

# *Monumenta Historica Dimicatoria*

## *Rules for Wrestling Tournaments in Rome* (17<sup>th</sup> Century)



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**Issue No. 2 (2017)**

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*MONUMENTA HISTORICA DIMICATORIA* (Materials on the History of Fencing) is an electronic publication devoted to primary source material on the history of traditional European swordsmanship and related martial disciplines, commonly known as HEMA (Historical European Martial Arts). It presents transcriptions and English-language translations of both technical and non-technical primary source material. Technical sources are those which principally deal with the physical and theoretical aspects of fencing, such as manuals on swordsmanship. Non-technical sources are those which clarify the social context and day-to-day practice of fencing, such as master certificates and fencing-hall ordinances.

Source material is drawn from all European martial traditions, and from all time periods. Issues are typically devoted to a single source, are published in PDF format, and are labeled as follows: Title, issue number, year. Interpretation and analysis are intentionally kept to a minimum, except as required to outline the significance of the source material and to clarify its relationship to the Historical European Martial Arts.

Experience over the past two decades has made clear that interpretive works on the Historical European Martial Arts soon become dated, because of the rapid evolution in our understanding of the technical aspects of swordsmanship. Time has shown that the greatest service to the international HEMA community, and to posterity, is performed by those who publish quality translations into English and other widely-spoken languages.

Unlike other martial arts, which are based on living traditions, HEMA has no living masters, no oral traditions. Accordingly, our understanding of both the social context and the physical practice of HEMA is directly related to the amount of primary source material accessible to scholars and practitioners. This electronic publication is intended to improve the understanding of HEMA in both academic and martial circles by providing greater access to primary sources.

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**Matt Galas, Editor, *MONUMENTA HISTORICA DIMICATORIA***  
**Mons, Belgium / 29 June 2017**

# *Rules for Wrestling Tournaments in Rome*

## *(17<sup>th</sup> Century)*

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Key Data	
Date	Undated (but post-1638, a date mentioned in the manuscript)
Provenance	France
Author	Anonymous
Language	French
Medium	Manuscript
Type of Document	Non-technical source (wrestling rule-set)
Citation for Original Document	Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Ms. Français 16988, folios 221 verso – 223 verso; <i>Mélanges concernant l'art militaire, les duels, les tournois, l'office de héraut d'armes et l'art héraldique</i> .
Literature	None
Credits	Thanks to Jérémie Gueben of Herchies, Belgium, certified translator, for his review and correction of the translation.
Dedication	To Jess Finley, for her efforts in reconstructing medieval wrestling, and to Timothy Devlin Hall, for his stellar performance as a wrestler at Swordfish 2016.

## Summary

This issue presents a transcription and English translation of a French-language text describing the conduct of wrestling tournaments in Rome and the surrounding region in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. It consists of a short passage (five pages) appearing in a manuscript compilation of texts on various military subjects. Images of the text from the original manuscript appear at the end of this document.

The author and date remain unknown, but the manuscript appears to originate from the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, based on the handwriting and various textual references.

The passage describes the location of the event (urban environment, outdoors, on grass or sand), the audience (general public, including women), and the dress of the wrestlers (nude except for sandals and short trunks). It describes the preliminaries and ceremonies surrounding the events.

Finally, the author gives some brief indications of the kind of techniques used by the wrestlers, including the use of a cloth belt tied around the waist to enable a more secure grip.

The discussion of wrestling is followed by a brief description of an annual jousting tournament in the city of Modena.

## Significance

This source contains a rare description of how wrestling tournaments were conducted in 17<sup>th</sup> century Italy. It documents the use of a lottery system to determine the order of competition, a practice which is mentioned in wrestling rule-sets from elsewhere in Italy.<sup>1</sup>

The use of the lottery is reminiscent of the contemporary tournaments held by fencing guilds in France and Belgium. Like the Franco-Belgian fencing tournaments, the Italian system uses a modified “King of the Hill” format, with the winner being the wrestler who successfully holds the field against all comers.

Wrestlers are assigned a number by lottery. #1 wrestles #2. The winner of that match then waits while #3 wrestles #4. He competes against the winner of that match. Whoever wins that match in turn awaits the outcome of #5 vs. #6, and wrestles the winner. Thus, the “King” enjoys an advantage, since he is (relatively) rested, while his opponents are coming fresh from a match. This is analogous in some ways to the After-Blow (*Naerslag*) advantage enjoyed by the King in Franco-Belgian style fencing tournaments.

As in other traditional wrestling systems, the competition centers around a prize (unspecified) which is carried off by the winner of the tournament. This also corresponds to fencing guild practice, such as the prize plays of England, France, and Belgium. The text does not describe the conditions of victory, but it appears to be to a single fall.

From a technical perspective, this source documents the prevalence of a belt-wrestling system in Rome and surrounding regions in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In passing, the text mentions concerns about cheating by wrestlers related to the tying of the cloth belt, and the means used to prevent that.

Finally, this text serves as additional evidence of the keen interest that the French took in Italian martial traditions. Both Montaigne and Brantôme mention the popularity of Italian academies teaching riding, fencing, and other martial accomplishments among visiting Frenchmen. This passage can be seen as a reflection of the same cultural trend.

## Translation

### Jousts and Tournaments

In Rome and all of the surrounding region, more than 20 leagues around Rome, wrestling is still practiced. Those who wish to offer a prize have it announced in the neighboring parishes that such-and-such a prize will be offered in such-and-such a place.

When all of those who wish to participate have assembled, they make a list of their names and their total number. Then they make that many tickets, each marked only with its number, starting from one up to the number of wrestlers. Then they draw lots in front of the entire company.

He who draws number one wrestles first against whoever drew number two. Number three then goes against number four, and so forth with the others, following the same order.

If the place which is to serve as the wrestling arena is paved, they cover it with sand. Constables (sbirre), who we call Archers<sup>2</sup>, are present there to prevent the commission of any kind of disorder.

The wrestlers present themselves completely nude, wearing only sandals on their feet and very short, light trunks to cover their nudity. The two who are supposed to wrestle together each attach a cloth to the other like a belt in order to avoid any trickery, such as intentionally knotting it poorly through malice, in order to allow one to escape his enemy who has achieved a better hold on him. Thus, it is knotted strongly in order to

give each a grip on the other. Once these cloths are attached, they retire in order to prepare their approach. They begin ordinarily by observing one another from afar in order to prepare and to put themselves in the right frame of mind. They nod their heads to show they are ready to wrestle. The ladies watch from the windows, and the rest of the company watches quietly.

Then they approach each other gaily, making mocking gestures and delivering with agility various kicks or punches in the air -- but swiftly, so as not to allow the enemy to catch hold. After they have engaged in various preliminaries of this sort, they wrestle in earnest, doing whatever they can in order to surprise each other, putting in a leg to make him lose his footing, lifting him to throw him to the ground, and each making use of the other's cloth to hold on to him.

Whichever of the two is thrown retires, and the winner remains in place and rests while two others enter anew to fight, dressed in the same way. The new winner wrestles against the first, the loser retiring again. And he who wins remains in place waiting for a third to defeat another in order to fight against him. And thus the same thing continues until the final one on the list. The final winner of those carries off the prize.

And whenever one man throws the other, the winner kisses him as a sign that he does not hold any ill will against him in this fight. Even when one or the other wrestler is crippled or killed, no charges are brought before the court of justice. This type of wrestling competition is held often in order to entertain the people and the ladies or to attract mistresses.

It is quite entertaining to see robust men testing their strength and skill, each trying to throw the other or gain a hold on the other. For they are unable to seize hold of each other except by their cloths, because the heat of the fight warms the skin and flesh of the fighter's bodies to such an extent that it leaves them no other way to catch hold of the body to throw them, since it is not permitted to grab hold of the hair.

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In Modena, in addition to the famous masquerades, they have balls which take place during the night before the windows of the ladies, on carts filled with musicians and excellent dancers; this occurs during the Carnival period. Every year they also have a very famous joust with the lance in which the greater part of the nobility take part, who assemble together from the surrounding area for that reason. They arm themselves in full armor and wear a short vest of light Taffeta cloth over their armor to indicate which of the two teams they belong to.

The Duke of Modena attends with his entire court, and the joust takes place with the lance in the main square of the city. The horsemen fight, one group against the other, one by one, mounted on horses with magnificent barding, and which are the best, the most handsome, and the most adroit in Italy.

The athletes are not said to be perfect, nor are they honored with the highest privileges, unless they have won three crowns<sup>3</sup>.

## Transcription

*Fol. 221v*

*Jouxtes et Tournois. /*

*A Rome et dans toutte la Romanie  
plus de 20 liéues aux environs de Rome  
la luitte est encore en usage, ceux qui  
proposent un prix font publier dans les  
paroisses voisines quil y a un tel prix et  
en tel lieu et quand tous ceux qui sy-  
veulent trouver sont assemblez lon-  
faict une liste de leurs noms et de leur  
nombre puis lon faict autant de billets cha:  
cun desquels est marque seulement depuis  
un jusques au nombre quilz sont de lut:  
teurs et tirant au sort devant toutte la com:  
paignie celuy qui a tire le chiffre á un,  
Lutte le premier contre celluy du 2. celuy  
de 3. contre celuy de 4. et ainsy des autres*

*Si la place qui doibt servir de Champ  
a la lutte est paveé lon le couvre de  
sable, les sbirres que nous nommons -*

*Fol. 222r*

*Archers sont la presents pour empescher  
quil ne se commette aucun desordre./*

*Les lutteurs se presentent tous nuds ayant  
des souliers seulement aux pieds et un  
leger cannecon fort court pour couvrir  
leur nudite; Les deux qui doivent lutter  
ensemble s'entre attachent une serviette  
en ceinture a fin quil ne sy fasse aucune  
tromperie et si lon la nouait mal expres  
par malice pour eschapper a son enne:  
my qui a plus de prise sur luy plus la  
serviette est fortement nouée pour se  
donner prise l'un a lautre, et sitost que*

*les serviettes sont attachees ils se retirent  
pour se mettre en presence, ils commen:  
cent d'ordinaire par s'en regarder un  
peu de loing pour se preparer et mettre  
en humeur et feindre de vouloir lutter  
secouant la teste, les Dames aux fenestres,  
et le reste de la Compagnie sans se  
rien faire puis par gayeté s'approchent*

*Fol. 222v*

*se faisant quelque nasarde et donnent  
quelque leger coup de pieds ou de mains  
en l'air mais prestement pour ne pas  
donner de prise a son ennemy, et quand  
ils ont faict quelques preludes de cette  
sorte ils luttent tout a bon, et font ce  
qu'ils peuvent pour se surprendre se  
donnant de la jambe pour se faire perdre  
terre s'enlever pour se terrasser, et se  
servant l'un l'autre se tenant a leurs  
serviettes./*

*Celui des deux qui est mis a bas se re:  
tire, et le vainqueur demeure sur le  
lieu et se repose puis deux autres entrent  
de nouveau au combat appareillez de la  
mesme sorte le nouveau vainqueur lutte  
contre le premier, le vaincu se retirent  
encore, et celui qui l'a vaincu demeurant  
sur le lieu en attendant qu'un troisieme  
en ayt vaincu un autre a fin de se  
battre encore contre luy, et ainsi la*

*Fol. 223r*

*mesme chose se continue jusques au  
dernier de ceux de la liste, le dernier vain:  
queur desquels emporte le prix, et a me:  
sure que l'on a mis l'autre a bas, le vain:  
queur baise pour marque qu'il n'a ap:  
porté contre luy aucune mauvaise  
volonté, en ce combat, et quand mesme  
en luttant l'un ou l'autre se seroient  
estropiez ou tuez, il n'en est fait aucune  
poursuite en justice, cette sorte de*



luite se donne souvent pour divertir  
le people et dames o[u] attirer les mais:  
tresse[s], et le divertissement n'en est  
pas recreatif de voir des hommes ro:  
bustes disputans de leurs forces et de leur  
adresse a se terrasser et a chercher prise  
l'un sur lautre quils ne peuvent ren:  
contrer quen se saisissant par les ser:  
viettes la chaleur de la lutte eschauf:  
fant tellement le cuir et la chair du  
corps des combatans quelle ne leur  
laisse aucun moyen de se prendre

Fol. 223v

au corps pour se terrasser, n'estant pas  
permis de se prendre aux cheveux./

A Modene outre les Mascarades tres  
celebres les bals qui se font la nuict  
devant les fenestres des dames sur des cha:  
riotz remplis de musiciens et d'excellens  
danseurs qui sy font, au temps du Car:  
naval, il sy faict encore tous les ans  
une joustre tres fameux a la lance par  
la plus plus part de la noblesses qui  
s'assemble de tous les environs pour  
cet effect, sarmant de toutes pieces et  
ayant une petite casaque de taffetas  
leger par dessus leurs armes pour mar:  
quer le quel des deux partis lon tient./

Le Duc de Modene sy trouve avec  
toute sa Cour, et la joustre se fait  
a la lance dans la grande place de la  
ville, les Cavaliers combatans les uns  
contre les autres tour a tour Montez

Fol. 224r

sur des Chevaux bardez magnifique:  
ment, les meilleurs les plus beaux et les  
plus adroitiz d'Italie./

Les Athletes n'estoient point ditz par:

*faictz ny honnorez des plus hautz pri:  
vileges quilz n’eussent gaigne trois Cou:  
ronnes./*

## End Notes

1. See the wrestling rule-set from the town of Tondi from 1600/1602, reproduced on pp 41-45 of *La Lotta in Italia dal Medioevo al Settecento*, by Antonio Merendoni, Emiliano Lanci and Paolo Salati (Firenze, 2007)
2. This is a reference to the French and Belgian custom of using the local Archers’ and Crossbowmen’s guilds as a kind of civic militia.
3. The crown is the symbol of victory, like the laurel wreaths used in fencing competitions in Germany. It is unclear whether this comment refers to the wrestlers, the jousts, or both.

## Images of Original Text

See the following pages for images of the original text.

## Jouxtes et Tournois /

A Rome et dans toute la Romanie plus de 20 lieues aux environs de Rome la lutte est encores en usage, Ceux qui proposent un prix font publier dans les paroisses voisines quil y a un tel prix et en tel lieu et quand tous ceux qui sy veulent trouver sont assemblez lon fait une liste de leurs noms et de leur nombre puis lon fait autant de billets chascun desquels est marque seulement depuis un jusques au nombre quilz sont de lutteurs et tirant au sort devant toute la compagnie celui qui a tiré le chiffre dun lutte le premier contre celui du 2. celuy de 3. contre celui de 4. et ainsi des autres En suite meme ordre /

Si la place qui doit servir de Champ a la lutte est pauee lon la couvre de sable, les sbirres que nous nommons -

Archers sont la presents pour empêcher  
qu'il ne se commette aucun desordre. /

Les luteurs se presentent tous nus ayant  
des souliers seulement aux pieds et un  
leger Cannecon fort court pour couvrir  
leur nudite ; Les deux qui doivent lutter  
ensemble s'entre attachent d'une seruiette  
en ceinture afin qu'il ne s'y fasse aucune  
trouperie et si l'on la nouait mal expres  
par malice pour eschapper a son enne-  
my qui a plus de prise sur luy plus la  
seruiette est fortement nouée pour se  
donner prise l'un a l'autre, et si tost que  
les seruiettes sont attachées ils se retirent  
pour se mettre en presence, ils commen-  
cent d'ordinaire par s'entre regarder un  
peu de loing pour se preparer et mettre  
en humeur et feindre de vouloir lutter  
secouant la teste, les Dames aux fenê-  
tres, et le reste de la Compagnie sans se  
rien faire puis par gayete s'approchent

se faisant quelque nasarde et donnant  
quelque leger coup de pieds ou de mains  
en l'air mais prestement pour ne pas  
donner de prise a son ennemy, et quand  
jls ont fait quelques preludes de cette  
sorte jls luttent tout a bon, et font ce  
qu'ils peuvent pour se surprendre se  
donnant de la jambe pour se faire perdre  
terre. S'enleuer pour se terravor, et se  
servant l'un l'autre se tenant a leurs  
serviettes. /

Celuy des deux qui est mis a bas se re-  
tire, et le vainqueur demeure sur le  
lieu et se repose. puis deux autres entrent  
de nouveau au combat appercevez de la  
mesme sorte le nouveau vainqueur lutte  
contre le premier, le vaincu se retirant  
encore, et celui qui l'a vaincu demeurant  
sur le lieu en attendant qu'un troisieme  
en ayt vaincu un autre a fin de se  
battre encore contre luy, et ainsi la

mesme chose se continue jusques au  
Dernier de ceux de la liste, le dernier vain:  
queur desquels emporte, le prix, et ame:  
sure que l'on a mis l'autre, a bas, le vain:  
queur baise pour marque qu'il ne ap:  
porte / contre luy aucune mauuais e  
volonte / en ce combat, et quand mesme  
en luttant l'un ou l'autre se seroient  
estropiez ou tuez, j'en est fait aucune  
poursuite en justice, Cette sorte de  
luite se donne souvent pour divertir  
le peuple, et d'ames ou attirer les Mais:  
tresse, et le divertissement n'en est  
pas recreatif de voir des hommes ro:  
bustes disputans de leurs forces et de leur  
adresse a se terrasser et a chercher prix  
l'un sur l'autre, qu'ils ne peuvent ren:  
contrer quen se saisissant par les ser:  
uiettes la chaleur de la lutte eschauf:  
fant tellement le Cuir et la Chair du  
corp: des combatans quelle ne leur  
laisse aucun moyen de se prendre

au corps pour se torrasser, n'estant pas  
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A Modene outre les Mascarades tres  
celebres les bals qui se font la nuit -  
deuant les fenestres des dames sur des Es-  
trades remplis de musiciens et d'excellens  
danseurs qui sy font, au temps du Car-  
naval, il sy fait encore tous les ans  
une joustee tres fameuse a la lance par  
la plus plus part de la noblesse qui  
s'assemble de tous les environs pour  
cet effect s'armant de toutes pieces et  
ayant une petite Casaque de Vaffetas  
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Le Duc de Modene sy trouue avec  
toute sa Cour, et la joustee se fait  
a la lance dans la grande place de la  
Ville, les Cavaliers combatans les uns  
contre les autres tour a tour montez

sur des Chevaux, Bardes magnifiques:  
mont, les meilleurs les plus beaux et les  
plus adroitz d'Italie. /

Les Athletes n'estoient point ditz par:  
faitz ny honnorez des plus hautz pri:  
uileges quilz neussent gaigne trois Cou:  
ronnes. /

