

Castle, Hutton, and the Pre-Raphaelite medievalists: rediscovery and use of medieval and Renaissance martial arts in the Victorian era

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Abstract

The Victorian era was a time of rediscovery of medieval and Renaissance ways of life and habits, which fed the Victorian imagination. Their impact on architecture, decorative arts, or painting has already been studied. But little research has been done on the revival of European martial tradition, brought to the fore by members of the army turned anthropologists and historians of the fighting art, like Alfred Hutton and Richard Francis Burton. The martial tradition also fuelled the production of some artists of the time, who were interested in the Middle Ages and trained in the military arts, like William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

My talk will focus on this process of rediscovery, halfway between direct transmission and differed revival; it will explore the link between this rediscovery and military practice, how Victorian martialists deal with their source material, and how it influenced Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian art. I will approach this subject not only from the point of view of a researcher in English studies, but as a practitioner of European Martial Arts, thus examining the validity of fencing revival, the plausibility of its representation in art, and the reality of martial transmission. This will be achieved through comparison between Victorian and medieval sources, through examination of Pre-Raphaelite representation of fighting, and through reconstitution of both Victorianized martial sources and Pre-Raphaelite representations.

Martial tradition in the Victorian era is double-sided: it combines old techniques rediscovered and modern techniques newly created. The contemporary field of Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) defines what can be studied as HEMA as being a martial tradition with a broken transmission – that is martial techniques that have stopped being taught. The Victorian era revived some long lost techniques, but it is debatable whether the line of transmission was actually broken, given that “serious” fencing (with risk and pursuit of grievous bodily harm) has never stopped being studied before World War I. This dissonance between continuity and interruption might

have had an impact on the study of martial techniques and on their representation, as I will try to show, and is at the core of the Victorian transmission of the medieval matter.

I will base my study on two sets of works: on the one hand, writings on swordplay, whether medieval (treatises from the Italian and German fencing traditions) or Victorian/19th century (Henry Angelo, William Pringle Green, school of Joinville-le-Pont), with a particular focus on the productions of Alfred Hutton and Richard Burton; on the other hand, a selection of visual and written works by medievalist Pre-Raphaelites, including William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Edward Burne-Jones.