

*The following is a re-print of a short article prepared for publication within "Chronicle", the in-house publication of Regia Anglorum. It is offered here as food for thought for all Living History enthusiasts of all periods as it covers wider ranging issues that I feel all re-enactors should at least consider when thinking about what it is their own society or group are actually aiming to represent.*

The Wirhalh Skip Felag held their annual Blod Monath Feast recently where I had been asked to give a talk about making "more authentic" costume. There were several group leaders there from various other local Regia groups all of whom declared I "had" to write up the introduction to this talk and get it published in Chronicle. I don't feel my words were quite as earth shatteringly important as all that, but nevertheless, as requested here's a summary of the introduction to that much longer talk.

I would hope most re-enactors, irrespective of the period or people they portray could distinguish between accuracy and authenticity. We should all know that however accurately we can replicate any specific garment, artefact or activity described in a period source or archaeological journal, it will only be authentic to the context in which it can be reliably provenanced. Two different reproductions may both be very accurate replicas from the chosen period, but neither may have a proven connection to the specific subject an individual may be trying to recreate. In short authenticity comes not just from accurately replicating a series of individual objects or pieces of clothing, but in establishing proof that they can all be reliably associated with each other within the specific time, place, subject, activity or social class being portrayed. In acknowledgement of this Regia tries to operate a policy of ensuring that anything we reproduce is not based upon a single piece of evidence, but is backed up by at least three different published sources in the hope that this may enable us to focus more on the representative and avoid wide spread reproduction of rare or unusual finds. However, despite the best intentions of such a policy I feel it will be inherently biased towards the rare and unusual it sets out to avoid because of the very nature of how we are forced to research our subject.

It is a well recognised part of human nature that we only tend to record the unusual so as to better explain or describe it to those who may be unfamiliar with it. If something is common place and familiar, it tends not to be recorded, the assumption being we all know about it already. Sadly though, we can't and never will know everything that was known or thought by the people who record the information we read. This is certainly true of period manuscripts where the activities of the nobility, clergy and military leaders feature far more frequently than the chance mention of a ploughman in a field or a wood cutter chopping trees. If we base our research largely on period documentation and illustrations then we are going to be very biased in favour of elite minority groups to the exclusion of the ordinary folk. For this reason, most people prefer to rely on archaeological evidence for their research, with little appreciation these publications can be equally biased in favour of the rare and unusual.

Now for those that don't know me, many years ago I qualified as an archaeological conservator and in the past I have been employed by English Heritage, York Archaeological Trust and several other organisations where I've been fortunate enough to work alongside some of the countries leading specialists in differing fields of expertise. I therefore feel I can talk, with at least a little authority, on the way archaeology "works", or more precisely "fails to work" to our benefit.

Everybody would acknowledge that British Archaeology is woefully under-funded, and that as such, negative findings or simply evidence which reinforces existing theories struggles to get the funding necessary to be published. You can therefore be sure it's a fairly safe bet that if you are reading about it in a journal or specialist publication it's because it's something rare or unexpected. It is exceptionally difficult to form any appreciation of what was common or typical of the period based upon what's published. To do this you need to study the vast majority of "ordinary" stuff that doesn't get published. Gaining access to this material however, is exceptionally difficult without friends "in the business". Nevertheless it's well worth trying to build relationships with museum curators, county archaeologists and others who may have a better and more up to date idea of the day to day state of current archaeology. Keep in mind that even the rare and exciting stuff that does get published can take years to make it to publication. How long ago were the Oseberg or Sutton Hoo excavations and there's still only a tiny fraction of the best bits of that material which features in accessible publications.

So when reading archaeological publications you need to constantly ask yourself "why has this been published in preference to the numerous other bits of research lingering in dusty filing cabinets or on inaccessible old data bases?" We need to try work out all the things we aren't being told. If a document about the finds from a particular excavation opens with the statement, "Of the 42 graves excavated only two had any grave goods..." What this instantly tells us is that the document is about to describe something which 95% of this population potentially didn't own. We need to try and find out if there was something special about the ground conditions of these two specific burials which preserved the grave goods indicating similar items may have perished in other graves. Or if the whole site was of a similar composition we can therefore conclude the other graves possibly didn't have such items in the first place. However, as said previously negative findings rarely get the funding they need to publish, and this potentially more important aspect of research goes un-mentioned in favour of cataloguing the things we find rather than discussing the reasons behind those we fail to find.

Most archaeologists are familiar with the way funding is awarded and know how to "hype up" certain points to get the finances they do need to publish their work. When reading archaeological publications we need to learn to read between the lines and extract the truth rather than accept at face value everything we are told. Much like a Tabloid newspaper is good at attention grabbing headlines, but broadsheets give us a few more facts. Then opening précis are designed to attract attention

(and funding), but you must wade through all the appendixes to get at whatever truth is to be communicated. We've all heard the quote "There are lies, damn lies and statistics." The best way to make any report sound more impressive is to initially quote some unexpected statistics to grab people's attention.

A classic examples of this is a section from The York Archaeological Trust's publication on the textile finds from Coppergate written by Penny Walton. I had the good fortune, for a short while at least, to share a work bench with her in the labs at York, so in some small way I was able to look over my shoulder and see the sort of work actually being done. Penny's work on early medieval dye analysis is well respected and she is justifiably regarded as the "big name" in this field of study, but when this work was first started the actual scientific testing was being done by somebody else working on her behalf. The scientist who did much of the early analysis provided a brief summary of their methodology for publication alongside Penny's more in depth evaluation of this investigation. One of the classic lines from this brief statement was that "...two thirds of the textiles tested proved to be coloured." In a report about dye analysis this is quite a claim and something re-enactors have jumped upon to justify wearing all the colourful clothes we love. Most re-enactors need little excuse to dress up, but how many willingly dress down?

Anyway, if we slowly work through all the statistical evidence included in the appendixes of this report we can see just what this claim is based upon. Firstly we will note that although the Coppergate excavations are noted as being primarily Anglo-Scandinavian in date, not all the finds tested were from this one excavation and some run well into the middle-ages. Furthermore, it was not possible to exhaustively test all the textile finds; the linens were too degraded to test, and much of the wool was in a similar state. Only the luxury imported silks survived well enough to be able to test the majority of them, many of which were fine ribbons, nearly all of which proved to be dyed. Now some might argue that we should therefore be using far more colourful silk ribbon, but it seems more plausible to argue that a sample based heavily on dyed foreign silk ribbons is perhaps not representative of normal or everyday life in the period we study.

Look deeper into the statistics and you find that even if we exclude all the foreign silks, the definition "coloured" also includes those wools that were naturally pigmented, and so would have been the colours of period sheep breeds; i.e. pale browns and greys, but not dyed to change their colour. If we choose we can form a somewhat different conclusion from the same statistical data. We could claim that in what was clearly a high status site in a very wealthy trading port less than half the woollen textiles from our particular period of interest showed evidence of dyeing them to change their colour.

Now if you wanted to claim that "less than half" is still a significant quantity of dyed wool and you still want to use this data to support the notion that colourful dyed costume was commonplace, consider the presence of huge, industrial quantities, of waste madder on the site which almost everyone has interpreted

as being indicative of the site being used as a professional dye house. So does the presence of some dyed textiles in a professional dyer's workshop in a major trading port really tell us anything about how common dyed clothing was amongst the rural populace that formed the bulk of the population? So whilst we do know that people of this period loved colourful clothing, and we do have lots of evidence for it, this is subtly different to saying we have evidence for lots of it or that everyone was wearing it. In wearing lots of colourful clothing, are we as historical re-enactors being authentic to the past, or are we just re-creating lots of accurate copies of a few well publicised finds?

Another word of warning regarding interpreting archaeology is a bit of government legislation which has gone through many variations and changes but is, I believe, still known as PPG16 (Planning and Policy Guideline 16) This basically states that as part of any planning application, whether it be to put up a small conservatory on the back of your house, or to spend billions on an inner-city re-development you must satisfy the county archaeologist that you will not destroy anything of historic significance. They have the right to force you to undertake trial archaeological excavations to prove the ground is clear, and in the event of anything significant being found they can force developers to fund more major excavations. The upside of this is that there is now more archaeology being undertaken in this country than at any point before. The down side is that in the past archaeology was always undertaken by professional academics looking to find things to answer specific questions. Now an increasing proportion of excavation work is undertaken by under qualified university drop-outs being unofficially offered "back-handers" and "cash incentives" to find nothing and clear off home. Finds from such rescue archaeology usually have to have a real wow factor before they are brought to the attention of the county archaeologist and must be of national significance for them to be published in a widely accessible format. So whilst we may be getting to read about more and more archaeology from urban sites, and whilst the best bits may be occupying more and more hours of TV documentaries we aren't getting to find out about the mundane, mainstream stuff that should form a core understanding of what was once common in a largely rural nation.

Having said all that, it is difficult to know what to recommend in terms of making our research more relevant and identifying what was actually commonplace. We must acknowledge that most of us aren't professionals in this field and can't go directly to unpublished finds lists, or rummage through museum stores to find out for ourselves just what is being dug out of the ground. We can't always talk to the people there in the muddy holes and find out what is being found on a regular basis. We can however, cast a more sceptical and knowing eye over the reports we do read, and "interpret" what is said rather than simply reproduce it as stated. The experts and specialists talk about what they can get funding for, if they didn't they'd be working behind supermarket check-outs, or in call centres (and probably earning more). Don't ever assume because lots of professionals talk or write about something that is was actually common, the opposite is far more likely to be true.

A better idea of how commonly certain finds are recovered, at least in terms of metal dress accessories like buckles, brooches and pins is to look at the prices metal detectorist's finds fetch on the open market. If a single silver or gold brooch is heavily featured with full colour illustrations in five different archaeological publications this doesn't make it common, it merely raises our awareness of a rare find. If five different metal detectorists can each sell you a genuine period example for under thirty quid it might just have been common in the past, but how well publicised are such commonplace finds?

One of the best, yet least used methods to understand what was common in any one particular place or time, is to look to other periods of history or other cultures of the same period and try chart an evolution of ideas and use this to fill in gaps in your own period of interest. We may know far more about other better documented or recorded periods of history than we do the one we are seeking to replicate. We can learn an awful lot about any one period from those which preceded or followed it. We can also deduce a lot on the basis that the commonplace and normal were presumably, to a large extent, the easiest and simplest solutions to daily problems and needs which have remained little changed over hundreds of years.

We must however judge the notion of simple or easy based on a period mindset, or as close to this as we believe we can achieve. Modern society is very transient and despite living in large crowded cities and towns we tend to lead isolated and private lives where we travel long distances to get to work and where we barely know our neighbours. Everything we require for a comfortable lifestyle can be bought cheaply and delivered to the door leaving us time and disposable income to lavish on foreign travel or simply "going out". In such a mobile, busy society meeting, or at least engaging with strangers has become a daily activity and so we place great importance on creating a good first impression. If we go back in time the vast majority of the population lived in small, stable, self sufficient rural communities where everybody had to work in close proximity with their neighbours simply to provide each other with the basic necessities of life. In such circumstances first impressions probably didn't matter when everybody had probably grown up together and knew each other's lives as well as their own.

If you were rich and powerful then impressing strangers may have been an important part of maintaining your wealth and status, and for this reason fashion and elaborate costume or jewellery may have been relevant to you. For the 90% or more of the population at the other end of the social spectrum who would rarely travel beyond the boundaries of their own small village, clothing which keeps you warm, dry and which can be quickly and cheaply made is all that matters. This means simple weaves, un-dyed yarns, patching, darning and the "passing on" of old clothes. These were ideas which all remained common place in rural Britain up until the time of World War I. Only in the last two or three generations have ideas about clothing and fashion changed so radically for us to now regard brand new affordable colourful clothing as ordinary rather than an expensive luxury.

With these thoughts in mind The Skip Felag have decided to try and make a real focus upon giving a more authentic portrayal of the day to day and ordinary, rather than the rich and wealthy. We have decided as a group that we are going to all try and stick to un-dyed naturally pigmented clothing and minimal dress accessories, so that collectively as a group we may be that little bit more authentic, rather than each being an independent re-enactor whom may be accurate only as separate individuals. By working some sort of informal rota we'll all get our chance to show off or parade in our finery, and hopefully when set against a back drop of the ordinary masses in their un-dyed pale browns and greys such rich colourful costume and jewellery should actually stand out as being something rare and expensive, rather than being the norm. It's going to take a lot of goodwill on everyone's behalf and it's an experiment that may still fall flat on its face but it's got to be worth trying. So let's hope that with time this might bring about a small change in attitudes so as to redefine the fashions of our group towards the truest meaning of the word fashion; i.e. "that which is (or was) most commonplace", rather than that which is most desired or prominently promoted.

Interpreting evidence to decide what was once common around a thousand years ago will always be subjective and no two people will ever agree entirely. However, until more people begin to understand the nature of the evidence we have to work with, and recognise that what we usually get to find out about is not the ordinary representative material, but rather the most unusual or attractive examples, I don't believe we can hold any kind of meaningful debate about what we as a group should be aiming to portray. I doubt that anything I have written will have answered any particular questions or resolved any relevant issues, but you can't broaden your level of understanding until you first broaden your level of ignorance. Without an element of doubt or uncertainty you will never be open to new ideas. If I've left people with a few new questions to ask and shaken a few popular misconceptions then maybe I might just have acted as a catalyst for promoting some fresh thinking and new debate.

*Although the above was notionally written for an audience interested in 9th-11th costume I feel the distinction between accuracy and authenticity is one of relevance to all areas of re-enactment and all periods of living history presentation. As standards in re-enactment are driven ever forward by a desire to more closely replicate the lives of our ancestors I think we have a need to re-question exactly what it is we are trying to portray and whether or not we are actually achieving that? Do we still feel it is acceptable to simply present an abstract collection of objects, artefacts and activities, each accurately copied from the most accessible sources of reference? Or should we now start questioning how broadly applicable those references are, and how biased towards certain contexts, locations or classes of society our presentations may actually be when we collectively bring all these "accurate" re-creations together?*