

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE . . .

(This is the part where the editor, strapped for articles to fill the first issue, puts forth a few more ideas about where we're going, and who else has already done what we dream about.)

During the last half of this century, folklife museums and rural history farms in Europe and the United States have flourished. Not surprisingly, as our SCA reconstructions have become more elaborate, we have found ourselves borrowing the methodology of historians, anthropologists and experimental archaeologists. The "open-air museum" concept that began in Sweden in the late 19th has become a common motif in the States, where more than 40 living history museums now offer a "slice of life" experience. Even traditional scholars now recognize historic reconstruction as a credible, often vital key to the study of vanished cultures and lifeways (1).

In Europe, reconstructions of iron-age homes, earthworks and hillforts have added considerably to our understanding of early cultures.

For example, when researchers reconstructed an iron-age house in Denmark in the late 1950s, they found that heavy smoke from the indoor fire pit forced them to spend most of their time inside lying down or sitting. A similar project sponsored by Danish television officials in 1966 concluded dramatically by burning the finished wattle and daub house. From the charred remains, archaeologists learned to identify various parts of primitive buildings in later excavations (2).

When most of us visualize places we have been or buildings we have seen in movies or books, we conjure up pictorial clichés. Our minds wash away the difficult angles, polish the rough stones and repaint the tapestries in primary colors.

Artists, however, transcend their imaginations. As my friend Duke Sir Merewald explains it, artists see things as they appear, while the rest of us see things as we think they appear (or as they SHOULD appear).

This suggests that before we can replace bad architecture with PRESENCE, we must learn to doubt our imaginations, to depend instead upon the failsafe inspiration employed by architects for centuries: RESEARCH.

A little local history

Three years ago, Duke Syr Baldar and Baron Master Geoffrey of Trimaris were among the first to combine some historical accuracy with showmanship, in an effort that produced an eye catching kingdom gate made from a pair of huge cloth columns, lit from Within. Master Geoffrey painted the columns using period illumination.

A year later, as King of Trimaris, I sponsored Master Geoffrey and many others in the reconstruction of Cadbury Camp, the iron age hillfort, as the gateway to the Trimaris royal encampment. We built the fort at two-thirds scale, complete with ramparts and massive wooden doors.

Last year, I abandoned gate building. Countess Hilary, ever my partner in design and construction, worked with me to build a small, thatched cottage using a post and beam framing technique.

In the process of researching for these projects, we discovered that experimental archaeologists have been camping out in reconstructed buildings for decades.

Jay Anderson, a professor of folklore and folklife, spent

several weeks living in a thatched house at Plymouth Plantation. He had a miserable time. The straw mattress made him itch. The damp got into his bones. As time passed, he dropped out of "persona" and talked about the pleasantries of the modern age. He described the experience as "stupefying." Of course, Anderson also worked all day chopping wood and plowing, then sat down with his male roommate to a plate of boiled salt fish and sour beer.(3)

Because SCA interest in historic reconstruction fits so nicely into the experimental archaeology field, some of the rules for reconstruction have already been written. One of the pioneers in the experimental archaeology movement has proposed guidelines for recreating historic living spaces. The rules also could be applied to SCA design projects:

- 1) Limit your construction to structures that could exist.
- 2) Use historically accurate techniques and materials as much as possible.
- 3) Do not allow modern technology to *interfere* with an experiment, but you may use it to analyze results (4).

Reconstructing the past takes time and money, of course, and making architecture PORTABLE creates several difficult obstacles. Bargain shopping, of course, saves hundreds of dollars. Our Cadbury Camp gate reconstruction cost \$375 and fit into a 5' x 10' trailer. We spent about \$500 on the hovel, complete with furniture and root cellar. The trailer, a built-up 5' x 8' flatbed, cost \$500 and held the house with all its furnishings. With a little ingenuity, and some advice from those of us who have already made expensive mistakes, unlikely sources provide cheap—and authentic—building materials.

As with any artistic endeavor, however, attention to quality must supersede cost. Covering a crannog with a blue tarp ruins the rest of your work. Sketching the project to every detail before building saves money AND marriages. Base the drawings as much as possible on archaeological finds. Paint surfaces to resemble natural materials found in your structure's geographic region. Develop a philosophy about re-creating PRESENCE before you start building. Imagining something beautiful, but building it badly, as Baron Master Geoffrey has so profoundly put it, is like "frosting a turd."

References

- (1) John Bowens, *America's Living Past: Historic Villages and Restorations* (New York: Portland House, 1990), 7
- (2) John Coles, *Archaeology by Experiment*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 64-66
- (3) Jay A. Anderson, "Immaterial Material Culture: The Implications of Experimental Research for Folklife Museums," in *Material Culture Studies in America*, ed. Thomas Schlereth, (Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1982) 306-315.
- (4) John Coles, *Archaeology by Experiment*, 15-16

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The Godstad bed