A Thousand Times Do it: Historical European Martial Arts and the Cultural Record

David Lichty

Abstract

The following paper explores how intangible cultural knowledge is represented in the cultural record as information made known through physical objects. It seeks to prove that the preservation of intangible knowledge requires the continued practice of that knowledge as well as the creation of physical information. I believe that a study of European martial arts will demonstrate this. This paper will cover the history of historical European martial arts manuscripts in the early medieval period, relevant advances in manuscript making in the late medieval period, and the current revitalization of historical European martial arts. The paper will describe how communities of practitioners dedicated to recording guidelines for what can only be realized in practice and which is intangible knowledge, employ new technologies, ideas and metadata in creating a cultural record.

Keywords: Information-as-thing, Metadata, Intangible Culture, Preservation, HEMA

“A thousand times do it, then you will know something.”

- Master Chang Lee, 6th degree black belt

If Master Chang Lee is right and part of “knowing,” the internalized understanding of information, is tied to the process of “doing,” then how do we go about preserving knowledge, particularly when that knowledge is a significant cultural practice in a society? As a martial artist and emerging museum professional, I find this a question of concern. In museology, library science and archival work, there has been a long-standing practice of preserving the physical: what can be stored, indexed and handled. According to Buckland, there is a focus on the preservation of “information-as-thing” (1989, p. 351). This emphasis has led to the idea that a cultural heritage survives in the form of a cultural record that consists of what is tangible; of objects that have been produced by a culture that have lasted until this moment in time (Chodorow, 2006, p. 373). This means that the preservation of knowledge can only take the form of the preservation of information in physical form. However, preservation methods should not end after information professionals store and index information. Promoting the practice of intangible knowledge has bearing on the quality of the information that is represented by “information-as-thing” for two reasons. The first is that a form of knowledge that is practiced is not something that is fixed. It is dynamic and fluid, changing form as the practice develops over time. The second is that technological advances open new opportunities to have more accurate methods of documenting the intangible but, in order to take advantage of new technologies, there would have to be a group of people knowledgeable enough to create new “information-as-thing.” We can see this by evaluating the interpretation, preservation and practice of historical European martial art manuscripts and the modern practice of Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA).

Throughout this paper, historical European martial arts will refer to the techniques and practice of the medieval fencing masters and their pupils, while the abbreviation HEMA will refer to the modern day practice of those techniques. HEMA is a revitalization movement of historical European martial arts. The HEMA society is a global community that attempts to reconstruct the martial art systems of medieval Europe using the recent rediscovery of medieval martial arts manuscripts (Jaquet et al., 2015, p. 3-5). This is done through practicing and analyzing the techniques in the historical literature. With this approach, a level of interdisciplinary expertise is required. Jaquet et al argue that while history and language experts require the embodied knowledge of a practitioner, the practitioner also requires the analytical expertise of history and language experts to create an informed practice (2015, p. 4). The example of HEMA demonstrates that sometimes, in order to extract knowledge from the

cultural record, information-as-thing for intangible knowledge cannot be left entirely in the hands of the academic community.

In order to demonstrate the importance of “doing” in preserving and growing a cultural record, it is important to understand the characteristics and history of European martial art manuscripts. These manuscripts exist as physical paper with inscriptions and illustrations of martial art techniques used in the medieval period. The intention was that these manuscripts were to be copied and distributed so different swordsmanship schools could use them for informed practice (Jaquet et al., 2016, p. 35, p. 489). This is a perfect example of Buckland’s idea of information-as-thing. The embodied knowledge of different combat techniques was being translated into a physical form. It is through this physical form that these medieval practices were able to survive. They were stored first in monasteries and then in libraries until they were rediscovered in the 20th century (Jaquet et al., 2016, p. 489). Their rediscovery has provided us with cultural records of martial art techniques for the medieval period. As it turns out, these records make clear that the fencing masters featured in these late medieval manuscripts emphasized the importance of “doing” and clearly wanted this captured and represented in these informative manuscripts. The writers of these manuscripts translated that concern into information for practitioners. These translations are seen as much more successful records in their preservation of cultural information than their earlier medieval counterparts.

The manuscripts of the early medieval period are difficult to use as informative martial arts texts because the embodied knowledge has been lost and not effectively translated to information-as-thing. These early medieval manuscripts only provide simple descriptions of the techniques. The paired illustrations of the techniques are hindered by the quality of the art and representation of the human body (Jaquet et al., 2016, p. 35). In contrast, the manuscripts written in the 14th century show an improvement largely because of the quality of the descriptions and illustrations, which seem to have been influenced by interdisciplinary consultation with mathematicians, engineers and architects (Jaquet et al., 2016, p. 5). It was only through practice that the fencing masters realized the manuscripts were limited in their ability to transfer embodied knowledge and saw that in order to preserve the knowledge of their respective fighting systems, new objects had to be produced for the cultural record.

As much as late medieval fencing masters benefited from an interdisciplinary approach to the creation of martial art manuscripts, they were also able to take advantage of advances in the technology of printing. As previously mentioned, there was a problem with the accuracy

of the illustrations that accompanied the texts in early martial art manuscripts. The problem extended beyond the representation of the body, as any replicated illustrations were bound to have inconsistencies because of the process of copying texts by hand. Lukesh explains how the consistent reliability of pictures in scientific works was not possible until the popularization of printed images because of intentional or unintentional changes in the image by the hands of the copyists (Lukesh, 2002). A certain degree of standardization of knowledge could not be achieved until the fencing masters made use of printing when creating their fight books and manuscripts. If not for the continued practice of fencing masters, the current information-as-thing in the cultural record would have been limited to the early, and difficult to interpret, medieval manuscripts. Their dedication to their craft allowed these masters to use developing technologies to create more usable “information-as-thing” that could be used by modern audiences for the practice of HEMA. This view of continuous consultation and updating of the cultural record continues to this day.

Through the example of HEMA, we can see how community interaction can improve and even grow the quality of the cultural record for intangible knowledge. Just like the fencing masters of the late medieval period trying to improve on the manuscripts of the past, modern day HEMA community members are taking it upon themselves to improve the quality of physical information on the topic by using the technologies available to them. This has manifested in a Wikipedia-style community-based website called Wiktenaeur. Wiktenaeur’s focus is creating an online community where practitioners and researchers can communicate. It also attempts to collect and present all of the known European martial art manuscripts in a digital format. What this community-based system of preservation has fostered is an increase in the quality of “information-as-thing.” Not only do individuals have access to digital photographs of the manuscript pages through this site, they also have access to the translations and interpretations of the manuscripts. Having a community-based style of preservation makes it much easier for there to be an active population of practitioners because they are able to access the “information-as-thing” quickly and effectively. By having this information available and having access to open source styles of preservation, it is easy to add to the cultural record. On YouTube, many HEMA schools are creating informative videos to better explain and demonstrate the techniques in the historical martial arts manuscripts. These HEMA practitioners are taking advantage of new technologies to contribute to and improve the quality of the cultural record by using their embodied knowledge to create “information-as-thing” that is more informative.

Like the fencing masters of the late medieval period, modern-day HEMA artists are using new technologies to make intangible knowledge more easily preserved and practiced. From the example of the printing press, it is easy to see how the cultural record improves from the direct influence of new technologies. What is perhaps harder to anticipate is how the cultural record improves from the indirect consequences of these same technologies. The way modern HEMA researchers and enthusiasts are utilizing the internet is creating a vast amount of metadata on the subject matter. As Gartner describes, the internet can create a single interconnected set of information through the use of hyperlinks and accessibility (Gartner, 2016, p. 90). What was once a scattered and siloed set of manuscripts and books has become a single collection of knowledge related to European martial arts online. Having this knowledge more available and accessible makes the practice of an art or skill easier to learn. There are fewer barriers of entry, meaning that more people are more likely to begin practicing and contribute to the cultural record through their participation. HEMA provides another example of how increased accessibility of “information-as-thing” creates a broader community of practice. In the last 30 years, modern HEMA has gone from an obscure hobby to an internationally competitive practice with associations, tournaments and workshops.

The HEMA community has clearly made great strides in improving and preserving the information that exists in the form of historical European manuscripts, but I believe that there could be further interdisciplinary collaboration to ensure the continued practice and preservation of European martial arts. I would suggest that the HEMA community try to connect with UNESCO’s intangible cultural heritage initiative. Doing this would change the status of HEMA from hobby/obscure sport to a recognized and protected cultural practice that would receive financial and governmental support. The difficulty with this approach would lie in being able to achieve recognition for having intangible cultural heritage status by UNESCO. On the UNESCO website, intangible cultural heritage is defined as “oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts” (UNESCO, 2003, p. 3). Martial arts do not immediately fall under these categories. A case would have to be made that European martial arts and their practice fall under the category of cultural knowledge. I believe that this is the case: the information that the manuscripts contain not only focuses on combative techniques but on social etiquette and relationships as well (Jaquet et al., 2015, p. 8).

As we have seen, in the HEMA community and amongst the fencing masters of the late medieval period, having a group of dedicated practitioners is essential to creating more informative “information-as-thing” for the cultural record. The example of historical European

martial art manuscripts also demonstrates that if intangible forms of knowledge are going to be preserved to the best of our ability, there has to be an interdisciplinary approach between academics and practitioners. Not only that, academics and practitioners have to be actively creating new “information-as-thing” using new technology that addresses the faults of the previous information when possible. That way, both research and practice can inform each other. Even though knowledge can only be stored and preserved as information, we get a little closer to “knowing something” if we keep “doing it” a thousand times.

References

- Buckland, M. K. (1991). Information as thing. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* (1986-1998), 42(5), 351. Retrieved from <http://myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/docview/216897238?accountid=14771>
- Gartner, R. (2016). *Metadata: Shaping Knowledge from Antiquity to the Semantic Web*. Springer. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-40893-4 [e-book]
- Chodorow, S. (2006). To Represent Us Truly: The Job and Context of Preserving the Cultural Record. *Libraries & the Cultural Record*, 41(3), 372-380. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/stable/25549346>
- Jaquet, D., Sørensen, C. F., & Cognot, F. (2015). Historical European Martial Art a crossroad between academic research, martial heritage re-creation and martial sport practices. *Acta Periodica Duellatorum*, 3(1), 5-35. doi:10.1515/apd-2015-0001
- Jaquet, D., Verelst, K., & Dawson, T. (2016). *Late medieval and early modern fight books: Transmission and tradition of martial arts in Europe (14th-17th centuries)*. Leiden: Brill.
- Lukesh, S.S. (2002). “Revolutions and images and the development of knowledge: Implications for research libraries and publishers of scholarly communications.” *Journal of Electronic Publishing* 7, no. 3
- Main Page. (n.d.). Retrieved October 2, 2018, from https://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Main_Page

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2003). *What is Intangible Cultural Heritage?* Retrieved from <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/01851-EN.pdf>