

## What would the Marshal do?: Historical heroes as role models in contemporary martial arts

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Received: 13/03/2023; Accepted: 12/07/2024; Published: 15/07/2024



ORIGINAL PAPER

### Abstract

Many martial arts systems have their own revered heroes, such as mythical founders and leaders of notable schools. The paper draws on ethnographic research conducted on The Blade Academy, an expanding historical European martial arts (HEMA) school in the United Kingdom. Among pedagogic strategies used by the lead instructors and their core followers are narratives about historic figures whose heroic beliefs and deeds should be respected and even emulated by practitioners. This article explores the case study of 12-13<sup>th</sup> century Norman-English knight William Marshal, who is used as a principal model for leadership, martial valour, economic success and moral activity by the lead instructor. We examine idealised models of chivalry that such modern martial artists aspire to follow despite them living within very different societies and value systems. We conclude by considering the merits of revisiting historical figures who might act as role models for modern teachers and their students.

**Keywords:** Martial arts; combat sports; ethnography; historical European martial arts; HEMA; heroes; ethics.

### ¿Qué haría el Mariscal? Los héroes históricos como modelos en las artes marciales contemporáneas

#### Resumen

Numerosos sistemas de artes marciales veneran a sus héroes, como fundadores míticos o líderes de escuelas notables. Este artículo presenta un estudio etnográfico realizado en The Blade Academy, una escuela de artes marciales históricas europeas (HEMA) en expansión en el Reino Unido. Entre las estrategias pedagógicas utilizadas por los instructores y estudiantes principales se encuentran las narraciones sobre figuras históricas, cuyas creencias y gestas heroicas deberían ser respetadas, e incluso emuladas, por los practicantes. En este trabajo se analiza el caso del caballero normando-inglés del s. XII-XIII Guillermo Mariscal, que el instructor principal utiliza como modelo principal de liderazgo, valor marcial, éxito económico y actividad moral. Examinamos los modelos idealizados de caballería que aspiran a seguir los artistas marciales modernos, a pesar de vivir en sociedades y sistemas de valores muy diferentes. Concluimos considerando los méritos de revivir figuras históricas que podrían actuar como modelos para los instructores modernos y para sus estudiantes.

**Palabras clave:** Artes marciales; deportes de combate; etnografía; artes marciales históricas europeas; HEMA; héroes; ética.

### O que é que o Marechal faria? Os heróis históricos como modelos nas artes marciais contemporâneas

#### Resumo

Muitos sistemas de artes marciais têm os seus próprios heróis venerados, tais como fundadores míticos e líderes de escolas notáveis. O artigo baseia-se numa investigação etnográfica efectuada na "The Blade Academy", uma escola de artes marciais históricas europeas (HEMA) em expansão no Reino Unido. Entre as estratégias pedagógicas utilizadas pelos instrutores principais e pelos seus principais seguidores contam-se narrativas sobre figuras históricas, cujas crenças e atos heróicos devem ser respeitados e até imitados pelos praticantes. Este artigo explora o estudo de caso do cavaleiro normando-inglês do século XII-XIII, William Marshal, que é utilizado como modelo principal de liderança, valentia marcial, sucesso económico e atividade moral pelo instrutor principal. Examinamos os modelos idealizados de cavalheirismo que esses artistas marciais modernos aspiram a seguir, apesar de viverem em sociedades e sistemas de valores muito diferentes. Concluimos, considerando os méritos de reviver figuras históricas que podem atuar como modelos para os professores modernos e os seus alunos.

**Palavras-chave:** Artes marciais; desportos de combate; etnografia; artes marciais históricas europeas; HEMA; heróis; ética.

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**Contributions:** George Jennings (ABCEFGHIJKLMN), Sara Delamont (ACGHILM). Codes according to CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy): (A) Conceptualization. (B) Data curation. (C) Formal Analysis. (D) Funding acquisition. (E) Investigation. (F) Methodology. (G) Project administration. (H) Resources. (I) Software. (J) Supervision. (K) Validation. (L) Visualization. (M) Writing – original draft. (N) Writing – review & editing.

**Funding:** The authors received no funding for this work.

**Conflicts of interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.



## 1. Introduction: Heroes, history and sport

The types and use of historical heroes vary from country to country, from region to region, and from individual to individual. The idea of heroes in sport is well established in sport studies, with both social historians and moral philosophers writing extensively on the topic over the decades. A seminal collection on the topic, *European heroes: myth, identity, sport* (Holt et al., 1996) set out the potential for such an avenue of scholarship within a poignant editorial introduction. Holt and colleagues begin with sketching an outline of (largely male) heroes and their relationship to contemporary individuals in the process of personal development:

Each growing individual sees, feels and hears beliefs and values not as abstract concepts and principles but as integral, personal parts of loved or disliked persons whom he [sic] experiences through social and personal interaction...Abstract principles, precepts and moral judgements are consequently more easily felt and understood and more highly valued, when met in a human being endowed with a symbolic form that expresses them. Obviously the 'hero' is ideally suited to this role. (Holt et al., 1996, p. 2).

These historians of sport then point the way to an overall aim of such research:

The ambition is to understand what these icons stood for in the eyes of those who watched them or read about them; vessels into which we poured all manner of gender, class and patriotic expectations [...]. European sporting heroes are often archetypes representing a set of personal qualities and heroic characteristics not only supremely valued by society but seen by contemporaries and succeeding generations as having major instrumental power. (Holt et al., 1996, p. 4).

Earlier, Holt (1986) stressed the fact that in sport, whether truth claims are actually true or not is less important than if people believe them to be true. One thing is for certain, though: Sport, for most of its history, has been male dominated. Holt (1989, p. 8) explains the social function of such male heroes:

Sport has been a male preserve with its own language, its initiation rites, and models of true masculinity, its clubbable, jokey cosiness. Building male friendships and sustaining large and small communities of men have been the prime purpose of sport.

Sporting heroes often have national or even nationalistic dimensions. In the recently devolved nation of Wales, where we authors are based, there is an obvious case of nation building through the historic success of many athletes and teams. Morgan (2004, p. i) argues such a case:

In all societies, sport started as practice for hunting and then as practice for war, or later as a substitute for war. In Wales, what is special is small country psychology – a special kind of need for heroes that could reassure us of our existence as a country. We might not have the conventional signs of life, or the institutional trappings of nationhood, but boy, could we produce runners and footballers and swimmers and fighters that we could all look up to.

Providing we have those heroes, we could do without our own royal family, our own parliament, national cathedral or supreme court. Our heroes reassured us that we were not going to disappear as a nation, that we could not be disregarded into the dustbin of history.

Such sporting icons are of course, like all of us, flawed human beings. Ethicists have also turned their attention to the exploits of famous sportspeople. Jones's (2016) study on sport and alcohol, for instance, examines the troubled relationship between sports stars such as footballer George Best and his unfortunate drinking behaviour. Best might have been admired for his innate talent, ingenious moves on the football pitch and affable, media-friendly persona, but he has also been criticised for alcoholism, the eventual liver damage and womanising antics surrounding such off-the-pitch conduct. Sporting heroes are therefore judged not only on their athletic merits and achievements but their moral compass and its application in social life.

Naturally, the martial arts and combat sports (MACS) have their own heroes in the form of mythical founders and legendary progenitors of notable schools – especially in East Asian cultures (Lewis, 1998; Roe, 2022). Although these heroic folk figures are often more myth than fact, their function is much as in sport. Like the mature field of sport studies, the more recently established



martial arts studies is an interdisciplinary academic field (Bowman, 2015) that can draw on literature, concepts and methods from a range of disciplines, such as history, philosophy and sociology. Holt (1989, p. 357) called for such a union of disciplines:

Sociologists frequently complain that historians lack a conceptual framework for their research, whilst historians tend to feel social theorists require them to compress the diversity of the past into artificially rigid categories and dispense with empirical verification of their theories. In truth both disciplines need each other, and distinguished authorities in both areas have recently emphasized the interdependence of sociology and history in the identification and pursuit of common problems in social science.

As with the early efforts in sport studies focusing on theories and macro-level analysis (noted in Holt et al., 1996), it is fair to state that the everyday, individual martial arts practitioner might be slightly overlooked in martial arts research. Personal case studies do exist on combat sport athletes and their mediated portrayal, as in mixed martial arts (Jakubowksa et al., 2016). There is an established body of knowledge on the sociology of gender, performance ethnography, film studies, cultural studies and so on (Bowman, 2017), but relatively little work on how these fields and sub-fields can be connected. For instance, there is extensive scholarship of household names such as Bruce Lee (1940-1973), his immense influence on popular culture (Barrowman & Bowman, 2019) through his charismatic affect (Brown, 2022) and his ingenious fighting strategy (Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2023), but there is far less work on what these icons mean to the martial artists teaching and training in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This article is a case study offering an attempt at such scholarship, drawing on an ethnographic study of historical European martial arts (HEMA) to consider the medieval concept of chivalry within the contemporary social environment of one British school led by a male instructor fascinated in a particular 12-13<sup>th</sup> century knight turned earl and regent: William Marshal.

## 2. Historical figures in historical European martial arts (HEMA): the knight William Marshal

Unlike feudalism, *chivalry* was a term used during the medieval period to guide what it means to be a knight and a noble, and this meaning evolved over time. Kniphfer (2018) notes that “Chivalry was not simply an elusive word, devoid of definition. It was the *ethos* that *men* aspired to in the Middle Ages. It was a real force that informed the politics, society, religion and warfare of the day. It may elude a neat definition, but that does not mean it does not exist” (p. 39, emphasis original). Paden (2002) considers that chivalry can be understood by four core values that knights were expected to live by: 1) loyalty, 2) prowess, 3) generosity, and 4) courtesy, with the latter value often being overlooked by scholars. Kniphfer (2018), on the other hand, stresses the values of prowess, wisdom, loyalty and honour. Regardless of the ordering and axiological hierarchy, it is important to remember that values such as loyalty were expected to be reciprocal, as in between knights and their liege lords and ladies (Mullally, 2003).

William Marshal (Guillaume de Marshal, c. 1146-1217) was a Norman-English knight and tournament champion who eventually became the first Earl of Pembroke and Regent of England, serving under five kings during an era of notable turbulence. Respected for his skill in combat, warfare and diplomacy, he is often labelled as “the greatest knight” and “the power behind the throne” by his adorators (and many current commentators). In this and later periods of French cultural dominance, the French handbooks of knighthood and the romances in French helped spread the ideals of medieval European chivalry (Keen, 2020). This ideal of chivalry was idealised in Victorian Britain, from where it influenced manuals such as the Boy Scouts of America – possibly influencing an entire generation (Kauper, 2005). Romanticised heroes such as the mythical Lancelot and the real figure of William Marshal were valorised by many boys and men. In fact, Venning (2023) remarks that Marshal was “paragon of contemporary chivalry and reputedly a model for Chretien de Troyes’ Arthurian creation Sir Lancelot” (p. 151). Crouch (2016) notes that his popularity was helped by the fact that Marshal was a man of action who took risks on the battlefield. No longer a secondary figure in history, Marshal is now represented in social media, film and even fiction. He is regularly celebrated by popular historians such as Jones (2017), who notes his relationship with the famed order of the Knights Templars: “the glamorous knight-turned statesmen William Marshal, who also appointed a brother as his almoner and would take Templar vows on his deathbed in 1219” (p. 221).



The biography of William Marshal follows his life from cradle to grave and it is regarded by scholars such as Crouch (2008) as “a reliable guide to the attitudes of the upper end of aristocracy of the late twelfth century” (p. 15) and a window into the world of Angevin England and Normandy. This includes the core values of the time – some of which can be relatable today. According to Gillingham (1988), “war is not fought for the sake of individual gain whether glory, reputation or material reward, but for the common good” (pp. 261-262). The ethics of warriors such as Marshal are tied to their destinies as heroes (Irlenbusch-Reynard, 2009).

Nearly all martial arts have their heroes – real-life founders of styles, mythical wandering monks and innovators of technique in many East Asian systems, for instance. Historical European martial arts (HEMA) is a 21<sup>st</sup> century umbrella term for a wide variety of reconstructed ‘martial activities’ (Martinková & Parry, 2016) that were lost to time, reinvented for entertainment and education (e.g., jousting) or slowly morphed into modern Western sports in the form of archery, fencing and wrestling. Although it includes formats of armed and armoured combat on horseback (Wauters, 2023), by far the more popular (and accessible) modalities include one-on-one medieval and renaissance fencing in the German and Italian traditions developed by revered fencing masters, duellists and mercenaries. These forms of HEMA focus on specific weapons such as the side sword, dagger / rondel, and poleaxe, with a typical specialisation in the late medieval two-handed longsword. HEMA classes around the world include instruction and practice of specific codes of combat that are based on these manuscripts or “fight books” composed by those noted fencing masters (Jaquet et al., 2016), as in Johannes Lichtenauer, Hans Talhoffer and Fiore dei Liberi’s celebrated texts. This focus on fencing is sometimes supplemented by physical training and exercises taken from other martial arts (such as surviving grappling styles) as well as unit combat (mock battle scenarios). Together, the HEMA communities help preserve intangible cultural heritage through physical objects, training and the creation of meta data on surviving fencing and fighting manuals (Lichty, 2019).

As HEMA is a broad and burgeoning movement, schools are led by practitioner-instructors who often teach on a part-time basis while working on private lessons, special events and competitions. The HEMA scene also includes notable influencers striving to make their passion a full-time occupation through writing, workshops, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok platforms as well as podcasts. The interpretation of texts is coupled with an open interpretation of what HEMA is and should be, including the attitudes, values and virtues of its exponents and leaders. Unlike martial arts such as Aikido, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and Capoeira, where one’s pedigree can be identified from a few generations from the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century figures of O Sensei Ueshiba or Mestres Bimba and Pastinha or a martial arts clan such as the Gracie family, modern HEMA practitioners cannot lay claim to a direct body lineage from medieval and renaissance fencers, warriors and mercenaries, so they must develop their own contemporary and historical role models that they can relate to, from Joan of Arc to William Wallace (often due to people’s national identities, political leanings and gender).

Research on HEMA tends to examine the methods of fighting (Sawicki, 2014), the ways in which historical fighters trained and how one could reconstruct these warrior arts in an accurate, scientific manner (Burkart, 2016) to form an academic field of HEMA studies (Jaquet, 2016). Less is known about the living (and dead) role models that HEMAists hold dear, and how they use tales of historical heroes within their classes and related social events to form a cohesive culture and social pedagogy. The early Norman-English medieval knight William Marshal is one such role model for an active HEMA instructor striving to cultivate a positive learning environment and community in today’s Britain.

### 3. Research methods

This case study stems from a three-year ethnography (2018-2021) of HEMA in one UK school, “the Blade Academy” (pseudonym), led by the charismatic Billy Marshall (also a false name). George joined the group some months after it opened, continuing through the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures, where the official pedagogy and related social activities adapted to online methods (Jennings, 2020). Like many fighting scholars (see Sánchez García & Spencer, 2013), George began the fieldwork as a direct student in the school, learning the basic footwork, cutting and defensive techniques as well as sparring alongside his fellow students. He also spent time after the

class, listening to stories, exchanging ideas and altogether taking part in the sociability dimension of the school. George has a background as a martial arts scholar-practitioner who had to unlearn previous habits of bodily motion in unarmed combat systems since his teenage years (such as Wing Chun Kung Fu) to comprehend the techniques of the body, pedagogy and culture of HEMA from a critical insider's perspective. He ceased the participant observation after the Academy continued to expand from two evening classes to five classes per week in different towns, in part due to an ongoing, parallel study of the Taijiquan school. This was coupled with George's concerns for (micro)concussion risks for his long-term health that could be increased by HEMA, a full-contact martial art involving blows – quite often to the head – from synthetic and blunted swords and other weapons such as poleaxes and spears.

Sara is a regular collaborator and co-author of George's who has acted in the guise of a critical friend for this particular study. As a member of the local martial arts practitioner-researcher network led by George, she is already familiar with Billy and his expanding HEMA school, and she has met with him to offer advice on the planned expansion of the Blade Academy in nearby towns. Moreover, she possesses knowledge on William Marshal from previous reading of popular historical books such as Tuchman's (2017) *The Distant Mirror*, which mentions Marshal as a hallmark of chivalry and knighthood, albeit one who, in Sara's words, "made his wealth from ransoming lots of people".

In addition to the three years' fieldwork in HEMA, George has conducted interviews with core members of the Blade Academy including its chief instructors, Billy and Issie. Although the official period of fieldwork is concluded, he has regular discussions with Billy about his teaching strategy and vision for the Blade Academy, which have extended to email correspondences used for follow-up questions and the verification of ideas. George has also undertaken a thematic review of their material on social media platforms and their official documentation including their website. Ethnography is an immersive approach to research that is emergent yet systematic in nature (Matthews, 2020). Although George's initial research question was on how fencers learned the anatomy of the blade in HEMA, he encountered unexpected findings in the Blade Academy – most notably the role of historical warriors as heroes.

Following much of the literature on historical role models and figures (e.g., Paden, 2002; Knighfer, 2018), we use a case study to represent our findings. The study was accepted by a university research ethics panel (code provided upon publication). Respecting ethnographic conventions, all names are pseudonyms, and we have not recorded any information on the other research participants' personal lives – instead focusing on the learning and teaching strategies in question. The data that follows focuses on the storytelling aspect of the classes in question and the words of the instructors and their core followers who reinforce the messages around historical heroes and their value in today's martial arts landscape. The analysis and discussion is a detailed case study of how one historical figure, William Marshal, inspires a specific contemporary HEMA instructor named after him, Billy Marshall.

In terms of representation, we have attempted to write and present our analysis in a clear manner, developing some initial theoretical ideas around chivalry and historical role models in HEMA. This follows Holt's (1989) call for the blending of sociology with history: "History crudely weighted down with the apparatus of theory and couched in specialist language spoils the enjoyment of a subject without enhancing our understanding of it. Clarity must be a precondition of explanation" (Holt, 1989, p. 357).

## 4. Analysis and discussion

### 4.1. *The Greatest knight: A tale of William Marshal*

Billy is an athletic, physically active British man of white and Malaysian heritage in his mid-thirties who has trained in various martial arts and combat sports since a child, starting with fencing and boxing, with later stints in Lee style Kung Fu and Tai Chi, Krav Maga, and more recently, Brazilian Jiu-jitsu. He has a background in historical reenactment, specialising in the Viking era, but he later specialised in HEMA – most notably the late medieval Italian tradition of Fiore de Liberi. However, Billy does not turn to the famed prizefighters of his native Wales (accounted for in Stead & Williams,



2008), the celebrated warrior-hero and last native prince of Wales, Owain Glyndŵr (Breverton, 2013), Chinese boxing masters of yesteryear (as in the classic text by Smith, 1974) or even British televised wrestling superheroes closer to his childhood era of the 1990s (see the oral history in Garfield, 1996). Instead, he has found a hero in a medieval Norman knight who died centuries before his birth. George first heard about William Marshal in a post-class evening social while waiting for pancakes and smoothies. His instructor Billy was speaking about the mercenary, duellist and fencer master Fiore dei Liberi and his 50 years of fencing experience that he drew on to write his famed manuscript. Billy then moved onto the daring deeds of his personal hero, William Marshal:

"I'm also impressed by the story of William Marshal. The guy died at 72. 72 years of age in the Middle Ages – that's just unheard of!"

The name sounded English, so George asked for verification.

"He was English." Nodded Billy, continuing to exclaim: "The man outlived five kings, and was loyal to each of them. He never broke his word. Some people made some claims against him, that he stole money from the crown, so he challenged them. He offered to cut off two of his own fingers and then fight three of their best men, but no one had the courage to fight him. They knew he was lethal." He said in awe as we listened intently.

"He once rode out to battle, during a siege, without his helmet, and then his squire rushed after him, 'Sire, you forgot your helmet. He immediately put it on, and just then was struck on the head. The helmet saved him.'" Billy said, as if he was there.

"That's a good squire!" Alun (one of the HEMA students) added, impressed with the timing.

"That is a good squire." Billy agreed.

"There's reference to William Marshal in *Ironclad*. That's the best one." Templar John said, smiling, returning to his favourite medieval film that he rated above all else. We continued to talk about the Templar movie genre, comparing *Ironclad* with *Arn: Knight Templar* and the *Kingdom of Heaven* cinematic version with the Director's Cut.

After hearing of this man's exploits, George wanted to learn more about William Marshal and consider his knightly ideals. But from reading various sources, George hadn't found anything about the challenge to the three other knights and the story of the missing helmet. Where did Billy get his information from? How did this character motivate him in his training? George wished to know more, and fortunately could do so with our upcoming brunch meeting. Did he take pride in being a Marshal, just like William Marshal, whose surname comes from his profession?

In George's research in The Blade Academy, several of the core members of the group do draw on historical figures and groups that they aspire to emulate in often romantic and fanciful ways. In the breaks between class exercises, Templar John (affectionally referred to as "Templar" by his classmates), an avid Knights Templar reenactor, often tells tales of the glimmering knights riding "shoulder to shoulder" in battle against brigands and renegades in the Holy Land. John also paid homage to the Spanish knight El Cid during a trip to sites linked to his famous battles and daring deeds, such as Valencia. Templar told George how he feels "like a knight every day!" when walking around the supermarket and on the local beach cutting and thrusting in the air with a fallen branch. The chief instructor of the Blade Academy, Billy Marshall, meanwhile, often draws on tales of William Marshal as an exemplar to follow. George actually named Billy after William, using a modern rendering of his name. It is also a fitting pseudonym given the fact that Billy sometimes refers to his historical role model in the affectionate form of "Billy Marshal." Furthermore, the title "Marshal of the Academy" was purposefully selected by Billy due to the fact that he previously held the title of "Marshal of the Castle Garrison" in his local reenactment group.

Being "always happy to talk about the Marshal", Billy explained how he first encountered his historical role model:

I first learned about the Marshal when I was a teenager doing historical reenactment. I first started studying his life when I started HEMA. As a fighter in an age of fighters trying to make a name for himself, I felt an affinity for his struggle as I too was a martial artist trying to make a name for myself in the part of the martial art world I inhabited.



Billy had accessed knowledge on Marshal through reading various books (Ashbridge, 2021; Chadwick, 2009) while also browsing excerpts of the original biography (as in English language translations seen in Bryant, 2016). In fact, he even met the novelist Elizabeth Chadwick on a tour of Chepstow Castle (Wales), and was deeply impressed by her knowledge of Marshal and the times in which he lived. According to several discussions and an email correspondence with Billy, George surmised that this deep respect for the historical figure is primarily due to five key factors:

1. He lived to a ripe old age of around 72 at a time when such a life expectancy was virtually unheard of.
2. He served all his kings with loyalty, even when he was on the losing side (for much of his life).
3. He wasn't a tyrant in the age of tyranny (unlike King John and others such as Richard the Lionheart who "were both scum").
4. He transitioned from a lowly, nearly destitute knight to the Regent of England.
5. He was loyal to, respectful to and proud of his wife above and beyond the expectations of the time.

Through George's own inductive analysis, these five aspects of Marshal's character might be understood in the six following principles relating to medieval chivalry as well as modern-day values:

1. *Prowess*: Marshal was highly adept in all warrior arts, as seen in his success in battle and the tournament field;
2. *Loyalty*: He supposedly remained loyal to all his liege lords, even when that loyalty was hard pressed (as in with King John's attack on his lands in Ireland);
3. *Generosity*: It is believed that Marshal obeyed the laws of chivalry that we can relate to today, and bestowed his own loyal followers with generous gifts;
4. *Marital fidelity*: He appeared to have a loyal and loving relationship with his wife Isabel de Clare, with no recorded mistresses (uncommon at the time of arranged marriages);
5. *Self-made success*: From a landless younger son to the most powerful man in the Kingdom, Marshal earned his wealth, power and success rather than inheriting it as many of his peers did;
6. *Longevity*: At a time when peasants might live until their early thirties, Marshal lived to his early seventies, which reflected his robust nature, ability to survive (and thrive), and good fortune.

Billy told George that he would love to know how Marshal fought. Unfortunately, little is known about William Marshal's fighting style, and he is not a technical figure in HEMA in terms of his stances, postures and cutting drills due to the lack of any manuscript from his time. The touchstone resource is the surviving posthumous biography endorsed by his surviving family members, which has inspired literature and documentaries about the warrior, politician and leader. Marshal is often held up as the paragon of early medieval chivalry and "the power behind five kings" of England and "the greatest knight" (the title of two books and one documentary). A landless Norman-English knight turned Earl (and later Regent of England for the boy King Henry III), Marshal's story has been largely overlooked in mainstream accounts of English and European history, although he is now being recognised by academic and popular historians and writers alike (Chadwick, 2009; Ashbridge, 2021). Documentaries on Marshal include an episode devoted to him on BBC Timewatch (2008) as well as more recent podcasts and YouTube videos (e.g., The People Profiles, 2020; Dan Davies History, 2023), some of whom are re-evaluating his life according to new understandings of neurodiversity (i.e., autism) due to Marshal's apparent directness and his inability to understand jokes (see Murderhobos, 2022).

As he was born into relative obscurity (a second son to a minor nobleman), these writers are still unsure of Marshal's exact year of birth. Nonetheless, through his skill in arms and political cunning, Marshal was able to succeed in the medieval tournament circuit, which prepared him for battle while accumulating wealth (through ransoming captives) and reputation. He eventually served



under Henry II, Henry the Young King, Richard I (the Lionheart), King John and his infant son Henry III (for whom he acted as Regent), leading troops and commanding lands in the expanding Angevin Empire of England, Wales, Normandy, France and Ireland. Keeping his word to the Young King, who died prematurely, Marshal embarked on a pilgrimage and a crusade in the Middle East. For Billy, cunning, clever and martially skilled men were widespread in medieval society, but “the thing that separated him [Marshal] was his loyalty to his lord and his wife.” In his early forties, Marshal married the young Norman-Irish heiress Isabel de Clare, eventually having ten children with her, with no known illegitimate children (uncommon for noblemen of the time). Living a considerably long life for the standards of the time, Marshal was buried as a Knight Templar at the age of around 72 shortly after defending the kingdom from a French invasion and uprising from barons at the Battle of Lincoln. His legacy includes enhancements of Chepstow and Pembroke Castle in Wales, the region of the United Kingdom where the Blade Academy is based. In addition, Marshal is one of the key signatures on the monumental Magna Carta document and is an ancestor to various dynasties of the British royal family.

In light of the times he was living in, Marshal’s longevity and life achievements are certainly impressive by many standards. One might be tempted to critique the relative lack of evidence around his marital fidelity due to the biography being endorsed by his own direct, surviving family. This is coupled with the fact that Isabel was only around 17 at the time of the marriage to the much older William (then in his early forties). Age-gap sexual relationships are a taboo in today’s society, and they even feature in many media stories around films such as the recent *Miller’s Girl* (2024) featuring problematic, power-bound relationships, as in professor-student relationships. Billy has once criticised the local youth hanging outside the sports facility in which he leads one of the Academy’s classes, branding the slightly older men (around the age of 30) “perverts” for being interested in what Billy believed to be 17-year-old girls. “What do you have to talk about with a 17 year old?” He asked George in a rhetorical fashion, shaking his head in disgust at the intentions of these local men. Nonetheless, in Marshal’s time, it was common for teenage girls to be wed to older, established men who offered them protection and reputation. As Sara remarked in a recent meeting, “many women died in childbirth during that era.” The young bride was needed for the many heirs that Marshal had – ten in total – some of whom are ancestors to today’s British royal family as well as monarchs of England and Scotland, including Robert the Bruce. It is also interesting to note that Billy does not criticise Marshal for being a feudal overlord – quite possibly as he wasn’t born in the position of first son and heir. This is despite Billy being a Welshman, and Wales being England’s first colony (see Johnes, 2019). Indeed, Marshal occupied much of South Wales and later Ireland, being one of the most powerful landowners in Britain. Billy does not take a modern feminist, nationalist or decolonial lens to understanding his hero, however; instead, he tries to see Marshal through the all-important lens for the warriors of the time: Chivalry.

Nonetheless, it is important to have a grasp of the harsh realities of life in Marshal’s medieval feudal context. In the recent *King Makers* (2023), Venning (2023, pp. 12-13) sheds light on Marshal’s rule over swathes of the Welsh Marches – a borderland between England and Wales that operated as feudal bastion for warlords:

These lordships were thus ‘family principalities’ like the original Welsh states and sub-states in this region, with private armies of tenants raised by and loyal to their lords rather than the king – against whom they often rebelled. They had a complex and bloody history, with family feuds, long-running hatreds, endemic violence, ‘gangster state’ ethics in the case of the worst offenders but a ‘harsh but just’ rule in the case of the most conscientious lords, and a constant theme of autonomist struggle against the central state – involving the personal relationships between these lords and the various English kings.

The lordships were centred on the fortified residences of the rulers, many of which still survive as major regional tourist magnets. The stories of the castles and their rulers is a mixture of clan-like family history and the involvement of the personnel involved in central government politics, and touches on major events such as the civil war of King Stephen’s reign (1135-54), the resistance to King John and the Magna Carta crisis plus the 1216 attempt to replace John with Prince Louis of France [...].

William Marshal’s life spanned those periods, with him having being held as a child hostage by King Stephen, having left his own seal on the Magna Carta and finally defeating the land and naval forces aligned to Prince Louis to defeat the invasion from France.





#### 4.2. Living and teaching as inspired by the Marshal

Billy is so enthralled by Marshal that he went to pay homage to his tomb in Temple Church in London when visiting another HEMA instructor in the capital. “Guess who I’m with...” he wrote to George through a WhatsApp message, adding an image of the stone-carved sarcophagus that is believed to be Marshal’s (but uncertain as he is buried with three of his sons). Billy later told George that he had taken the time in Temple Church to speak directly with Marshal in order to draw on his inspiration to plan for the second semester of the Blade Academy’s syllabus. He explained that this speaking to dead figures was taken from the preparations of Nicola Machiavelli when he drew on imaginary discussions with past writers in order to produce the well-known treatise *The Prince*. A key question for Billy to ponder on was: “What would the Marshal do [in this situation]?” During our regular coffee meetings used to discuss updates on the Blade Academy, Billy often talks of Marshal and how he compares with other figures in the martial arts world. For instance, contrasting Marshal with the more contemporary Bruce Lee, Billy is thankful for Lee’s influence on the martial arts, but noted with a hint of a joke about today’s cancel culture: “It seems he was a bit of a womaniser. He’d be cancelled now.” Of course, it is easier to criticise more recent celebrities such as the late Bruce Lee due to the amount of information on his numerous marital infidelities and untimely death in his (final) mistress Betty Ting Pei’s apartment (see for example, Polly, 2018). Billy is also dismissive of the ethical virtues of Fiore dei Liberi, the fencing master whose fight book is the cornerstone text for the Blade Academy. Billy regards Fiore as an elitist who “wasn’t a nice person” although he does admit admiring his vision for fencing. In addition to Marshal and Fiore, Billy notes that Jacque de la Hache and Giovanni de la Banda Nerra were “wonderful characters.”

Medieval fencing would have been a world for the white European, right-handed, heterosexual, Christian nobleman. In contrast, the Blade Academy has an ethos of inclusivity (as in ethnicity, gender, nationality and sexuality) that is coupled with a healthy degree of humour, as in jokes about the awkwardness of training with left-handed fencers, a group that would have been excluded in medieval times due to associations with clumsiness and devilry (Jennings, 2022). In the HEMA classes, Billy has also noted that Hans Talhoffer ruled that “under no circumstances should this art be taught to the peasantry.” Today, HEMA is taught and practised by a wide variety of practitioners, including those from working-class backgrounds, gender identities (including women, transgender people and those with non-binary identities), different ethnicities, spiritual and religious beliefs and physical capabilities. Following Martinková and Parry’s (2016) taxonomy of martial activities, we might regard the warrior arts of the elite having been restored and repackaged into a more inclusive martial art and combat sport, with Billy stressing the martial art element of HEMA rather than the sporting manifestation that he deems to be a petty arena of “hand sniping” (continually hitting the opposition’s hands) for cheap points – often regarded as “fluff” within the Academy. Indeed, he is keen to verbally stress the *martial* art (focusing on real-world applications he had learned in the likes of Krav Maga) as opposed to the martial *art* (as in the more flamboyant or esoteric Wushu and Taijiquan). His own students are taught to use quality techniques rather than such strategies of flicking their longswords out to get a brief touch of their opponent’s hands and wrists or to gain an “after blow” (hitting one’s opponent after being struck oneself), which would be scored within a typical HEMA tournament’s rule sets.

This desire to live up the standards of high-quality medieval fencing – deep cuts and committed movements – and taking risks are highly regarded by the students in the Academy. “Hand sniping” and glancing blows are frowned upon, and loyalty to Billy and his team of instructors is highly prized. In fact, Billy has awarded students prizes for their dedication to the Academy, which was shown in the fifth-year anniversary dinner and masked ball in recent months. A tall and strapping yet tearful John Edwards – not to be confused with Templar John – was given this accolade in the form of a medal due to his assistance within classes, “not being only focused on his own fencing, but that of his fellow students.” An only child, Billy has created another prize in memory of his late friend Tim, who he regarded as a “brother” (as is Callum, his first student). This sense of fraternity is deeply rooted in the Blade Academy, which is run by Billy and his wife Issie (named after Marshal’s wife Isabel), with assistance from their senior student and the school’s webmaster, Len. Billy summarises this ethos: “People are loyal to you because they sense you are loyal to them.” He fights side-by-side with his students in the unit combat shield wall formations, spars with each of his



students and opens himself to vulnerability when fighting with other HEMA instructors and competitors.

For Billy, William Marshal remains a role model in terms of ethical conduct. “What would the Marshal do in this situation?” is a question that Billy poses to himself not just within the confines of the Templar Church. In terms of the six hallmarks of chivalry that Marshal exuded, Billy does demonstrate such virtues. He remains the most skilled martial artist in his school, and he is continuously working on his techniques, strength, stamina and weaknesses, as in ground fighting (through Brazilian Jiu Jitsu [BJJ] training). Although he runs an independent HEMA school, he remains grateful to his original HEMA instructor in Italy, Angelo, who he often mentions in classes. He rewards his students with prizes and commendations in special events and classes as well as name drops in social media (especially the private Facebook group). He is generous in his regular meetings with students, which involve buying one another cups of coffee (and the occasional brunch). His marriage with Issie appears to act as the bedrock from which the Blade Academy stems, and he often talks of how “I couldn’t do a fraction of what I do without Issie” who possesses the business and financial acumen to run the Academy as a business while also being a respected HEMAist herself, having won gold medals in competitions. Issie’s role involves assisting in the classes and taking beginners through the basic techniques of different fencing traditions while Billy focuses on the intermediate students. She also reminds students about their monthly fees (“subs”) and annual membership and the all-important insurance for this contact-based martial art. Although Billy’s mother is a successful businesswoman with economic resources, he is keen never to borrow from her and form a finance-based, dependency relationship, and he has therefore lived through tough times during precarity. In fact, he told George of periods when people were worried about his gaunt appearance due to him living off one meal a day. Those hard times have thankfully passed, even though he still works part-time elsewhere, but he often reflects on those days that built his resilience.

Like Marshal, Billy is an ambitious man. He has openly stated his desire to run the largest and best HEMA school in Britain and, more recently, to teach internationally. He founded the Academy “to create my own university” after facing a painful rejection of his application to a master’s degree in medieval military history at a prestigious university. With reflections on how he needs to expand, he is seeking new venues for different evenings and day courses while slowly becoming a professional instructor. Billy is still in his mid-thirties, and he has several students who are older than him (such as Templar John and John Edwards), but he aspires to leave a lasting legacy through an Academy that outlives him, being entrusted to loyal students and followers. These students follow Billy’s example as a martial artist, teacher and human being, as Templar John once claimed on the Facebook group: “Where the Marshal leads, others follow.” Billy’s reflections on his visits to William Marshal’s former strongholds mentioned earlier by Venning (2023) (as in the castles protected by the Welsh heritage organisation CADW), shared in an email correspondence, reinforces the importance of such a lasting legacy:

The question about visiting the sites is an interesting one because the world has moved on and it is sometimes difficult to slip into the mindset of what it must have been like to be a part of medieval society. That being said, however, I love visiting Pembroke Castle, the seat of William Marshal’s power. Being there can absolutely hammer home how much this person, who lived over 700 years ago, achieved in his lifetime that his legacy remains to this day.

Billy is still forging his name today, remarking that like the Marshal, who made his name as a knight, tournament champion, earl and magnate, “it is not enough to make your name once.” He is deeply impressed by the fact that Marshal made his name in so many ways during a time before social media and moveable printed type – replying primarily on word of mouth. Centuries on, Marshal’s reputation is still being spread in that fashion, including in HEMA tournaments. Very recently, Billy attended a competition in Italy, which he recounted to George in one of their regular catch-up meetings:

I was shaking at that tournament. I had entered every event [for all weapons categories] and ended up winning a silver and a bronze medal. Issie took a silver as well. One competitor asked me, “Are you crazy? What are you doing that for?”

“I want to be like William Marshal.” I replied.



“William Marshal...who’s that? What’s his HEMA rating [modern HEMA sports ranking system]?” Replied the other fencer.

“He’s dead, but imagine his HEMA rating would be pretty good.” I said.

“Oh, I’m sorry. When did he die?” Asked the man.

“About eight hundred years ago.” Billy smiled.

## 5. Concluding comments

Sport has its rich canon of national and discipline-specific heroes, and so does the world of the martial arts and combat sports, which range from ancient, semi-mythical founders of styles to a nation’s battlefield heroes, renowned Samurai duellists and renegade monks (see Roe, 2022). Heroes can also be more recent figures such as founders of modern-day styles and associations or heroes on the silver screen, as in Bruce Lee. Beyond the potentially nationalistic and perhaps even anti-imperialist purposes behind tales of such figures (Lorge, 2017), these heroes can be very meaningful to real-life, contemporary practitioners of more recently created fighting systems. Moreover, martial arts teachers need to hold their students’ interest in a given subject, and one strategy is to use real-life stories with deep meanings that create a sense of belonging. As with much of martial arts studies, the topic of heroes and role models is an interdisciplinary research problem containing ethical, historical and social questions to address.

This social scientific article stems from an ethnographic study of historical European martial arts (HEMA) that enabled the deep study of everyday interactions and personal meanings pertaining to heroes and role models. More specifically, the paper addresses the use of historical role models in historical European martial arts (HEMA), in order to highlight how figures from the past can be upheld as heroes for modern-day students. This case study is illustrative of a trend in martial arts to provide a blueprint for future interactions between members of the schools. They are also unique through their use of history to form a cohesive community associated with close bonds, even if the history is often far removed from the contexts in which the students live – in this case, 21<sup>st</sup>-century Britain. The Blade Academy made frequent use of William Marshal’s story within class and in social events to reinforce core values of the group. The lead instructor (Billy) feels a sense of affinity for Marshal, who had to establish his reputation in a competitive environment, much like the martial arts sector with its many schools and rivals. Marshal’s embodiment of the ideals of chivalry are expressed by his prowess in the tournament and on the battlefield and his loyalty to his liege lords and wife. Within the ethos of the Blade Academy, the students are not merely being trained to fight for fighting’s sake; they are developing as human beings through martial arts as vehicles for education, including learning about cherished values that we can relate today, including honour, loyalty and courtesy.

Looking beyond HEMA as a case in point, we might begin to imagine studying historical heroes acting as contemporary role models in a wide range of martial arts and combat sports. In Capoeira, for example, the forefathers of the three main styles (the late *mestres* Bimba, Pastinha and Waldemar) are revered not just for their martial arts skills but their vision, creativity and resistance to the continued discrimination against and suffering of the African-Brazilian population. Their fight was a struggle for racial equality, which continues to this day – both in Brazil and overseas. Nationalised (and nationalistic) martial arts might have their own local heroes of the people, while cross-cultural arts might have heroes that speak to today’s practitioners in terms of their virtues of bravery and martial prowess. How do modern-day martial arts exponents select their heroes among the potential canon of exceptional fighters and teachers? Which virtues and values do they hold dear and perhaps devalue in return? What is the influence of historical heroes in terms of martial arts tourism to hallowed sites related to their biographies? How are heroes venerated and debated within and outside the official training environments? These are some of many potential research questions for a new line of research in martial arts studies: Examining the role of historical role models for contemporary students and teachers of the martial arts.

This article is an early step in this new direction. Being based on one local ethnographic project on one martial system and school, this brings a relatively limited ability to extrapolate any further without empirical evidence. Future work on martial arts pedagogies from various cultures



and periods might examine how specific cultural and historical role models are used in a wider variety of styles and institutions, and how the students of those arts perceive the stories of knights, warriors and masters that they hear and read about in and out of their classes. Case studies on a range of styles of individuals would enable scholars and practitioners alike to understand this phenomenon, while survey-based research could allow for a wider picture of the types of role models selected in specific martial arts and cultural / geographical locations. This research could be coupled with an examination of the value systems developed and reinforced within specific martial arts communities. Such work might involve surveying, interviewing and observing martial artists to understand the broad recognition of martial arts heroes, the meaning they hold for the people in question and how they put their stories into action within martial arts and social contexts. Finally, scholars in education might consider the role of historical warriors and heroes in the national curricula of schools in terms beyond national identity and myth, but in the formation of a new generation of citizens with values and behaviours that are concerned with courage, dignity, prowess, loyalty and other such virtues.

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