

# WIRHALH SKIP FELAGR



Viking & Anglo Saxon Living History

## What price “Authenticity”?

*The following is a re-print of a short article written by the Skip Felagr’s authenticity officer Aidan Campbell and published in the international reenactment magazine Skirmish.*

Courting controversy is not something I do intentionally, although the following may be akin to repeatedly poking a hornet’s nest with a big stick. However, complacency is not good for anyone, and to encourage debate it is occasionally useful to shout out loud the things others mutter behind closed doors. As such I ask if a wide spread drive for improved “authenticity” is inadvertently costing the hobby the historical accuracy it set out to improve?

It is undoubtedly true that over the last forty years costumed historical interpretation has changed from being a minority professional activity utilised by a limited number of museums, to a widely accepted recreational pastime for thousands. You could debate whether such a transition must inevitably result in lowered academic credibility, but nevertheless the word “authenticity” entered the re-enactors vocabulary long ago and is something more of us are spending our hard earned cash on trying to improve. Consequently a large commercial market has evolved producing all manner of so-called “replica” goods for recreational re-enactment, but does spending more on our costume and equipment actually guarantee improvements in authenticity?

Well, of course spending more doesn’t guarantee improvement. It depends on the knowledge, skill and integrity of the people we buy from, along with our own understanding and expectations. Obviously traders can only make money out of producing what their customers will actually buy, and the reality is no consumer knows everything about everything, nobody has a limitless budget and to some degree modern aesthetics and personal tastes bias all our judgement of the replicas we buy. So how much do different traders compromise authenticity in order to make saleable goods, and do we as consumers know enough to recognise those compromises? Do we accept every trader’s expertise if their recommendations contradict our own expectations or desires? If we don’t know what is appropriate do we simply follow the crowd and purchase what we see other re-enactors already using, or do we walk away and actually do some research? In short do we genuinely want to buy more authentic goods, or do we simply want others, even if ill informed, to keep reassuring us that the goods we are buying are more authentic?

Almost every re-enactor, group and manufacturer now claims to take pride in their authenticity, and as such it has become a meaningless cliché. Nobody sets out to get things wrong but attitudes regarding what constitutes appropriate levels of research, along with the degree to which compromises are tolerated vary enormously. Many use the term “fully authentic” for something which meets all of their understanding, whilst others see it as a phrase used only by those whose understanding is too limited to recognise that compromise is an inevitable part of this hobby. I’ve even come across individuals who derisively refer to people who “dress up like re-enactors” as a means of criticising those whose costume and equipment reflects all the blatant misconceptions and compromises now common in our hobby. We must also distinguish between accuracy and authenticity; it is relatively easy to take a detailed reference source and accurately copy a single artefact or item of clothing but does this make it authentic? Context and use are just as important as constructional accuracy and so even if a replica is a beautifully crafted and expensive item we’d love to own, the more authentic choice may be to do without.

Too many re-enactors and traders derive their understanding of what constitutes authentic merely from copying others around them. Much like a game of Chinese whispers errors creep in and get compounded each time they are copied. Prior to the rapid growth of the internet, we had to research directly from period artefacts or specialist publications written by academic experts. Now anybody with a computer can make their thoughts accessible to the world at the push of a button, enabling huge amounts of information to circulate rapidly with no form of quality control. It's no surprise that there is ever increasing conformity of attitudes, standards and equipment amongst re-enactment groups around the globe for it is now so easy to base your own portrayal of the past solely on what other re-enactors have already done. Consequently many "facts" about the past that re-enactors unquestioningly continue to promote as authentic can only be traced back as far as the origins of a particular re-enactment society and the assumptions their founding members made. Sadly once an idea becomes broadly ingrained and accepted as commonplace no-one ever seems to bother to go back and actually verify if it is supported by evidence.

It's a very bold trader who, having done research which contradicts the trends established by the most active groups portraying a particular period, will actually change their products. As a case in point I've a couple of friends who both make a living out of making replica historic footwear. I've raised issues with each of them about their shoes only to be told that although they agree with my concerns, the corrected shoes wouldn't conform with what everybody in a particularly prominent society wears. As such the majority of their customers won't actually buy the more authentic versions as they say they look wrong! Conversely I know of a talented metalworker who created an original piece of work in a loosely period style he thought would get noticed as a bit different. To this day he won't be drawn on whether or not it was actually a deliberate experiment, but because of his reputation for quality work it was inevitably copied, quite a lot actually. Consequently in its increasingly modified variations you can chart the spread of this design as it has evolved to become commonplace among most traders now supplying this particular period, with many listing their own interpretations as "authentic" period replicas.

These aren't the only artefacts affected by such problems, I know traders dealing in arms and armour, camp equipment, costume and much more who feel compelled to compromise their research and understanding of authentic simply to make their products profitable, and many more who are seemingly unaware of the errors or compromises in the so called "replicas" they copy. I therefore recommend you always ask what references products are based upon, and the time frame, geographical location, social status or military rank in which such products can be considered "authentic". Don't just ask what features make them more accurate, but more importantly the compromises made to make them more appealing or affordable. Very few traders are genuinely dishonest and willing to lie in order to make a sale, though not all traders are knowledgeable enough to talk through the research relating to the products they make or sell, and sadly even if they can, relatively few consumers are interested enough to listen and learn.

I personally feel the push for improved authenticity across every re-enactment group has in many cases backfired. It's certainly made us all much keener to stress that what we do is just as authentic as everybody else. It's certainly made us all much keener to stress how much more "stuff" we now own, as if this is a direct measure of academic credibility. However, this seems to stem from increased feelings of inadequacy compelling us to compare our efforts to others around us, thereby increasing the number of people who are primarily trying to convince themselves that what they are doing will be accepted as authentic. Many groups seem so frightened of being bettered by competitors they emulate their standards. Many individuals are so frightened of not meeting their own groups standards they are desperate to conform rather than question those standards. Something which leads to widespread stagnation rather than improvement.

Ultimately I feel the drive for improved authenticity has, unintentionally, reduced the percentage of re-enactors willing to risk their reputation or "upset the apple cart" by putting forward new research. Let's be honest, how many of us now simply "Google" the things we want to know, hoping some anonymous re-enactor or trader will have made available a few pretty pictures with captions telling us what they do? So whilst many welcome the ease of this unquestioning conformity as a form of research based authenticity, is it true that those still interested in genuine academic study of period sources and surviving artefacts have been so outnumbered their efforts no longer have an impact on driving forward understanding and historical accuracy?

Total authenticity is an ideal no re-enactor or manufacturer will ever fully achieve, the best we can hope for is to both minimise and be open about the compromises we have to make. However, are we now defining authenticity merely as an object's ability to meet some averaging out of the standards of others, or our willingness to keep amending our own standards to meet new or more detailed evidence? We all say we want to improve our authenticity but is this genuinely true as it seems most are more driven by achieving the acceptance of other reenactors than by challenging them? So I question "What price Authenticity?" Is the hobby truly getting more authentic products for our increase in expenditure or primarily poorer quality versions of products we couldn't previously afford? My own personal feeling, one which some may view as condescending or elitist, is that a drive for improvements in authenticity is not inherently a bad thing, much like opening up further education to more of the population should not be bad thing. However, badly implemented changes in university education ultimately lowered overall standards, caused dissatisfaction and generated a glut of under-employed graduates whose quasi-academic degree certificates are worthless to professional employers. Similarly, because of a stampede like drive for improved authenticity, the notion of achieving it through continual research and steadily improving understanding is being lost among the crowds of people hoping to bypass any need for knowledge or study and simply buy "instant authenticity". Naturally where there is money to be made suppliers have stepped in to supply such consumers. Reputable suppliers are still out there, but when the word authentic is now used to describe all "replica" goods of widely varying quality and price it is increasingly difficult for the growing numbers of re-enactors without appropriate knowledge to separate the good from the bad. It is in such situations, that most tend to look to the majority opinion for reassurance, and in following the crowd further perpetuate the problems.

We can't all know everything about everything but we must try to learn enough to decide for ourselves which opinions are worth following. Consequently I'll finish with a warning and an illustration of the principle that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing." I am aware of a certain trader, who to spare embarrassment shall remain anonymous, one who retails hand dyed and hand woven cloth for making replica historic costume. Obviously such a thing is very expensive to produce but the people who buy this presumably do so as they believe they are able to make a much more authentic set of replica clothes out of it. Sadly, although hand coloured with "traditional" plant dyes, some of the natural dyes used are ones I am unaware of there being any evidence for from the chosen period of history, so in terms of colour they may be no more accurate than a modern synthetic dye. The yarns used are wool only in so much as the modern definition uses the term for mixtures of man made fibre containing some natural wool. Similarly whilst being hand woven, the modern loom used bears little similarity to the period looms the original cloth would have been woven on and with differences in sett, weight and pattern of weave the end product is arguably no more appropriate than the mass produced, modern, acrylic mix fabrics most re-enactors buy because it is labelled "wool". However, no one ever says that they can't see anything particularly special about such products or asks what it is that is actually "better" about them. They are made by a "specialist" and cost more, consequently folk automatically aspire to using what must be more "authentic" cloth!

.....and am I the only one who recalls the tale of an emperor who bought his new clothes based upon fairly similar logic?

*It may have become an unpopular truth, but to genuinely improve our authenticity we must spend more time studying the past, not more money to buy more copies of other re-enactors kit and equipment. So whilst most claim that what they are doing is now "more authentic", do we simply mean increasing numbers of us are conforming, without question, to a dumbed down definition of authenticity?*

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