

# **Building an Authentic Kit**

*Baroness Eithni ingen Talorgain, OL, OP, Pyxis  
eithni@gmail.com*

While many of us start out in poly-cotton T-tunic borrowed from the Gold Key or Chatelaine and there is no authenticity requirement in the SCA, many gentles eventually become interested in putting together a more authentic kit. However, the task can seem daunting and this is a basic guide to strategies for tackling the project.

## **Do your research first**

While it may be tempting to dive right in and start “upgrading” your kit, you should first invest some serious time into researching the time and place you plan to recreate. Often, common perceptions of what was or was not done in a time and place are wrong or missing some essential detail. It is depressing to invest time and money in a project only to learn something a few months later and again be dissatisfied with your new kit.

## **Keep doing research**

Of course, it is likely that, even having done significant research in advance, eventually you will find additional information that will make some aspects of your “improved kit” obsolete. Embrace these as opportunities for learning and growth, not failures of the previous research. Only very bad scholars never learn anything new or develop new ways of interpreting old ideas. Besides, without new research and new ideas, you would eventually actually complete your “to do” list, and we can’t have that!

## **Network with others in the field**

Doing your own research and working out solutions to problems is a fine thing, but you do not always need to completely reinvent the wheel. Regardless of how obscure your topic is, there are other people who have similar interests who may be excellent resources for assistance or collaboration. Failing that, find other people who are interested in promoting an authentic appearance in general. (In Northshield, these would especially include members of the Order of the Pyxis.) These people all have valuable experience to share and likely will be eager to hear about your efforts as well.

## **Decide on an acceptable level of authenticity**

While your ideal may be to have every detail perfectly correct in every way, even most authenticity wonks find they need to make compromises in some places. Think about what sorts of substitutions you are willing to make and which sorts you may HAVE to make. Will your goal apply to just your appearance, or your language, demeanor, conversation topics, and more? Also consider the settings – your standards may be higher for a single-day event than for a week long camping event or you may be willing to set a higher than usual goal for a demo or other educational event but be comfortable falling short of perfection at a general event. It is OK for your goals to fluctuate, but making them gives you something well-defined to strive for.

### **Choose a strategy for improvement**

Looking at the list of all the things you would need to actually have a fully authentic kit can be a daunting task. There are several strategies you can use to simplify the process, the two main ones of which are to either 1) replace one category of reenactment goods at a time (i.e., feast gear, camp gear, clothing) or to 2) gradually improve overall as you have time and money. Most people who slowly decide to improve their level of authenticity tend to follow the latter strategy, but the former has some distinct advantages. First of all, you are able to engage in more limited, focused research in preparation for the upgrade. This means you are more likely to be able to get all the details right more quickly. Second, since it is limited in scope, it is a concentrated expenditure of time and money and may seem like less of a financial or time burden. Third, you have the satisfaction of knowing that, while you are working toward a more period appearance, *this* part is complete and beautiful. There's nothing like the pride of a job well done to spur you on to the next project.

### **Invest in quality materials**

Just as you should invest in quality research before upgrading your kit, you should also invest in quality pieces and materials. Consider what you have determined is a level of acceptable authenticity and then aim for that level or higher. Do not make compromises for lesser quality or less authentic goods unless it is completely unavoidable. Often, such compromises simply lead to shortly needing another kit upgrade due to equipment failure or increased dissatisfaction with the inferior products.

### **Be prepared for “authenticity creep”**

Once you get started, you will find that creating an authentic kit is very interesting and rewarding. Even gentles who start out with moderate aims often eventually find themselves a full-fledged authenticity wonk. That's OK! Share the joy with other folks interested in your period of interest and others interested in authenticity, just do your best not to press authenticity on people who are not interested in it for its own sake. Rather, lead by example and show people how much fun research can be!

### **Some resources and suggestions**

- No matter how obscure your period of interest is, there is probably a few interest groups available on the web – seek them out!
  - SCA and other reenactment groups – many have well-researched web pages with specific information, patterns, and other how-to articles.
  - More and more, academics actively working in the field are making their work available online in real time. Check for Facebook groups they run and follow them on Academia.com.
- Look at the web pages of museums that have objects of interest to your field – many are happy to share information about and pictures of their holdings.
- AVOID commercial patterns unless you know they were well researched.
- ALWAYS do a reality check on web pages – check bibliographical sources and do some of your own research whenever possible.
- You don't need to make everything yourself! Ask other authenticity wonks about recommended merchants.