable, therefore a brief description of the different epoch's warfare will be presented.

*Classical Greece:*

The hoplite and his phalanx (alongside the Trireme) stands 'supreme', although these are hardly the only ways of waging war in the period.<sup>7</sup> If there is any sort of broad scholarly agreement, a 'hoplite battle' develops in the archaic and early classical period, and then evolves into more complex 'combined arms' warfare during the Peloponnesian War (431–404BC) and beyond.<sup>8</sup> It was, at least in the standard interpretation (if there is one) a battle of motley non-professional militiamen, after all "the classical hoplite was never a uniform creature".<sup>9</sup> It was also supplemented by mercenaries and some cities had programs for maintaining professional (or near enough) soldiers.<sup>10</sup> Skirmishers and perhaps some cavalry are also involved.<sup>11</sup> The exact mechanisms by which hoplite battles were won or lost are hotly debated, but the seemingly crucial 'othismos' (push) would occur, one side would yield and turn to flee.<sup>12</sup> At this point the defeated can expect heavier casualties. The victors would erect a monument, a parlay would return the dead, and terms could perhaps be reached.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Wees 2004: 61ff

<sup>8</sup> Schwartz 2011: 11ff; Kagan and Viggiano 2013: 10-12; Matthews 2012: 240-1

<sup>9</sup> Wees 2004: 52

<sup>10</sup> Pritchett 1974: 221-4

<sup>11</sup> Wees 2004: 61ff

<sup>12</sup> Matthews 2012: 205ff

<sup>13</sup> Wees 2004: 134-8, 184ff

### *Early Modern Holy Roman Empire:*

Although in the high medieval period, battle has traditionally been considered to have been dominated by heavy cavalry (which would make a very poor comparison, culturally speaking, to Classical Greece), there has been a shift to infantry overtime.<sup>14</sup> Warfare is dominated by blocks of pikemen (with halberdiers and swordsmen as well) and musketeers (sometimes crossbowmen/archers), with cavalry fulfilling various roles.<sup>15</sup> The idea being to reduce the integrity and strength of the enemy with missile fire, then hopefully break the opponents pike blocks and drive the enemy from the field.<sup>16</sup> Rogers goes so far as to say that “there is a striking degree of continuity in tactics from Ancient Greece through the early Renaissance, deriving from the essentially constant capabilities of the human body and the limited possibilities for variation in hand-held weapons of steel and wood.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Methodological Issues:**

If we wanted to better understand Classical or Early Modern military/martial arts training for ourselves, attempting to recreate some approximation of that experience seems like an obvious place to begin. Activities like HEMA, archery and sport shooting seem like obvious

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<sup>14</sup> Rogers 2010: 203-4

<sup>15</sup> Jørgensen et al 2005

<sup>16</sup> Rogers 2010

<sup>17</sup> Rogers 2010: 208

choices. It is worth stating that "... 'archaeology by experience' is quite commonly confused with experimental archaeology by the lay person and even the professional."<sup>18</sup> This experiential and experimental archaeology are often contrasted with each other. Dolfini and Collins state that "The lower rung [compared to experimental archaeology]... would be crowded by a penumbra of hazily defined re-enactment activities, educational demonstrations, and leisurely experiences, which seem to lack any unifying marker. They are normally grouped under the somewhat belittling term of 'experiences'."<sup>19</sup> There are clearly significant methodological issues to consider. If "the senses are historical"<sup>20</sup> then "excavating our own sensory stratigraphy"<sup>21</sup> (nor indeed emotional state) is really rather challenging. We are not 5th century Greeks or Burghers of the 16th Century HRE, nor are we doing exactly what they did, as obvious as that is. A practitioner researcher doing HEMA has to live with that tension, and consider, philosophically, what one is 'actually' reconstructing as well as what one is 'aiming' to reconstruct, to relive, or even what one is trying to achieve.<sup>22</sup> Lukenchuk states that "most of practitioner research is autobiographical, in addition to phenomenological, since it describes, interprets and endows the lived experience with meaning..."<sup>23</sup> In that vein it is worth stating that my main interest is in the works of the mid-late 16th century fencing master Joachim

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<sup>18</sup> Jeffery 2004: 13

<sup>19</sup> Dolfini and Collins 2018: 37

<sup>20</sup> Hamilakis 2014: 118

<sup>21</sup> Hamilakis 2014: 119

<sup>22</sup> Mondschein 2021; Schmidt 2021

<sup>23</sup> Lukenchuk 2006: 426

Meyer. I have been studying (and occasionally teaching, currently to a few of my A level students) his system for about six years. It is from an autobiographical experiential perspective, combined with textual comparatives from both the HEMA and classical sources, which will provide insight into the experience of training.

This modern experience is not intrinsically done in the same way, or for the same reasons as in the past. Modern martial arts training (itself hugely diverse in nature, purpose and method) generally has two major focuses self-improvement and preparation for ‘self-defence’, which are not mutually exclusive. It is not (usually) in the hopes of preparing to fight in a militia for ‘the good of the community’ and to gain or maintain prestige behoving of one’s social rank.<sup>24</sup> There is, to varying degrees, a performative aspect to most modern training but distinctly personal aims affect its focuses, practices and the mind-set in which participants approach it, which is certainly true in HEMA.<sup>25</sup> However, that does not mean that modern experiences do not have something to add to our understanding, and it seems impossible that training in Free Imperial Cities or Classical Polies was divorced from ‘self-defence’ or ‘performing masculine virtue’ to focus entirely on the Commonweal.<sup>26</sup>

## **Comparing the Experiences**

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<sup>24</sup> Forgeng 2015: 37; Thlusty 2011: 221; Crowley 2012: 119; Wees 2004: 97; Lowe 2020 243ff

<sup>25</sup> Schmitz 2021: 247-2; Zillinger 2021: 351-3

<sup>26</sup> Marsden 2016: 63ff; Rawlings 2000: 234-6

There were a few major avenues for public training with arms in the HRE, the shooting or archery club/ competition<sup>27</sup> and the Fechtschulen (public exhibitions/tournaments, as well as the possibility of potentially lethal brawls with strict legal/social expectations)<sup>28</sup>/ Fencing Schools. Drill could also be taught when inducted into the actual military force, in a similar way to some Greek commanders.<sup>29</sup>

Classical Greek training (with arms) is often assumed to be either non-existent or very personal and small scale<sup>30</sup>excluding perhaps ‘chosen men’ such as the Theban Sacred Band or the later Ephebia of Athens.<sup>31</sup> However, there is one clear exception that bears resemblance to the early modern practices, that of the Hoplomachia. Most famously they feature in Plato’s dialogue the Laches, where we are introduced to the public demonstrations of men who are available to hire to teach others how to fight in hoplite arms (ἐν ὄπλοις). Specifically, the platonic dialogue revolves around hiring a Hoplomachos to educate a young son and the nature of courage. Meyer’s 1570 manual (et al) have similarities to the Laches, both texts suggest, often public, martial training/ activity as a cure to young men’s tendencies to drinking and other stereotypical issues of mores.<sup>32</sup> Both

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<sup>27</sup> Tlusty 2011: 189ff

<sup>28</sup> Amberger 2007: 183-4; Tlusty 2011: 89ff, 210ff

<sup>29</sup> Pritchett 1974:219-221; Whaley 2013: 496

<sup>30</sup> Wees 2004: 89

<sup>31</sup> Pritchett 1974: 221ff

<sup>32</sup> Forgeng 2015: 42; Plat. Lach. 181e

likewise suggest such training is a necessary, or at least useful, preparation for war.<sup>33</sup>

However, our main interest is in the experience of undergoing such training publicly, so this leads to the question, what exactly is ‘public training’? Classical Greek training is envisaged as “mainly informal, private exercise, most of it aimed at general physical fitness rather than specialist combat skills.”<sup>34</sup> This might not capture the full picture. Of course, training entirely alone and unobserved is not public, such as ‘solo drills’ or individual cutting or target practice. However, training usually requires several people and often takes place in a public or semi-public place (a club for example). Martial arts training (in fact, much physical training) is often intrinsically public. Even Theocritus (3rd century BC) has a father son training montage.<sup>35</sup> Rather than a hard and fast divide, I would suggest training is on a continuum, from solo drills in one’s own household, to exhibitions in front of an audience. There certainly is, at least for me, the desire to ‘do better’ than others and one’s past self. In my time at UWTSO our university HEMA society would organise a martial arts demonstration at the annual ‘medieval day’, which were somewhat similar to Fechtschulen. Shooting competitions are also deeply public affairs, in my experience each person lines up behind the stand and carefully watches the clay’s flight and the actions of the shooter ahead of them. There is certainly a much greater element of social pressure to ‘do well’, with a bit of adrenaline and fear when competing or training in more public arenas. This is probably better

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<sup>33</sup> Forgem 2015: 43; Plat. Lach. 182a

<sup>34</sup> Wees 2004: 89

<sup>35</sup> Theoc. 24. 125-6



preparation for the highly public nature of combat in the Classical Greek or Early Modern world. Furthermore, the demonstration of martial virtue is not just for the battlefield, but also in training and in competition. After all, the people you lived and trained with may well also be the people you fight alongside.<sup>36</sup> What follows below is a comparison of various personal experiences, and a small selection of evidence from the Classical and Early Modern world to try to hone in on the shared nature of this experience.

1. *Anxiety over seeming foolish or failing, despite actual or proclaimed expertise.*

**Modern Concern:** Personal Experience: I undertook some aid work in Ukraine in August 2022. We were doing some refresher training on tourniquet use before heading to Kharkiv, and I was asked to prove I knew how to use one. However, I had been trained and practised with my own tourniquet which was with my ballistic vest (not required to be worn in Kyiv), and borrowing a different style, fumbled with it for a few more seconds than is acceptable. I felt acutely embarrassed, as I had assured the instructor that I knew what I was doing.

**Early Modern Concern:** Meyer 1570: “the practice of combat has its origin in a true rational foundation, and is not based on slipshod sword mummery... the knightly art of combat has always been held in great

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<sup>36</sup> Crowley 2012: 45; Tlusty 2011: 204-6, 221

esteem... while street-mummers are taken for the most worthless and useless folk in the world.”<sup>37</sup>

**Classical Greek Concern:** Plato’s Laches: “people would be on the lookout for even the slightest mistake on his part, and he would incur much grievous slander; for the pretension to such skill arouses jealousy, so that unless a man be prodigiously superior to the rest in valor he cannot by any means escape being made a laughing-stock through professing to be so skilled.”<sup>38</sup>

## 2. *Concern over martial performance.*

**Modern Concern:** Personal Experience: When sparring at any of the clubs I have attended, I sometimes feel an anxiety that my performance might be judged, the instructors often watch from the side-lines. After an exchange, one might receive a nod, a smile or some critique from them. Furthermore, one’s peers are also quite free to watch as well. As silly as it seems, one wishes to do well in front of one’s peers for fear of any loss of face, or perhaps just not showing the best that you can do.

**Early Modern Concern:** ““What peasants war were you in? How many have you killed, you cripple?”... For citizen soldiers like Zeindlweber... verifying physical prowess through close combat were the paths to honour, status and materiel reward.”<sup>39</sup>

**Classical Greek Concern:** Although the Iliad is not classical, it is foundational to Classical culture and therefore something to draw upon here.

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<sup>37</sup> Forgeng 2015: 49

<sup>38</sup> Plat. Lach. 184b-c

<sup>39</sup> Tlusty 2011: 91

The Iliad's applicability to Classical warfare is made by Wees suggesting “it may have been precisely because heroes and hoplites were not worlds apart that the Iliad remained an inspiration to later generations...”<sup>40</sup> The Iliad is so full of disputes over honour, and the desire to use violence to gain honour/ display prowess that it's hard to pick a particular passage. However, the public ridicule of those who cannot live up to such standards demonstrates this, such as when Odysseus rebukes a lesser warrior “You are a coward and no soldier; you are a nobody either in fight or council; we cannot all be kings”<sup>41</sup>.

Plato also suggests that a city might host regular drill and what might be martial contests in which winners receive praise and losers receive shame.<sup>42</sup> Although this does not necessarily reflect reality, perhaps it does reflect attitudes. However, it is worth noting that the (imagined?) sparring activity in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* ends on a lighter note of mutual embarrassment and mirth,<sup>43</sup> so just as in modern HEMA, the experience is hardly constantly a tense one.

### 3. *A suspicion of martial arts masters/other interpretations.*

**Modern Concern:** One of the beautiful things about HEMA is the multiplicity of focuses and interpretations. It can also be somewhat frustrating if one splits their time between different clubs, as ingrained habits may be applauded in one setting and criticised in another. My

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<sup>40</sup> Wees 2004: 153-165

<sup>41</sup> Hom. Il. 2.200-205

<sup>42</sup> Plat. Laws. 8.829a-831b

<sup>43</sup> Xen. Cyrop. 2.3.17-20

instinctual gut reaction is to fall back on what I know best, and it takes a conscious effort to actively explore new options, for example in a different styles of footwork in the clubs I attend practices.

**Early Modern Concern:** In the early modern world, this suspicion occurs both from other masters and the general population.<sup>44</sup> Pseudo-Hans Döbringer states “illegitimate masters...will be praised by the uncomprehending just for the liveliness of it as they fiendishly arrange themselves with those beautiful parries and wide fencing-around and deliver wide and long hews slowly and sluggishly.”

**Classical Greek Concern:** Plato’s Laches: “And yet in all the other arts, the men who have made a name are to be found among those who have specially pursued one or other of them; while these persons, apparently, stand out from the rest in this particularly hapless fate of their profession. Why, this man Stesilaus, whom you watched with me in that great crowd as he gave his performance and spoke in those high terms of himself before us, I have watched elsewhere giving a finer entertainment in the form of a very real display that he made against his will.”<sup>45</sup> Plato then goes on to describe how this man’s own invented weapon fails in a naval battle.

### **Conclusions:**

In summing up, similar martial anxieties and therefore similar experiences are clear in this comparative, which is not terribly surprising considering

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<sup>44</sup> Tlusty 2011:215-7; Price 2011: 94

<sup>45</sup> Plat. Lach. 183c ff

certain social/economic/political parallels. These anxieties help might help us to better understand the ancient world in two main ways.

Firstly, the Hoplomachia themselves are clearly viewed with some element of suspicion, as are their events which is similar to how Fencing Masters in the Early Modern world. This should not be surprising, spurious martial arts masters still come in for ridicule today.

Secondly, although authors such as Wees may be correct that most training was private,<sup>46</sup> the non-private needs exploring, the Hoplomachia's 'sales pitch'<sup>47</sup> may be more than it appears, the comparative evidence could suggest as much. There might well have been an intense anxiety for them to prove themselves and their training when in public. However, we cannot be certain.

Clearly this is only a very surface level overview that, it is hoped, at least suggests an experiential and comparative approach to be one worthwhile investigating when it comes to the nature of military training in Classical Greece.

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<sup>46</sup> Wees 2004: 89

<sup>47</sup> Wheeler 1982: 225

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