

Jeux de la Hache

The Manuscript

Le Jeu de la Hache is an anonymous Burgundian manuscript written circa 1450. It is a compendium of techniques in paragraph form, seventy-three in number. It is the largest known collection of poleaxe techniques as well as the only known manuscript dealing solely with the poleaxe. It has three introductory paragraphs that lead us to believe its use was for the lists, for either the judicial duel or for tournament play. This is borne out in the following excerpt from the text:

Et premierement vous qui estes l'ung des ij champions appelle en champ de bataille soit a oultrance ou aultrement soyés attendant ou deffendant sur tout devez sentir en vostre conscience auoir bonne et iuste querelle.

Firstly, you who are one of two champions called to the field of battle, either "à outrance" or otherwise, whether appellant or defendant, above all be sure in your conscience that your quarrel is good and just.



Many of the techniques have either non-lethal alternatives that may be substituted or are implicit throughout the remainder of the plays.

The manuscript groups similar techniques in succession, with follow-up techniques and counters presented in a logical order. The author seemingly put much effort into the organisation of the text, and with few exceptions, this pedagogy is constant throughout the manuscript.



The manuscript begins by describing techniques for right-handers versus right-handers, the most common type of encounter. It then follows with plays for left-handers versus right-handers. Mirroring the plays will give any remaining handedness combinations. Unlike some Italian and German sources for the poleaxe, there are no discernible grip-switches in the manuscript (with one exception), although the left-handed plays may imply such switches. In the absence of positive evidence, we may assume the manuscript was intended for left-handed players and not for wielding the axe reversed, although

logic dictates that the plays will function as advertised regardless of intent.

Finally, there is some general advice given throughout the manuscript, with a concentration at the end of the right-handed section. The author informs us as to the manner in which to approach the opponent, how to hold the axe, how to avoid exposing our palms, and other such crucial information.

¹ In outrage

The Weapon

The poleaxe (pollax, *hache d'armes* [Fr.], *azza* [It.], *streitaxt* [Ger.]) is a fearsome weapon. As the name suggests, it is a polearm, although it is disputed whether the prefix “poll” actually refers to the haft of the weapon. Most sources for the word refer to “poll” as meaning “head.”

The haft varies in length from four to approximately 6 feet, although there are some sources that suggest an extreme length of 8 feet. While still a poleaxe, it was just as often mounted with a hammer head, known in the *Jeux* as the *mail*. It often bore a back-spike or “fluke” of varying lengths named the *bec de faucon* (often abbreviated to *bec*) in the *Jeu*, in reference to a beak. The *bec de corbin* is a type of poleaxe with just such a spike from which it gets its name. The poleaxes in the *Jeu* are of the hammer variety, but the techniques can be adapted to any type of poleaxe.

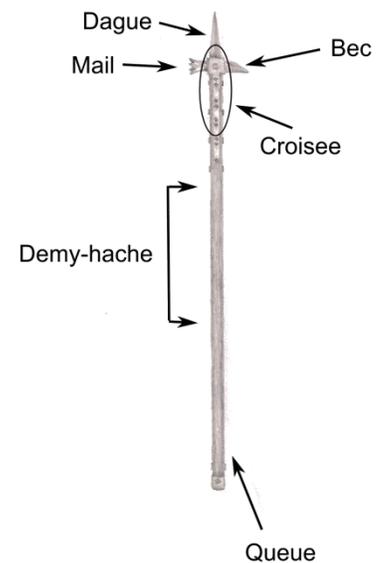
The top of the poleaxe usually bears a spike or *dague* for thrusting attacks. Its counterpart on the opposite end, or butt spike, is referred to as the *dague dessous*, although that specific term is not used in the manuscript, the author seemingly preferring the more generic term *queue*.

Langets (*languettes*) reinforce the juncture of the head of the axe where it attaches to the haft. The entire head assembly is referred to as the *croix* with the juncture of the head and shaft below the *mail* being called the *croisée* in reference to the action that occurs there (the crossing).



Knights and Men at arms used the poleaxe on foot as an armour-breaching weapon, since it could deliver tremendous force and doubled as a short spear with its thrusting *dague*. There is plenty of evidence for its use in the lists in both tournament play and in duel settings, while images from medieval iconography often depict poleaxes used in a battlefield context. While use from horseback is certainly possible, the shorter “war hammer” or “horseman’s hammer” was more likely used when mounted.

The poleaxe figures prominently in various manuscripts such as Talhoffer’s *fechtbuch*, Paulus Kal’s manuscript, The Codex Wallerstein, Fiore dei Liberi’s four extant copies of the *Fior di Battaglia* to name but a few, as well as other German and Italian works.



Grip

Hold the axe in thirds, with one third protruding beyond the top (right) hand and the other third below the bottom (left) hand. The top hand is nearest the *mail* and the left hand is near the *queue*, assuming a right-handed combatant. The grip is firm, but flexible, allowing the axe to slide through the hands at need.

Guards

The manuscript mentions two guards: the *garde de la dague* and the *garde de la queue*. Both guards have certain tactical advantages, but the author shows a preference for the *garde de la queue*. He implies its use is by experienced axe-players, and this preference is perhaps due to a perceived speed advantage conferred by the use of the *queue* versus the *mail* in defence, allowing the Player to out-time his attacker by employing the quicker, lighter *queue*, although other sources dispute this notion.



Figure 1 - Garde de la Croix

Assume the *garde de la dague* from a neutral stance, right foot forward, and feet shoulder width apart. Hold the axe diagonally across the body, with the *croix* held at roughly shoulder to eye level and the *dague* directed at the opponent. The *queue* trails back and down, charged for a rising strike or parry. Hold the arms somewhat away from the body, keeping them slightly bent. This is the “spear” mode of the weapon, prepared to thrust and set aside blows.

The *garde de la queue* is a mirror image of the former, using a left foot forward stance. Hold the *mail* slightly above the head so that the blow is “charged”. Our preference is for shorter axes, but a longer axe will behave in much the same fashion, with

the caveat that it will likely be held higher due to its length. The *queue* slopes down and across the body, providing cover. Powerful *tour de bras* are launched from this position, as well as enabling rising parries with the *queue*.

It is interesting to note that the action of changing guards occurs mostly by taking a step and the resulting turn of the body. Naturally, the positions of the arms must be readjusted; however, the major action in changing guards is the turn of the body, one guard on the left, the other on the right.



Figure 2 - Garde de la Queue

Attacks

Attacks with the poleaxe are much like any other weapon. There is the possibility of strikes, called *tour de bras*, using the head or *mail*. The *dague* is used for thrusting (*estocq*), as is the *queue*. The latter is also used for battering attacks and disarming manoeuvres. The *bec* can be used for both striking and hooking attacks, and the *demy-hache* is used both for striking and in pushing an opponent out of the list. Thrusts using the *dague* or *queue* can be either ascending or descending; the former being more frequent from the *dague* and the latter being more frequent using the *queue*.

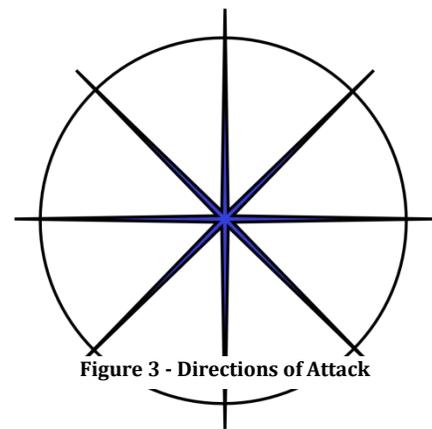
While there are 8 basic directions used for attacking with any weapon, those used most often in the *Jeu* are descending blows from right to left using the *mail*, ascending vertical or diagonal left to right blows with the *queue*, and horizontal left to right blows using the *queue* and remembering the previously mentioned thrusts.

Descending right to left blows are named *tour de bras* in reference to the circle described by the hands when striking. As the arms exchange positions, the axe traces an arcing motion through the air. To strike a *tour de bras*, assume the *garde de la queue* and step with a pass. Push the upper hand forward, letting the axe slide slightly through the hand at need. This sliding action provides more power to the blow while slightly extending the reach. Pull back on the lower part of the axe using the lower hand to provide more impetus to the blow. One should take care not to overreach with the strike, since a loss of control will give the opponent a longer lever arm to use against the Player.

Ascending blows with the *queue* use the opposite mechanic. Pull back using the upper hand and push the *queue* up and forward, letting the *queue* slide through the hands to add power to the blow. Possible targets are the hands, the head and the neck.

Thrusts can be done either *en coulant* (using a pool-cueing motion) or by setting the thrust and using the body and hips to drive the thrust home. Thrusts can use either the *dague* or the *queue*. Thrusts form the dominant form of attack in *Le Jeu*, with mentions of thrusts far outstripping any mention of attacks with the *mail*. The anonymous author of *Le Jeu* seemingly uses the axe as a “spear with benefits.”

Finally, the *demy-hache* is used to either push or strike the opponent. By levelling the axe and striking with the portion of the haft between the hands, a powerful blow can be dealt. As with the thrust, accompany this blow with footwork and press forward using not only the arms, but using the hips and body as well.



Fundamental actions

The manuscript is designed as a defensive treatise, teaching one how to defend against attacks. Most, if not all of the actions occur from a parry or cover of some kind. As such, all the fundamental actions in the manuscript are covers. We find three main actions: covers with the *croix*, covers using the *queue* and covers using the *demy-hache*.

The cover with the *queue* in paragraphs 4-6 is the primary defensive action of the manuscript. It figures throughout the text, with the author going so far as to say that a “*joueur*” (player) will use the *queue*. By “*joueur*,” the author means an experienced axe player, rather than one untrained in the art of the poleaxe. The three paragraphs describing the cover also serve to illustrate the universality of the plays. The text describes the cover from both guards while advancing, retreating and remaining stationary. This lesson applies to all the plays that follow in the manuscript.

The cover with the *croix* is a secondary action, most often made from the *garde de la queue*, and may happen when both players attack simultaneously, coming to a bind, although the text describes it as a specific cover without a step.

The cover using the *demy-hache* is described last, but figures prominently, with entering actions being the most common follow-up manoeuvre, given the collapsed measure it affords.

Each type of cover can therefore be used to cover a strike *tour de bras*, a strike with the *queue* or a thrust. The exception is using the *croix* versus a strike with the *queue*, which is rarely done.

Covers using the *queue* (paragraphs 4-6)

The cover versus the *tour de bras* is a rising strike into the oncoming blow using the *queue*, keeping the *croix* at least as high as the *queue* and roughly parallel to the ground. The final position of the haft is more or less oblique across the body with the butt spike (*queue*) angled forward and left, covering the head. From here, the author tells us to drive the opponent’s axe to the ground to the opponent’s left with a slight pulling motion, disarming him in the process. Raise the *queue* and thrust to the opponent’s face. While not explicitly described in the text at this juncture, if the opponent does not resist the parry, your *queue* may align with his face, in which case you may thrust directly to him.

A cover versus a strike with the *queue* requires more of a horizontal component than a cover versus a *tour de bras*. To properly cross the *queue*, the *croix* must be lower than the *queue* in crossing. Depending on whether the opponent resists or not, you may thrust through or take off under the opponent’s *queue* to set it aside with a strike *arrière main* (backhand).

Cover a thrust with the *dague* using the *queue* by voiding, stepping well out of the way to strike the opponent using the *queue* against his neck or shoulders. Alternatively, simply set the thrust aside using the *queue* against the opponent’s backhand (a left-to-right movement) to make it fly from his hand.

Covers using the *croix* (paragraph 7)

Covering a *tour de bras* using the *croix* is simply a matter of crossing the blow with one of our own, arresting the strike. The text is explicit in that this action is done *without* stepping. From this position, raise the *queue*, striking the axe out of the opponent's hand. The author is again using the previous lessons to illustrate how the principles apply to techniques universally. He also gives us an important lesson concerning the bind and initiative from the bind. If both Players strike *tour de bras* at the same time, they cross at the *croisée*. The text states that whosoever moves first from this bind may strike the other with the *queue*. If both Players strike simultaneously, they come to a bind at the *queues*.

Cover using the *Demy-Hache* (paragraph 9)

A *tour de bras* may be covered using the *demy-hache* to catch the blow on the haft of the axe and between the hands. This can be done from either guard, with or without stepping and while taking care to keep the *croix* slightly higher than the *queue*, but the primary lesson has us step *into* the blow with the right foot to cover, then step left, placing our *queue* under the adversary's chin to topple him.

Plays from the Bind

Once the axes have crossed, and the axes "stick" we can say a bind has occurred. There are three types of bind: a bind at the *queue*, a bind at the *croix* and a bind at the *demy-hache*, corresponding to each type of cover from the perspective of the Player. Examining each type of bind gives us different, albeit similar options.

Bind at the *Croisée* (paragraph 16)

From a cover against a *tour de bras* using the *mail*, having caught the blow against your *croisée*, the opponent will attempt to push aside your axe. From this position, pull your axe back towards you to change through to place your *dague* to the other side of the opponent's axe, against his backhand. Quickly reverse the axe, bearing the head of the opponent's axe down and to the side, simultaneously striking him with your *queue* and making him fall down.

Bind at the *Demy-hache* (paragraph 29)

When bound at the *demy-hache*, the text advises to take a step back and forcefully hook the opponent's axe with your own, pulling it towards yourself, disarming the opponent and/or forcing him to step forward. Regardless of whether or not you succeed in making the axe fall from his hand, you should be able to pass forward to thrust with the *dague*.

Bind at the *queue* (paragraph 35)

If you are bound at the *queues*, it is supposed that you cannot thrust through to the opponent's face, requiring a different technique. Force his *queue* high by raising yours to thrust over his axe, and when he raises his *queue* in response, withdraw yours and slip it under and to the other side of the opponent's axe. Strike a blow against the opponent's backhand to displace his *queue* possibly making him drop it while stepping back to strike a *tour de bras* to his head.

The strike “*d’arrière main*”

The backhand blow occurs throughout the manuscript as a method for displacing blows or forcing the opponent out of guard in preparation for an entry. While the blow may originate from the Player’s (attacker’s) backhand, it is *always* struck versus the *opponent’s* backhand, forcing it out of his hand to the weak side. Examples of its use follow:

Versus an opponent carrying his *queue* high: the text advises to strike a *tour de bras* against his *queue*, making it fly from his hand. Follow up with a thrust or strike, as the opportunity presents itself. (*paragraph 20*)

Versus an opponent carrying his *queue* low, employ the same principle. Since the *queue* is out of distance for a blow using the *croix*, use your *queue* to set it aside with a backhand blow, employing a rowing movement backward and to the left to disarm the opponent. Follow-up as necessary. (*paragraph 24*)

Hooking actions

We have already seen a hooking action in the bind at the *demy-hache*, whereby the Player hooks the opponent’s axe with his *bec*, pulling it back towards himself to perform a disarm or otherwise make him step and lose balance. Another hooking action takes place in the manuscript and is described in both the left and right-handed sections – the knee hook (*paragraph 22*).

From a bind where the opponent covers using his *croix*, the text describes a feint to the head with the *queue*, and in raising it, you should lower your *bec* to strike the opponent’s knee. The text advises us to strike deeply should the opponent move back to avoid the strike, and to hook the knee just above the armour to pull off the *cuisse* if the hook does not make him fall in the first instance.

Finally, the text states that whenever you can, you should throw your *bec* to the opponent’s neck to hook him and take him down.

Counters

Any good martial system should have counters to its own techniques, and the *Jeu de la hache* is no exception to this rule. The manuscript details many counters and follow-ups to plays in its many paragraphs, several of which we will detail below. Some of the counters are simple, the text stating simply to regain measure by backing up. Other counters are more involved, and require more explanation. The descriptions below offer more detail.

Counter to the hook from the bind at the *demy-hache* (*paragraph 30*)

This is a very simple counter to the hook of the *demy-hache*. The text advises the Player to release his lower hand from the axe, stepping back and regaining the axe as he does so, returning to guard. Alternatively, the text advises to follow the pull with the *bec*, passing to the opponent’s right side using your left foot and raising the *queue* as you do so, striking the opponent against the collar, toppling him.

Counter to the knee hook (*paragraph 23*)

The counter as described in the text has the defender pass forward, using his *queue* to dislodge the *bec* from the crook of his knee. This brings the *dague* simultaneously in-line with the opponent, making the follow-up thrust the logical conclusion to the play.

Counter to the backward throw (paragraph 11)

When the opponent attempts to pass his *queue* over your head to throw you over backward, the text advises us in the play of the *demy-hache* cover to step back, turning your body, and bringing your *dague* to bear on the opponent, thrust under his armpit to push him away from you. Alternatively, the *demy-hache* can be used if the *dague* misses its mark.

Disarms

There are several disarming actions described in the manuscript, all of them employing the same basic principle – a lever action against the backhand, towards the weak part of the hand and in the direction the hand opens. We find several instances of this principle in the text.

Queue vs. Croix

From a cover using the *queue*, employ a strike against the opponent's backhand, pulling the axe back and down with a rowing motion as you do so.

Queue vs. Queue

There are two variants of this technique, both utilising the same principle, but dependent on whether the opponent's *queue* is held higher and lower than his *croix*.

In the *croix* higher variant, the Player passes his *queue* **over** the opponent's left arm, between his hands and near to the left hand. This places the *queue* under the opponent's *demy-hache* and with a simple rowing motion, pull the axe back and down. The opponent will be forced to release the axe.

In the *queue* higher variant, the Player passes his *queue* **under** the opponent's left arm, between his hands and near to the left hand. Pulling back towards you, again employing a rowing motion should apply a lever to the opponent's wrist, forcing the axe from his hand.

This simple principle is present with every disarming technique throughout the manuscript, and can be applied universally whenever an opportunity presents itself.

Conclusion

Le Jeu de la Hache is simple in its design, yet complex in its execution. Subtle cues and the extrapolation of principles to other plays give us a wide variety of options to explore once we have assimilated the core plays. In exploring the *Jeu*, we will recognise waypoints in our techniques where we can apply a principle or technique from another play, lending us an infinite variety of tools with which to work either in earnest or in "play." It is our hope that this simple primer will have served as a helpful introduction to the manuscript and its core principles and plays. The poleaxe is, and should be, a part of every medieval martial arts enthusiast's repertoire, if only for what it brings to the greater understanding of the Art as a whole.

Attack Drill

This simple drill is meant to take the practitioner through the various attacks and steps and incorporates a grip switch, making the drill symmetrical. Begin the drill in the *garde de la dague*.

1. With an advancing step, thrust with the *dague*
2. Pass with the left foot, employing a rising diagonal strike with the *queue* to head level
3. Thrust using the *queue* using an advancing step.
4. Pass with the right foot, striking a *tour de bras*.
5. Invert the axe, *croix* low, and hook to knee level with the *bec*.
6. Strike using the *demy-hache* with an advancing step, keeping the right foot forward.
7. Strike horizontally with the *queue*, passing forward with the left foot.
8. Switch grips, assuming the *garde de la dague* on the right.

Set Plays

Drill 1

The following drill will combine several techniques present in the text. These are the cover with the *croix*, the parry with the *queue*, the entry described in the cover using the *demy-hache* and its counter.

1. Player 1 strikes *tour de bras*.
2. Player 2 covers using the *croix*, without stepping.
3. Player 2 immediately counters with the *queue*, setting aside Player 1's axe.
4. Player 2 enters, stepping behind Player 1's heel with his left foot and placing the *queue* of his axe against his throat to throw him to the ground.
5. Player 1 retreats, placing his *dague* against Player 2's armpit and pushing him away, preventing the throw
6. Player 2 parries the counter using his *demy-hache*, stepping back into the guard of the *croix*.
7. Both Players return to their respective guards.

Drill 2

The next drill shows an alternate outcome depending on the responses of the combatants. We will substitute the bind at the *queues* and its subsequent plays to illustrate technique flow.

1. Player 1 strikes *tour de bras*.
2. Player 2 covers using the *croix*.
3. Player 2 immediately counters using the *queue*.
4. Player 1 reverses his axe, defending with the *queue* and resulting in a bind.
5. Player 2 raises Player 1's *queue*, subsequently slipping his underneath to strike it from the other side, attempting to disarm Player 1 in the process.
6. Player 1 raises his *croix* higher than his *queue*, effectively winding over Player 2's axe, and thrusts to his abdomen, pushing him away.
7. Both Players return to guard.

Drill 3

This last set play illustrates the grip switch as well as some of the dynamics involved in left versus right-handed play.

1. Player 1, right-hander attacks with a *tour de bras*.
2. Player 2, left hander, covers using the *queue*.
3. Player 1 reverses his axe, striking Player 2's *queue* using his own.
4. Player 2 voids the counter with the *queue*, lowering his *queue* and passing it under Player 1's, stepping in and attempting to throw Player 1 backward.
5. Player 1 counters, placing his *demy-hache* under Player 1's armpit, pushing him away.
6. Player 2 counters by reaching down over Player 2's *demy-hache*, grasping him by the crotch (careful!) and throwing him.
7. Player 2 releases his axe with the right hand, placing it higher on the haft while sliding the left hand down, effectively switching grips. Player 2 then pushes Player 1 with the *demy-hache* to the collar, preventing the throw.
8. Both Players return to guard.