

Researching Obscure Time Periods

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Types of Sources

- ❖ **Primary sources:** sources that are directly associated with the historical event and have not been interpreted in any way (Note: in many cases, translations of a primary document can be considered interpretation, making the translated text a secondary source.)
 - Records kept at or near the time of the event
 - Annals and local histories
 - Records of estates, parishes, or monasteries
 - Charters, letters and diaries.
 - Works of art*
 - Paintings and manuscripts
 - Sculpture and Architecture
 - Poetry and Theatre
 - * *Caution!* Works of art are not always valid primary sources! If the artist was using artistic license, figures of speech, or other non-literal representations, the objects and situations depicted may not be real or representative of the period you are studying.
 - Artifacts
 - Extant objects from the period of interest, including but not limited to clothing, home goods, structures, books, etc. Again, use caution when the use or construction of an object is not certain!
- ❖ **Secondary sources:** a resource that in some way analyzes, compiles, or interprets primary sources.
 - Books, dissertations, or web pages written about a subject
- ❖ **Tertiary sources:** resources that compile and condense information from multiple sources.
 - Encyclopedias, dictionaries, tables, timelines, etc.

Finding Resources

Often one of the most difficult challenges in researching an obscure time period is even finding sources to evaluate. Here are some suggestions:

- ❖ **Your Local Library: Books, Journals, and the Librarian**
 - When doing research, the librarian is your best friend! Most librarians are more than happy to assist you in finding information and obtaining books from other libraries, if necessary.
 - Types of libraries: libraries are not all the same. Your local library will likely have general information on most SCA-related topics, but if your topic is very obscure, you may need to ask the librarian how to obtain materials through inter-library loan. If you live near a major college or university, it is often possible to borrow books from their collections, which often will include more academic books and journals than those generally available at the local public library.
 - Look for your specific topic in the subject card catalog, then check related words

- If you know the name of an expert in the field, try searching the author index
- Don't forget the journals! Many history societies publish a journal where new research is published. Also, in areas where scholarship is very sparse, a researcher may be able to get an article printed when there is not sufficient interest for an entire book. Check the journals' index edition or online index for the citations of articles relevant to your topic.
- Use what you already have. Most books and web pages that are good resources have a bibliography. Read through the bibliography and identify other books that might be useful to your research.
- Do some shelf-reading. Once you have identified one or two books that are of interest, get those books off the shelf and then look at the books immediately around them. Since books are grouped by subject matter, then nearby books are often also relevant. Some online "card catalogs" for major libraries even allow you to browse electronically.

❖ The Internet

- The internet can be a tricky place for serious research and any information you find should be carefully scrutinized. However, nothing beats a quick internet search to get started identifying resources.
- Search for your topic, being as specific as possible. Try general search engines like Google as well as specific ones like the Labyrinth from Georgetown University that specializes in medieval topics. <http://labyrinth.georgetown.edu/>
- Use Google Scholar to specifically look at academic sources and filter out all the football and appliance information from your search about Vikings,
- Review some of the more reputable-looking web pages to obtain some preliminary information. Then look at their bibliographies and references (the good sites will have them) and obtain those books from your local library.
- Look for organizations that are related to your topic, like professional history organizations, other living history groups, programs of study at universities, etc.
- More and more journals are offering at least some of their issues online, sometimes for free. See if the primary journals in your field are available online.
- Look for email lists that discuss your topic and the web pages of people who are experts in the field
- Museums also often have some part of their collection available online or they may be willing to give you information about their holdings. However, be prudent when inquiring with a major museum. Curators may not be interested in answering a broad beginner's question, but specific questions about particular items may be enthusiastically answered. Be prepared to have a significant delay before a response is made or not to receive a response at all. On the other hand, in some cases, you may be able to get information about items that are owned by the museum but that are not currently displayed.
- The internet can also be a great resource for obtaining hard to find books. Try resources like Dealoz.com, a metasearch of online booksellers.
- Learning Historical Research is aimed at college students, but has excellent and accessible information about starting to do research. <http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/>
- I have more hints and resources for research and documentation on my website at <https://eithni.com/research/>

Hands-on Research

While doing hands-on research can be difficult to arrange, it is worth considering.

- ❖ **Museums:** Many museums are happy to help you find information about their holdings and some will even allow you direct access to objects in their catalog. Not everyone can travel abroad, but artifacts from many cultures are available in museums across the US as well as in their native countries.
 - Find out if anything from your period of interest is held at a museum that is accessible to you. Visit the museum and see the pieces firsthand.
 - If you would like to get a better view of an object or if would like to look at items not currently on display, here are a few hints: Contact the curator of the department in advance, ideally at least one month before your planned visit, to ask for an appointment. Explain why you are interested in the objects you are requesting to see and why the currently available information does not meet your needs. Dress neatly when you arrive for your appointment and be prompt. Bring a pair of white cotton gloves (available from your local pharmacy) – they are not always used anymore, but it shows you are prepared and mindful. Follow all their instructions regarding the appropriate handling of materials exactly. If allowed, bring a notebook and pencil for taking notes and a camera. Bring a list of questions about the object that you would like to observe or ask the curator about. If you are looking at several similar items, consider making a template so you remember to examine the relevant characteristics of each item. Make note of which image numbers correspond to which items. Thank the curator(s) and send a physical thank you card afterwards (an email is not sufficient).
 - If items are not available for an individual viewing, they are not easily photographed, or you are not allowed to photograph them, you may be able to order professional photographs of the objects from the museum for a fee.

- ❖ **Historical Sites:** Many sites from the SCA period are still intact or at least partially extant and are often able to be visited. There's nothing quite like standing in a location that your persona may have been familiar with, especially if the site has been well preserved.
 - If you cannot physically visit, see if there is an online visitors' guide, web pages done by other visitors, or a Google Street View.
 - Think about the places that are of greatest importance to your period and learn as much as you can about them *before* you visit. Make lists of specific things you would like to observe at each site. Bring maps, directions, and a compass, if necessary. Bring a notebook and pen or pencil as well as a camera to record details about the site.
 - If you are interested in a site that is on private property, remember to ask the landowners for permission before visiting, if at all possible, or ask when you arrive if you cannot make contact in advance. Be polite and explain specifically what you are interested in seeing.
 - In rural areas, be aware of dangerous local flora and fauna as well as local hunting seasons and trespassing laws.

Evaluating a Resource – Books and other written documents

- ❖ Table of Contents (TOC)
 - Is there a TOC? Does the TOC cover the topic(s) you are interested in? How much of the book is devoted to your topic(s)?
- ❖ Text
 - Is the text clearly written? Does the author support statements with examples, citations, or careful reasoning? Do they discuss other authors/theories/evidence? Do they use overly colloquial language or lots of extraneous punctuation!!!!!!
- ❖ Illustrations
 - Are there illustrations pertaining to your topic(s)? Are they clearly labeled? Referenced? Is a scale provided?
- ❖ Footnotes, endnotes, and bibliography
 - Does the author provide support for his/her ideas? Are there several different sources cited? Are these other sources well respected? Has the author included information from the “gold standard” sources for your topic? If not, why were they omitted? How many times does the author cite him/herself?
- ❖ Index and Glossary
 - How easy is it to find information within the book? How many times is your topic referenced? How specific is the index?
 - Is there a glossary? How basic are the terms that are defined?
- ❖ Overall
 - What are the author’s credentials? Is the author affiliated with a university or professional organization that relates to the topic? Are the ideas in the book contemporary, or are they outdated? Is the book or journal put out by a well-respected publisher? What other books on the subject has that publisher printed?

Evaluating a Resource – Web pages

- ❖ Text, Illustrations, Footnotes, endnotes, and bibliography – see above
- ❖ Links
 - How useful are the links? Do most or all of the links work? Does the web page link to other reputable resources? Do other good pages link back to this page? Are there links to the references cited?
- ❖ Overall
 - When was the last time the website was updated? Is the site well written and well organized? What are the site owner’s credentials? Is s/he affiliated with a university or organization that relates to the topic?

Evaluating a Resource – Other

Not all sources are written and the evaluation of other sources can require you to think carefully about the object. Some questions that might be pertinent (depending on the object in question):

- ❖ Why do you think it is a good source? Do other people who are knowledgeable in the field consider it a good source?
- ❖ Is the following information known:
 - Where and when it was made (& supporting information)
 - Where and when it was found or its history of ownership
 - What sort of context it was found in (especially important for archeological finds. Was it a chance find or part of an organized dig? Was the site intact or disturbed? Where in the grave/site was it located? What other finds were nearby?)
 - The object’s exact dimensions, materials, distinguishing characteristics
- ❖ If there is any question about the above or similar questions – what else could the object be? What other explanations are there for the object?