

The Public History of Westeros: *Game of Thrones* Through the Display and Preservation of  
Artifacts and Cultures by Katie Brethorst

“You either win the game of thrones or you die. There is no middle ground.” In George R. R. Martin’s *A Game of Thrones*, Cersei Lannister implies that power is what is sought after once a game of political intrigue is won. However, there is a more obvious kernel of truth in that statement. Should someone win the throne, they are to sit on it with the power they have earned. But what if there was no throne? What if all that came with the prestige was a crown and status empty title? Are the characters now playing a game of crowns instead? Is this crown and status desirable, or is it as intimidating as a throne made from swords and forged together by dragonfire? The physical throne is an icon of the power that has been won by the player. Forged out of a thousand swords of the enemies of Aegon Targaryen, the Iron Throne is a representation of the forging together of the losses of enemies into one powerful motif that can be controlled by the winner. Be it land, armies, gold, or simply the power of ruling a kingdom, the physical manifestation of this is one of the key motivations within the world of Ice and Fire. The novels and show portray stories and invisible power through artifacts and the preservation of public history. Without the display of historical objects and maintaining this history publicly, powerful leaders would not be able to convey the masterfulness of their hierarchy of power.

Certain cultures within the Known World and Essos are interwoven through the maintenance of their artifacts. The statues beneath Winterfell, the large Titan of Braavos, the skulls of dragons beneath the Red Keep, the godswood, and various other objects are showcased. Westeros would have virtually no culture without their public history department preserving them. By examining architecture, statues, oral history, ceremonial objects, expressions of cultural

practices, ethnomusicology, sacred spaces, and symbols of knowledge and wisdom, they reveal how history is conveyed publicly on Planetos.

## **Architecture**

The architecture of Westeros tells a history within itself about how people perceive the reigns of leaders and heroes from their designs. For instance, at the first sighting of the Wall, George R. R. Martin says that, “The largest structure ever built by the hands of man...*This is the end of the world* it seemed to say.”<sup>1</sup> The book goes on to further detail the expanse that is the Wall: “Almost seven hundred feet tall it stood, three times the height of the tallest tower in the stronghold it sheltered.”<sup>2</sup> This is a massive structure that completely dwarfs everything in the vicinity as well as the country. The description of the Wall makes it seem ominous, even stopping the ever-joking Tyrion from speaking. The Wall was meant to keep creatures of the night out, as well as the wildlings, and the size and shape of it speaks to the fear of the people who built it, the First Men: “Somehow Jon knew that if it fell, the world fell with it.”<sup>3</sup> There is something terrifying at the thought of a fortification that gigantic because it stands testament to the fact that there are unspeakable monsters that lay beyond it. The Wall is a piece of public history that tells a story of survival from the First Men. The Wall represents security for Westeros, and portrays past glories of the Night’s Watch. It gives the brothers in black a purpose. It becomes a barometer for the status of the environment, and by the Wall being built up and fortified multiple times, it represents the success of past leaders.

The castles within Westeros also speak to certain periods during their history. Looking specifically at Winterfell, it is built for strength and many men. For instance, the Great Hall is

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<sup>1</sup> Martin, George R. R. *A Game of Thrones*. Mass ed. Series 2011. New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1996, pg. 183..

<sup>2</sup> Martin, *A Game of Thrones*. Pg. 184.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

described as having grey stone walls, several platforms built towards the front of the room as well as a massive fireplace.<sup>4</sup> The room is dim, yet cozy with a fire that can warm an entire hall of men and women gathered for a feast. The platforms separate the lords and ladies from the common folk, yet it can be assumed that those on the bottom level are still included with the festivities which is an excellent way to describe the traditions of the North. All the families of the region participate in the politics and decision making process while the final decision is still left to the Starks. Arranging a room to fit this dynamic clearly expresses the style of politics that have been taking place since the castle and the room were built by Bran the Builder. This showcases the importance of every voice being heard in the North.

Harrenhal also clearly depicts a history all its own. Arya is imprisoned within the damaged walls, and describes it as follows: “Harrenhal’s gatehouse...was as scarred as it was massive, its stones fissured and discolored...Every tower was more grotesque and misshapen than the last, lumpy and runnelled and cracked.”<sup>5</sup> The castle was irreparably damaged by the dragons of Aegon Targaryen, its outward appearance etches that history into stone, showing the charred and destroyed bricks. The visual image people have upon seeing it tells the story. This allows people to ponder the choices of their previous leaders, such as Aegon. The physical structure allows visitors to see the war weapons used in the past, such as dragons. With the disappearance of dragons, the main weapon of great kings vanished, which is not unlike the atomic bomb, seeing as it hasn’t been used since 1945. The recipe for that destruction isn’t lost, but the fear of destruction returning is prevalent within our society, which could also be said about the return of the dragons. Similar to Wildfire in *Game of Thrones*, Greek fire was a flammable substance that

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<sup>4</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Martin, George R. R. *A Clash of Kings*. Mass ed. Series 2011. New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1999, pg. 419

was used in battles. The recipe was lost to time, no one could ever replicate it again, although there are still theories as to how it was made.<sup>6</sup> The physical destruction that dragons and Wildfire wrought on buildings is a historical reminder of their power. Harrenhal is not unlike bombed out buildings in Europe that have been preserved to show the impact of war. With their mangled form, they represent the historical memories of the past. Without these reminders, we would know so much less about the Westerosi civilization and how physical destruction impacted their society and historical narrative.

### **Statues and Artwork**

Statues are often seen as silent sentries that tell the testament of time. They depict societal heroes, people who had led the region through tough times, or pay homage to the gods.

Throughout the world of Ice and Fire, there are statues that plant meaning and tell the history of the country and regions. Within the crypts of Winterfell, statues serve as the grave markers for those long dead: “Their likenesses were carved into stones that sealed their tombs.”<sup>7</sup> These statues serve as the only link for remembering the ancestors that came before them. At one point, Eddard passes the tomb of his father, saying that, “The stonemason had known him well.”<sup>8</sup> This is a way for people to remember their loved ones, as well as pass on the stories of the past to the youth and help the children place a face with a name.

The Titan of Braavos stands as a marker to the entrance of Braavos, guarding the city as a protector against unwanted visitors. Upon learning that the city of Braavos allows for all gods to be worshipped,<sup>9</sup> the Titan could be interpreted as being the protector of any who believe in any

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<sup>6</sup> Larrington, Carolyne. *Winter Is Coming: The Medieval World of Game of Thrones*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2016, pg. 118.

<sup>7</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*. pg. 42-43.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Martin, George R. R. *A Feast for Crows*. Mass ed. Series 2011. New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2005, pg. 126.

god within the walls of Braavos. Any who worship within the city's walls will want protection, and they can look to the giant god that is said to guard the city. This could be said for the beliefs of immigrants who travelled to America, believing that the Statue of Liberty embodied their hopes and dreams for a better life. The Braavosi are fierce, strong people, and it makes sense that their hero be personified in such a fashion. The Titan represents the refugee status of the original Bravossi and their protection.

The Dothraki also keep a collection of statues, however, their statues tell the history of pillagers and plunderers. Upon entering the sacred city of Vaes Dothrak, the Horse Gates are composed of two bronze stallions that form an archway above the entrance to the city.<sup>10</sup> The horses represent the culture of the people who live there. They ride horses, eat horses, will not go where their horses won't, and are even buried with their horses. The statues symbolize the greatness of Dothraki identity. The entrance to the city is littered with statues that have been stolen by the Dothraki. Daenerys notices them as they enter the city: "Plundered gods and stolen heroes loomed to either side of them...Stone kings looked down from their thrones...even their names lost in the mists of times.....Monsters stood in the grass beside the road; black iron dragons with jewels for eyes, roaring griffins, manticores with their barbed tails poised to strike."<sup>11</sup> The mismatched assortment of cultures show how the Dothraki civilization functions. The statues represent conquest rather than what they were originally intended for. They steal from other cities and destroy what they don't think is useful. Their collection is not unlike an eclectic museum that collects artifacts from various places and times. The historical memory of these cities is now only preserved from the Dothraki perspective, and they are no longer in their original historical context. A common challenge for museums is to have the ability to display an

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<sup>10</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 385.

<sup>11</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 386.

artifact without its original context yet still allow for visitors to learn about the piece and its historical background. Other cultures that did this within real history are the Vikings and the Mongols, taking what they wanted and destroying what they didn't desire before travelling to their next location. Both details of these statues and their public context are required for the understanding of where they came from. In the case of Winterfell, we understand the statues' meaning, but with the Dothraki, these statues' history has been reinterpreted, so they have lost their original context.

### **Oral History**

Oral history is a tradition of sharing short stories that people have heard or witnessed, and in today's society, it is usually associated with women who are the storytellers. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, this is also true. Old Nan constantly mentions the historical past throughout the series, albeit it is sometimes exaggerated and supernaturally charged. Some of the instances include when characters are recalling the memories of Old Nan telling a scary story about a place or a thing, such as when Arya arrives at Harrenhal. "Harren the Black had mixed human blood in the mortar...Aegon's dragons had roasted Harren and all his sons within their walls of stone...the stone had melted and flowed like candlewax down the steps and in the windows, glowing a sullen searing red as it sought out Harren where he hid."<sup>12</sup> While this story might have been used to frighten noble children, it holds quite a bit of truth into the history of Westeros. Children learn the historical battles of their country, and the stories teach moral lessons. Clearly this works quite well since Arya remembers them so many years later. Another time is when she describes the Titan of Braavos. "He was a giant as tall as a mountain, and whenever Braavos stood in danger, he would wake with fire in his eyes, his rocky limbs grinding and groaning as he waded out into

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<sup>12</sup> Martin. *A Clash of Kings*, pg. 418-419.

the sea to smash the enemies.”<sup>13</sup> Braavos is a place that will not often be visited by the nobles of Westeros, but it is still important to share the cultures and myths of other countries, such as Essos, so that the children will learn the qualities and traits of another person. These insights show how oral history is a connector to the past, tells the truth, and can change historical memory of a place or event or person over time.

Oral history is important to the narrative because the use of knowledge from these tales assists the Stark children in how they handle their decisions that they make throughout their lives. While Old Nan’s tales hold quite a bit of exaggeration, in some cases she is on the mark with her stories. Her stories are what introduce us to the racist ideas that run through the Westerosi people about wildlings, as well as a bit of how the myths of what lay north of the Wall are perceived. Bran recalls, “The wildlings were cruel men...slavers and slayers and thieves. They consorted with giants and ghouls, stole girl children in the dead of night, and drank blood from polished horns. And their women lay with the Others in the Long Night to sire terrible half-human children.”<sup>14</sup> This introduces us to the prejudice that readers will later see against wildlings, and it introduces readers to Westerosi skepticism toward the Others, a.k.a. the White Walkers. This brief description of an oral history sets the readers’ basic mental outline for the structure of how the culture works in regard to the Wall and the ‘necessity’ of the Night’s Watch. It also shows how people do not always trust oral history as reliable memory. While Old Nan’s tales of the White Walkers are proven correct, their fantastic nature makes listeners skeptical. In a similar way, oral history is understood by historians as a balance between what actually happened in the past and the way that the past events have been colored by the memories of those sharing their tales. Recognizing this reality, George R. R. Martin writes essential historical

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<sup>13</sup> Martin. *A Feast for Crows*, pg. 126.

<sup>14</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 13.

information in an interesting way that doesn't feel like a complete stream of consciousness and makes the reader unsure of oral history's reliability. It also immediately shows the importance of oral history in the series of *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

### **Ceremonial Objects**

Ceremonial objects tell much about the tradition and honor that corresponds with certain regions and characters within the story *A Song of Ice and Fire*. As discussed in the introduction, the throne itself is a ceremonial piece that tells the history of the solidification of the seven kingdoms as well as the molten swords that were forged to create the throne. Another ceremonial piece is Ice, the sword made of Valyrian steel, which is solely brought out for the occasion of beheading someone who has committed a treasonous crime. Ice is first introduced when Eddard Stark beheads a member of the Night's Watch who deserted the Wall.<sup>15</sup> This is extremely important because it shows that this is a custom that calls for a great deal of respect and honor for the person wielding Ice. Later, readers and watchers see Ice again, only this time it is shown in a desecrating fashion, at the beheading of Eddard Stark. Arya is the first to realize that the sword Ser Ilyn Payne is holding is her father's own sword, and it isn't being swung by King Joffrey, who ordered the sentence.<sup>16</sup> In the beginning of the book, Eddard makes it clear that the only honorable death to a prisoner must be carried out by the person who orders the execution.<sup>17</sup> The fact that Joffrey cannot even do this shows the desecration and cruelty of his sentencing Lord Eddard to death, and the fact that he is using the sacred Stark sword in this bastardization of justice only fuels the hatred between the Lannisters and Starks. It seems that another reason for why Ice is so sacred may be that it was created with magic: "It fits a mythical concept of a sword

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<sup>15</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 727

<sup>17</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 17

for heroes. Heroes have special abilities; no ordinary warrior is capable of fighting with such a sword.”<sup>18</sup> This increases the importance of telling its stories because it has a history that is specific to Westeros and how everything functions within the world, and it also strengthens the tragedy at losing a heroic character like Eddard Stark to his own ceremonial sword. In contemporary public history, ceremonial swords are also preserved to commemorate the rank of soldiers. For instance, many Civil War leaders possessed ceremonial samurai swords with them in battle. The reasons for their production were not for battle but to indicate the importance of the individual who wielded them. They stand on the ceremony of gentlemen ideals, calling for a charge with their sword raised, and while it will do little good on the battlefield, it will rally the spark of courage within their men. Ceremonial objects hold an important message within them, sanctifying the customs and beliefs of a culture by giving them a symbol that they can rally around. Within *Game of Thrones*, this is no different, and ceremonial objects are a way to bring comfort and camaraderie amongst those who believe in the symbol.

Dragonglass also has ceremonial purpose. The children of the forest used to gift the brothers of the Night’s Watch one hundred daggers made of dragonglass every year to protect themselves from the Others.<sup>19</sup> This exchange can be seen as a treaty between the two cultures as a way to better join forces against the enemy, which poses a threat to both of them. This is equally as fascinating within the series since Jon Snow requests the same of Daenerys once she lands on Dragonstone so that magical entities, i.e. dragons, and humans can fight against the monstrous White Walkers.<sup>20</sup> This is a ceremonial piece that time and time again has brought

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<sup>18</sup> Polack, Gillian. *Game of Thrones versus History Written in Blood*. Edited by Brian A. Pavlac. Hoboken, NJ, USA: Wiley Blackwell, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Martin. *A Feast for Crows*, pg. 114

<sup>20</sup> Benioff, David, and D. B. Weiss, writers. "Game of Thrones/The Spoils of War." Directed by Matt Shakman. HBO. August 6, 2017.

different people together in a verbal contract that has the possibility to save entire populations from being killed to extinction by an undead army. It is fascinating that something as simple as a piece of obsidian can hold so much power, but then again wars have been fought for precious metals and pressurized coal. Ceremonial pieces hold quite a bit of significance for the world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* because it holds the difference between life and death, and any who learn this history, such as Samwell Tarly who researches this topic quite heavily,<sup>21</sup> understand the complexity of such artifacts.

### **Cultural and Anthropological Expression**

Cultures and anthropology are significant within the show and books, especially because so many cultures come together to create the narrative. When Martin relates simple historical traditions he creates a rich and textured understanding of Westeros. Something as simple as the way hair is fashioned can tell a lot about the region and culture. Dothraki riders cut their hair when they lose a battle, so when Martin goes into illustrious detail of the length of Khal Drogo's braid, it showcases what an immense warrior he is without really having to explain its significance.<sup>22</sup> This symbolic representation can be found within other cultures as well, taking the form of such ceremonious body modifications like tattoos, scarification, adornments placed on certain areas of the body, or war paint during rituals. When looking at India, women who are married place a bindi<sup>23</sup> on their forehead to symbolize that they are already taken. Other symbols could be expressed through the decor of one's residence. For instance, when the Targaryens occupied the Red Keep, the Great Hall held skulls of dragons, ranging from Balerion the dread, the largest who is said to be able to swallow aurochs<sup>24</sup> whole, to a skull no larger than the size of

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<sup>21</sup> Martin. *A Feast for Crows*, pg. 114

<sup>22</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 37

<sup>23</sup> A decorative mark, usually red, worn by Indian women who are married.

<sup>24</sup> A type of wild cattle, resembles a steer.

a mastiff skull.<sup>25</sup> These were the skulls of creatures that had been able to conquer the Known World, and their bones represented the power that lay behind them. It also showed the history of the family that had ridden them, associating the Targaryens with a terrifying power to anyone who entered the room. This is similar to game hunters who stuff their trophies so that all may see what terrifying creatures they were able to kill. When people interpret prowess, they are more likely to respect the person who is displaying their trophies, as well as fear what they are capable of doing. This is similar within the Targaryen family and it is displayed prominently within their throne room. When Robert Baratheon seizes the crown, the dragon skulls are the first things to go, and it is decorated with banners and tapestries to better represent the new king by depicting his triumphs rather than the Targaryens.<sup>26</sup> The cultural symbolism that can be found within objects such as these speak to the people about the leaders who rule from the Iron Throne.

Customs are also sanctified within the cultures of Westeros and Essos, showing the customs of the people who follow them. Should there be any array of sacrilege committed, however, it is one of the highest dishonors, and it could lead to one's very painful and humiliating death. For instance, it is mentioned throughout the books that guest rite is incredibly important to the families in Westeros. "Once you have eaten of his bread and salt, you have the guest right, and the laws of hospitality protect you under his roof."<sup>27</sup> This belief specifies that despite one's differences, there shall be peace while the guest sleeps in beds under the roof of the host. There are also special places in hell for those who disregard guest right, with children's stories to warn them of the consequences of breaking these oaths. Bran tells the story of the Rat

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<sup>25</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 122

<sup>26</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 121

<sup>27</sup> Martin. *A Storm of Swords*, pg. 671

Cook who killed the son of a king and fed the flesh of the boy to his father.<sup>28</sup> The gods cursed the cook and turned him into a rat, forcing him to feed on his young forever.<sup>29</sup> The gods find punishment that is seen as equal to the horrific crime of breaking guest right, and within the show, a similar fate awaits Walder Frey when Arya feeds him a pie made out of his children before she kills him in the same manner he killed her brother and mother.<sup>30</sup> This clearly shows the impact that breaking a code of honor has for those who should be following it. It shows the public history of the culture, maintaining that they prefer peace and trying to work out differences diplomatically instead of betraying their honored guests.

A similar custom occurs across the sea in the city of Vaes Dothrak, the heart of Dothraki culture. The rule states that no weapons shall be brandished and no blood shall be shed within the city, and all khalasars may be safe while they reside within the city limits.<sup>31</sup> This resembles that of the guest right, and even on a separate continent the rules of hospitality are sacred. When Viserys breaks this rule by brandishing a weapon during a ceremony for the khal's son, bringing upon his bloodless death by being crowned with molten gold.<sup>32</sup> These customs show the importance of being honorable and not taking life while residing in one's home. It shows respect for life and that there are better ways to handle issues than fighting, especially if they are dignified enough to hear out the opinions of their enemies. These are known rules that speak for a culture, and they are orally distributed so that all know the rules that encompass their culture, better depicting where their values lie. Cultural expression is vital to life within Westeros,

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<sup>28</sup> Benioff, David, and D. B. Weiss, writers. "Game of Thrones/Mhysa." Directed by David Nutter. HBO. June 9, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Benioff, David, and D. B. Weiss, writers. "Game of Thrones/The Winds of Winter." Directed by Miguel Sapochnik. HBO. June 26, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 390

<sup>32</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 498-500

creating perceptions of power, saving lives by birthright, and cursing those who do not heed the warning that comes with obeying their cultural rules. Within the series, it is important to heed the expressions of other cultures, else the game of thrones will be lost and you will be dead.

### **Ethnomusicology History**

One of the ways that early storytellers captured the tales, myths, and histories of a culture was by creating songs to encapsulate them. Often bards and minstrels performed at courts to help reestablish the history and power of the royal family, depicting the victories they've won and sing praises of heroes that helped found their country. This is similar within the world of Ice and Fire. These songs tell of the society and how it views certain persons within it. One of the first mentions of songs comes from Sansa during the tourney held in her father's honor: "They watched the heroes of a hundred songs ride forth, each more fabulous than the last."<sup>33</sup> The honor and glory that come with being a knight is portrayed in a romanticized way, making young maidens such as Sansa believe that they are the epitome of grace and valor, fighting for the honor of the girls at home. This is similarly portrayed throughout history, making the mythical White Knight a trope of perfection throughout literature and music of the times. To this day girls are told through media and society to wait for a knight in shining armor to save them, which reinforces the idealistic man who wears shiny metal and holds up a code of honor. While this is not the worst thing to strive for, it is hardly realistic and, like Sansa, it is all too soon that the men deemed 'knights' usually turn out to be pompous, bloodthirsty and power hungry, such as Ser Gregor Clegane. This depicts the culture of idealizing maidens who are beautiful enough to exist within sung words, and the respectability that comes from knighthood. The culture that forms around this is picturesque, yet sets up the listeners for the disappointment of reality.

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<sup>33</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 293

Historical tellings happen through song and when a society is fading out of historical memory, can be one of the only surviving records of what had happened. Battles, persons of interest, and historical events can all take place within the songs, portraying the history in a way that is accessible to all who hear. In one instance within the story, the depiction of the battle of the Reach is portrayed through song. When all the dragons are unleashed upon the battlefield, the singers call it the Field of Fire and tell of the four thousand men that burned that day.<sup>34</sup> People of the country can now learn of the great victory of Aegon Targaryen, and can better visualize the carnage of the battle. This plays an important part within historical memory, and can often be the only way peasants know what is happening within their own country. The Lannister song also has a song that depicts their power and ability to conquer. ‘The Rains of Castamere’ portrays a Lannister victory over a nobleman who doubted their strength, saying that they essentially ended his reign.<sup>35</sup> “And so he spoke, and so he spoke, that lord of Castamere, But now the rains weep o’er his hall, with no one there to hear.”<sup>36</sup> This is a song that clearly portrays their strength and is a song that they are proud of. It is apparently played quite often, seeing how Olenna Tyrell comments on it during Tyrion and Sansa’s wedding feast: “I do so hope he plays us ‘The Rains of Castamere.’ It has been an hour, I’ve forgotten how it goes.”<sup>37</sup> This song later makes an appearance during the Red Wedding, letting the audience know that something disastrous is about to happen when Lord Frey has it played.<sup>38</sup> This symbolizes the Frey’s treason to the Starks, letting everyone know that their allegiance now lies with the Lannisters. Catelyn knows the song without having any words sung,<sup>39</sup> which shows just how widespread this song heralding the

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<sup>34</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 123

<sup>35</sup> Martin. *A Storm of Swords*, pg. 538

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Martin. *A Storm of Swords*, pg. 826

<sup>38</sup> Martin. *A Storm of Swords*, pg. 701

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Lannisters has reached, and the implications it entails. Songs depict histories that drive the stories of Westeros, and the story within the songs can help drive the stories, as well as help track the historical events of a country. Bards are the true historians of medieval times, and knowing the songs is sometimes the only way to know what happened within history, as well as the way society felt about these events.

## **Sacred Spaces**

Sacred spaces are one of the most protected areas within the series, and they express what is precious to those who take part in the beliefs of the culture. Sacred spaces can include religious areas, areas of knowledge, and cities. For instance, religious instances seem to be the most common, with places that are associated with godswood being particularly sacred based on their origins. The faces within the godswood were supposedly carved by the Children of the Forest in the time before the First Men, and it is a particularly serene area for the characters in the story to go and reflect. At Winterfell, when Eddard Stark is troubled by something in his life, he retreats to the godswood to find peace, such as when he beheads a young man who abandoned the Night's Watch: "Whenever he took a man's life, afterward he would seek the quiet of the godswood."<sup>40</sup> It is a place of solace for one to reflect on choices made in the still pools of water beneath the godswood tree, and Ned Stark takes particular advantage of the quiet place to think. With the added history of the trees being created by mythological beings thousands of years prior, it has a particular meaning for Eddard to retreat to the same space that his ancestors before him went for comfort. It can be interpreted that these great men that history remembers went through similar trials as him, and it could be that Ned is comforted by the past because he is not the only one who has had to make difficult decisions. Sansa also finds solace at a godswood

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<sup>40</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 22

when she is held captive in King's Landing. It is the only place she can be left alone: "You could feel the old gods watching with a thousand unseen eyes."<sup>41</sup> This place connects her to her father and all the Starks before her, giving her a small taste of peace while being held hostage. Jon Snow, when taking his sacred vows for the Night's Watch, opts to say them within a grove of weirwoods beyond the Wall, feeling as though he connects with his Stark ancestry better because of it.<sup>42</sup> The feeling of peace that surrounds these sacred spaces speaks to how much it means to the people who follow certain religious sects. To find peace and support beneath the boughs of a tree older than the country itself is a sacred space indeed.

The Sept of Baelor is another sacred space, yielding its power to the Seven. It is a temple where most major events happen within a royal family, including weddings, funerals, and trials during the reign of the High Sparrow. Beneath the eyes of the Seven, people are wed, dead, or beheaded, and the sanctity that follows is almost tainted when the religious practices becomes too extreme. For instance, Joffrey is married to Margaery Tyrell beneath its roof, yet he was sadistic and cruel and mad, and within a few days after his wedding, his funeral takes place there.<sup>43</sup> It seems that the Seven do not take pity on even a king when he is disrespectful and sadistic towards others. Ned does not follow the Seven, yet he tries to make his claim against Joffrey, he is later beheaded on the steps of the Sept.<sup>44</sup> The sept is to watch out for its followers at the most importance stages of their lives, from birth, to their wedding, and in death, yet when the laws of the Seven are twisted, the power of the Sept of Baelor goes up in flames. To end the tyrannical and radical zealot that is the High Sparrow and everyone she hates, she implodes the

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<sup>41</sup> Martin. *A Clash of Kings*, pg. 283

<sup>42</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 517

<sup>43</sup> Benioff, David, and D. B. Weiss, writers. "Game of Thrones/The Lion and the Rose/Breaker of Chains." Directed by Alex Graves. HBO. April 13 & 20, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 727

Sept of Baelor with Wildfire during the trial of the Tyrells.<sup>45</sup> The sanctity of the Sept had been tarnished, so the Queen no longer believed in the gods and their power. This is a stark contrast to earlier within the series when she worried for her immortal soul beneath the eyes of the Seven when she defiles the sanctity of the sept when she has sex with Jaime atop the altar.<sup>46</sup> With sacred places come sacred rules, and when they are broken, all sanctity is lost. This is also true with the rules that surround Vaes Dothrak and their mentality that the city is the home in which they are all one herd.<sup>47</sup> To break these codes of honor results in one's death. Sacred spaces are important within the world of Ice and Fire, and to commit sacrilege against these areas can result in death or damnation by the gods. It speaks of the culture that follows its rules, and it shows the life or death matter of following the rules in that sacred area. With the destruction of certain areas that were once deemed sacred, it shows the end of an era for that generation and culture.

### **Symbols of Knowledge and Wisdom**

Within the world of Ice and Fire, there are few places that can be deemed worthy of academics of the country. The ones that there are, however, are almost sacred in their own right, but only men worthy of the attempt at gaining wisdom may enter. It speaks highly of those willing to record the everyday history of a country, make decisions based on the series of events that lead to it, as well as maintain the history that has already been recorded. The number one example of this sort of person within the series are the maesters. Maesters train at the Citadel to become an expert on most fields of expertise, including history, literature, herbicology, medicine, environmental studies, and decision making. Once they leave the Citadel, they usually work for a specific house that needs a maester. All maesters train at Oldtown, studying in the

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<sup>45</sup> Benioff, David, and D. B. Weiss, writers. "Game of Thrones/The Winds of Winter." Directed by Miguel Sapochnik. HBO. June 26, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Martin. *A Storm of Swords*, pg. 851

<sup>47</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 390

library day in and out so that they may serve their houses well. They wear links that they ‘forge’ once they master a specific subject, such as black iron for mastering ravenry,<sup>48</sup> Valyrian steel for mastering the higher mysteries,<sup>49</sup> and silver for medicine.<sup>50</sup> Once they master it, they are given a link by the Citadel to symbolize their knowledge. They are never to take off their chains, not even while sleeping, else they will be shamed and considered no longer a maester. This is the supreme symbol of knowledge of wisdom throughout the land, and anyone who sees a chain of a variety of metal links will immediately be able to recognize the authority of the person wearing it.

Libraries are also supreme symbols of knowledge, and the one that symbolizes all knowledge is in Oldtown. Samwell Tarly leaves the Wall to study and become a maester, and he is bowled over by the sight of the library.<sup>51</sup> There are thousands of books, ranging from historical books to books about medicine, in which Sam learns how to cure Jorah Mormont when he arrives with greyscale.<sup>52</sup> This is the ultimate sign of wisdom and learning is to be able to enter the library and find a book on practically every subject, every ruler, and every maester that ever came before. Samwell could have stayed to learn everything he could so that he could have become a maester, but he left so that he could protect Jon and those he cared about at the Wall. Maesters are supremely intelligent, but they are not compassionate, which seems to be the main reason Samwell Tarly left because they could not see anything different with the troubling times than the times before, not caring for the lives of those who would be lost. Samwell does care, as

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<sup>48</sup> Martin. *A Feast for Crows*, pg. 4

<sup>49</sup> Martin. *A Feast for Crows*, pg. 12

<sup>50</sup> Martin. *A Game of Thrones*, pg. 192

<sup>51</sup> Benioff, David, and D. B. Weiss, writers. "Game of Thrones/The Winds of Winter." Directed by Miguel Sapochnik. HBO. June 26, 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Benioff, David, and D. B. Weiss, writers. "Game of Thrones/Stormborn." Directed by Mark Mylod. HBO. July 23, 2017.

he cared for the life of Jorah Mormont, thus saving one of the influential characters of the series. While intelligence and wisdom is highly regarded, it cannot be the only attributes to make a good leader and character. People tend to stand up for Sam because he is intelligent, as well as loyal and compassionate. These are attributes that cannot be learned at the Citadel, and while areas of knowledge are respected, they are not as all-encompassing as one might think. However, public history is encapsulated within, and this is the only place that keeps a detailed account of the complete history of Westeros and before, and anyone—bastard or royalty—can go to learn about the past that created the culture and country that they know.

## **Conclusion**

Public history is everywhere within the world of Ice and Fire and *Game of Thrones*. Everyday people adhere to it when they sing a drinking song about some poor king who got doused in dragon flames, or they preserve it by keeping a statue or a relic of something long faded from historical memory. People of the land preserve the history through maesters and songs, but they also adhere to it in their everyday lives, choosing what decisions they are to make, and which path leads to devastation. Those who keep the history are among the utmost respected, yet those who desecrate it are among those damned to the lowest levels of hell. The public history of Westeros is encapsulated within every aspect of the world that George R. R. Martin has created, stories within the story that make sense of what the characters are going through. Without the history, there would be no story, and it is amazing in itself at how deep the history of this fictional world delves. Readers can learn the culture from the stories the characters tell their children. They can feel the sense of warning when a certain song is played, and they can understand the punishments of characters when they disregard the rules of sacred areas. The power of the seven kingdoms is wrought through the public history and the preservation of

artifacts that manifest within the overarching story, creating a more complex, realistic, and expansive world for readers to delve into.