ISSN 2976-9124

living MEDIEVAL

sixth edition

HISTORY, BY THOSE WHO LIVE IT.

APRIL '25



CANDLEMAS 1461

A 24/7 Winter Immersive Event

IVAR THE BONELESS

A Medieval Case of Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome?

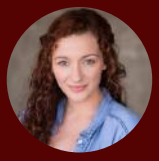
PLUS...A GIRLS GUIDE TO MEDIEVAL MURDER, PRINCELY BURIALS, HOW TO DECORATE THE EARLY MEDIEVAL HOME AND MUCH MORE!

WELCOME

living MEDIEVAL

HISTORY, BY THOSE WHO LIVE IT.

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS


Welcome to the sixth edition of Living Medieval! As the days grow longer and we begin to shake off the chills of a long, dark winter, we're thrilled to present this latest issue that embodies both the spirit of resilience and the promise of brighter days ahead.

First and foremost, I'd like to extend a warm welcome to our new staff writers. Your creativity, dedication, and passion for the medieval world have already brought fresh energy to this edition, and we are excited to share more of this passion in future.

A heartfelt thanks goes out to all of our contributors and image providers whose work has made this edition possible. Your commitment to preserving and exploring the medieval era is the backbone of this publication.

Within the depths of this winter, we embraced the season with an immersive event at Weald and Downland. This extraordinary experience transported us to the heart of medieval life at Candlemas and showcased the enduring magic of historical craftsmanship and resourcefulness. We are proud to feature this event in a major article in this edition by Black Knight Historical, and we hope it inspires and captivates you as it did us.

As we turn towards summer, we encourage you to dive into this issue and enjoy the diverse world of medieval life woven together in these pages. Thank you for being part of our journey—you, our readers, make all of this possible.

The Editors

COVER IMAGE BY RUSSELL COBB - @RUSSELLCOBB - COBBPHOTO.COM



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IVAR THE BONELESS

A Medieval Case of Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome?

By Melissa Speed

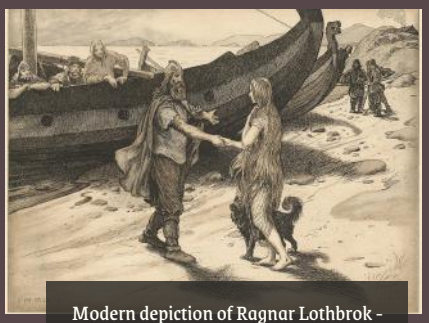
@SPEED.MELISSA

Arguably of the most legendary warriors of the Viking era, Ivar the Boneless is said to have been exceptionally ferocious, with chronicler Adam of Bremen referring to him as 'the cruellest of Norse warriors.' Indeed, a number of chronicles indicate the man in the Icelandic sagas was a real Norseman who invaded Britain and Ireland. Yet, one thing history hasn't agreed on is the reason for his intimidating, or belittling, epithet 'boneless.' Scholars and history enthusiasts have proffered many possible explanations, but nothing has been conclusive, leaving the subject open to further debate. In recent decades, fictional portrayals of the iconic warlord have led to history enthusiasts, film and television fanbases, and lovers of literary works all joining the debate, with online discussions on the subject never waning. One of the explanations commonly accepted by historians is that of a hereditary bone disease, osteogenesis imperfecta (OI), which causes bone fragility, while the more popular opinion amongst fandoms is that it relates to some form of impotency. We can but make our own minds up based on existing theories, research, and experience. My own opinion is that Ivar the Boneless was a medieval case of Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome.

A rare connective tissue disorder which has many variants, Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS) is named after Edvard Ehlers and Henri-Alexandre Danlos, who respectively categorised and identified key features of the condition. Though their work in the 1900s gave the condition a name, characteristics of the syndrome had been intriguing the medical world for centuries, from Hippocrates in 400 BC to Chernogubov, who wrote a seminal paper on the connected symptoms in 1892. EDS can cause many presentations, including, most commonly, frequent dislocations and hypermobility. A similar connective tissue condition is Marfan Syndrome, however, it can be difficult to distinguish between the two based on visual appearance, for some characteristics associated with each condition are not mutually exclusive. A key difference is that EDS is more likely to cause hypermobility. Diagnosis of OI, EDS, and Marfan Syndrome have all been made easier by modern science. Of course, no medical explanation or scientific proof of genetic mutations were available to identify any of these conditions in the ninth century (Ivar is said to have died in 873 AD). Though all three of these conditions are possibilities, I believe EDS is the most likely.

Whilst all the conditions mentioned above have subclassifications, a consistent feature of OI is brittle bones. It seems unlikely that a person whose bones break so easily would become a great warrior unimpeded in his invasions.

Additionally, Ivar is generally considered to have been tall (Professor Martin Biddle argues that the skeleton of a 9ft tall Viking found in Repton may have been the famed warlord), yet short stature is a common feature of OI. Similarly, the most prevalent characteristic of Marfan Syndrome is tallness with long limbs, but great height does not warrant the moniker 'boneless.' Here, I draw upon my own lived experience of EDS to support my argument. Inefficient connective tissues lead to very lax joints.



Modern depiction of Ragnar Lothbrok - Ivar's father
World History Encyclopedia (2018)

In many cases, almost as easily as bones slip out of position, they can be slipped back in again. Kneecaps that can be pushed to the side of the leg as naturally as turning one's head, and an ability to bring arms tied behind one's back effortlessly over one's head could easily create the illusion of lacking some of the bones in one's limbs. Similarly, arms and legs bending the wrong way are common





Examples of EDS - Hyperelasticity and hypermobile joints

Images - Wikimedia Commons; public domain

and when seen so rarely, could certainly be mystifying enough to lead to such a sobriquet. Given the extreme likelihood of injury warriors face in battle, a propensity for easier (though not painless) reduction of dislocations would render a warrior quicker to recover and continue fighting. Moreover, it could make them seem invincible, appearing unsusceptible to debilitation from dislocation.

Though some argue for belittling explanations for Ivar's nickname, it seems unlikely that chroniclers of a losing side would want to diminish their vanquisher, or that his kinsmen would be derisive of such a successful Viking. A fierce warrior with EDS, whose strong limbs can seem without bones, being lauded with an intimidating epithet, seems far more likely.



A fifteenth-century depiction of Ívar and Ubba ravaging the countryside as it appears on folio 48r of British Library Harley 2278.

Wikimedia Commons



ANGLO-SAXONS, LAW AND MEMORY

By Toni Mount

Suppose you travelled back to that exciting period and place known as Anglo-Saxon England, how should you behave to avoid getting in trouble with the law? This is important because any newcomer to a village is immediately the prime suspect if a crime is committed or some disaster occurs. In fact, the law requires you to announce your arrival as soon as you enter the village, either by blowing a horn or shouting or otherwise making a lot of noise. If a crime takes place, you don't want to be blamed because it can be an expensive business.

One of the first ever law-codes in England was written down by King Wihtraed of Kent in 695 CE and later recorded in a book, the Textus Roffensis, kept at Rochester Cathedral in Kent. It includes a list of Wergild payments, that is 'man-gold'. Every man, woman, child and slave has a monetary value. Under King Aelfred's laws in the 880s, killing a freeman, even if by accident, will cost you £5. Even a fingernail has a price! If you punch someone on the nose, you owe him 3 shillings [15 pence]. That may not seem like very much but weekly earnings are only a few pence so this could be six weeks' wages or more.

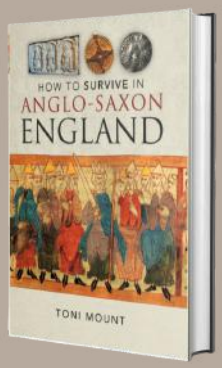
If a man injures you, he must pay you compensation. If he steals from you, he must repay the value of what he took, plus a generous bonus for causing you inconvenience or become your slave until the debt is paid off. If the wretch flees, then his kinsmen are responsible for the Wergild and also have to ensure the miscreant behaves in future or stays away. Very civilised, these Anglo-Saxons. Sadly, as Christianity takes a firmer grip, capital punishment gradually replaces Wergild which is unfortunate because a hanged man does his victim no good, whereas compensation can be most helpful.



A scop reciting his tale with musical accompaniment at Butser Farm

Taken by the author

Under the early laws, before Christianity is adopted, property agreements are verbal, made between two parties. If one party dies, the contract lapses and has to be renegotiated. For the ordinary Anglo-Saxon this means that his or her heirs have to re-discuss terms with their overlord after their death and the same applies if their lord dies – all previous agreements are void. But the Church likes to know exactly how matters stand regarding its estates and properties and unlike mortal individuals, it isn't going to die, so a verbal contract isn't good enough. Churchmen insist on writing things down, preferably in a great book, like the Textus Roffensis, that won't be mislaid or stolen. Kings come to realise this is a brilliant idea and will save their heirs a lot of tedious discussion about who owns what and on what terms in the future, so royal estates and properties also begin to be recorded on parchment and termed bocland or 'bookland'.

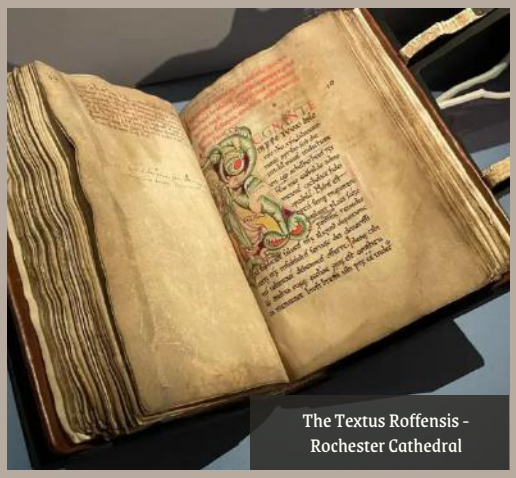


How to Survive in Anglo-Saxon England book, by Toni Mount



The author, Toni, discussing medieval remedies in Faversham

But ordinary folk don't trust written documents, especially if they can't read them or they're recorded in Latin and churchmen become notorious for 'adapting' such contracts to benefit the Church. Common folk still prefer verbal agreements and trust to memory to preserve them. You may have heard the phrase 'time immemorial' meaning ages ago. But to the Anglo-Saxons, its meaning is quite precise and refers to the passed on memories of the oldest inhabitants in the village. For example, an elderly woman may recall her grandfather talking about climbing the ancient oak tree that used to grow by the watermill and marked the village boundary in his day. The oak tree stands no longer and the mill has been replaced farther upstream but as a remembered boundary marker the tree is still relevant under the law. The Anglo-Saxons are famous for their prodigious memories and remembering details of village or family history is their forte.



The Textus Roffensis - Rochester Cathedral

In fact, they consider writing things down to be the lazy way of recording them. Memory is more trustworthy, they believe, and far more difficult to corrupt. The scop, or story-teller, can recite poems as long as Beowulf, for instance, from memory and knows by heart the king's family decent through a hundred generations, back to the gods, Woden or Thor, perhaps. This would seem to be an astonishing skill which we have lost to a considerable degree. But if only they had not had such astonishing memories and written down their early beliefs, thoughts and stories, their business deals and contracts, our present knowledge of Anglo-Saxon society could be far more extensive. If only we could travel back, ask and take notes... This is my historian's lament.

Toni Mount is an historian, writer and costumed interpreter from Kent. She is the author of How to Survive in Anglo-Saxon England published by Pen & Sword Books in 2024 and several other best-selling non-fiction books - and the popular Sebastian Foxley series of medieval murder mysteries.

A GIRL'S GUIDE TO MEDIEVAL MURDER

By Tricia Maniaci

@TRICIA_MANIACI

There is one thing I love more than Medieval History. Crime - not a life of (my life is above board in every aspect), but rather the ins and outs of criminal psychology and true crime. While this genre seems to have gained popularity in the past few years thanks to the rise in various podcasts and docuseries on streaming platforms highlighting the most nefarious among us, it should go without saying that neighbour disputes, assault, larceny, arson, and murder is nothing new.

Please know this is not an attempt to glorify crime and murder. Nor am I trying to fit the entirety of legal history, precedence, and legal anomalies into a short article. If anything, I hope to highlight what else was happening in the dark corners of the medieval world and that people haven't changed. At all.

If you are looking for a glimpse of medieval crime and murder, look no further than Medieval Murder Maps. The team of researchers, historians, writers, solicitors, clerks, and sociologists have compiled a collection of maps highlighting various crimes (not just murder) over medieval London, York, and Oxford. Each pin on the map provides a brief description of the crime that took place from the grizzly to the as-expected (drunken students and tavern goers getting into brawls), to the rivalrous (the guilds were a rowdy bunch) to the I could have seen that coming (an angry homeowner chases away a loud bard*) to the downright head scratching, (involving theft of manure and broken bones). Accompanying each tag is the crime in further detail.

So, how did one get away with murder in the Middle Ages? And what was the weapon of choice? Let's start with the weapon of choice. You wouldn't be wrong if you guessed an axe, a bow, or drowning. After all, whatever a person had on hand would work, including their hands. On the aforementioned map, 12 crimes involved the perpetrator just using their hands. Sword, short knife, and staff are the top four most popular weapons, which makes sense. These items would have been close at hand in almost any environment. The number one weapon documented was the long knife. However, the tailor's guild made frequent use of their needles and scissors for activities other than sewing.

Well, now you've done it. You were sitting in the tavern minding your business when a group of drunken students crossed your path. One thing led to another, and now you have blood on your hands and a body (or two) at your feet. Now what?

You could run. With no CCTV, you might have a chance. Move towns, change your name, find a new trade, and change your hairstyle. No one will be the wiser.

You could claim self-defense. A good reputation helps, and the jury might buy it. Especially with no other recourse but to use deadly force, i.e., you couldn't flee. Thomas Hardy of York did just that; according to the jurors, Thomas struck his wife Cecilia out of self-defense. On her right tibia. With a knife. He also fled the scene. But the jury, under oath, concluded Thomas acted in self-defense.

Did you act out of duress? Or are you young? Your act might not be seen as felonious; Pardoned and off you pop; you're free to go.

You could claim sanctuary, as did one Robert of Hemingbrough after stabbing Simon of Eggsfield. But that would involve an admission of guilt, which Robert did to the local coroner and sheriffs. Then what? Like Robert, you could refuse to surrender and escape in the middle of the night to avoid arrest.

Remember that good reputation you have? Up until you brutally slaughtered a group of law students next to you, that is. If you get the requisite number of people, Acquittal might work. In 1276, Christiana de Dunelmia was accused of poisoning her husband. While 12 was the usual number, Christina had 36 people swear under oath she was of good character. She was acquitted.

Finally, you could hope that your connections to the rich and famous pull through and a royal pardon is issued; hope it's issued quickly – the legal system was swift.

Or – you could just not murder.

*This particular incident appears on the London Map and is my favorite. And if I'm being honest, I'm on the homeowner's side after living near an event venue that never respected noise curfews.



The murder of Thomas Becket Casket c. 1180, V&A Museum, London - Public Domain



THE READING VIRGIN

Women and books after the XIII century

By Gaia Sorrenti

Painted and written sources tell us that medieval women were readers. While we should avoid generalizing this statement and keep in mind that literacy rates were different through decades, geographical areas and social groups, this brief article wants to walk through the relationship between medieval women and readers.

When thinking about female readers in the Middle Ages, a word that often comes to mind is the adjective "extraordinary". We often take extraordinary characters, such as Christine de Pizan, as our point of reference and from there imagine female readers as rebellious and strong-willed, an exception to the rule that makes reading a mostly male activity. We think that they affirm, through the reading of the book, their independence from gendered expectations and limitations. And yet, Leonardo, Botticelli and many before and after them depict the Virgin with a book as she receives the news of her duty to bear the son of God. If an exemplary woman such as the Mother Mary is shown reading, it might be necessary to take into consideration that female readers might have been a somewhat common occurrence, and that they did not necessarily question gender roles.

From the XIII century onward, there is a change in the portrayal of the Virgin Mary. The womanly activities typical of earlier paintings of the Annunciation, such as spinning and drawing water from the well, are replaced by the act of reading. Resting on Mary's knees or on a lectern, clutched in her hand or dropped on the floor, the book becomes an unexpected co-protagonist of Marian scenes.

Like the spindle of earlier Annunciations, the book can thus be considered a symbol of a woman's virtues. Though, it's not any book, those depicted are prayer books such as Psalters or Books of Hours, appropriate readings for the pious woman.

Amongst the saintly women depicted with books we must mention the Virgin's own mother, Saint Anne, often portrayed as she teaches her daughter how to read. It is interesting to point out another typical scene of teaching, in which the Virgin switches from student to teacher towards her infant son. These images suggest that not only did women know how to read, but they were often the ones teaching their children. And the books used to teach children how to read were, in fact, those prayer books mentioned above.

"The wise mother will give great attention to the upbringing and instruction of her daughters", writes Christine de Pizan in The Book of the Three Virtues. Dante Alighieri, in De vulgari eloquentia, adds that vernacular is "that language to which children are instructed by those around them [...], which is learnt with no rule by imitation of the nurturer". While some women did teach their children Latin, those who knew it were few and the motherly teaching focused mostly on the vernacular languages. It is precisely in the XIII century that more texts begun being written in vernacular, culminating in the following century with Boccaccio's Decameron and Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. As the use of vernacular grew, so did the literature available to most female readers, now expanding beyond religious and votive texts.



Madonna of the book - Sandro Botticelli 1480-81 (Public Domain)

On the last stretch of our journey, it is important to further consider books as teaching materials. There is another switch of roles, in which the female teachers of letters become students to the books themselves, perpetrating gendered identities and behaviours. How? By offering these female readers model examples of feminine behaviour.

Religious writings describe saintly women that should be imitated, promoting feminine values such as obedience, meekness and submission for both nuns and laywomen. And it isn't just religious works that provide these models. The Decameron's last tale is that of Griselda, a young woman of humble origins taken as wife by a nobleman and then tested in the above-mentioned virtues through years of cruelty from her husband. How the author meant for the tale to be read is still the topic of debate amongst scholars, but the reception of Griselda as an ideal wife for the readers of the time is undeniable, as suggests the popularity of her tale's scenes for the decoration of women's marriage chests.

In conclusion, medieval women were readers with access to both religious and mundane texts. These books were part of their daily lives as Christians, as mothers, or simply as readers. But the act of reading did not and does not make them heroines that questioned gendered expectations of the time, and there is no judgement to be given in that.

In our interest towards history, we should avoid dressing these women in the clothing of modern ideas and instead try to fully understand the complexities of their inner lives.



The Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni by the Domenico Ghirlandaio, c. 1489-90. (Public Domain)

CANDLEMAS, 1461: A 24/7 WINTER IMMERSIVE EXPERIMENT

By Ian Pycroft WWW.BLACKKNIGHTHISTORICAL.CO.UK

EVENT DURATION: 9 DAYS
JANUARY 25TH THROUGH FEBRUARY 2ND 2025

Background: Written on the Feast of St Agnes. 21 January 1461

The Country is at War. Supporters and factions of York and Lancaster are fighting for the throne. Later you shall know this conflict as The Wars of the Roses, but for now, 'The Cousin's War' seems most apt. It certainly isn't 'Civil'...

The leadership of the House of York now rests on the young shoulders of Edward, Earl of March, since the death on December 30th last, outside Sandal Castle, near Wakefield, of his father, Richard Duke of York and Edward's brother, the Earl of Rutland.

Lancaster is led by the Queen, Marguerite d'Anjou, ably assisted by the Lords Somerset, Oxford, Clifford, and the family Tudor.

According to the Yorkist faction, the current King, Henry VI, is unfit to rule.

Our local Lord at Singleton, William FitzAlan, Earl of Arundel, has already changed his allegiance and now actively supports the Yorkist cause. His brother-in-law is the Kingmaker, the Earl of Warwick.

Even as I write, the young Earl of March, with a considerable force of arms, heads to Hereford for a probable confrontation [2] with the earl of Pembroke, Jasper Tudor, and his mercenary Lancastrian army, intent on attacking the Yorkists castles at Wigmore and Ludlow.

All this talk of war and powerful men seems alien and at odds to the life within our house of North Cray, where everyday life is typically hard at this time of year, even though the family, servants and tenants are not by any means, poor.

(The above was approved and welcomed by the Museum as a credible back story.) Testimonials from visitors and Museum staff can be viewed at the end of the report.

When I proposed a winter event to the Interpretation team at the Weald and Downland Museum in the summer of 2024, little did we imagine just how much we would learn and deliver over 9 days and nights.

We were not portraying Lords & Ladies, nor poverty-stricken peasants, but a land and property owning class of society, with family members visiting, household servants and visiting tenants/businessmen. There were to be a dozen persons living and interpreting each day, inside North Cray.

The event started for real on Saturday 25th at daybreak, as a 24/7 immersive event, nothing modern was to be brought into the house, nor would we change at 5pm into modern clothes, or sleep modern, or drink coffee, or use mobile phones. Everyone policed everyone else in the friendliest way to keep such a high level of authenticity, and I think we had a 99% success rate with that edict.



SLEEPING

The simplest beds were a linen sack, stuffed with straw laid directly on the floor, and described as a Palliasse. A palliasse is first mentioned in written accounts in England in 1506, derived from French word for straw [palea] – the term pallet has also been used for such a mattress. That, of course, doesn't mean they weren't used, or known, as that before the 16th Century.

Wooden beds were made and brought in, with rope sub-frames and a straw-filled mattress on top. Some had fleece 'toppers' for extra warmth and insulation - with a night time temperature of about 2 degrees, they were much welcomed. Bolsters, coverlets, linen sheets and fur blankets made the over layers, but most slept in their clothes, wearing hoods and caps through the 'long dark' time in bed, almost 14 hours of darkness.

DISPROVING THE 2 SLEEPS CONCEPT

14 hours of darkness is enough for anyone, but what does one actually do in the middle of winter, with no light? Keeping lights burning in a normal house is risky and expensive, and



getting up to do more than fumble for a chamber pot in pitch-darkness was impossible. You cannot read, do any crafts, prepare food, so the activities possible are all bed related...

CHAIRS, STOOLS AND BENCHES

All the household accounts I've looked at from this period show a dearth of chairs with backs. So we decided on one chair in the house, for the lady owner; everyone else made do with benches and a 'backed' stool with a drop-in back rest.

From the outset this wasn't going to be a normal re-enactment event. Many people expressed interest, but the team eventually comprised about 20 persons, some doing all 9 days, others only available for a few, but still averaging a dozen each day. Plus Maude, the star of the show and our furry bed-warmer terrier.





COOKING

Food preparation took up a considerable amount of time, from the outset, utilising available medieval-appropriate foodstuffs, seasonal produce, period-correct preservative methodology and late 15th Century recipes.

We split the event in half with Mols running the kitchen until Wednesday when Marian arrived, and I

spent time creating a cook book in advance for use. [Serof it Forth, available to order, 250 period recipes]

For the house to be believable, we created a larder for storage of food, ironwork, tools, firewood, as well as using the pantry and buttery for their correct purposes.

Storage vessels, labels and lids were made along with new shelves.

Smoked, salted, dried, pickled goods were all labelled, flour of different types kept in a chest away from vermin, and some butter kept under salt water.

ST BRIGHID'S DAY

We made St Brighid's crosses for February 1st, and hung 'brat Brigid' ribbons for the Saint to visit and bless the house. A straw doll [the Brideog] was made in the Brideog bed. (Brighid is also a patron saint of healers, poets, beer, blacksmiths and dairy workers, so maybe we brewed our ale on the wrong day).

RELIGIOUS DEVOTIONS

Religious devotions were a daily occurrence, including the daylight Hours of the Virgin, plus Latin grace afore meals, and Sarah read the text from Luke 2:22-40. It proved impossible to read the night time offices of Compline, Matins and Laudes. The grace is that used in Queens College Cambridge and dates back, in various guises, to the 8th Century.

The Gospel for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, was read on February 2 (Candlemas) before we cast our stubs of beeswax and tallow into the fire and enjoyed a celebratory meal.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Making buckskin leather from the deer hide, oiled/waxed linen fenestrals, candle making, tallow rushlight making, spinning using a great wheel, keeping daily household accounts, ink making, carving woodblocks ready for linen printing, weighing everything, pole lathe turning, broom, net & rope making, playing games including tables, cards, playing music, prayers, silk narrow-wares, period-correct distillation, making faggots for the oven.







TROBAIRITZ, THE OTHER SIDE OF COURTLY LOVE

By Francesca Austeri @VARIA_ET_CURIOSA

The world of courtly love, is perhaps one of the seasons of the late Middle Ages that most powerfully stirs the modern imagination with vivid images of dashing aristocrats, sophisticated ladies, colourful jesters and, not least, troubadours.

Scholars define troubadours as celebrities from the Middle Ages. They played a fundamental role in the society of the Occitan courts of southern France during the 12th and 13th centuries.

Courtly love is a complex cultural phenomenon, rooted in the peculiar social and political structure of the region. Occitania was a lively, rich, culturally diverse territory with many different important centres: including Montpellier, Avignon and Toulouse. Unlike northern France, where the feudal model prevailed, the political landscape of Occitania was characterized by more fluid and decentralized forms of power. This, along with an array of other factors, contributed to the sophistication and dynamism of Occitan society, creating space—albeit limited and reserved for the privileged—for women to exert a measure of influence.

Every court had its ruling family, and the head of the household acted as patron to a wide array of characters; troubadours played a leading role in this vibrant cultural scene. They were not merely poets: unlike the joglars and joglaressas (male and female jesters who used to mainly put on stage other composers' material), the troubadours were skilled musicians and composers and, often, performed their own works. It is essential to remember that, at the time, as is true for much of the past, poetry was always presented with musical accompaniment.

The central, though not exclusive, theme of their compositions was fin'amor, the most refined and elevated form of love, considered a means of spiritual and personal elevation. The object of this love was typically the lady of the court, idealized as a flawless, almost celestial figure, worshipped like a saint or a goddess, yet never truly attained or conquered.

The experience of fin'amor reached its emotional climax not in possession, but in longing; its essence lay more in desire than in fulfillment.



Comtessa de Dia: incipit of the canso Ab joi et ab joven m'apais, vida and portrait.; Chansonnier provençal; Source gallica.bnf.fr / BnF

Several scholars interpret fin'amor as a political metaphor: the true aim was not romantic union, but the attainment of higher social status and improved economic standing. While some troubadours were noblemen, many came from lower social classes, constantly seeking protection, patronage, and financial support. The troubadour tradition, however, is far from monolithic. It spanned more than two centuries, and each poet expressed a unique voice, even while adhering to a shared poetic canon.

Troubadour poetry is an erudite and intricate form of literary art, but while the domna—the lady— is central to the narrative, she is granted no voice of her own. This makes the emergence of the trobairitz all the more remarkable. The term, the feminine form of troubadour, derives from the Occitan verb trobar, meaning "to compose" or "to make verses." The trobairitz represent one of the most important testimonies of women's writing in the Middle Ages, offering a rare and valuable glimpse into the female condition during the period. They were among the first women in Western Europe to engage with vernacular literary discourse. The trobairitz allow us to see the other side of courtly love. These were aristocratic women, well integrated into court society and fully immersed in the cultural game of fin'amor. So much so, in fact, that they often participated in poetic debates called tensos with their male counterparts.

Names like Na Castelloza, Azalais de Porcairagues, Beatriz de Dia, Bieiris de Romans, Maria de Ventadorn, and Tibors de Sarenom stand out among them. While biographical information about these women is scarce, in some cases we have vidas—short biographies that offer fragments of their lives and identities.

From being the silent object of desire, the woman becomes the speaker, the subject. The trobairitz wrote of love, but theirs was not the abstract, coded, and politically charged fin'amor of the male troubadours, it was love experienced as real emotional engagement, often marked by passion and sensuality.

Although the surviving corpus of trobairitz poetry is considerably smaller than that of their male counterparts, it is more than sufficient to demonstrate their skill and fluency in the poetic code. They understood the conventions and they used them to express their own voices with power and precision.

Approximately 30 to 40 poems and fragments attributed to trobairitz have survived. Of these, only one is preserved with musical notation: A chantar m'er de so qu'ieu no volria (I have to sing about something that I would rather not), composed by Beatriz de Dia, also known as the Comtessa. In this canso, she gives voice to her frustration and sorrow over the distant and arrogant behavior of her lover. The first stanza:

> "I have to sing about something that I would rather not, so much I feel resentful towards my friend whom I love more than anything; but to him, are in vain my graces and courtesy, and my beauty, my merit, my sense, for still I am betrayed and deceived, as if I were unpleasant."

THE SUMPTUARY LAWS OF LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

By Nicola Rietiker

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The term 'sumptuary law' refers to a number of regulatory laws that were prominent from around the 13th to 16th centuries, that aimed to control the dress and behaviours of the social hierarchy of the period. They limited various types and colours of fabrics, furs, accessories and even food and drink by social rank. But why were the English nobility so invested in controlling what people could or could not wear?

The most immediate way to tell rich from poor is by the quality and style of their clothing. The rise of trade, commerce and increasing urbanisation in this period followed the significant decrease in the population across all social levels after the Black Death the century before. Skilled workers were fewer and more valuable, so people like merchants, bankers, or skilled craftsmen, gradually became wealthier and more influential. Luxury goods, which had previously only been available to members of the nobility and royalty, suddenly became more accessible.



Poulaines worn in Burgundy c.1470 near the end of their most fashionable period (Public Domain)

Displays of excess and fashion from wealthy commoners in growing urban centres like London blurred the lines between the different ranks of society, and directly challenged the rigid social hierarchy of centuries before. The introduction of sumptuary laws therefore aimed to reinforce the social order, prevent this newfound social mobility and the blurring of class distinctions based on an individual's appearance. The laws also served another purpose - by limiting the import of foreign goods, such as silks, spices and certain furs, and promoting local products like woolen cloth, lawmakers sought to stimulate the domestic wool industry, a critical aspect of the English economy.

The 1337 Statute of Apparel, and the subsequent 1363 Statute of Dress were both enacted under the reign of Edward III, and specified that only the king, queen and nobles could wear clothes made from silk, velvet or cloth-of-gold, and that the lower ranks of society could only wear wool or linen. Commoners were forbidden from wearing purple or scarlet, as these colours were considered symbols of royal authority, and were not allowed to wear any clothing lined with fur. Certain furs, such as ermine and sable, were also restricted to the ranks of royalty or the high nobility, while lower nobility could wear fox or rabbit. In the 15th Century, Edward IV introduced the Act of Apparel in 1463 - under this law, wealthy merchants were given permission to wear furs and silk if they were given special privileges by the crown. During this time, pointed shoes known as poulaines had become very fashionable, and Edward IV's law prohibited commoners from wearing shoes with long, pointed toes, setting limits on the length of shoes acceptable for commoners. Even for the nobility, the length of the poulaines should not exceed around two inches from the tip of the toe - any longer and the wearer risked accusations of social vanity, impiety, fines, and the occasional trip hazard!

Edward III's laws also aimed to control the consumption of luxury foods. Sugar and spices like cinnamon, pepper and cloves, were limited to the upper classes, in addition to meats like venison, wildfowl and some poultry. Wine was also viewed as a luxury commodity - the 1376 Statute on Wine forbade common people from drinking imported foreign wine, and limited them to beer and ale. Cosmetic items like fragrant oils or perfumes, powders, and other make-up, as well as luxury items like jewellery were limited. Even the size of social gatherings was limited, to prevent excessive displays of wealth that would mimic the feasts of the nobility.



Houppelande examples from Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, avril (Public Domain)

The punishments for disobeying sumptuary laws could range from fines, confiscation of the offending items, and repeat offenders could face imprisonment. Of course, a wealthy enough individual could simply pay the fines and carry on, and I imagine the odd bribe to the local authorities didn't go amiss.

So what does this mean for reenactors or living historians? If you're aiming to portray a particular rank between the 13th and 15th centuries I definitely think doing some reading on sumptuary laws is a good place to start your research, and they also make a great talking-point for interacting with members of the public at events. But please, if you're going to wear poulaines, practice walking in them!

PRINCELY BURIALS

of early Anglo-Saxon England

by Liam Norman

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Taplow glass claw beakers, British Library - Authors image

Throughout the late sixth and early seventh centuries a small number of elite burials featured mounds and an array of high-status grave goods. Two of the most elaborate examples of these burials are from Sutton Hoo and the discovery of King Childeric in Tournai (Belgium). This article will focus primarily on princely burials in England, discussing their importance to our understanding of history and burial rites. Princely burials, quite simply put, are a term coined to burials of the highest status which indicate the likely inhumation of a king or elite individual. The most well-known examples in England are Sutton Hoo, Prittlewell, and Taplow, with others such as Snape and Broomfield equally important to the study of such burials. These burials do not gain such a distinctive name just from the wealthy assemblage of objects within them, but from the laborious process of inhumation itself. All of the aforementioned burials featured huge mounds of earth above the individual, with the body itself placed in a wooden chamber. The burial chamber at Prittlewell is suggested to have weighed around 160kg, with over 10 oak trees needed to be felled and a significant work force required to build the chamber and create the mound itself.

Often throughout the sixth and seventh centuries, cemeteries, or a cluster of burials are placed over previous Bronze Age or Iron age barrows, with around 25 percent of burial sites being identified as having significant importance with such ancient sites. Some of the notable princely burials comprised of ancient re-use involve Sutton Hoo, Taplow, Snape, and Benty Grange. Although princely burials are not the only occasions for reuse of ancient sites, these elite barrows began to consist of single burials which were not smaller than the previous ancient barrows, but instead dominated the landscape and often emulated them. This suggests their burials were not forms of a collective perception of their past, but instead were attempts at imprinting their control and lineage to the land surrounding them.

Grave goods found in princely burials often share similarities, with gold-adorned buckles, weaponry such as spears and swords, and objects portraying the social aspects of life. For example, drinking horns with decorative terminals and glass drinking vessels as well as a musical instrument known as a lyre. Some of the material culture would have been imported into the country as gifts, or perhaps even brought back by the individual themselves when returning from military service. A collection of objects from Sutton Hoo are Byzantine in origin, with a great silver dish excavated, containing the control stamps of the Byzantine emperor Anastasius (491-518CE). Coins from Prittlewell are Merovingian in origin and were in use between 570-670CE, with a Byzantine spoon found dating to the sixth century. A similar spoon was found at Sutton Hoo, with the inscription of 'saul' and 'paul' meaning these gifts may have travelled from the east to the kings as a baptismal gift. Gold foils were discovered at Prittlewell, which are suggested to have been placed over the eyes when buried. Some of these Christian objects demonstrate the turbulent religious views among the kings throughout the conversion period, or at least people who buried them.

The combination of reusing ancient sites to create towering, impressive mounds of earth, while filling the burial chamber full of the highest quality objects from both local and continental regions, projects the wealth and importance of the families and king buried. The princely style burials in England only appear throughout the late sixth and early seventh centuries, in which the mid to late seventh century witnesses a rise in the number of wealthy female burials. These burials of elite women are often 'bed burials' such as at Trumpington, Harpole, and a unique example in the North of England at Street House, North-East Yorkshire. Considering this, princely burials are a form of ritual burial through a relatively short period of time, in which aimed to stamp their authority and importance into the landscape.





Sutton Hoo shoulder clasp , BL - Liam Norman



Taplow belt buckle , BL - Liam Norman



AN ELEGANT WEAPON FOR A MORE CIVILIZED AGE:

Reconstructing the late Medieval balistrarius and his work

By Elisa Trentin

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In a world - the mid 13th century communal reality of Northern Italy - where a person's identity was largely defined by their association with a specific guild, it is only natural that, when trying to build the impression of the common citizen, we look, first and foremost, to the profession he could have practised in his daily life. The question is: how can we, as reenactors, offer an interpretation of how life in the bottega (the workshop) was like, and of what the knowledge, the abilities and techniques employed by its artisans were? The answer lies, in our case, in a journey through sources. A rather peculiar study in this field comes from the impression of the crossbow-maker, the balistrarius, by fellow reenactor Marco Dal Poz (you may know him as @balestrum25piloti on social media).

Over the course of several years, he has gathered enough knowledge and material to be able to flawlessly impersonate this very specific figure. We start, as every good reconstruction should, with some thorough research. One needs to understand many things: the role and social status of the crossbow-maker within his town - a topic that could take up an article by itself, and sadly will not be explored here - the life and environment inside the bottega, its products, the techniques, materials and know-hows of its workers. We are helped in our strenuous research, mostly, by written sources: we are lucky enough to still have access to the Venetian Capitolari delle Arti, largely composed during the 13th century, but observed and adjourned for centuries thereafter. These books are of the utmost importance for every reconstruction in our geographical and chronological context, as they were written to regulate life in the bottega, covering its every juridical and material aspect; their relevance is exceptional in the case of the balistrarius, who seldom appears in other local sources. Still pertaining to the Italian territory, we can also rely on South Italian and, especially, Genoese sources, both local, but also from across the Channel, as we possess documents about payments made from the English to the aforementioned artisans, whose fame was rapidly rising in this period.

The second step is to look at the materiality of the profession: how were crossbows built? What were the main techniques and materials used? Here it becomes necessary to move away from period sources and start interacting with academics, historians and archaeologists who have studied the subject, and may have had more luck in handling findings from museums. Some excellent crossbow-related publications have surfaced in the last few years: Die Hornbogenarmbrust: Geschichte und Technik (Verlag Angelika Hörnig, 2006) by Roger Richter, and the more recent Die Armbrust im Hochmittelalter: Eine technikgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Aussagewert, Realitätsgehalt und Aktualität von Text, Bild und Objekt (Weger Verlag, 2022) by Fabian Brenker.



Images- Marco Dal Poz - Compagnia dell'Antica Torre

These books provide the reader with measurements, in-depth analyses from findings, new sources, critical observations and insights which are often of crucial help, providing new points of view. Discovering all of these details may be thrilling at first, but can sometimes pose new challenges to the aspiring craftsman, were he to discover, for example, that the male Alpine ibex (a wild goat whose horns seem to have been one of the most used materials in the construction of composite bows in 13th century Italy) is now a protected species. It is in these more extreme cases, though, that the academic publications come in handy, for who would have ever thought that the horns of the water buffalo have a physico-chemical structure that strongly resembles that of the ibex, and thus are a near-perfect match for the construction of crossbow-bows? The aspiring balestrarius has to give up the tiniest bit of historical accuracy, but at least he can cite his sources, and, most importantly, he won't get arrested for poaching.

The last, and arguably, the most boring part of this journey is the organization of all the knowledge acquired: one must catalogue everything, from writings, to findings, to iconographies, according to the time period and the geographical area. From here on, one can begin experimenting, sourcing the materials, building the necessary tools, trying out the techniques he's been studying in books, up until he's satisfied with his work and has in his hands a crossbow which is built head-to-toe with the know-hows of a 13th century craftsman. But mind you, this is neither an easy, nor a quick process: the research alone can take years (and it is never truly complete), and it demands much dedication and much attention, to the point where the list of "to do's" becomes longer than that of the accomplishments. But reenactors wouldn't be reenactors without a sprinkle of unhealthy obsession over the most "menial" things, would we?



Image - Marco Dal Poz - Compagnia dell'Antica Torre



GALLOWGLASS: IRISH MERCENARIES

By Gabriel Garcia
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In the 13th century, a great lineage of warriors began to abandon the old Norse settlements on the scattered isles of western Scotland. Clans journeyed south on the gray seas until they met dark cliffs that strained upward and yielded to green country roaming sheep and holy houses, which marked a path to the castles, and there, the warriors traveled to offer their services. These were the Gallowglass, elite mercenaries forged by Viking and Scottish warrior ancestry. Each man had been selected for strength and stature, and he possessed neither fear of death nor mercy for his enemies. These hills of medieval Ireland were ruled then by Indigenous Gaelic clans and Anglo-Irish lords who raided and killed one another for land, goods, and pride. They hired 80-man groups or battles of these traveling Gallowglasses for their violent ends, often for three-month terms or permanent contracts.

In 1316, the daughter of a chief strategically hired a band of Gallowglass to assassinate her rival cousin. They executed the contract, collected the blood money, and continued to lead raids on rival clans. Their presence shifted the dynamics of Irish warfare, which had previously revolved around skirmishes and fleeting charges. Full-scale wars and invasions were waged with their mighty Viking-inspired axes, and for the right price, the Gallowglass afforded Ireland a violent check on the rising power of England.

When they first arrived in 1169, the English conquered large stretches of the country at the king's behest. Although the Irish forced them back to Dublin and the surrounding region called the Pale, the English forever sought to supplant the Indigenous centers of power in Ireland. They attempted to outlaw the Irish language and intermarriage with native Irish.

Centuries of the English presence in Ireland bore witness to constant horrific warfare. In 1423, the northern O'Donnell and O'Neill clans rallied the Irish of Ulster in a southward march against the English. With them marched the Gallowglass of a clan called the McSweeneys led by Mulmery McSweeney. The war camp hummed eagerly on the eve of battle. The Gallowglasses were known to revel with cards and drink, and around the fire, they would shout bellicose promises to slaughter the enemy.

Rising at dawn, the clans and Gallowglass made their way into county Meath, whereupon English troops met them across a field; standing in their shining ranks, yeoman knights and halberdiers all gathered under a gallant commander, one English knight whose esteemed name had been lost to time.

Irish kerns made the first barefoot charge, volleying their spears before falling back. The sound of bagpipes then signaled the onslaught of McSweeney's in a crash of iron; the hulking Gallowglass cleaved open the chests and skulls of their enemies. The English line shattered, and a hundred fallen English lay dead. Mulmery McSweeney met the English commander on the red battlefield. In raising his great ax, he slew the knights and declared victory. The spoils were great, and the Irish negotiated peace in exchange for tribute. As it happened, the Gallowglass had begun to supplement their ranks with strong native-born Irishmen, and even minor victories over English forces represented the defeats of a crown that laid claim to Scottish and Irish homelands alike.



Albrecht Dürer's drawing of Irish mercenaries in Europe.
Wikimedia commons

However, a Gallowglass was nevertheless a mercenary. Some bolstered the English colonial ranks and served as the trusted guards for English nobles in Dublin. It was known that a Gallowglass would cut down one of its own if a mission so required, and he often needlessly killed civilians in his pillaging. Like knights bereft of chivalry and scorned as heartless killers, the Gallowglass served for their wages and not for love nor affection, but they served valiantly.

In the 16th century, as Henry VIII claimed all of Ireland, thousands of Gallowglass found themselves in the employ of earls who rebelled against a full-scale English conquest of Ireland. Chased into the bogs in 1582, eighty Gallowglasses stood their ground to permit the escape of their wounded lord Gerald Fitzgerald, the rebel earl of Desmond. Many died perishing in those dark waters.

At any rate, Queen Elizabeth put a bounty on Fitzgerald in the O'Moriarty clan center. The earl's head was recovered the following year, and the English would, in subsequent years, impose martial law, outlaw the catholic church, and partition Irish land for southern Scot and English settlers.

As clans and earls fell with their Gallowglass, Queen Elizabeth abandoned hiring unruly Irish Gallowglass, and the elite class of mercenaries sank into legend. The Gallowglass were resigned to weathered graves and Shakespearean sonnets. They dominated Ireland for three centuries, and it was remembered that they were men of great and mighty bodies, cruel without compassion, and that the most significant force of battle consisted of choosing instead to die than to yield, highlighting their unwavering commitment to their cause.





EDWARD'S NOTORIOUS FAVOURITE

By Kamilla Agayeva @HERTFORDSHIRE.WITCH

DESPAIR.
SILENT DESPAIR AND HOPELESSNESS.

Nine long days of awaiting what was inevitably destined to happen.

Had King Edward II ever thought that his closest friend and favorite raised by him to unimaginable heights, showered with his grace and gifts, would one day be condemned to death by the barons? Could he have imagined that throughout all those long days, as Piers Gaveston, earl of Cornwall, awaited the execution of his death sentence, he would cling to hope for deliverance until the very end? Yet on June 19, 1312, instead of the king's messengers, it was the executioners who entered the door of the dungeon where he was imprisoned.

THE LAST HOPE FADED.

The king would long mourn his friend, swear vengeance in his name, and order prayers for the repose of his soul.

But in the end, all that remained were memories...

He is a villain, the most powerful magnates of England admonished. He empties the treasury and sends the funds to the Continent. He has turned the king's heart away from his loyal vassals and favours robbers and murderers. He has persuaded the king to start a war without their, the barons', consent. "And all the aforesaid he does cunningly, falsely and treacherously to the great disgrace and loss of the realm, the deprivation of the crown, and the manifold destruction of the people" (Vita Edwardi Secundi).



Edward II shown receiving the English crown - British Library

The barons' bitter jealousy and resentment, inflamed by Gaveston's unparalleled closeness to the king, were only worsened by Edward's own actions. The undeservedly exalted Gascon was too self-assured. He defeated them in a jousting tournament at Walingford in December 1307 – only to be accused of dishonesty at once. At the king's behest, he served as regent of England while Edward traveled to France to marry Princess Isabella. Gaveston donned royal purple at the joint coronation of Edward and Isabella – a color reserved solely for royalty – and played one of the most prominent roles in the ceremony. Humiliated, the magnates sought to exile him, but the king instead appointed his favorite Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, where Piers proved himself a capable leader. Upon his return, he mocked the barons openly, bestowing upon them scornful nicknames.

Gaveston was unbearable!

And yet, he was handsome, athletic and intelligent. One of the finest knights of his age. He had to be removed at any cost.



Gaveston's Cross - Warwickshire

As Vita Edwardi Secundi declares:

"Piers Gaveston has led the king astray, counselled him badly and persuaded him deceitfully and in many ways to do evil... Piers Gaveston, as a public enemy of the king and of the kingdom, shall be utterly cast out and exiled, not only from England, but from Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Gascony, and from every land as well beyond the sea as on this side of the sea subject to the lordship of the king of England, for ever and without return."

This was the twentieth article of the Ordinances, drafted by the Lords as part of their proposed reforms. To his horror, Edward realized they imposed severe restrictions on his authority, but the twentieth article struck him with particular dread.

In truth, there was no evidence that Gaveston had committed the crimes laid at his feet. The king did not spend so much time with his favourite that Gaveston could have truly interfered with governance, as alleged. His closeness to Edward did not prevent the birth of an heir – the future Edward III was born in 1312, nor did the king lack progeny, as he already had an illegitimate son. The favourite never flaunted his Gascon origins, and despite accusations, he did not pack the court with foreigners; most of his retinue were Englishmen. Gaveston did not hunger for power, and when he held it, he wielded it with restraint. He did not plunder the treasury, nor did he zealously exploit even the revenues from his own lands. The true offense was this: he enjoyed the king's unwavering patronage and favour. And for that, the English barons would never forgive him.



Initial from the charter granting Gaveston the earldom of Cornwall, showing the arms of England at top, and Gaveston's coat of arms impaled with those of de Clare below.

Cornered, Edward was forced to accept the Ordinances in full. Gaveston was to leave the kingdom for the third time – this time, permanently. Yet despite the mortal peril, Piers returned to court in early 1312. The reason was that on January 13, his wife, Margaret, gave birth to their first child – a daughter, Joan. What followed was a chain of fatal missteps, each leading inexorably to his doom.

The mighty earls would not pardon the king for daring to recall his friend and restore his titles, defying the Ordinances.

The ill-fated favourite had to be eliminated – once and for all.

So, they seized him.
Tried him. Sentenced him.
Nine days. An eternity of waiting for the executioner's stroke.
The last hope guttered out – like a dying spark, like a life cut short on Blacklow Hill...



THY KINGDOM COME

The Margrave Wars of Bohemia

By Tyler Batstone @TYLER_BATSTONE

The conflict began in 1376 AD with the House of Luxembourg effectively ruling the kingdom of Bohemia as well as the Holy Roman Empire during the reign of Charles IV. The previous Margraves' War saw conflict between Charles' nephews, Jobst and his younger brother Prokop who would frequently attack the other's properties and land holdings over inheritance rights until one of them capitulated. The two were already at odds with one another being on opposite sides of the Papal schism of 1378 with Prokop supporting Pope Clement VIII of Avignon and Jobst supporting Pope Urban VI of Rome. During that same year, Charles IV had died and his son Wenceslaus IV had succeeded him in becoming the king of Bohemia and began to support Prokop's claim to the Moravian lands whilst Jobst allied with Wenceslaus' brother, King Sigismund of Hungary. In 1398, Prokop's acquisition of church lands from the bishop of Olomouc led to his excommunication and a year later, Sigismund crossed over into Bohemia with an army to oppose both Prokop and Wenceslaus.

With the help of Jobst and a coalition of anti-Wenceslaus nobles calling themselves the 'League of Lords', he kidnapped and imprisoned both of them and began to sack the rest of Bohemia into submission with the goal of usurping his brother's throne. Jobst, now realizing the utter chaos he had unintentionally unleashed across the land, switched sides and began to oppose Sigismund and his conquest. During his invasion, Sigismund's eye became fixed on the wealthy city of Kutná Hora as a means of accessing his brother's wealth to continue the funding of his army. Meanwhile his Hetman, Sir Markvart Von Úlice, was ordered to attack and besiege the fortress of Suchdol owned by Sir Petr Píšek, a supporter of Wenceslaus, in 1402. The siege was a success and Sigismund's army captured the castle while Von Úlice was killed after being shot in the throat by an arrow during battle.

In 1403, Sigismund focused on controlling the production of silver in the kingdom and attacked the silver mining town of Stříbrná Skalice. The town's burgrave Sir Racek Kobyla of Dvorce, fled with his subjects to the castle of Talmberk, and later continued on their way to the town of Rattay, where Racek was welcomed and sheltered by Sir Hanus of the House of Lipa. With the kingdom becoming more destabilized, the members of the nobility who supported Wenceslaus had begun to employ robber barons and mercenaries to wage unconventional warfare tactics on the League of Lords and Sigismund's army throughout Bohemia. This is where infamous robber knight, Hynek I Suchý Čert of Kunštát and Jevišovice, known more commonly as 'Dry Devil' gets his spotlight in history. Hynek was already a supporter of Prokop during the previous Margrave Wars and turned his efforts towards Sigismund after Prokop's arrest and imprisonment.

By the end of the year, John II of Liechtenstein rescued Wenceslaus from his imprisonment in Vienna and safely transported him back to Bohemia where he resumed the throne as king of Bohemia. After leaving Bohemia for a year to deal with political treacheries back in Hungary, Sigismund returned to Bohemia with a massive army in 1404 as a last attempt to usurp the throne from his brother. The culmination of almost thirty years of fighting led to the decisive Siege of Znojmo in 1404. The battle saw use of both trebuchets and cannons to attempt to breach the city walls that were being defended by Dry Devil, Sir Jan Sokol of Lamberk, and their armed forces. The siege lasted six weeks and was only lifted after an outbreak of dysentery in the Hungarian military camp forced Sigismund and his allies to retreat back to their home.



The Town of Kutná Hora in modern day Czech Republic - Public Domain

A year later, peace was brokered between Jobst, Wenceslaus, and Sigismund as well as the release of Prokop and the Moravian Margrave Wars came to a close. Prokop died that same year due to his treatment from captivity and Jobst succeeded in being elected King of the Romans, a title he held for a year before his death. With the heirs of Moravia dead, Wenceslaus IV inherited the land and properties of his cousins, uniting the crownlands of the kingdom under his control. Racek Koblya, along with famous noble cutthroats such as Matthew the Leader, Jan Sokol of Lamberk, and a young Jan Žižka, conducted robberies and guerilla warfare on Henry III of Rosenberg, the last major opposition to Wenceslaus' rule. The wars were so devastating to the economic, political, and religious stability of the kingdom that they created a wound in Bohemia that would never heal. These wounds only festered more as the aftermath of the war paved the way for the inevitable Hussite Wars, firmly affecting the kingdom of Bohemia and leaving it changed forever.

Aerial view of Trosky Castle , Public Domain





SEARCHING FOR THE LAST KING OF ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

Harold Godwinson, England's Golden Warrior

WWW.THREADSTOTHEPAST.COM

By Paula Lofting

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A NEW BIOGRAPHY THAT AIMS TO SHED A NEW LIGHT ON ONE OF ENGLAND'S GREATEST HEROES.

The Battle of Hastings seems to be a far less known event than it was once. Go back twenty or so years ago and more people seem to have been familiar with it than they are now. Go back even further to the 900th anniversary of the battle in 1966, and most people would know this pivotal event in our history.

Today I am hard put to find anyone apart from die hard historians who would know that our last Saxon English monarch, Harold II, died in 1066 on a field near Hastings. They are more likely to know that the first king of England was William the Conqueror – also known as William, Duke of Normandy, or William the Bastard. Most people need prompting about the king who was shot in the eye with an arrow (a myth though), and that is as far as people go with what they know of him. Beyond this, he is mostly relegated to the shadows in English history and is probably less well known than Alfred the Great. I wanted to do something to rectify that and shine a light on what I believe to be a great hero in English history.

Harold Godwinson's reign of nine months and nine days was one of the shortest, which partly explains his obscure presence in history. However, Harold's story spans some forty odd years, and for at least twenty years of his life he played a lead role in the events that led him to become Edward the Confessor's successor, and eventually his death in that same year. He came from a high-profile family who dominated the first half of the eleventh century. Their wealth exceeded even that of the Confessor's when they were at the height of their influence. Harold's sister, Edith, was queen of England, and their patriarch, Earl Godwin, rose to become the second most important man in the kingdom.

Though not the only famous family of their time, the Godwinsons have also fascinated contemporary and modern historians, like Edward Freeman and Frank Barlow, for decades. However, no Godwinson story can be told without Harold at the centrepiece, and no story of Harold can be fully understood without a discussion of his family. This is why I have endeavoured to include the members in such a way that adds clarity to the narrative but with the caveat that this is Harold's book and not a book about the Godwinsons.

People often ask where my interest in Harold Godwinson came from, and I tell them it was not so much the man himself who lured me, but the time period that drew me to him. Writing a series about a fictional family set in England in the years leading up to the Battle of Hastings and the Norman Conquest, he naturally crops up as an important player, so it was necessary to do the research not just to create an authentic historical background, but an authentic Harold Godwinson.

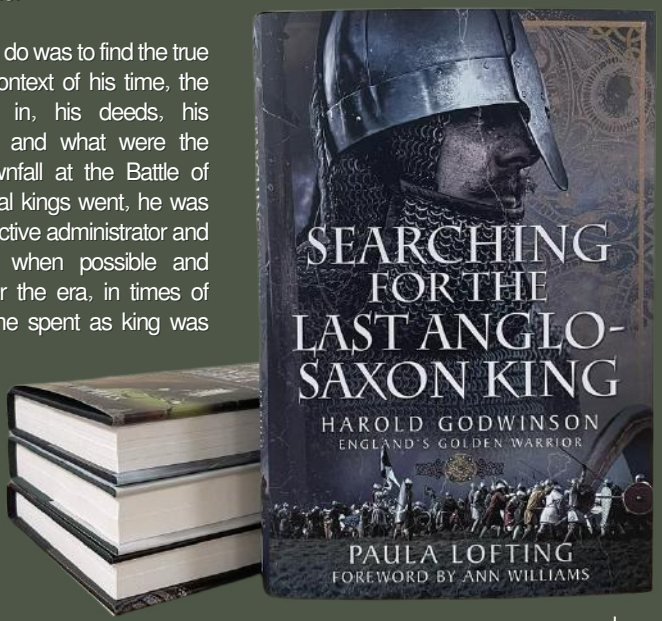
The Norman sources have always been very derogatory about Harold and a lot of Welsh historians refer to him negatively. The former have been especially vitriolic and the later the source, the more embellished they became. I became determined to find out the reason why, and what I found was that in order to justify his regicide of an anointed king and invasion of England, William needed Harold to look as monstrous and tyrannical as possible. He had to show him as someone who ascended the throne by force, rather than by the agreement of the witan, an oath breaker rather than someone who was coerced to swear on holy relics with thinly veiled threats. He was an honoured guest who had perjured himself before God, rather than a hostage whose release came with conditions. In other words, for the crime of 'usurping' the throne from the man whose right to it did not exist, he had to die.

Essentially, what I wanted to do was to find the true essence of Harold in the context of his time, the world in which he lived in, his deeds, his achievements and failures and what were the events that led to his downfall at the Battle of Hastings. As far as medieval kings went, he was hardly a monster but an effective administrator and diplomat, avoiding conflict when possible and responding appropriately for the era, in times of crisis. And what little time he spent as king was spent well until that fateful day in October 1066, when luck went against him and his life was brought to an end by I four man Franco/ Norman hit squad, butchered on a field near Hastings.



IMAGE BY @REGBPHOTOGRAPHY

"Searching for the Last Anglo-Saxon King, Harold Godwinson, England's golden Warrior" was published at the end of February 2025, and a biographic of King Edmund Ironside is also in the pipeline. Paula has also written a short essay about Edmund for Iain Dale's Kings and Queens, articles for historical magazines. When she is not writing, she is a psychiatric nurse, mother of three grown up kids and grandmother of two and also re-enacts the Anglo-Saxon/Viking period with Regia Anglorum.



HEDEBY HYGGE:

Decorating the Early Medieval Home

By Leah O'Cuinneagain-De Bernardi
@EOFORWICPROJECT



As living historians, we aim to present a snapshot of daily life in the past. The majority of people spent the most of their lives at home, something we can relate to today. But what were the trappings of an Anglo-Saxon or "Viking" home?

Whether you're looking to spruce up your living history encampment or add some evidence-based historical décor to your home, this article is for you.

FOLLOW 'THE EOFORWIC PROJECT' ON WORDPRESS

IMAGE - WEAVERS AT LOOM AT ODINS ODENSE - BY SARAH MURRAY



Image by Leah OCDB - bedding at Fyrkat Viking Fortress Denmark

WALL-HANGINGS AND CURTAINS

A simple wall-hanging can transform a space instantly. Tapestries, curtains and wall-hangings are widely attested in English and Scandinavian literature alike, with Beowulf's hall Heorot containing "Gold thread shone, In the wall-hangings, woven scenes That attracted and held the eye's attention". Íslendinga saga too describes a wealthy household, with multiple rooms "entirely hung with tapestries." They feature in English wills in the 10th and 11th centuries, with rich individuals sometimes owning several.

These tapestries and wall-hangings could take different forms, likely based on local taste. The 11th century Bayeux Tapestry is a famous example of an embroidery (not a tapestry!), with a colourful narrative design worked in wool on a linen backing. However, the Jämtland region of Sweden has produced several different wall hangings dating across the Viking Age, all with fairly similar woven-in geometric designs in a predominantly red and white palette.

Wall-hangings are an eye-catching way to decorate, but they can also be functional. They provide insulation and even a plain cloth can help divide your living space, affording privacy and somewhere to store your modern belongings.

Curtains were used to surround beds and divide rooms, with the 11th century Norman writer Goscelin mentioning curtains when he describes the improvement of some very poor lodgings with soft furnishings.



Image by Leah OCDB - bedding at Fyrkat Viking Fortress Denmark



Image by Leah OCDB - room at Oldenburger Wallmuseum Germany

CUSHIONS & PILLOWS

Cushions may not scream "Viking", but the evidence is plentiful!

From Norway, there's the Øksnes pillow- it was a 2/2 twill wool square of 30x30cm, stuffed with eider, cormorant and seagull feathers. The Mammen grave in Denmark also contained a wool pillow, with an unusual ergonomic shape and rounded almond-shaped gores in each side. Dyed blue and decorated with a contrasting line of herringbone stitching, it's a subtly beautiful piece.

Pillows being found in graves supports Ibn Fadlan's description of a nobleman being buried in his boat with cushions beneath him. Pillows for the living were of a similar shape and size- the Bayeux Tapestry and Caedmon Manuscript show patterned and plain rounded pillows under the backsides of saints, kings and Biblical figures.

Silk cushions are a luxurious way to liven up an elite-level encampment. King Knud's late 11thC grave in Odense Cathedral contains a samite silk cushion still under his head. The precious silk was likely already vintage when it was buried and was pieced together to make the cushion.

BEDDING & BLANKETS

Bed clothes are frequently mentioned in Anglo-Saxon wills, but the archaeological evidence is less conclusive. After all, how does one tell a blanket from a cloak, or indeed from a shroud?

Norway's Skjoldehamn burial preserved a naturally-coloured and -patterned woven blanket, which archaeologists have identified as early 11th century in date and probably of Scandinavian manufacture. A similar textile was found in a boat burial at Rolvsøy. We might consider leaving someone our bedding to be unhygienic and strange, but textiles were far more valuable in the Medieval period.

One Aelfric Modercope leaves his friend Bishop Aelfric "my tent, and my bed-clothing, the best that I had out on my journey with me" and a certain wealthy Wynflaed leaves several sets of bedding to her loved ones, contained in chests and complete with bed-curtains and linen coverlets. Bedding could be extremely costly, with Eyrbyggja saga describing a rich bed being laid with "richly-embroidered bedding", "English sheets" and "silken blankets."



Image by Leah OCDB - room 2 at Oldenburger Wallmuseum Germany

IMAGE - THE LOOM AT ODINS ODENSE - BY SARAH MURRAY



TOWELS, TABLECLOTHS & NAPKINS

Food is usually at the centre of our encampments, yet table settings seem an awfully modern conceit. After all, did the Vikings appreciate a nicely-set table?

The sagas occasionally describe dinner-tables spread with tablecloths, with the diners cleaning their hands with napkins. The quality of these cloths could indicate the type of hospitality you were offered- in The Story of Burnt Njal, Flosi takes offence to being given a raggedy napkin and tears off a piece of the tablecloth rather than using the one he was given!

In The Lay of Rig, Mother lays a table for dinner with a "figured white cloth of linen". Hers is a genteel kind of household, so perhaps poorer families did not own specific tableclothes or they were of a lower quality.

Contemporary artwork supports the case for table dressing: MS Cotton Tiberius C VI's feast scene features a voluminous tablecloth and noble diners on the Bayeux Tapestry are served by waiters with dishcloths.



CHILD PILGRIMS IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

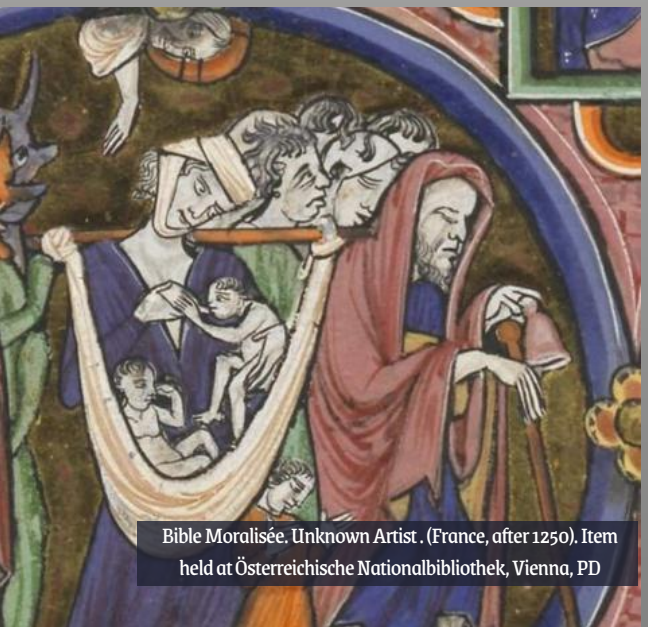
By Bethan Catherine Watts

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Despite its irreverential comedic take on pilgrimage in Medieval England, Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales (c. 1387) paints one of the most vivid pictures of the celebration of saints cults in the English Middle Ages. Yet amongst the thirty-one pilgrims embarking on their journey – both literally and spiritually – toward the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral, one group of worshippers have been completely omitted: the children.

Did children go on pilgrimage in Medieval England? A brief glance at records like hagiographies (the life stories of saints), miracula (their miracle stories) and pilgrim records suggests not. But nestled between mentions of unearthly miracles, dusty relics and impressive shrines, small faces begin to peek out. By closely studying these sources, we begin to reveal child pilgrims in Medieval England, as well as the reasons for their journeys, and even how they travelled. In fact, despite their absence from The Canterbury Tales, records show that Becket's shrine at Canterbury was one of the most popular for child pilgrims. At least five children had been recorded by Benedict of Peterborough in his chronicle of the martyr's life (written c.1171-1173) visiting the shrine. They included a seven-year old girl who had travelled on horseback from Folkestone to seek aid for a crushed hand, a young boy named Durand who sought a cure for earache, and the daughter of Guibert of Thanet, who had walked to the shrine with the assistance of a cane; all children were miraculously cured (Benedict of Peterborough, The Passion and Miracles of St. Thomas Becket).



Bible Moralisée. Unknown Artist . (France, after 1250). Item held at Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, PD

Some historians have taken issue with the idea of sick children embarking on pilgrimage. Shulamith Shahar wrote that it was 'impossible' to transport ailing children to shrines for intercessory cures, 'unless it was nearby' to their homes. But the sources suggest otherwise. When the efforts of local healers and physicians had been exhausted, it was no surprise that anxious parents turned to saints as a last-ditch attempt to seek cures for their children. William Freebridge of Aldermanbury walked with his nine-month old son Miles from London to the shrine of King Henry VI at Windsor in thanksgiving for the infant's recovery after choking on a pilgrim badge (obtained coincidentally from an earlier pilgrimage to Becket's tomb).

At Oxford, a worried father took his sick daughter to be measured for a candle the length of her body to be laid at the shrine of St. Frideswide; she was cured (Edwards, Medical and Spiritual Healing, p. 186). Even monarchs begged for saintly intercession for their ailing children. In 1274, life-sized candles of six-year old Prince Henry, son of Edward I, had been sent to the shrines of Becket, St. James at Reading, and Edward the Confessor at Westminster. But despite the best efforts of parents and child, the pilgrimages and offerings were not enough; Henry died later that year .

Some children embarked on pilgrimage without their parents, perhaps in the company of other pilgrims, relatives, or even friends. In twelfth century Northumberland, a leprous young girl who had spent three years receiving treatment at a leprosarium at Durham, was cured upon a visit to St. Godric at his shrine at Finchale alongside other sufferers (Orme, Medieval Children, p. 109). St. Swithin interceded on behalf of a deaf and mute boy who had walked alongside three blind women from the Isle of Wight to Winchester. And in one charming tale, childhood historian Barbara Hanawalt recounts how three teenaged pilgrims passed the time as they walked to Windsor to pray at the tomb of Henry VI by sharing 'customary stories' and 'trifles'.

Some of the most popular pilgrimage sites for children in Medieval England were the tombs of child martyrs. England had at least four child saints between 1144 to the Reformation of the 1530s. William of Norwich, a pre-adolescent, attracted crowds of pilgrims from Norfolk and Suffolk, including one teenage boy who had swallowed a viper swallowed in his sleep; he was cured by drinking Holy Water laced with shavings of St. William's tombstone. Elsewhere, shrines celebrating young St. Harold of Gloucester, Robert of Bury, and 'Little' St. Hugh of Lincoln continually attracted both adults and children alike. One historian even credited Little St. Hugh with the 'most popular' pilgrimage site in England after Becket.



Seven Sacraments Altarpiece. Rogier van der Weyden . (The Netherlands, ca. 1440-1445). Item held at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp

But English children did not only travel to the shrines of English saints; some went further afield, embarking on pilgrimages to sites dedicated to St. Elmo (the patron of childhood illness), and jolly St. Nicholas (who patronised children and gift-giving). One adolescent boy was found buried at the cemetery of St Mary Magdalen, Winchester, wearing the scallop shell pilgrim badge of St. James, suggesting that he had travelled as far as Santiago de Compostela in Spain to seek a miracle.

These sources reveal that children did actively and routinely embark on pilgrimage in Medieval England, whether alongside adult companions or completely alone. Their faith had driven them to seek aid and offer thanksgivings, even at the most dire periods of their young lives.

PILLOW TALK & POLITICS: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL SCOTTISH POLITICS

By Sian-Alice Higley



The role of women in politics has always been limited, especially during the medieval period. That is not to say that women did not participate or have any influence when it came to male political agenda. It does mean however that they had to find less obvious ways to change the narrative and gently impact. Their contribution to politics and significance cannot be measured against that of men, politics was created by men and women were largely used as conduits for political consequence. We, of course, will never know the detail of the private, intimate conversations that may have taken place but we can rightly assume that they did happen, just as they continue to happen to today. In terms of Scottish women in national politics, we are limited by not only their gender but also their nationality as succinctly summarised by historian Elizabeth Ewan.

Scotland during this time was turbulent as it changed from disjointed clans to something that looks more like the country we recognise today. The continual infighting left its domestic policy weakened and when combined with periodic outbreaks of war with England, international politics could be regarded as shaky too. With the outbreak of the first War of Independence, Scotland entered the fourteenth century with an unstable line of succession and no clear male heir to the throne. The only option they were left with was the largely unknown female entity that was Margaret, Maid of Norway but there seemed to be little opposition to this interestingly. Her untimely death before ascending to the Scottish throne only undermined the instability of the Scottish line of succession and its monarchy.

Women's roles were clearly defined by the church and society to largely embody that of the Virgin Mary, to act as wife and mother in subservience to patriarchal society. Piety was a core value and informed many of the decisions made by women and also those made for them. Pilgrimages were an important part of a noble woman's remit and depending on the circumstances, varying shrines would be visited in the hope of a favourable outcome. Margaret of Denmark is recorded to have visited the shrine of St. Ninian on two separate occasions which coincided with the birth of two royal children to add to the line of succession.

The image of a king was highly important at this time in history and their wives of course played a large part in this. The marriage of a King solidified his status but a Queen also had the ability to soften his image. It spoke of the continuance of his line to succeed the throne after him and offered him a chance at legacy. With this position of influence that queens found themselves in, they were able to gently and often discreetly influence their husbands. The use of womanly wiles has likely been used since the beginning of humankind and was not limited solely to husband and wife but also mistresses and partners. If Shakespeare's play is to be believed then this is exactly what happened to Macbeth.

There are of course examples of Scottish noblewomen who did participate in open politics especially during the end of the fourteenth century particularly at Anglo-Scottish tournaments. Queens were said to have taken an active role in diplomatic exchanges and at a time when English and Scottish relations could turn on its head at any given moment, any positive political dialogue is commendable. Following on with this theme of women as political pawns, is the imprisonment of the Countess of Buchanan and Mary Bruce by



Margaret Tudor, from Hours of James IV of Scotland, c. 1503 - Public Domain

Edward I. Their continued incarceration into the reign of Edward II highlights their political worth as prisoners and could be used as leverage to agree on the most favourable terms for their release. The Countess of Buchanan and Mary Bruce of course did not have any choice in being political pawns (as few women did) and whether they would have chosen this state of affairs for themselves is a different matter.



Lerwick Town Hall stained glass window of Margaret, Maid of Norway - Public Domain

Ultimately, women were only allowed to outwardly participate or influence the political landscape in Scotland when given the allowance and opportunity by men. Noble women's very existence was used to influence political consequences through marriage and the production of heirs but direct political influence was limited. Their value politically was evident but their ability to channel this value was dictated by men. I believe that this actively led women to rely on other means of influence to impact political agenda by using what they had at their disposal. Softly and gently whispering in the ear of a man as all generations of women have done, the outcome is often the same be he king or not.



GLASTONBURY MEDIEVAL FESTIVAL

BY ANDREW CHORLEY @AWD.HISTORIES

Tucked away in the picturesque countryside of Somerset lies the storied town of Glastonbury. While it is best known for its world-renowned music festival, Glastonbury holds another gem up its historic sleeve — the Glastonbury Medieval Fayre. Over the years, this charming event has gathered an impressive array of re-enactors and living history encampments, creating a vibrant tapestry of the past brought vividly to life.

The Fayre has breathed fresh energy into history, attracting a wonderfully diverse audience, from young children to an encouraging number of teenagers and young adults. Yet, the true heart of the event lies in the passion of the re-enactors and the welcoming spirit of the living history communities, all eager to share their knowledge and bring the past into the present.

Among the many groups present, Lovell's Reenactment Companye stood out. Their camp was alive with a fascinating range of medieval games and displays of equipment, with visitors delighting in a lively match of Four Seasons Chess, Four seasons chess is a version of chess for four players, dating back to at least 1283. Follow them on Facebook!



For the aspiring knight, a lively joust offered all the classic trappings of good versus evil. Though it may not have been the finest joust I have witnessed, it nonetheless delivered excellent entertainment, especially for families seeking a taste of medieval adventure.

One of the true highlights was reconnecting with Ben from Hiow-Beorht. His passion for calligraphy and illumination is endlessly inspiring. If you ever have the opportunity to attend one of his workshops, I highly recommend t—you'll not only gain fascinating historical insights but also begin to develop a beautiful skill set that is sure to impress. You can follow Ben and his incredible work here: Hiow-Beorht on Facebook.



Overall this is a great event to add to the calendar and if you wish to attend next year please do check it out .

glastonburyabbey
medievalfayre.co.uk





ABOUT US

Founded in 2022, the Living Medieval Magazine brings the medieval world to life through the knowledge and experience of those living and learning it.

The Middle Ages both fascinate and horrify in equal measure. It was both a sensitive yet violent era that captures the imaginations of millions. And for good reason; it was a time when the reality of the world could and did resemble a shocking Game of Thrones episode. But what do we truly know about this medieval world?

Living Medieval is here to shine a light on the what, why and how of living in this captivating period through the knowledge and experience of re-enactors, archaeologists and historians.





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We love to share interesting and diverse aspects of medieval life, considering the facts and events of history alongside the realities and practicalities of everyday medieval life.

Living Medieval is published online 4 times a year and is open for submissions year round.

If you are interested in getting involved with the magazine then head over to the 'Write for us' page on our website to find out more!

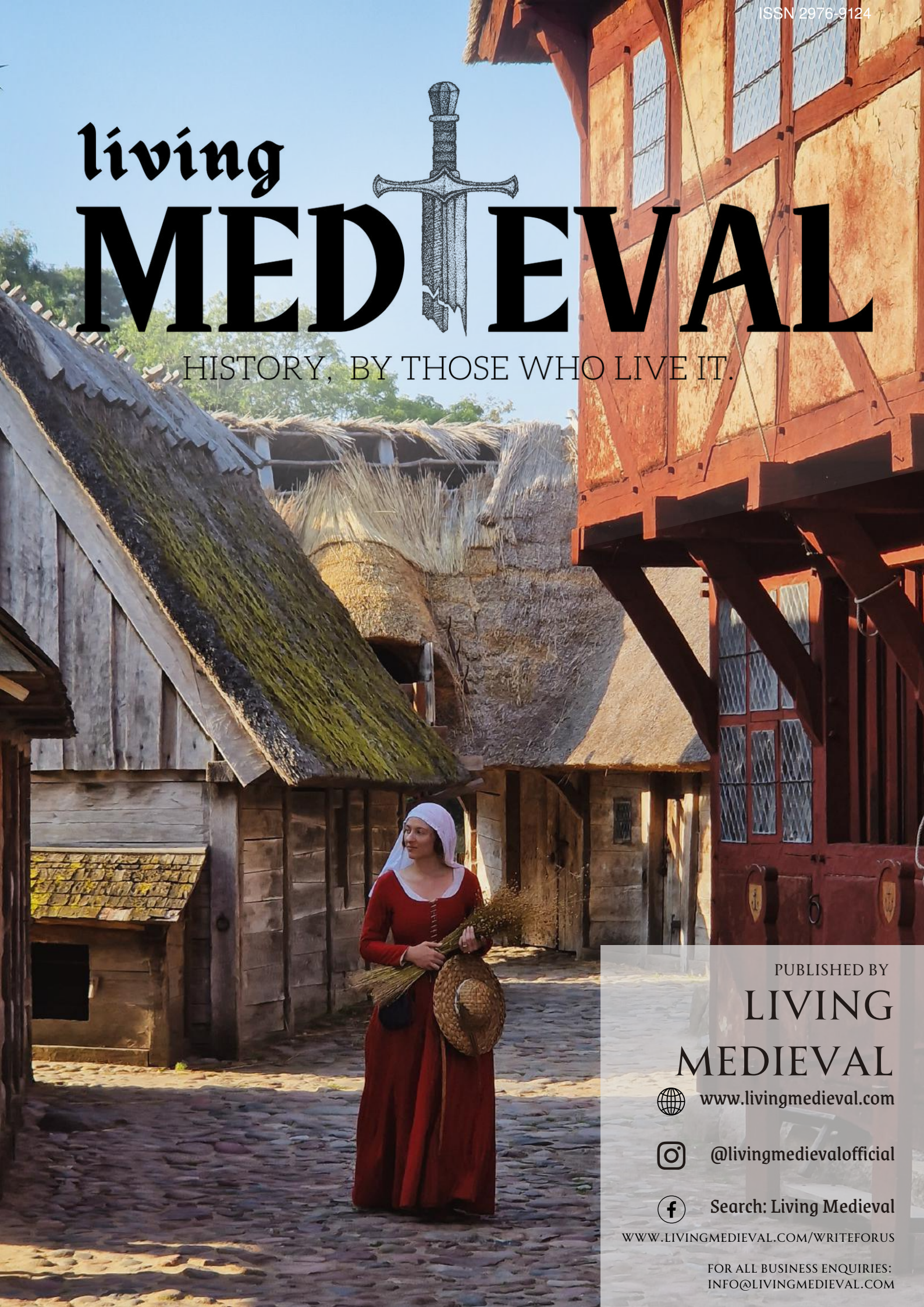
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ISSN 2976-9124

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