Matters of Opinion

In Defense of Authenticity

Much of the fun of the SCA consists of recreational scholarship–learning how things were done in the Middle Ages (and the Renaissance) and trying to do them. For some of us that means working out recipes from fifteenth century cookbooks–and discovering that, surprisingly enough, they taste good. For others it means making real armour–armour that not only looks right but also works. For still others it means telling stories from the *Mabinogion* or the *Thousand and One Nights*, or making suits of clothes that are medieval down to the underpants.

What I find puzzling and disturbing about the present state of the Society is that, although a considerable number of people do such things and have for very many years, surprisingly little of their work finds its way into our daily life. We have been at it for over twenty years now and yet it is still the case that in most of the things we do, what we do is much less authentic than what we know–and what we know about how things were really done is much less than what we could know. Thus, for instance, a sizable majority of the dances commonly danced in the Society are not only not period, they are not even seventeenth century. Most feasts in most groups contain no dishes that are cooked from period recipes. Events occasionally feature running-around games for the entertainment of those who are not fighting, but they are virtually never period games–although many such are known. The list could be expanded.

The problem may be in our attitude towards authenticity. Authenticity often seems to be viewed as something to be done, if at all, because one is supposed to do it–not because it is worth doing. A typical example is a pamphlet I recently read on one of the performing art forms. It contained a passage of a few pages discussing what pieces were period. The passage began with the explanation that those who were entering contests might find the information useful. The implication, clearly enough, was that no performer would care whether a piece was or was not period unless it was being entered in a competition. One result of this attitude is that, in many of the things we do, period work seems to be largely limited to competition entries.

The attitude can be seen most clearly in responses to the suggestion that something not be done because it is not period–for instance, that the fact that "Road to the Isles" is a twentieth century dance based on nineteenth century originals is an argument for finding other and earlier dances. Such a suggestion is usually interpreted not as an attempt to make the Society more interesting by making it more medieval but simply as an attempt to spoil everyone else's fun. One can get the same reaction by suggesting that since there is no evidence that cold tea was drunk anywhere in Europe any time in period and considerable evidence that chocolate deserts were not made anywhere in the world until late in the seventeenth century, we ought to find other things to eat and drink at our feasts.

The most common objection to such suggestions is that "the SCA is supposed to be fun." This is true. It is also true of folk dancing, baseball, and video games. Nonetheless, it would seem rather strange to show up at a tournament with ball and bat, or at a baseball game with sword, shield, and armor. Each is a different way of having fun and each implies a particular set of constraints on what you do in order to have fun.

It would not be surprising if the response to the suggestion that something should be more authentic was the reply that authenticity, although a good thing, was in this particular case more trouble than it was worth. We cannot all do everything perfectly; the same person who researches and uses period recipes might reasonably enough dance modern folk dances on the grounds that he does not know any good period dances and has neither the time nor expertise to research any.

But the usual response, and the one with which I am concerned, is not that inauthentic dances are better than no dances–it is that historical authenticity is irrelevant to the normal activities of the society and the attempt to introduce it is therefore an intrusion. The argument is not often put that baldly, but that is what it amounts to.

This brings me to the essential question which is rarely asked and more rarely answered: What is the point of authenticity? If the answer is that its only function is to give more authentic people an excuse to feel superior to less authentic ones, then surely we should forget about it.

Authenticity has several functions within the Society. One of them is to encourage us to learn how things were done in the past by trying to do them, which turns out to be fun–a kind of fun that is hard to find anywhere else. We are very much more likely to figure out how things were done in the past if we feel some obligation to try to do them that way than if we feel free to do "anything that is fun."

Consider dancing. Sixteen years ago, most of the period dances done in the Middle and East Kingdoms were out of one book–Arbeau's *Orchesography*. Most of them still are. The reason is not that Arbeau is the only surviving period dance treatise–it is not. It is merely the only one readily available in English.

If one gets bored with the dances in Arbeau, one solution is to use modern folk dances instead. It is easy enough to do–there are lots of good dances, and plenty of folk dancers to teach them. That, for the most part, is what has happened.

If, however, you are unwilling to use dances that are out of period, or if you regard them as a temporary expedient to be used only until something better can be found, there is another solution–look for more and better period dances. The first step in that direction is to go to the early editions of Playford, which are almost period; the first was published in 1651. The next step is to find translations of earlier dance treatises such as Caroso, or to locate copies of untranslated treatises and try to translate them and work out the dances. If you are a dance master but not a linguist, there are probably other people in your kingdom who are linguists and not dance masters–and could be interested in a joint project.

Why does that not happen? One answer is that it does; there are people in the Society who have worked on dances from period sources other than Arbeau, although very few. I am neither a dancer nor a linguist, but I am a cook, and have gotten volunteer translators from within the Society to translate several previously untranslated period cookbooks. The reason it does not happen very often may be because most of us feel satisfied dancing 19th century folk dances and cooking from Fanny Farmer, and many regard period cooking or period dancing or period almost anything else as something done only in order to win a contest, probably in the hope of getting an award–not as what we should be continually aiming at in everything we do.

So one reason for authenticity in what we do is as a way of encouraging us all to engage in one of the forms of fun that distinguishes the Society from baseball and video games–figuring out how people danced, cooked, sewed, fought, and lived in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Another reason for authenticity is that it helps us to an experience that we cannot get elsewhere–the experience of living, for an evening, in a different world, of being a different person with different beliefs and feelings, seeing, for a little while, out of a different set of eyes. The attempt to do things, so far as possible, in the way they were done is one way of making events feel real–something more than costume parties held by people whose hobby is dressing up and hitting each other with sticks.

I am not suggesting that we should never do anything at an event that is not entirely authentic. If you have no period dances, folk dances are better than nothing; if you have no period recipes, Fanny Farmer's beef stew is better than going hungry. What is wrong is being satisfied with folk dances and beef stew, instead of trying to work to replace them with something better.

(Versions of this were published in *Pale* and *Pikestaff* in 1987)

Concerning Contests

It is widely agreed that while the Society has at least enough fighting and politics, it is seriously deficient in most other medieval arts–that it would be both more medieval and more fun if we had more singers, poets, jewelers, cooks, musicians, and artists of many other sorts. The most common solution suggested for this problem is that the arts be encouraged by holding arts contests. I agree with the diagnosis but not the prescription. We ought to have more medieval arts in the daily life of the Society, but I doubt that contests are the way to get them.

One problem with arts contests is that they are, as a rule, among the most unmedieval events we hold. Most, in my experience, feel more like a modern debate tournament than like anything from the Middle Ages. While this may not be inevitable, it is at least difficult to avoid. At an arts contest we are judging not only the quality of the works submitted but also their authenticity. It is hard to do so without judges and entrants discussing what was or was not done in period. But any such discussion forces us to look at the Middle Ages from the outside, not the inside–as twentieth century students of the period, not as medieval people. No medieval judge evaluated art works, and no medieval craftsman defended them, according to whether or not they were authentically medieval.

A related problem is the tendency in arts contests to judge works on documentation instead of, or in addition to, judging them on authenticity. Obviously, if the artist has reason to expect the judges to make a mistake–if he knows something about the authenticity of his work which they probably do not know–it is up to him to pass on the information. But the requirement for documentation in arts contests often goes much further than that. Artists are expected to provide evidence to the judges of things that the judges ought to know if they are competent to judge the work, such as what verse forms were used in period. Documentation is treated as an objective in itself, rather than as evidence for the authenticity of the work. In some cases–exotic dancing, for example–entrants get credit for documentation even if all the documentation shows is that neither the entrant nor anyone else knows enough to tell what was or was not being done in period. In effect, the artist is being judged partly as an artist and partly as an amateur scholar. I can think of few better ways of discouraging the arts than to require that every work of art be accompanied by a term paper.

One might be able to solve, or at least reduce, these problems by creating events that function as contests but fit into medieval patterns. One could imagine an occasion at which poets perform before a king or great lord, with the best being rewarded by the gift of a silver arm ring. That is how poetry was encouraged in some period cultures. If, as is likely, the lord who is giving out the prizes does not know enough about period poetry to judge which performances are or are not authentic, he can always have advisors whispering in his ear. The idea is not to avoid considering the authenticity of the work, but rather to prevent open discussion of the authenticity of the work from destroying the authenticity of the event.

Other arts might compete within the framework of a fair–as often happened in the Middle Ages. The fiction of the event would be that the craftsmen were there to exhibit and sell their work, with ribbons being given by the local lord as a way of recommending particularly worthy

craftsmen to his people. For some that fiction would be fact, since many Society craftsmen do produce work for sale. Those who wished to exhibit but not to sell could always explain that they were currently too busy to accept orders. Here again, questions of authenticity would be considered by the judges on whose advice the lord would make his decisions but kept out of the public view.

So far I have been discussing ways in which we could continue to have arts contests while making them feel more like medieval events. I believe, however, that the real solution to the problem does not lie in contests at all. Almost inevitably, contests encourage the idea that art and authenticity are hothouse flowers, suitable for contests rather than for the daily life of the Society. This reinforces the unfortunate tendency of modern American society to regard education and "culture" as things that are good for you but taste bad–like cod-liver oil. The objective of encouraging the arts is not to produce authentic contest entries but to make medieval arts part of the daily life of the Society. The way to achieve that is by practicing our arts within the daily life of the Society and encouraging others to do so.

For those of us who are cooks and are producing feasts, that means developing authentic dishes and serving them at feasts. Since we are cooking not for a handful of judges but for a hall full of hungry people, we had better be sure that they are dishes which people will like–or we will not be asked to do any more feasts. That is a constraint that also applied, in a somewhat more extreme form, to the cooks of the Middle Ages.

For those of us who are cooks and are not doing feasts, introducing our art into the daily life of the Society means bringing a basket of period nibbles and offering them to all and sundry. That is both an exercise of the medieval virtue of generosity and a way of spreading the news that authentic food can also taste good.

Those of us who are jewelers can and should make medieval jewels, wear them, give them as gifts, sell them. Those who are poets or storytellers should use their art to entertain those who wish entertainment. If we find that we cannot hold an audience, that is evidence that there is something wrong with either the piece we have chosen or the way in which we have presented it. That, too, was a problem that period performers had to deal with.

One reason for the popularity of arts contests as a way of encouraging the arts may be that tournaments are such a visible part of our activities, and fighting one of the two medieval activities that do not seem in need of encouragement. My own view is that we have it backwards. Fighting is popular not because we have fighting contests but because it is something that many people do for its own sake. The prevalence of elimination tournaments is one of the things wrong with the way we do fighting, not one of the reasons for its popularity.

For crown tournaments we must have an objective way of determining who has won, since our Kingdoms would not work very well if the reigning monarchs could, by naming the day's best fighter, choose their successors. That is why crown tournaments are, and perhaps must be, elimination lists. But I think it is a mistake to make so many other tournaments into small scale imitations of the crown. Elimination tournaments allow the less experienced fighters to do very little fighting. Worse, by encouraging the idea that we are fighting to win a tournament rather than for fun, honor, and glory, they have some tendency to make fighting less fun and less friendly than it might otherwise be.

Furthermore, our elimination tournaments are not particularly medieval; their structure is based on modern sporting events not on medieval tournaments. The winner of a medieval tournament was the fighter who, after the day's fighting was done, was judged to have fought best–but he did not have to prove it by working his way up a double elimination tree.

Perhaps, if we wish to encourage medieval arts, we should take our model not from fighting but from the other medieval art of which we have at least enough–politics. The people of our kingdoms, as in the kingdoms of old, require no public competitions, no special prizes, to engage in that activity. It is done for its own sake, for the pleasure of the game and the rewards proper to it. The reward of a successful politician is power–the ability to influence what happens within the kingdom–just as the proper reward of a story teller or a musician is an attentive audience and the proper reward of a good cook is a hall full of happy and well fed people.

If we wish medieval arts to be a part of the life of the Society, to function for us as they functioned in the past, it is to the past we should look for models of how to practice and encourage the arts. If you are an artist, find ways of working your art into the life of your kingdom. If you wish to encourage the arts, recognize and reward the arts you wish to encourage.

I brought three silver arm rings to the most recent Pennsic war, and departed with two. The third left on the arm of a lady singer, who had come to our campfire to delight us with the tale of Cuchulain and the Cattle Raid of Cooley. To the next war I propose to wear seven rings, and, fortune favoring, to bring none away. If one wishes to attract bards, one must use the proper bait.

Concerning the C in SCA

A question that occasionally arises in the Society is whether there is some essential conflict between being creative and being authentic. Must we choose between slavishly copying historical works, on the one hand, and being creatively unmedieval on the other?

The answer is no. It would be difficult to argue that Chaucer was not creative–or Michelangelo, or Dante, or the unknown master who created the Sutton Hoo treasure. Their works could hardly be described as slavish copies of what already existed. Yet each worked within the artistic canon of his own time. Each, to some degree, enlarged that canon by his own work. When they were all done, the year sixteen hundred had not arrived, so nothing that they did can be properly classified as out of period for the Society.

Just as the creative artists of the past worked within the technical and stylistic limits of their own times, and in doing so produced works of great and original art, so we, if we are good enough, can produce our own original works within those same limits. A poet does not have to invent his own verse form, or even his own poetic conventions, in order to write original verse–and few poets do. While a painter may find the lack of modern acrylics inconvenient, there is a vast body of medieval and Renaissance art to prove what can be done without them. The most beautiful jewels ever made, in my judgement at least, are more than a thousand years old, and the most technically impressive more than two thousand. The treasures of the past provide ample evidence that there is no conflict between originality and authenticity.

In some arts there is a division between author and executor. A great actor or dancer need not be the author of the plays or dances that he performs; a great musician does not play only his own music. Most of the dishes cooked by even the greatest chef are not of his own invention. In such arts, the interpretation of the existing work is itself a difficult and creative act. If the art we are practicing is acting, or dancing, or music or cooking, there is no need to produce new plays, dances, pieces, or recipes in order for our performances and our dishes to be original works. By choosing to execute works that were produced in period, we make it more likely that our execution will be authentic as well as original; we do not have to worry that errors in our interpretation may be compounded by errors in what we are interpreting. We know that a recipe written down in 1226 contains only period ingredients.

What if we wish to create not a period dish but a period recipe–or poem, or play, or jewel? There is still much to be said for starting out by copying surviving works. Close imitation is not essential to authenticity, but it is one of the ways in which artists learn their craft. It is even more important as a way of learning for us than it was for the artists of the past. A medieval cook spent his life learning what medieval cooking was like by eating it and learning how it was done by watching other medieval cooks. That is not an option available to us.

The nearest alternative is to cook a large number of dishes from period cookbooks. The process is not entirely lacking in creativity–medieval recipes rarely include quantities, temperatures, or times–and it is the essential preliminary to any more creative medieval cooking. If, instead of beginning by cooking from medieval cookbooks, we start our exploration of medieval cooking by inventing our own dishes, what we will be inventing will not be original medieval dishes but original twentieth century dishes, perhaps slightly influenced by twentieth century ideas of what medieval cooking was like.

Similarly, a Society jeweler with the good taste to want to make Anglo Saxon jewelry will be wise to look at as much of it as he can. Having done so, he will want to make pieces closely based on some of the simpler originals. As he gets better and acquires more of a feel for what an Anglo Saxon jeweler might have done, he may go further afield, while still producing nothing that would look out of place in the Anglo Saxon rooms of the British Museum.

I have been arguing in this essay that there is no conflict between authenticity and originality. That does not mean that authenticity has no other difficulties. There has been a great deal of technical progress since the year sixteen hundred, with the result that it is easier to cook in a modern kitchen than in a medieval one or to make jewelry with modern rather than medieval tools. The use of period techniques is made still more difficult by the fact that if you wish to use period tools to make jewelry you must first make the tools. The result is that most Society artists compromise, using some mixture of authentic and modern techniques to produce their work. It is better to do work that is imperfectly authentic than to insist on being perfect and as a result do nothing at all. The best should not become the enemy of the good.

I have, as it happens, made Anglo Saxon jewelry–but not in an Anglo Saxon jeweler's shop. I have sometimes daydreamed about building the workshop that Theophilus describes in a book written at almost precisely the date of my persona, but I will probably never do it. I do medieval cooking, but mostly in a modern kitchen.

While I accept the necessity for a certain amount of compromise in how authentic I am able to be, I also believe that more authentic is better than less authentic and that those who manage to do medieval crafts with medieval techniques deserve our admiration and applause. My favorite example is the Sated Tyger, a cookshop at Pennsic which, for some years, produced and sold a large volume of period baked goods cooked in period ovens. Each year the staff of the cookshop arrived early to build their ovens (named Hansel and Gretel) out of bricks and clay. When it was time to bake they lighted a fire inside each oven, heated them up, removed the fire and put in the pies. Their medieval cooking was more medieval than mine and I honor them for it.

The Romans say that if you have a Frank for a friend, it is certain that he is not your neighbor. (From a ninth century Life of Charlemagne.)

The Bardic Arts: A Comment

In a recent article on filk songs, Mistress Morgana asks what sort of bardic performances are appropriate in the SCA. The question is of interest to me both as a performer and as host of the bardic circle at my encampment at Pennsic. While I agree with Mistress Morgana that we do not want to limit ourselves to works actually composed in period, that does not get us very far towards deciding what should be encouraged or discouraged.

I find it useful to divide performances into three categories: unacceptable, tolerable, and period. The division is based mostly on the degree to which the performance creates or destroys the illusion of really being, for at least a few minutes, in the Middle Ages. Unacceptable is anything that makes it obvious that the performer is a twentieth century person addressing a twentieth century audience. That includes stories about knights going through metal detectors and anything else with obviously out of period references–the "Song of Sir Greenbaum," for instance. It also includes anything written to an obviously modern tune or in a blatantly modern style, especially take-offs on popular songs. Those are the sorts of things that I do not perform at events (post revels are another matter) and try to keep out of my bardic circle.

The tolerable category consists of pieces that would be recognized as out of period, in form or content, by any reasonably expert observer, but not by a random member of the audience. That includes folk songs with post 1600 tunes and songs, stories, or poems that refer to events that are out of period but not obviously so. The tolerable category does not include folk songs prefaced with an apology about not being in period; the song may be acceptable, but the preface is not.

The period category includes works actually composed in period, such as stories from the sagas, Boccaccio, Usamah or al-Tanukhi. It also includes works written, inside or outside of the Society, in period form on period topics. Examples would include the words, at least, to "Song of the Shield Wall," "The Raven Banner," and "Catalan Company"–three of my favorite SCA poems. Stories about events in the SCA also qualify, if told in such a way that they could be stories about people in period. Works in this category are the reason for having a bardic circle.

There are a lot of borderline cases. The tune to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" is not exactly modern, but most hearers know it is not period. At the other extreme, the words to "Catalan Company" contain echoes of the modern folksong from which its tune is borrowed, but not many people are likely to notice them.

A song that sounds fine to me may seem clearly unacceptable to Mistress Johanna, who is a semi-professional lutenist; a story about Iceland or al-Islam that sounds period to her may strike me as obviously out of period in style or contents. As with most things in the Society, the important classifications are not right and wrong but better and worse. We cannot expect to do things perfectly–even period songs are rarely played on exact replicas of period instruments–but we can agree that the closer we come, in form and content, to works that were or could have been created in period, the better.

There are many dimensions to authenticity and sometimes they conflict. To Johanna, a period song in translation is less authentic than in the original language. But one of the characteristics of the original song as originally performed was that the audience understood it. For an audience that does not understand the original language, the translation is, in that dimension at least, more authentic than the original.

(Published in *The Mews*, summer 1988)

No Audience

One of the oldest traditions of the Society is the requirement that everyone present at an event make some attempt at period dress. To me, this symbolizes the idea that there is no audience–everyone present is a participant. That is an essential difference between an event and a play. We are all inside the medieval fantasy. Some of us may be playing medieval fighters or actors while others are playing medieval spectators, but we are all playing.

I am reminded of this tradition when I hear someone complain after an event that it was boring–there was not enough entertainment. Such complaints reflect a fundamentally mistaken view of what an event is. They assume it is a show put on by someone else for our entertainment–and that it is therefore that someone's fault if we, sitting in the audience, are bored.

But there is no audience. An event is not a play; it is a stage, on which we all are players. The hosts provide a place, a framework, decoration, usually food. The rest is up to you.

If you are a musician, find other musicians and go play something. If you are a story teller, find some bored people and tell them stories. Start a game of nine man's morris. Gossip with some of your friends about the doings of others. Start an interesting conversation about something your persona might have talked about. Ask the fighter who has just taken off his armor to explain that beautiful blow that he won the fight with.

If you cannot play an instrument, or sing, or tell a story or a poem, or play a period game, and are too shy to gossip, or start conversations or ask questions of fighters, do not despair. Somewhere in the building someone is cooking dinner, or setting up the hall for court, or doing some other of the myriad things necessary to maintain the framework of the event. Another pair of hands will almost certainly be welcome. However shy you are, after an hour and a half of deboning chickens you should find it easy enough to strike up a conversation with your fellow workers.

Some time ago, I attended an event accompanied by an energetic eleven-year-old. Shortly after we arrived, he vanished. On further inquiry, I discovered that he had volunteered to help someone with something. When I asked him about it, he explained that he had discovered he had more fun that way.

The people who bear the load, who make the Society work, are the people who create the events, write the poems, tell the stories, sing the songs, sew the clothing. If you have just spent two hours deboning chickens then you are bearing your share of the load. If you are a card carrying member of the SCA Incorporated and come to every event expecting to be entertained, you are part of the load being born.

"What do you call the last man out of the kitchen at an event?"
"Your Majesty"
Old joke.
Unfortunately.

(This was published in *The Gargoyle's Tongue* in 1988)

Peers Errant

From time to time, in one kingdom or another, someone suggests that the peerages should get organized and do something. In my view, this is usually a bad idea. If the peerages were better organized they would be less useful; if they tried to get together and do things they would get less done. The purpose of this essay is to explain why.

To understand the shape of a key, one must first know what sort of lock it is intended to open, so I start with the problem to which the peerages are one of the solutions–the problem of getting things done in a large, decentralized, volunteer organization. Given the present size and structure of the Society, if everything happens through channels very little will happen. If people only engaged in artistic activities after being told to do so by their local MOA who had been told to tell them by the regional MOA who had been told to tell them by the Kingdom MOA who had been ... we would have very little in the way of period arts. The obvious solution is for most people, most of the time, to ignore the official structure and just go out and do things. That is how most of what we make–garb and armor, weapons and songs–gets made.

One difficulty with this is that the individual member of the Society may have no way of knowing which other members are reliable authorities. If someone announces that he is holding a workshop on medieval cooking in his kitchen next Sunday, how can those who attend tell whether he is an expert on the subject or just making it up as he goes along? If one of the local fighters offers to teach you how to fight, how do you know whether he is really competent or someone the other fighters all regard as a blundering blowhard?

One solution is formal organization. If you learn about cooking at a class at a Royal University or from a T.I. article, there is at least a presumption that the information is reasonably accurate. If you learn fighting from the local Knight Marshall, the odds are reasonably good that he knows something about both fighting and training and is regarded by the other fighters in the group as a responsible person.

This solution, however, brings us back to the difficulty of getting things done in a hierarchical, bureaucratic, "organized" way. It is all too easy for people in a formal organization to end up spending their time writing reports instead of teaching classes, or for a group to consume its time and energy and its members' mutual good will fighting over who has what office.

The peerages are a different solution. If the person who has announced that he is teaching a class in his kitchen has a Laurel, there is a presumption that the information presented is reasonably accurate. If the person who offers to teach you fighting has been knighted, there is a presumption that he knows how to fight, how to teach, and is a reasonably honorable person. In both cases it is only a presumption. Doubtless there are Laurels who are not careful to make sure what they teach is true before they teach it, just as there are villain knights–and mistakes in T.I. articles. But these are the exception not the rule.

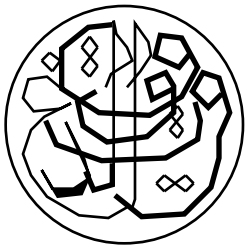
The orders of peerage ought, I believe, to be viewed not as organizations with corporate responsibilities but as groups of individuals, each with the job of going out and doing good in his particular way. The function of the white belt or the Laurel medallion is merely to make it a little easier to do certain kinds of good, by certifying the bearer's competence.

This is, incidentally, a period conception of knighthood, although not the only period conception. Consider the knight errant of the romances, the figure on whom our image of the knight is chiefly based. He is not someone who has received orders from the Minister of Giant Killing to go out, kill a giant, and send back a report in triplicate. Rather he is someone wandering around the countryside looking for deeds that need to be done, deciding for himself which of them to do

and how, and depending on his position as a knight, at most, to get him a certain amount of respect and attention. That, I think, is what peers should mostly do. Hence the title of this essay.

Peers are not the only ones doing it–any more than knights are the only people authorized to kill giants or rescue maidens. A kingdom, a Barony, a Shire flourishes or fades by the number of its people who see themselves as having the job of finding things that need doing and doing them. We are all–sovereigns, peers, and people alike–knights errant.

"A Kingdom's no more solid than a sound
That must be built on air eternally,"



(Cariadoc)

On one occasion Amr, still Governor of Egypt, came to Damascus to visit (the Caliph) Mu'awaya, who was now grown old and feeble. His freed slave Wardan was with him. The two old men fell into talk.
Prince of the True Believers, said Amr, what pleasures keep their savor for thee nowadays?

Women? said the Caliph; no–I do not need women any more. To go fine? My skin's so used to stuffs the softest and richest, I cannot tell what's of the best any more. And eating–I have eaten delicate dishes so many that I can no longer tell what I like. No, I think I have no pleasure keener now than drinking cool in summer, and seeing my children and my grandchildren go about me. And thou, Amr, what's thy last remaining pleasure?

A bit of cultivable land, said the conqueror of Egypt; enough to yield me some fruit, and a little profit over and above.

Then the Caliph turned to the freedman Wardan. Thou, Wardan, said he, what would be thy last enjoyment?

A noble generous deed! said he. Some deed that would live in the memory of all remembering men, and earn for me in Eternity.

The audience is concluded! cried Mu'awaya; that's enough for today! This slave here, Amr, is a better man than thou or I.

(Quoted by Eric Schroeder in *Muhammad's People*)

Medieval vs Medievalish

I believe that the Society would be more fun if we all made a greater effort to be authentic–to cook feasts from period recipes instead of from Fanny Farmer, to do Renaissance dances instead of modern folk dances, to base SCA swashbuckling on sixteenth century fencing manuals instead of on twentieth century fencing. I further believe that such authenticity is most fun when it is integrated into the daily life of the Society instead of being isolated on a reservation as contest entries.

In trying to explain my views to other Society members, I have come across an argument that I find interesting, persuasive, and wrong. It may be stated as follows:

Coke cans should be kept out of events because they spoil the mood. We all know that medieval people did not use either Coke or cans, so having Coke cans around makes it hard to feel as if we are really in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, most of us do not know enough about medieval cooking to realize that a modern beef stew does not qualify. Most of us do not know enough about dance or music to tell the difference between something that seems vaguely medievalish–Road to the Isles or Joan Baez songs–and something that is actually period. Since we cannot tell the difference, the medievalish works for us just as well as the medieval. So there is no reason for us to try to make what we do any more authentic than it already is.

The conclusion of this argument is not merely that being authentic is sometimes more trouble than it is worth. With that I would agree–which is why I have learned neither Arabic nor Berber, although my persona would have spoken both. The conclusion of the argument is that authenticity, beyond a rather low level, is worthless.

One answer is that authenticity–learning how people did things by doing them–is fun. For many of us that is true, but it provides no reason why those people in the Society who do not enjoy researching the Middle Ages should make any effort to use what is discovered by those who do. And yet I think there is a reason. I believe that authenticity makes the Society more interesting for everyone, including those who have no interest in researching the Middle Ages. I believe, in other words, that medieval really is better than medievalish.

Why? Part of the answer is suggested by the following paradox: If Coke cans are bad only because we know they are not medieval, then the less we know the better off we are. If only we were sufficiently ignorant, there would be no need to do without Coke cans.

What is wrong with this, of course, is that if we did not know enough about the Middle Ages to realize that Coke cans are not a part of them, we would also not know enough to get any fun out of playing medieval. Much of the enjoyment we get from the Society comes from imagining we are medieval people in a medieval society. The less we know about the Middle Ages, the less interesting that game is.

I have sometimes heard it said that the Society is not really based on the historical Middle Ages at all, but on the nineteenth century romanticization of the Middle Ages, as seen in the works of authors such as Scott and Doyle. But if that were all the Society was, it would not work as well as it does. There are, after all, re-creation groups based on works of fiction, such as the Friends of Darkover or the Tuchuks. None of them is as large, as successful, or as interesting as the SCA. One reason, I think, is that no fictional world has the richness of detail, the complexity, the persuasive reality of an actual society. An author has a hard enough time making the little piece of his world that the reader can see through the window of one book seem real. We are basing our game on a story that was written over a thousand years by millions of authors and is real from every direction.

A different way of putting the point is to observe that the medieval works of writers such as Scott and Doyle would have been very much less good if they had had to invent the Middle Ages for themselves. What we see and enjoy in *Ivanhoe* or the *The White Company* is the image, however distorted, of a society that really existed.

If this is true, then the attempt to make the daily life of the society more authentic, to go beyond medievalish to medieval, serves two quite different purposes. It is an opportunity for recreational scholarship–doing research for fun. It is also a way of preserving and increasing the richness, the detail, the complexity, and the interest of the game we are playing, the fantasy in which we jointly participate.

Period Solutions

Many years ago, I constructed for myself a *char aina*, a simple form of Persian body armor made up of four plates, usually rectangular, covering the front, back, and sides of the body. To attach the plates to each other I used leather straps riveted to the metal plates. After using it for a while, I discovered that the system was unsatisfactory; the rivets kept pulling through the leather and having to be replaced.

I then did what I should have done before starting the armor–looked at pictures of surviving *char ainas* to see how they were held together. I did not find a single one in which the leather had been riveted directly to the metal. The most common system was a buckle on one plate and a D-ring on the plate it was joined to. From then on, when a strap pulled out I replaced it with a D-ring on one plate, a buckle on the other, and a strap joining them. That system works fine.

This is a simple example of something quite common in the Society. Many of the problems we encounter in trying to reconstruct the Middle Ages, both simple (how to fasten armor together) and more subtle (how to encourage Medieval arts), were also encountered in the original Middle Ages. In trying to solve such problems, our first step should be to ask how they solved them.

There are two reasons to approach problems in that way. The obvious reason is that the more we use period solutions to our problems, the more accurately we will succeed in recreating the past–which is one of the purposes of the Society. A less obvious, but equally important, reason is illustrated by my *char aina*. The system I originally used not only is inauthentic–it also does not work. We know more than the people of the original Middle Ages about certain things, such as astronomy, mathematics, and physics, most of which are of only marginal relevance to the things we do in the Society. We know very much less than they did about how to build armor, cook with period ingredients, rule a kingdom, or preserve food without benefit of modern technology. These are things that were matters of great importance to people in the Middle Ages–frequently matters of life and death to those most directly concerned. They therefore devoted a great deal of thought, effort, and experimentation to discovering how to do them–far more than we have.

Since there is no evidence that our intelligence is greater than theirs and since most (although not all) of our superior scientific knowledge is irrelevant to such problems, it is quite likely that the solutions they came up with are better than the solutions we will come up with on our own. If so, then finding period solutions to period problems is not merely a way of making the Society more authentic. It is also a way of building armor that does articulate and does not fall apart, cooking feasts that taste good, building happy and prosperous kingdoms and surviving Pennsic without daily shopping trips off site.

That last problem is one that my Lady Wife and I have been working on for some years. Keeping

meat fresh in a cooler for a week-long war is not only inauthentic, it is also a nuisance–not to mention somewhat dangerous. One medieval solution is to slaughter the meat as you need it. Unfortunately, the mundane authorities might object–and in any case a whole cow or sheep is rather a lot of meat for two adults and one child. Another solution is the use of salt fish; we have some, but have not yet done the experimentation necessary to produce a workable period recipe using it.

Our best solution so far is one we discovered in a collection of recipes included in a fifteenth century Icelandic medical miscellany. It consists of two recipes entitled "The gentry's *salsa*" (or "the lord's salt") and "How to use the above *salsa*." The *salsa* is a mixture of spices, salt, and vinegar used to preserve cooked meat. In our experience, it will preserve meat in an unsealed container at room temperature for over three weeks. At both TYC and Pennsic, we have brought pickled meat to the event and used it over a week later.

These examples involve technical problems–building armor and preserving food. The same approach can also be applied to problems of a somewhat more subtle nature. Consider, for instance, the perennial issue of how to encourage the arts.

The most popular solution in the Society is to hold arts contests. Almost inevitably, such contests force the participants, both entrants and judges, to look at the Middle Ages from the outside rather than the inside. The result usually feels more like a modern debate tournament than like anything from the Middle Ages. Neither medieval craftsmen nor medieval judges worried about whether a work of art was or was not authentically medieval.

How were arts encouraged and supported in period? In part, for those arts that produced a tangible product, in the same way that twentieth century arts are in the twentieth century. Jewelers or tailors or painters produced things for their customers to buy. For some arts that works well in the Current Middle Ages as well–armor is a notable example.

Another way of encouraging the arts was for prominent people, especially kings and great lords, to honor and reward artists. In Norse and early Germanic culture, a generous lord was a ring giver–one who rewarded those who pleased him by giving them arm rings of silver and gold. As is clear in the sagas, the recipients included skalds who composed and performed poetry for the King.

The kings of the Current Middle Ages are rarely rich in material things, so giving valuable gifts to express their appreciation of poets may not be a practical option. They can, and sometimes do, give presents of costume jewelry, but that is not an entirely satisfactory substitute. Much of the point of a gift is in the fact that it costs the giver something and is worth something to the recipient. What the King wants to convey to the artist is not "I am pretending to appreciate your performance" but "I do appreciate your performance," so a pretend gift does not really serve the purpose. In this as in many other things, one must remember that the Society, despite appearances to the contrary, is real.

Our Kings are rich in things other than gold and silver. For most performers, being asked to sit with the King at high table, being called before the Queen and thanked, being publicly praised, are gifts of great value. And they are gifts that cost something to the giver as well: time is among the scarcest possessions of princes. In such ways kings can, and good kings do, encourage the arts.

Building a kingdom is the job of the king, but not only of the king. Many of the people of the Society are rich, if not in money then in other things of value. If a king can express his appreciation for a performer by offering him a seat at his table, a vintner can do the same by

offering a bottle of his best vintage, a jeweler with the gift of a jewel of his own making. Here again, it is precisely the fact that the gift is of real value to both giver and recipient that makes the compliment a real one.

Long ago and far away, a gentleman whom I greatly respected was given a peerage that he very much deserved. His persona was, like mine, Muslim. After the King granted him his peerage, I presented him with a robe of honor–a robe and turban appropriate, so far as my knowledge ran, to his persona. The presentation of robes of honor was a period Muslim tradition–and, now as then, a way of showing the recipient the honor he had earned.

The Royal Tale of Atlantia

(Mnemonic verses written for a contest of that kingdom)

Carissa, Queen of all the East,
With Michael gave our realm its throne–
And then, before their reign had ceased,
They won it back to be their own.

Now Anya is a queen most rare.
Bertrand full half his kingdom knows.
He can describe each lady fair–
But not the color of her clothes.

In floods of mead the benches drown
And great the glee of thirsty men
When Gyrth, great-gutted, takes the crown
And Melisande is queen again.

John and Tuiren have done more
Than ever lords of coast and sea-salt.
For they have ruled from shore to shore
Atlantia to Drachenwald.

Now Bedford's blade in fury falls
And for his foes 'tis death to find it.
Duke Michael is a moving wall
Carissa wholly hid behind it.

It was Sir Olaf, when he fought,
For Aslinn with his heart and hand,
Who by his skill and fortune brought
Atlantia's crown to southern land.

Now Richard Corwin for his Anne
Atlantia's crown has bravely won
He's just a good and faithful man
Who's doing as his knight has done.

Sir Knarlic, with a dragon blade,
Atlantia's knights has beaten down,
But conquered by Atlantian maid
He to Alexis brings the crown.

For Gyrth it is a gladsome day
To know he has such sturdy men;
Count Richard in the bloody fray
For Anne has won the crown again.

Sir Olaf, through the flood of foes,
His Aslinn spies above the fray,
And bold Tsuneo, dying, knows
The crown will not be his today.

Tsuneo keeps his Nyan Nyan near.
He has such skills as suit a knight,
Can fight with sword and bow and spear.
His concubine can read and write.

Some kings and queens for dress are known,
Others for how they plot and scheme
Since Claus for Cyffaith won the crown
Our sovereigns are a Melee team.

Words and Things

Cultures develop their own customs and jargon, and the SCA is no exception. Some of ours are based on historical practice; there really were knights in the Middle Ages and they really had squires. Many others were either deliberately invented within the Society or represent one person's historical mistake, converted by a few transmissions into historical fact.

Having our own terms and customs is not wholly a bad thing; a real medieval kingdom would have developed customs of its own, after all. What is clearly a bad thing is when people mistakenly believe that what we are doing is historically accurate, thus putting us in the position of spreading ignorance rather than knowledge. And it seems a pity, when there are perfectly good medieval terms for the things we want to talk about, to use our own inventions instead, thus replacing a part of the real Middle Ages with the invention of a twentieth century mind–usually bearing signs of its origin.

The purpose of this note is to discuss some of the errors.

Knighthood

In the SCA, all knights are in direct fealty to the crown–they are, in medieval terms, tenants in chief. In the real Middle Ages, a knight was no more likely to be a tenant in chief than any other noble. What he owed service for was not his knighting–which in any case, for most of our period, was usually done by someone other than the King–but his land.

In the SCA, the white belt is the token of knighthood; people who are not knights are strongly discouraged from wearing them. In the Middle Ages, a white belt (and white garments) were sometimes used in the knighting ceremony. But I have seen no evidence that knights continued to wear white belts thereafter, or that other people didn't. If anyone does have such evidence, I would be interested in seeing it.

Rank and Jewels

In the SCA, we have a set of rules defining what kinds of coronets people of different ranks may wear–strawberry leaves for a duke, pearls for a baron, etc. In the real Middle Ages, particular crowns–or particular swords–occasionally had a symbolic value. But so far as I can tell, there was no general correspondence between type of coronet and rank. The one exception I have come across is the crown imperial–a crown with arches, which was supposed to be limited to emperors. The rules we use are apparently based on current British practice, originating in the late 17th century. Thus, for example, Fox-Davies writes: “when it is remembered that the coronet of a baron had no existence whatever until it was called into being by a warrant of Charles II after the Restoration, and that differentiated coronets for the several ranks in the Peerage are not greatly anterior in date, ...” Arthur Fox-Davies, *The Art of Heraldry an encyclopedia of armory,* pp. 279-180.

Many, although not all, SCA kingdoms also have sumptuary laws that define what rank you must be to wear a coronet that is not on the reserved list–most commonly, requiring an AoA for even a plain band of greater than some specified width. Sumptuary laws existed in period; they are summarized in great detail in Chapter 8 of Ronald Lightbown’s monumental *Medieval European Jewellery* (published by the Victoria and Albert Museum). Typically, the period laws limited extravagance in general–silk clothes, jewels with pearls, and the like, as well as rich headgear. Often the restrictions apply to all ranks; sometimes they permit richer clothes and jewelry to those of higher rank.

The only example Lightbown mentions which comes close to fitting the SCA pattern is a set of laws enacted in Messina in 1308 which provided that women “were not to wear chaplets with ornaments of pearls or enamels, though they might wear bands of stuff on their hats. This rule was not to apply to the wives of knights: they might wear garlands decorated ... provided their width did not exceed two fingers’ breadth, and provided they had no fleurons. ... which presumably were reserved for those of baronial or princely rank.” The laws make an exception for maidens, who are permitted to ornament themselves as they like “up to the day on which they are married, and for a whole year afterwards.” And the laws also imposed extensive restrictions on forms of expensive display other than headgear.

Jargon

The place where we collect admission for an event is usually called the trollbooth and the person doing it is often called the troll. This is, of course, not a medieval usage but a modern joke. One problem with finding a period term is that this is not a period job. When a noble invited his friends and neighbors over for a feast, he did not charge them for it. A period term for a related function is "Porter"–doorguard. There are doubtless others that could be found.

Groups going to Pennsic or other large camping events often send one member ahead in advance to claim land for them; this person is sometimes referred to as the landlord. Arranging camping space in advance for travelers or troops on the march is a medieval problem. The person who did it was called a “harbinger.”

It is widely believed in the SCA that the period term for "course" was "remove." It is not true. "Remove" is a post period term for a sort of course within a course–a dish that was removed before the rest of the course or brought in after. The period term for "course" in English is "course."

Many people in the SCA use the term "smalls" for children; it is sometimes hard to tell whether they believe it is a period term or merely think it is cute. One sees phrases in period such as "great and small they assembled"–but that does not mean that "small" is a synonym for "child" any more than "tall and short they assembled" would mean that "short" was a synonym for "short person." In English, the period term for "child" is "child." This particular error has spawned another–the belief that "smalls" (short for "smallclothes") is the period term for underwear. It is a historical term, but after our period.

In the SCA, the person running an event is usually called the autocrat. It is a period term, but that is not what it meant. One alternative would be "seneschal"–the chief servant of a castle–but we are already using that for something else. "Autocrat" has spawned a host of entirely unmedieval terms, such as crashocrat and feastocrat. The person who is producing a feast is the head cook. You may want to find your own period terms for some of the others.

Technology as Magic

Another problem is the common practice of describing out of period things as magical. Tape recorders get referred to as magic boxes, for example, and cameras as soul stealers. Sometimes this is a deliberate effort to be funny by drawing attention to the mundanity; given how hard it is to ignore the twentieth century when you are living in it, I do not think it demonstrates any great wit to talk about tape recorders, cameras, or televisions at an event. But such references are also made by people honestly trying to fit the mundane object into the medieval context.

Their mistake is in confusing the Middle Ages with modern fantasy. Medieval and renaissance literature included references to magic–so does much modern literature. That does not mean that

medieval people regarded magic as a normal part of their lives. My persona–or yours–would no more expect to meet an enchanter, elf or fairy than you or I expect to meet James Bond or Captain Kirk or Elvis. Referring to mundane things in magical terms calls attention to them–our personas' attention as well our own. If we must refer to such things (much of the time we can simply ignore them) it is better to treat them as casually as possible in a medieval context–to describe cars as wagons, not dragons or fire chariots.

If people must take photographs at events, it is not necessary to talk about stealing souls ("no, white chief, me not mind having soul stolen"). People in the Middle Ages did not have cameras but they did have pictures. There is nothing unmedieval about asking someone if he minds your making a quick sketch of him.

In all of these cases, the problem is not just that a word or idea is out of period but that it is obviously so. There are plenty of terms that are out of period but that almost nobody knows are out of period–the period English term for a sword guard, for example, is “cross,” not “quillions.” It is better to use the correct term, but failing to do so is not likely to break the medieval mood for many people, since most hearers will not know it is wrong.

Quite a lot of us, on the other hand, know that the social occasion called "tea" is associated with Jane Austen not Jane Seymour, so a Queen's Arts Tea makes us feel less medieval and more nineteenth century. Although very few of us could say exactly when “minister” acquired its modern meaning of a high officer of state, quite a lot of us realize that Elizabeth I did not have a minister of defense and Elizabeth II does–which is a reason why we shouldn't call our art officers "ministers of arts."

Two Hundred of Your Closest Friends

One of the most unmedieval things about SCA feasts is that we charge for them. A medieval feast hall was not a restaurant. The feasts on which our events are based were dinner parties held by a lord for his retainers and a few–or a few hundred or, in some cases, a few thousand–of his friends. To have charged them for their meal would have seemed wildly inappropriate to all concerned. Generosity was an important medieval virtue. And even if a feudal lord lacked that virtue, there was still a considerable difference between his social role and that of an innkeeper.

This point was brought to the attention of members of our Shire by our seneschal, Dain Greymouse, when we were discussing ways of making our next event feel more medieval. He suggested a simple solution to the problem and persuaded the rest of us to try it. The event was held as a tourney and feast with no site fee and no feast fee–a dinner party for two hundred of our closest friends. It was a successful event, so we did another free event the next year and intend to continue doing at least one a year.

One of the things that helps make our free events possible is that our group has several experienced feast cooks who can produce a feast that is both period and good at a cost of about $2.50 per person. In addition, we are a University group with free access to one of the best sites in the kingdom (a medievalish student activities building designed, in the early part of this century, by a previous generation of anachronists). With no site rental and low feast costs, a small event (50 people) only costs us about $125, and even an event for two hundred is only about $500.

The first time we did it, we persuaded the Student Activities Board that putting on a medieval feast was a worthy activity and deserved a subsidy. The next summer, we were asked to do a medieval feast for a mundane wedding; we made enough money from that to pay for another free event. Before we got around to doing it, we put on a coronation. His Highness persuaded us to

raise our proposed feast fee to something closer to what coronation feasts usually cost, with the result that we made quite a lot of money on the event. Between that and the income from occasional paid demos, we now feel confident that we can put on at least one free event a year.

A free event not only feels more medieval, it also makes it easier to make the event more medieval in other ways. We would like, if possible, to get our guests to leave their cameras at home, to avoid obviously mundane conversations in places where other people will hear them, and in various other ways to help make the event feel as though it is really taking place in the Middle Ages. While some regard such restrictions as an attractive feature of the event, others may see them as at least a mild imposition. It is easier to get people to go along if they feel you are doing something special for them–such as feasting them for free.

The relation between the authentic event and the free event works in the other direction as well. Our ideal free event would have about a hundred people. Not only does that keep the cost at a reasonable level, it also means that, with a limited number of us to run the event, we are not too stretched to do a good job. By making it clear that people who come are expected to be more careful than usual about keeping things period, we can keep the numbers down to a reasonable level–and at the same time, encourage those who want to attend the kind of event we want to put on, while discouraging those who do not. Another way of achieving the same result is to schedule our event against a popular event of the sort we do not like, in the hope that it will draw away precisely the people who would neither enjoy nor contribute to ours.

Of course, it is possible to overdo such an approach. Our second free event was scheduled (deliberately) against a popular RenFair and (accidentally) against a border war that the King decided to promote, with the result that we ended up with only about forty people–and a very pleasant small event. Maybe next year we'll get it right.

One difficulty with a free event is that it is harder to estimate how many people are coming. We could require advance reservations, but to enforce that would require a troll booth and feast tokens–two of the things we are trying to avoid. Besides, with no feast fee, there would be no cost to sending in a reservation and then changing your mind, so we might get substantially more reservations than guests–just as, at Pennsic, people often rope off space in their encampment for everyone they think might show up. We ask people to tell us if they are coming, but we do not require reservations–everyone who shows up is fed. We try to estimate attendance in advance by requests for crash space plus talking to local people. In addition, we try to make our feast plans sufficiently flexible so that we can scale the feast up or down at the last minute.

I do not think it is practical to make all SCA events free. Some are so large that they would bankrupt even a very wealthy group. Some groups have no sources of income adequate to pay the cost of even a fairly modest free event. But there are many groups that get a substantial income from participating in renaissance fairs, putting on paid demos, and the like, and many events–indeed, many of the most enjoyable events–are small enough so that such a group can afford to put them on for free. Doing so, at least occasionally, is a nice way of practicing the medieval (and modern) virtues of generosity and hospitality.

Some learned men were sitting talking of the fabulous generosity of famous men of old, and especially of that of the Barmecides. Sa'id, the Vizier of Mu'tamid, remarked that he believed all such tales were fictions invented by sycophants in the hope of gain. Abu'l-Aina asked why, in that case, no similar tales were invented about His Excellency the Vizier, from whom something was to be hoped and feared, whereas the Barmecides were dead and could do neither good nor harm to anyone.

(Condensed from al-Tanukhi, 10th century)

I Have Seen the Past–And It Works

The structure of the Society consists of a rather peculiar mixture of feudalism and central authority. We use feudal terms such as "Barony" and "Baron" but then try to combine them with a modern central administrative system in which the baron's herald is appointed by the king's herald, who in turn is appointed with the assent of the Corporation's herald. Odder still, it is the medieval fiction and not the modern hierarchy that more accurately describe what is really happening in most kingdoms most of the time. Local officers may be warranted by their kingdom superiors, but most of them are actually chosen by their local group.

There is a reason why the Society is more feudal in substance than in form. The essential characteristic of a feudal order is that the key resource is controlled at a low level, with the result that higher level "rulers"–kings, princes, dukes–are coalition leaders rather than autocrats. This is as true of the Society at present as it was of France in the twelfth century. Their key resource was heavy cavalry. Ours is volunteer labor. The result is that, in practice, the most powerful people in the Society are barons or their equivalent–local leaders who can get things done. Our king wins his crown on the tourney field, but to actually accomplish anything he needs the support of the local leadership–just like a medieval king.

I have argued elsewhere that authenticity is often desirable for purely practical reasons–medieval people knew more about making armor than we do, so by imitating them we produce better armor. The same is true of political institutions. The constraints facing the Society (and, I suspect, many other volunteer organizations) are analogous to those faced by medieval societies, so medieval political structures may work better for us than modern ones. If so, we may be better off encouraging the feudal tendencies of the Society rather than setting up a (functionally inappropriate) centralized system and then using it to pretend to be feudal. In addition, by accepting and building on the actual feudal structure of our organization, we make what we are doing feel, and be, more period and more real.

What follows is a detailed proposal for a medieval solution to one of our current problems–the gap, in large SCA kingdoms, between the King and the Baron. The basic idea is to make possible a new unit, called a county, consisting of several baronies, shires, or the like that want to work together. The Count would be chosen by the member groups, with the approval of the Crown. He would serve much the same functions–symbolic and charismatic leader, arbitrator, coordinator–that are served by the King in smaller kingdoms. He would be, in essence, a coalition leader, someone powerful lords one step down want to follow–which is, I think, what powerful nobles in period mostly were.

One further advantage to the proposal is that it would get us away from the modern idea of identifying geography with politics–of dividing the Middle Kingdom, for example, into regions defined by state boundaries. A County might contain two groups in Illinois, one in Minnesota, one in Indiana and one in Michigan–just as the holdings of William Marshall included part of Ireland, part of Normandy, a chunk of the Welsh Marches, and bits and pieces of land scattered around the Angevin domains.

"Short and straight is the road to a friend, though he lives far away." (*Havamal*)

"Who would want to be King when he could be Baron of Carolingia?"

Counties: A Proposal

1. A county shall be a collection of three or more independent groups (shire, barony, province, or equivalent) in the same kingdom, sharing a common feudal head. The groups need not be geographically contiguous.

2. A county is created by the Crown on the petition of the constituent groups.
   a. A petition from a barony must be signed by the Baron. It shall be considered invalid if opposed by a majority of the members of the barony, as determined by the crown.
   b. A petition from a province or shire must be signed by a majority of the members of the group.
   c. Each petition must state the proposed name of the county and who the feudal head is to be; all petitions must agree in order to be counted together towards the establishment of a county.

3. In order to be formed, the proposed county must have a population equal to one fourth of the minimum population required for a kingdom; currently that is 100.

4. a. Once a county has been formed, additional groups may petition to join it; member groups may petition to secede from the county. Petitions are as in part 2 above.
b. In case of disagreement between a Baron and a majority of the barony, as in 2a above, the *status quo ante* shall prevail while the crown attempts to resolve the conflict.
c. In order for a group to join the county, its petition must be approved by both the Crown and the Count.
d. The feudal head of a county may, after consulting with the barons of the county and requesting the advice of the populace, announce that he is unwilling to continue to accept the fealty of a particular baron, or of the members of a particular group. Such a group will then cease to be a part of the county.

5. a. If a county drops below the minimum required population or number of groups due to loss of members or groups, it will have six months in which to meet the requirement, after which it may be dissolved by the Crown.
   b. If a county is below the minimum required population due to an increase in the population requirement, it shall be given a reasonable length of time by the Crown to meet the new requirement.

6. If the feudal head of a county already holds the rank of count, he shall be known by that title. If he holds the rank of duke, he may use either that title or the title of count; in the former case, the county may be known as a duchy.

7. Landed Counts
   a. The feudal head of a county who is neither a Count nor a Duke shall be known as a Viceroy, or by such other equivalent title as the Crown shall specify and the College of Heralds approve.
   b. After he has served as viceroy for two years, he shall receive the title of Count. Time during which the county is below its minimum required population, as in 5 above, shall not count towards the two year term.
   c. Such counts shall be known as landed counts, to distinguish them from royal counts.
   d. Landed counts shall retain the title of count even after giving up the office.

8. If the feudal head of a county is female, substitute Countess, Duchess, and Vicereine above as appropriate.

9. The feudal head of a county may be a couple.

10. Powers of the Count
   a. In this section and the next, "Count" refers to the Count, Countess, Duke, Duchess, Viceroy, Vicereine or couple who is the feudal head of a county.
   b. The Count shall have the power to devise and bestow such non-armigerous awards as he sees fit.
   c. The Count shall have the power to devise and bestow armigerous awards only insofar as that power is specifically delegated to him by the crown. In particular, the Count may be authorized to give awards of arms to the citizens of the county on behalf of the crown.
   d. The Count may receive the allegiance of the Barons of the county, and shall offer his allegiance to the crown.
   e. The Count may hold courts within the confines of his county, or elsewhere by invitation of the Crown, local Count, or Baron.
   f. The Count may, but is not required to, request one or more kingdom officers to appoint county officers. Such officers must be acceptable to both the Count and the kingdom officer.
   g. If the office of Baron becomes vacant, the Count may offer his advice to the crown concerning a replacement, but the decision shall be made by the crown based upon the desires and welfare of the populace of the barony.

11. Term of the Count
   a. The position of count, like that of baron, is a permanent one, save that a Count may resign or be dismissed by the crown for cause. A Count may also lose his office if his county fails to meet the requirements for population and number of groups, as in section 5 above.
   b. If one member of a ruling couple resigns or is dismissed, the remaining member may, at the discretion of the crown, be permitted to rule alone. Alternatively, a replacement for the absent member may be appointed by the crown, as in c below.
   c. If the office of count becomes vacant, the crown may appoint a successor after consulting with the people and baronage of the county and with the previous Count, if available. The decision should be based upon the desires and welfare of the populace and baronage.

A Letter

The Board of Directors
Society for Creative Anachronism, Inc.

Summer 1982

Dear Sirs:

In your June minutes you quoted from a letter by Catherine Rogers-Cook, in which she argued for stiffening membership requirements for participation in the SCA. The quote ended with the comment from the board that "events are moving in this direction." I am writing to argue for precisely the opposite position; the direction in which, in this regard, "events are moving" is, I believe, one symptom of an undesirable trend in the Society.

In order to make my argument, let me first make a distinction which I think important between the Corporation and the Society. The former is a legal entity, chartered in the state of California; the latter is a set of people, a social network, linked by mutual acquaintance, a common interest in "recreational medievalism," and joint participation in a "game." A few members of the Corporation are not members of the Society (isolated subscribers); many, perhaps a majority, of the members of the Society are not members of the Corporation. The trend that I consider undesirable is the increasing tendency either to regard the Corporation and the Society as the same entity, or else to regard the Society as in some meaningful sense the property of the Corporation.

Thus Ms. Rogers-Cook writes, and you apparently agree, that "when a person takes an active part in his or her branch, the person owes it to all the other members to commit to the group at least to the extent of an associate membership." As you and Ms. Rogers-Cook know, there are people in the Society, probably a fair number of them, whose annual expenditures on the Society, in time and money, come to well over a thousand dollars. What you are saying, in effect, is that such people, if they do not choose to be members, are making less of a commitment (and presumably less of a contribution) than those who spend one percent as much–provided that that one percent is a payment to you for membership in the corporation. From the standpoint of the *Corporation* that is reasonable enough; those who have not paid their membership have not contributed to the corporation. If the board were elective it would be appropriate to deny them a vote. But they have still contributed to the *Society*, and it is only the confusion of the two that makes it possible for Ms. Rogers-Cook to write what she has written, and for you to agree.

You may reply that the Society and the Corporation are different, but the former is the creation of the latter, hence the Corporation is entitled, if it wishes, to demand that those who participate in the Society pay their dues to the Corporation. My answer is that this is simply not true. The Society is the creation of several thousand people over some fifteen years. The Corporation did not invent the personae, sew the clothes, write the poems, do the deeds, start the wars, or brew the mead. Certainly the Corporation played an important role; it provided the bulk of the publications and most of the formal structure. But it did not do anything approaching all of the building, and it is therefore not entitled to tell its co-creators that the joint product belongs to it and they must pay for the privilege of participating.

Of course, it is appropriate to tell people that if they do not pay for membership they are not entitled to what membership directly pays for–T.I. and the newsletters. It is equally appropriate for the College of Heralds to tell those submitting devices that if they do not pay the fee they will not get the services of the college. It is equally appropriate for Raymond's Quiet Press to refuse to give its publications to those who do not pay for them. But to say that if Raymond does not pay you he is not committed to the Society and should be restricted in his ability to participate in it makes little more sense than to say that if you do not buy his books you are not committed to

the Society and should not be permitted to participate in it.
So far I have discussed the Corporation's claim to own the Society, which I think implicit in current trends, in terms of its justification or lack thereof. One half of ownership is the legitimacy of the claim; the other half is the power to enforce it. There is a sense in which the claim to own something, however well justified, is pointless if there is no way you can control what you say you own. It seems to me that the Corporation is very nearly in this position.

Ms. Rogers-Cook proposes that “membership be required to register as the head of a household, to hold any office whatsoever, to receive any award whatsoever, to attend or give counsel at any Peers' circle, any award advisory circle, or any ruler's council, and that no (one?) should be given the precedence, rank or status of any awards they have been given in the past or which they have won who is not a member.”

This entire catalog of proscriptions seems to me an example of the confusion of form with substance; its implementation would simply push the two farther apart.

I will start with the final proposal. There exists a bard by the name of Baldwin; you probably know him. I presume he is a Laurel. If he fails to pay his membership and is forbidden “the precedence, rank, or status” of a Laurel he will not be one bit less a bard, nor will he be to any degree less entitled to the respect he now receives. Nor will he fail to get it. I am, as it happens, entitled to wear the tokens of a knight. The only respect I wish to get is from those who know enough about me to believe that I also deserve to wear them. That is why, at a large event such as Pennsic, I mostly do not wear a white belt; I do not want the regard of those who recognize only the belt and not the man.

Going farther up the list of proscriptions, it is suggested that non-members be forbidden to give advice publicly. Since neither you nor Ms. Rogers-Cook can control to whom rulers talk, and since rulers will in any case take the advice of those whose council they value and ignore the rest, this proposal, if it were implemented and if it had any effect, would move peers' circles, Curiae, and the like, a little more towards being empty ceremonies and a little farther from serving their intended purpose.

Next up comes the proposal that non-members be forbidden from holding office. Here you have at least some case, since officers, or at least some officers, are representatives of the Corporation. The content of the proposal, however, is that the corporation, an organization that depends for its functioning mostly on volunteer labor, should refuse to accept donations of labor unless they are accompanied by donations of cash. While you may be entitled to do so, it seems a peculiar policy. And here again, you risk separating form from substance. You cannot prevent a non-member from holding unofficial fighting practices. If he is a good fighter and trainer, you cannot prevent him from being regarded by the other fighters in the group as their leader. All you can do is make sure that the person officially in charge of fighting in the lists at official events is someone else, lacking that regard.

I come now to the first, and to my mind least defensible, of the proposals, that non-members be forbidden “to register as the head of a household.” *Being* the head of a household has nothing to do with the Corporation or even the kingdom; it is a fact about the relationship between one person and some others. The Kingdom, or the Corporation, can if it wish refuse to admit that someone is the head of a household; it can also refuse to admit that the earth is round, with about as much effect.

In finishing this part of the argument, I will briefly assume that you decide, as you so far have not, to go all the way in trying to force participants in the Society to be members of the Corporation, by forbidding non-members to attend events. Assuming that the kingdoms do not

simply ignore the order, the first effect would be to encourage unofficial events. You could forbid the newsletters from publishing such events–thus greatly increasing the circulation of the unofficial newsletters. You could not, as a matter of both mundane law and practical enforceability, prevent me from transporting "Cariadoc," the persona I have created, from the context of an official event of the SCA to the context of unofficial events to, eventually, some alternative framework such as one of the parallel organizations already existing, or some new organization of a similar sort. You could not prevent me and others, if we wished to do so, from basing our ranks, customs, rules of fighting, and the like on those that have developed in the Society. You could impose on us the cost and inconvenience of redoing some of the organizational work that has been done over the past fifteen years; that is all.

I have argued that the Corporation neither can nor should own the Society. You may reply that I have misinterpreted your attitude, that all you really want to do is to assure that officials are well informed by requiring them to subscribe to the newsletters, or that your objective is simply the practical one of raising enough money in membership fees to pay for the Corporation's essential expenses.

With regard to the first argument, it is certainly desirable that officers be well informed. Being a member is some evidence of that, although not much; one can subscribe and not read the newsletter, and one can fail to subscribe and read someone else's copy. It is also desirable that officers be hardworking, responsible, well informed, likable, competent, and many other things. Whoever is responsible for choosing the officer must balance these desiderata in deciding who among the limited number of people who want the job can best do it. I see little point in choosing the one characteristic of being a member, which is in any case only mild evidence of what you really want, and elevating it into an absolute requirement; by doing so you in effect say that you would rather a shire choose a knight Marshall who does not know how to fight but is a member than one who does but is not.

The final argument that may be made for current trends is that the Corporation requires income to do its essential duties, and requiring people who benefit from those duties to be members is the obvious way of getting it. My first reply is that how much the Corporation needs is not something handed down from the heavens; it is the result of choices made by the Corporation. An immediate example is the case of the new groups in Australia and New Zealand. You have, as I understand matters, chosen to handle the groups through the Steward's office rather than letting one of the Kingdoms deal with them as has usually been done with new groups. This may be a good or a bad idea, but it was certainly a choice which could have been made the other way. Its consequence was to transfer the work from the Kingdoms, which run on volunteer labor, to the Steward's office. Having chosen to do so, you can hardly claim that the fact the Steward is doing so much as to require a salary is an unavoidable necessity of running the Corporation.

You can, of course, argue that everyone in the Society benefits from the good work of the Steward's office, and everyone should have to pay for it. But many of the "beneficiaries" will disagree, and if pushed hard enough will express their disagreement by doing without whatever services you insist require membership to receive. It seems to me a much wiser policy to require payment for those services (T.I. and the newsletters) that can be clearly separated out from the general activities of the Society, and which in any case absorb the bulk of the Corporation's income. This is, if anything, more practical now than in the past, since T.I. has improved to where it is, by itself, well worth the cost of membership.

Your Servant in the Service of the Society
David Friedman
(Cariadoc of the Bow)

This letter was written some fourteen years ago; aside from minor stylistic editing, it is as originally sent. The issue is still with us. In recent years it has become customary in many groups to charge a higher price at events to non-members; for a year or so the Board made such a policy mandatory, although it has since reversed itself. The argument is that those who are not willing to contribute to the Society, or to bear their part of the load, should be charged more.

It is easy enough to recognize those who contribute to an event. Look in the kitchen after the feast has been served–they are the ones washing dishes. When everyone else has gone, they are pushing brooms. Before everyone else has arrived, they are posting signs or peeling onions. They bear the load–not the people who pay twenty dollars a year for membership and treat every event as an amusing spectacle produced for their entertainment. Membership fees pay the printing and mailing cost of Tournaments Illuminated, part of the cost for the kingdom newsletters, and the expense of centralized administration–some of which is worth doing. They do not sing songs, write poems, hire halls, cook feasts or clean up afterwards. People do those things–the people who make the Society whether or not they are members of the Corporation.

A group with ten paid members and fifty people willing to work lives. A group with fifty paid members and nobody willing to work dies. Telling people at their first feast that they are perfectly welcome–at a higher price than everyone else–is not a good way of attracting new members.

When I first joined the Society, the rules included a long list of different classes of members. At the bottom of the list, somewhere around class G, was anyone who showed up at an event in garb. That may no longer describe a member of the SCA Incorporated, but it is a good minimum requirement for a member of the Society.

Decentralization, Democracy, and all That

In January of 1994, the Board of Directors of the SCA, with no advance notice or public discussion, announced that it had decided to increase dues by about 40% and close SCA events to non-members–the latter a policy that had been proposed for comment in the past and abandoned in the face of an overwhelmingly negative response. The reaction by members unhappy with this decision (of whom I was one) included an unsuccessful attempt to impeach board members deemed responsible, a successful legal action to force the Board to open the corporation's books of account to members (as required in the corporation's bylaws), and a public announcement, by royalty representing eleven of the thirteen kingdoms, that if any kingdom chose to secede from the SCA Inc., the others would continue to deal with it.

A number of the Board members associated with the decision eventually resigned, the policy of required membership was reversed, and the ultimate result may yet be significant changes in the structure of the Society. Readers interested in the controversy and my views of it will find extensive material on the SCA pages of my web site, currently located at www.daviddfriedman.com/~ddfr/Medieval/Medieval.html (in case I ever move my web site, try searching on "David D. Friedman" or "Recreational Medievalism"). I include here two documents that date from that controversy but deal with issues that are, I believe, of continuing relevance to the SCA Incorporated and the wider Society of which it is a part.

Thu, Jan 27, 1994

The Board of Directors
Society for Creative Anachronism

Dear Sirs:

I am writing in response to your actions of Saturday, January 22nd, in particular the decision to require membership of all who attend SCA events. I believe that this decision was a serious mistake, both on its own merits and in the context of the clearly expressed preferences of the membership as shown in recent polls. For my reasons for considering the policy undesirable on its own merits, I refer you to the letter on that subject that I sent you in the Summer of 1982. I will be happy to provide copies to any who desire them, since I understand that there has been some turnover in the Board’s membership in the interim.

The purpose of this letter, however, is not to argue that particular issue but rather to discuss what I believe to be the reasons for the problem that led to your recent action, and how that problem might be better dealt with. There are two reasons why you might find my views on the subject of interest. The first is that I have been involved with the Society through most of its history, including having reigned, twice each, over what are now the two largest kingdoms. The second is that I am a professional economist, having taught at (among other places) UCLA, Tulane, Chicago and Cornell–and some, although not all, of the issues I will be discussing are within my areas of professional competence.

It is my understanding, based in part on a recent public letter from the chairman, that the board's action was a response to severe budgetary problems. These problems come chiefly, I believe, from two sources–administrative expenses and legal expenses, the latter including the cost of liability insurance.

This raises an obvious question–what has changed to create such problems? Society dues, in recent years and over the history of the Society, have risen more rapidly then general prices, so why is it that dues which were reasonably adequate a few years ago are now inadequate?

The usual answer is that the problem is the increasing size of the Society. It is not immediately obvious why this should be the case. Additional members bring additional expenses, but also additional dues and potential volunteers. If, fifteen or twenty years ago, we were able to provide for a membership a tenth its present size entirely with volunteer labor, why can we not provide for the present membership with ten times the amount of volunteer labor?

The answer, I think, has to do with the nature of volunteer labor. Volunteers are paid, not with money but with status, gratitude, a feeling of accomplishment, and similar intangibles. These resources, like monetary resources, increase with the size of the Society–but they are much harder to transfer and concentrate. The result is a severe problem for an organization that maintains its centralized structure while greatly increasing its size.

With a membership of two thousand people, we can find (say) ten people living near the Society headquarters, each willing to contribute several hundred hours a year to helping run the Society. When we increase to twenty thousand without changing our structure, we need either ten people willing to each contribute several thousand hours or a hundred willing to each contribute several hundred–still all living in a fairly restricted area. We can find neither.

The lack of volunteer labor is not the only problem that arises as a result of increasing the scale of organization. Social sanctions are sufficient to keep most people honest against the temptation to steal tens, perhaps even hundreds, of dollars. They may be insufficient against the temptation to steal thousands or tens of thousands. So as the sums involved increase, there is pressure to shift to professional employees, legally binding contracts, bonding agencies, and similar formal (and expensive) mechanisms of control.

One way of trying to deal with this problem, and the one you seem to have chosen, is by raising the per member cost, trying to force more participants to be members, and maintaining the present structure of the Corporation. I think there is a better solution.

To start with, note that the shortage of volunteer labor exists almost exclusively at the national level. The kingdoms and the local groups routinely use quantities of volunteer labor, to fill offices and run events, vastly larger than the quantities of paid labor the Corporation finds it necessary to employ. The reason for this disparity is that the resources used to pay volunteer labor are much more readily available at lower levels of the organization. Very few of us know the people who handle the Corporation’s membership list, or have an opportunity to thank them.

Most of us know who cooked the feast we just ate or taught the class we just attended, and many of us not only have but use the opportunity to thank them.

So the obvious solution to this part of the Corporation's problem is to decentralize its operations, at least to the Kingdom level. One way of doing this would be to maintain the present organizational structure but turn over most of the operating responsibilities to the kingdoms. That would probably include having each kingdom collect dues from its own membership and maintain its own membership list.

A better way, in my opinion, would be to decentralize organizationally rather than administratively. Convert the kingdoms into independent corporations and let the present Corporation convert itself into an organization providing services to the kingdoms. The Society would thus follow the model of many other volunteer groups, including (I believe) most of the other living history groups, in which most of the formal corporate organization is at the equivalent of the kingdom or barony level rather than at the national or international level.

Under this model, the Corporation would continue to produce Tournaments Illuminated. Kingdoms could, and most probably would, include in their membership charge the cost of T.I., which they would purchase from the Corporation for their membership. The Corporation could, and probably would, produce model sets of rules for fighting and other activities, which the kingdoms would be free to adopt if they wished. The Corporation could offer to purchase insurance on behalf of the kingdoms–and the kingdoms could accept or reject the offer, according to whether or not they found that the Corporation could get better rates than they could get for themselves. The Corporation could support itself both by selling services, to kingdoms and individuals, and by requesting subsidies from the kingdoms.

So far I have discussed decentralization as a solution to the problem of inadequate amounts of volunteer labor. It also helps to reduce the problem of legal costs. The more resources the Corporation controls, the more attractive it is as a target for lawsuits.

Suppose a fighter in Florida is injured and he (or his insurance company) is considering suing. Under present circumstances he can hope, if he wins, to receive compensation from the resources of an organization with tens of thousands of members and hundred of thousands of dollars of income. Under my proposal, his direct case would be only against the (incorporated) Kingdom of Trimaris–which has much shallower pockets and is thus a much less attractive target. He might have some case, although a far weaker one than at present, against the SCA Inc.–which would also be a much less attractive target than it now is. He would have no case against the rest of the kingdoms, and thus no hope of getting at the bulk of the resources now controlled by the Corporation.

It follows from this argument that legal costs, both the direct costs of litigation and the indirect cost of insurance against such litigation, ought to be substantially lower for a Society decentralized into a dozen or more separate corporations. This is one advantage of organizational decentralization over the sort of administrative decentralization that I described earlier.

Similar arguments apply to the problem of controlling malfeasance by individuals who handle money on behalf of the Society. Embezzlement is not much of a problem for local groups, although it doubtless occurs occasionally, because the sums available to be embezzled are not very large. It is hardly worth offending all of one's friends in order to steal enough money to run away to Atlantic City for a weekend. By moving most of the flow of money down to the Kingdom, or even the Baronial, level we would restore the situation as it existed when the Society was much smaller–too small to be an attractive target for embezzlers. To put the same argument in a somewhat different form, consider how much more attractive a target we would be

at present if the admission fees paid for local events all flowed through the hands of the Corporate treasurer.

Hoping that you will find these suggestions useful, I remain

Sincerely Yours

David Friedman

Visiting Professor, Cornell Law School
Known in the Society as Cariadoc of the Bow, Knight, Master of the Laurel, Master of the Pelican, and Duke.

How Another Hobby is Organized

Every August, Elizabeth and I load our minivan and head for Pennsic. Every February, Elizabeth's parents load their minivan and head for Tucson. Our hobby is the SCA; theirs is mineral collecting. The Tucson Gem and Mineral show is several times the size of Pennsic. My wife's parents are as active in their hobby as we are in ours–more active these days, since their children are grown and ours are not. My mother-in-law is currently the first vice president of the Midwestern Federation of Mineral Societies. We had formed the impression, from past conversations, that the formal structure of their hobby was considerably less centralized than ours, so on a recent visit we asked some detailed questions.

How Gem and Mineral Collecting is Organized

The national organization of gem and mineral collectors, their nearest equivalent to the SCA Inc., is the American Federation of Mineral Societies (AFMS). It has seven members–the seven regional federations. The members of the regional federations are local gem and mineral clubs, plus some unaffiliated individuals (typically from areas without a local club). The individual clubs are unincorporated, or in some cases incorporated, associations.

The only control that the national federation exercises over the regionals, or the regional federations over the individual clubs, is the decision to accept them as members. A club that wishes to be a member of one of the regional federations must submit its bylaws for approval, but my mother-in-law had never heard of an application being turned down. A club must also agree to a statement of principles covering things such as collectors leaving sites at least as clean as they find them and reporting important finds to the appropriate scientific authorities. Subject to approval of bylaws, the internal structure of the club is entirely its own business. There are no mandatory reports up a bureaucratic hierarchy, no requirement that the regional approve the officers of the local club or the national approve the officers of the regional.

Individual clubs have no territorial monopoly; I am free to form a club in the same city in which one already exists. Regional Federations do have a defined territory. They cannot solicit clubs outside their territory, but can accept clubs from outside their territory that ask to join. A club can, and a few do, belong to more than one regional federation.

How Directors and Officers are Chosen

The Board of Directors of the national federation consists of the president and first vice president of each regional federation plus one national officer elected (by the previous year's board) from each of the seven regions.

The rules of the regionals vary; my information is on the Midwest Regional Federation. Midwest has an annual convention at which each club gets one delegate. Regional officers are nominated by a nominating committee of 7, consisting of two committee members elected each of the past three years (for a three year term), plus the current president. They nominate 4 candidates for their committee, of whom 2 will be elected to replace the 2 whose terms are expiring. They nominate one candidate for each of the 5 offices. Candidates can also be nominated from the floor, by a petition signed by at least 100 adult members (which is currently less than 1% of the membership), coming from at least 10% of the clubs. This has happened, but rarely–in my mother-in-law's view, when the committee nominated the wrong person.

This structure shows one possible way of combining stability with democracy. As long as everything goes smoothly, the system is self-perpetuating. But if the people running either the regional or national level do things that the membership strongly disapproves of, the membership has the power to replace all of the regional officers within a year (assuming the other regionals have systems similar to the Midwestern) and all of the national directors within two years.

How Well Does it Work?

Gem and Mineral Collecting is a somewhat bigger hobby than ours; my in-laws estimated about 50,000 members nationally and about 13,000 in the Midwest, which is the second largest of the regional federations. One similarity between the two hobbies is that in both there has been a recent, drastic increase in dues at the national level. In our case it was a jump from $25/year to $35/year for a subscribing membership, along with changes in the other classes. In their case it was a jump from twenty-five cents to fifty cents per club member in the fee that the National Federation charges the regional federations. The fees charged by regional federations vary; the Midwestern Regional charges its clubs a fee of $1 per member per year, out of which it pays (or will pay when the new rates are implemented) fifty cents to the National Federation.

One reason their cost is so low is that the National has only two employees, both part time. With only seven members the National Federation does not need to do a lot of complicated record keeping. Similarly, since the Regional has mainly clubs as members, it also does not have to do a lot of record keeping. Money earned or spent by a club is the concern of that club, not the regional or national federation. In the SCA, in contrast, every dollar of feast revenue collected by a local group is, in theory at least, income of the SCA Inc., to be kept track of at the corporate level and reported in the corporation's tax return.

A second reason is that they provide substantially less in the way of publications to their members. Both the national and regional newsletters go to clubs–two or three copies to each club (to the president, vice president, and newsletter editor if there is a club newsletter). Individuals can also subscribe separately. The national newsletter provides about as many square inches per year as we get, although the physical quality is more like a newspaper and less like a magazine. The Midwest Federation newsletter provides somewhat fewer square inches per year than the Pale.

A third reason their cost is low is that insurance is not included in the basic membership. It is available to clubs that want it for an additional charge (in the Midwest) of $1.60/member/year. Coverage is $1,000,000 per incident/$2,000,000 per occasion. It covers all members at a club event against liability. Some sites require an additional insurance certificate naming the site as coinsured; my in-laws thought that had cost either $60 or $100 for a gem and mineral show they were involved with, which had about 2000 attendees, about 70 club members working the show, and about 50 dealers.

History of their Hobby

One argument raised in discussions of decentralizing the SCA is the possibility of internal conflict, splits, etc. I asked my in-laws about whether the Gem and Mineral hobby had had such problems. Their answer was that, so far as they knew, there had been one serious split in the history of the National Association. The facts, as they remembered them, are as follows:

The Eastern Federation used to cover the entire East Coast, from Mississippi to Maine. Quite a long time ago, some of the southern members decided that they wanted to split off. Under the national rules, a new regional federation is recognized by the AFMS only if it is has the consent of the regional federation it had been a part of. Instead, the Southerners seceded.

For a while, the resulting Southeastern Federation was not a member of the National. Some clubs in the region were members of the Southeastern Federation, some of the Eastern, and there were bad feelings between the two groups. After about ten years, the Eastern Federation agreed to accept the split and the Southeastern Federation became part of the AFMS.

Comparison

The two striking differences between what I have described and the SCA Inc. are that they are much more decentralized and much less expensive. Including the cost of insurance, membership in the Midwest Federation comes to $2.60/year. The comparable figures for the SCA are $20/year without any publications or $35 with publications. Our publications are somewhat better than theirs, and they go to all subscribing members–but they only absorb about a third of our budget. Their system for handling publications provides a way of guaranteeing that the club has information about regional and national activities, without requiring officers to subscribe individually.

Their insurance limits are, I believe, the same as ours. Their insurance covers all club members; the SCA's liability insurance, as of 1994, covered the corporation but not the members. Their hobby is probably at least as risky as ours–mineral collectors sometimes do their collecting in dangerous places such as abandoned quarries and old mine shafts, their shows have a lot of outsiders going through them, and their merchants have much more expensive goods available to be stolen or damaged.

Decentralization does not prevent cooperation. Gem and Mineral shows are sometimes run by groups of clubs and are generally open to competitors from lots of other clubs and exhibitors both from other clubs and from outside the federation. My general impression is that the level of consistency across the member clubs of the AFMS is not radically different from that across the groups of the SCA.

Nor does decentralization seem to lead to more internal conflict than centralization. Over a history significantly longer than ours, they have had one internal conflict on the scale of a kingdom breaking up with the breakaway region effectively seceding, and it was eventually resolved. We have had at least two smaller conflicts of that sort (leading to the Far Isles group in England and MSR in New York), both so far unresolved, and our present difficulties might easily lead to one or more kingdoms seceding.

David/Cariadoc

The article above was originally posted to the Rialto (rec.org.sca, the SCA newsgroup on the internet) in 1994; I have edited it slightly for publication.

Another Sort of Letter

30 July, 1973

Tournaments Illuminated

Dear Sirs:

Much as it pains me to disagree with an authority so learned as Master Bersark, I fear I must take issue with his criticism of the cover illustration of T.I. #25. Master Bersark's essential error (which, I must confess, I too made on first examining the cover in question) was to interpret it as illustrating a combat between two men with great swords. More careful examination, however, will show beyond any doubt that only *one* of the weapons in question is in fact a great sword. The other weapon is equipped with a pair of spikes about half way up the blade; while these bear a superficial resemblance to the secondary quillons sometimes found on great swords, their position, midway between the true quillons and the point, demonstrates conclusively that the weapon is not a great sword at all. It is, rather, a grattle swax, a (deservedly) obscure weapon combining the faults of both great sword and battle axe, while possessing the virtues of neither.

Once we have correctly identified the weapons in the illustration, it becomes clear that what is here represented is the well known exercise of great sword and grattle swax. This rather peculiar form of combat, popular among the more timorous knights of medieval Germany, involved the two parties crossing their swords and leaning upon them, each supported by the other. The warrior who first collapsed, or fell asleep, was deemed defeated. The function of the false secondary quillons of the grattle swax was, of course, to prevent the blade of the great sword from sliding along that of the grattle swax. It might be argued that two grattle swaxes would work even better, but this would require the combatants to actually possess two of them, which was unlikely. I should perhaps add that, in the opinion of some scholars, the exercise of great sword and grattle swax provides the true origin of the term “tilting.”

Yours in behalf of scholarly endeavor,

Duke Cariadoc of the Bow, O.L., KSCA, etc.

(*Tournaments Illuminated* #29)

Jokes

Why are the hills of Lebanon bare?
Because every Frank in Christendom has a splinter of the True Cross.

Why does the King of the East wear a crown?
To discourage falcons in nesting season. (Written during Finvairr's reign)