

**Michael Chidester and Christian Trosclair, *Wiktenauer* (Historical European Martial Arts Alliance, 2009-). Online**

**<http://wiktenauer.com/>.**



*Review*

In his landmark work *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*, Sydney Anglo remarked that ‘both the significance of these [martial] arts, and the fact that they have been largely ignored by historians, are easily established.’ Following a brief but fruitful surge of interest by Victorian swordsmen-scholars such as Alfred Hutton, Richard Burton, and Egerton Castle in the late nineteenth century, the study of historical European martial arts lay fallow for the better part of a century until the invention and development of the Internet allowed previously disconnected amateur practitioners and researchers of these deceased arts to share manuscript fascimiles, transcriptions, and translations between one another, triggering a revival of interest in these arts.

The *Wiktenauer* project, launched in 2009 with sponsorship from the North American ‘Historical European Martial Arts Alliance’, is the latest iteration of this community-based approach to amateur practice and scholarship. The project is an open-access, collaborative online database of translations, transcriptions, and digital scans of medieval and early modern historical martial arts manuscripts, whose stated purpose (according to their home page) is to ‘collect all of the primary and secondary source literature that makes up the text of historical European martial arts research and to organize and present it in a scholarly but accessible format.’ *Wiktenauer* is run and maintained by a community of volunteers led by director Michael Chidester and system administrator Christian Trosclair on an operating budget of \$500 per year. Following a successful fundraising drive in 2014 which raised \$3,611.93, the project appears to be financially secure for the foreseeable future.

*Wiktenauer's* primary function, at least at the time of writing, is to serve as a catalogue and repository of high-quality manuscript scans. Although lacking the extraordinary breadth of comparable databases like *Early English Books Online* and *The Nineteenth Century Collection*, the website makes up for this shortcoming in the exceptional quality of many of its lavishly illustrated manuscripts, allowing researchers to discern the intricacies of its many complex miniatures and even, in one case, to count the number of hair follicles embedded in the parchment. Although the majority of manuscripts available on *Wiktenauer* can be accessed directly through the websites and databases of their host institutions, *Wiktenauer* cuts down significantly on the labour of locating, obtaining, and comparing these manuscripts independently.

The transcriptions and translations which make up most of the remainder of *Wiktenauer* vary drastically in quality. These contributions are provided by amateur practitioners and researchers who often lack formal academic qualifications, even if they have a great deal of experience in this particular field. Although the transcriptions are generally accurate with regards to the words and letters themselves, they sometimes fail to properly represent textual features such as rubrics and marginal notes. The translations, meanwhile, are accorded a grading of A- through D- to reflect their quality and accuracy. At time of writing, there are only two significant passages of A-grade translation, which is defined as a 'polished and professional-grade work containing no clear errors in translation or grammar'. The majority of passages are listed as B-grade translations. Although these translations 'may still have some translation or grammatical errors and may leave many difficult words untranslated', this standard 'represents the standard that [the editors] would like all translations on *Wiktenauer* to meet over the long term', and so are unsuitable for academic use.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to note that the *Wiktenauer* project is not a scholarly resource in the traditional sense of the word. The website is neither peer-reviewed,

institutionally supported, nor competitively funded, and the quality of its transcriptions, translations, and commentaries varies unpredictably. Scholars desiring to use *Wiktenauer* as a resource are encouraged to approach it as a portal to the output of a community of research assistants. The historical European martial arts community has put in tremendous hours of work collecting, collating, and digitising archival and manuscript sources, and offers these sources up to the general public completely free of charge. The transcriptions and translations, though not accurate enough to use for detailed scholarly analysis, provide a very useful rough guide to a text so that scholars can quickly identify important passages that would benefit from a more careful translation in preparation for scholarly analysis.

The *Wiktenauer* project offers an exciting take on the digital open-access movement by providing a unique collaborative environment for amateur practitioners and institutional scholars alike. Provided that scholars recognise and remain aware of the project's limitations and the way in which they can be overcome, a bright future for both *Wiktenauer* and the scholarly study of historical European martial arts awaits.

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