



ON MEDIEVAL HARNESS, CLOTHING & FOOTWEAR

A friendly note of explanation for the Hawaii SSG

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Hawaii is hot. Not Dallas or Kuwait-hot, but the high humidity can make one soak through a gambeson in record time, or make it difficult in a closed helm to extract enough oxygen to breathe properly. Combined with the cost of armour, and the momentum of the modern HEMA movement, it is tempting in SSG Honolulu, and perhaps in other places, to rely on HEMA-style masks and plastics in place of medieval clothing, armour and footwear. Unfortunately, there are several problems with this.

TECHNICAL ISSUES

One immediate effect of the lighter modern sporting equipment arises because **it is not the protective equivalent of armour**. While medieval armour was available in hardened leather or in brigandine configurations, the vast majority during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century was iron or steel plate. If combatants don't wear harness, then their **opponents are forced to ratchet down their power** and are unable to complete strikes. The **stylistic response is for guards to come forward**, away from the pulsativa positions, like the "hybrid" *posta di donna* held at the shoulder, a common non-*posta* we commonly see. Those fighting in HEMA-style tournaments in the East coast report a similar thing: the preference for the German guard *vom Tag*, which is very similar in form and function. But remember: medieval combatives such as the SSG practices are differentiated from their civilian counterparts because of the need for power. **If you're not wearing armour, your opponent isn't encouraged to deliver a blow with power** and is in fact incentivized to fight more in the civilian form, relying on the arm alone to flick in quick snipes. While such "*blossfechten*," (*'blouse'-fighting*) does exist in history, the SSG has always been focused on the military aspects, on chivalric (rather than urban) culture and practice. While the two worlds came together briefly in some contexts (I'm writing about this in my current book project), the cultures were quite distinct.

Shoes are another concern. Modern shoes are built to elevate the heel, which tends to gather weight there, instead of on the ball. The *tre volte* of the feet are hard to do in modern shoes, which is why for many years students of the SSG in Dallas bought medieval shoes first. I highly recommend them here in Honolulu as well. With **soft shoes, many footwork issues are resolved because wrong foot placement gives immediate negative feedback**—you slip! I highly recommend using medieval shoes, such as those sold by www.revival.us, instead of sneakers or combat boots. The "low 14th c. boot" is the common choice, but any will work.

SAFETY

Closely aligned is the issue of safety. Everyone relies on their brain at work, at school and at home. While masks provide some protection, they aren't in any the safety equivalent of a helmet. While it can be difficult to get enough oxygen in saturated air, the open WMA-style visors largely alleviate the problem so a helmet with multiple visors is the best possible solution. Likewise, plastic on the elbows or knees



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isn't as protective as a stainless cop. At the elbows in particular, a simple steel cop just buckled inside the elbow over a gambeson well the elbow joint. And it's cheap. Similarly, a simple vambrace provides important protection to the lower arm.

Gauntlets represent a special challenge. The HEMA community is trying every possible variant of plastic and synthetics to protect the hands, but, frankly, these just aren't the equivalent of a good gauntlet. Hands are prone to cracks and breaks, and Lacrosse gloves, a good choice for many beginners, are not the ultimate answer. SCA combatants, who use as much power as we do and whose fighting is in many ways complementary to our own, solved this long ago through the use of a basket-hilted sword, reducing the need for gauntlets to polearms, bastard- (our longsword) and greatsword. Today, a great many armourers are now offering gauntlets and the three-piece classical North Italian mitten gauntlet can be made locally with a bit of effort.

THE USE OF DIFFERENT SWORD SIMULATORS

As I wrote in *Sword in Two Hands*, **every** simulator distorts technique. After having seen the nylon Blackfencer type weapons in use now for some time, I have to say that I think they are too massive for safe use against opponents wearing only a gambeson and mask. While it is possible to have some number of safe fights "being careful," the reality is that the nylon or steel weapon packs too much of a punch for a mask, because **the mask cannot provide the mass to counter the weapon's momentum.** So I would say that we should use only the Rawlings or Revival Poly swords against the masks, except in special circumstances. Rawlings swords are available at low cost with Prime shipping through Amazon, for around \$62.

The Blackfencer style weapons, those in machined nylon, are good against armour. Indeed, I'd like it very much if the SCA were to allow them on an experimental basis! But for us, my advice is to restrict their use to opponents wearing a helmet, throat, rib armour, and at least knee and elbow protection. **For those wanting to use rebated weapons, with Fiorean power dynamics, you need armour.** Period.

EXPENSE & AVAILABILITY

An oft-heard and reasonable objection to the use of armour is that it is expensive. While it is still not *inexpensive*, with the entry of so many skilled Eastern European armourers into the market, it's cheaper now. A good helmet can be had for \$300 - \$500, in stainless, while a souped up bascinet with multiple visors and an aventail, liner and everything can go for \$900-\$1200. This is in line with the quality gear one needs for any other sport, like skiing, scuba, or surfing. Workable gauntlets have been found in the \$250 - \$400 range, while HEMA hand protection is hitting the \$200 mark for far less protection and an appearance that is...not medieval in the least.

Some elements of armour can be made here on-island. Andrew's place of business has some of my tools available, including a metal shear, dishes, and some hammers. We have an abundant supply of stainless steel, courtesy of Scot, and many of the simple things you'd want to make are featured in my 2000 book, [*Techniques of Medieval Armour Reproduction*](#). There are copies floating around.

Beginning combatants should do whatever they can to get onto the field. But as one becomes an intermediate, the SSG intent was (and is?) for combatants to arm themselves in a historically accurate



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fashion, from the ground up. It's courtesy to the opponent, and its frankly safer than the plastic equivalent.

MAINTENANCE

Damage to expensive armour is one reason that highly detailed reproductions aren't often found in ACL/HMB combats, because steel weapons tear it up. Neither the Rawlings nor the nylon Blackfencer-style weapons are as bad, but damage will still happen. So figure a helmet has a viable life of 5+ years, if it's sturdy enough (12ga. or 2.6-3mm). I made my 10 ga. bascinet in 1981, and it's still my go-to helmet. Many combatants end up with a nice set of limb armour that eventually becomes their practice set as they replace it later with a nicer set for tournaments, very slowly rolling through a couple of sets over their careers. It's a slow process, however, since the SSG doesn't end up with as many blows to the cuisses as our SCA counterparts.

Armour here on the islands rusts faster than any place I have ever seen. Ever. Even Florida. As a result, stainless armour is preferred here. Several Ukrainian and Russian armourers are offering it. Sometimes it makes sense to use a plastic or leather alternative in practice, but we should avoid the temptation to default to masks in sparring. Another interesting alternative are the super-light titanium arms, legs and body armour being made for SCA and ACL combat. More expensive, but much lighter and very durable. Probably very good for weekly practice harness.

CROSS-"FIGHTING"

Here there is value both in the HEMA-style civilian and the SSG armoured approach. For those who live near other HEMA groups, having HEMA-compatible gear affords the possibility of active cross-training, as is done in Savannah, Atlanta and Charleston. There are many SCA groups that can offer extremely valuable cross-fighting experience, if you have armour. (The idea of "cross-fighting" is Colin Chock's, to differentiate compatible forms of combat training from cardio and strength building).

Here on the island, I highly recommend cross-training with the SCA group, Barony of the Western Seas. Not only are the SCA folks already familiar with and friendly towards the SSG, but we have many who play in both. And there are SCA groups almost everywhere. SCA fighting is, in addition, another full-power kinetic art, so their form is I believe closer to what medieval armoured combatants were doing than is much of what is done in the HEMA community, which is drawn mostly from civilian sources.

IDENTITY

Finally, and most importantly, the SSG grew out of the Company of Saint George, a tournament company emphasizing the deeds of arms and its purpose as an exercise for the full spectrum of chivalric virtues. Part re-enactment and part combat society, the painstakingly researched tournament formats, in particular the pas d'armes, and **the arms, armour and clothing contributed to the chivalric atmosphere of the fighting experience, which was and is our most important safety feature.**

Our chivalric identity differentiates us from many in the HEMA community. Not because we're somehow more courteous than they, or more virtuous, but because **what we are doing are military combatives** only partially illuminated by the early treatises by Fiore and Döbinger. We need the authentic clothing, arms, armour and footwear to better capture that reality, to inform our movements, and most importantly, to reinforce our most important safety component, our chivalric respect for one another. We remain rooted in the historical record not only of the fighting treatises, but in the whole of the medieval record,



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which includes the romances, chronicles, archaeological record, surviving harnesses, and our own experimental and celebratory efforts. A tournament is an exercise of arms and of character, and it remains central to who we are as a group.

WHAT SHOULD THE BEGINNER DO?

Novices should acquire protection for the body, heads, and hands as soon as they can so that they can participate as fully as possible (don't forget, you also need to be a member of the SSG, Inc. to spar [\$30/yr]), for insurance purposes. The Absolute Force HEMA fencing mask costs about \$110. A gambeson from Revival costs \$125 while a heavier custom one from Yefimova ([Quilted Armour](#)) runs \$180. A Rawlings sword is \$62 through Amazon, and Lacrosse gloves are about \$70. About \$400 all told.

What I would then advise is to build towards an armoured harness. First elbows and vambraces, maybe \$100 in stainless; or they can be made in the shop here. A finger buckler and maybe a quick reinforce for the thumb. Next, a brigandine gorget, like the ones Revival has, are about \$70. Shoes, also from Revival, \$80. Maybe a quick plastic breastplate under the gambeson to protect the ribs. Then it's time to think about the intermediate gear.

WHAT SHOULD THE INTERMEDIATE DO?

A good gambeson is the foundation for the rest of the harness, as are the shoes. If you've followed the advice above, you already have those. Much of the [armour can be had reasonably from one of the Ukrainian](#), Russian or American armour shops or resellers (of the American shops, [Clang Armory](#) is a favorite for SCA – SSG folks). Some can be found on the secondary market, which is often a good and cheap way to get going. **I strongly recommend a late fourteenth century harness**, because of the individual expression, price, and mobility. The fighting houpelandes commissioned from Quilted Armour go with this period. Fifteenth century armour in the Italian, German, Flemish or English styles is also appropriate, but is more expensive and complex. **Try to create a coherent historical presentation, because that's part of what the SSG is all about.**

The helmet is the core of the defense, and I'd advise saving for a good model. It's worth every Penny. Get one that you can use in SCA fighting as well as within the Schola. Pad your helmet in a medieval fashion (it works better) and get a chin-strap, required for SCA use such that the visor does not touch your face. A visored bascinet with multiple visors (grille for SCA, punched for HEMA/SSG, solid for tournaments) is the best option, with a mail aventail and padding. The American armourers are all familiar with SCA standards, as are many of the Ukrainian ones. Clang's stainless helmets are favored by the SCA here with good reason.

Next I'd replace either the gauntlets or the body protection, or add shoulder armour (spaudlers). A brigandine can be had for \$200, or made for about \$50, if done in canvas. Spaudlers are about \$150, or just \$50 for cops alone (also possible to make on-island). Gauntlets aren't that cheap, but from \$250 you can find good ones, and the recently offered ones at \$350 in stainless seem a bargain. Here in Hawaii, getting those done from some form of stainless is wise. Or, with more expense, one can do the hyper-light titanium ones. Next just add a legharness, and start to think about matching arms. For the legharness, you'll want a fighting pourpoint (Art of Steel or Black Swan), instead of the terrible (and wholly modern) suspender things too often worn. **Now** think about a rebated or solid nylon sword. You're nearly there!



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MEDIEVAL MARTIAL ARTS

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HONOLULU



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