A Quick and Dirty Intro to Research in the SCA

What It Is and How to Do It

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Your Lecturer

Some dude who throws himself down a lot of historical rabbit holes.

Not an academic or a teacher. *Be warned!*

- RenaissanceNetherlands.com

- Facebook.com/RenaissanceNetherlands

- HugoVanHarlo.com

Today's Agenda

- 1:00   Introductions

- 1:05   What Is Research (And Is Not)

- 1:10   A General Research Methodology

- 1:20   Finding Your Sources

- 1:35   Vetting Your Sources

- 1:50   Taking & Organizing Your Notes

WHAT IS RESEARCH? WHAT IS IT NOT?

The word "research" gets
thrown around a lot in the SCA.

What does it mean to you?

Research:

(a) the systematic investigation into the study of materials, sources etc. in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions

(b) an endeavour to discover new or collate old facts etc. by the scientific study of a subject or by a course of critical investigation.

- The Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary

Why I Personally Bother with Research

1. To feed my curiosity about a distant time and place

2. To **move from speculation to documentation** in my personal projects and commissions

3. To save money, save time, and save face: research first; get the physical object last.

   (Because it sucks to invest big bucks into a project only to find it's not correct or historical… and then you're stuck with the question of what to do about it.)

It All Boils Down to Informed Decision Making

- *"Authenticity is a rod with which we beat ourselves."* It can also be our shield!

- The SCA isn't a strict living history organization or a university. There are differing priorities about historical authenticity or plausibility.

- Research gives us a more intellectually honest space to defend our choices and interests when compared to *"if they had it, they would have used it."*
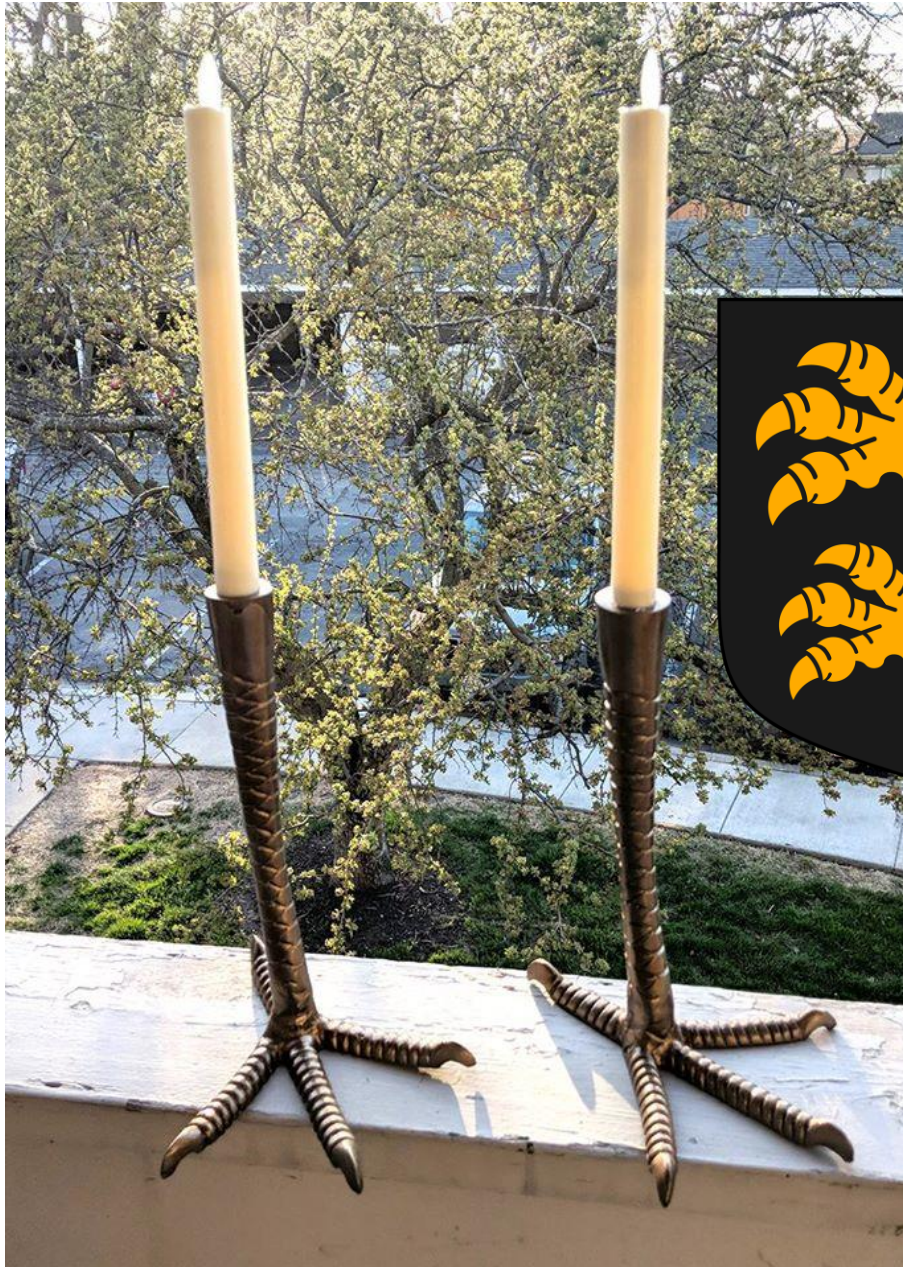
If anyone thinks I'm only a boring authenticity guy, check out my so excruciatingly high personal benchmark:

tacky heraldic candlesticks.

WHAT RESEARCH IS AND IS NOT

Perceptions

If you want to get the most out of learning to do "research," you're going to have to **change your mind.**

Research begins *before* we reproduce a historic item or make claims about the past. What we learn informs the shape and nature of the work that follows.

VS

We create an item or make claims about history, *then* search for confirmation of our works or claims. (What if our research contradicts what we've already done?)

Research is an exciting rabbit hole into the past. Sources lead me to more accurate and historic creations, which is rewarding.

vs

Research is tedious and a waste of time. Being forced to reference sources limits my creativity unnecessarily!

Documentation *and* Authenticity

Understanding and Celebrating What Was in Common Use

vs

Speculation *and* Justification

Searching for the Rare, Unique, or Hypothetical

"Research is an expression of faith in the possibility of progress. The drive that leads scholars to study a topic has to include the belief **that new things can be discovered, that newer can be better, and that greater depth of understanding is achievable.**"
– Henry Rosovsky

"Research is formalized curiosity.

It is poking and prying with a purpose. "
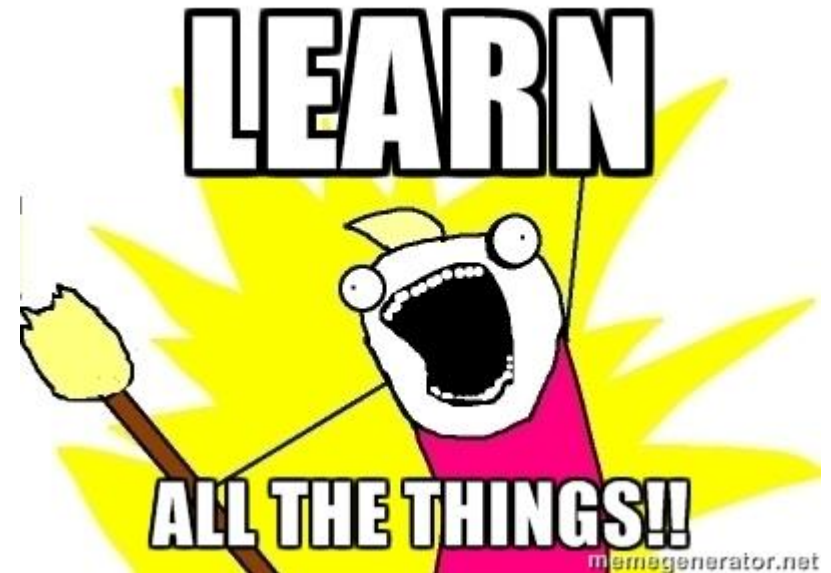— Zora Neale Hurston

METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

A Question of Scope

*Research can vary
in scope and intensity:*

- The ongoing vacuum-cleaner approach to self-education of your subject

- Episodic or one-off research dives for specific projects, papers, or classes

A General Research Methodology

Once you've identified a topic to research:

1.   Build up your foundational knowledge of the subject.

2.   Create a strategy of where and what to look for.
      Find sources via databases, archives, & search engines.

3.   Collect relevant primary and secondary sources.

4.   Evaluate and vet those sources.

5.   Take notes and keep them organized!

Writing papers, documentation, and/or blogs all come later.

Wherein we do *sometimes* start with Wikipedia or Pinterest or Google.

Start with Building a Foundation of Knowledge

You can't get specific until you understand the basics.

i.e. To be comfortable enough with your material to understand what to look for, and once you found something, to judge its relevance.

- What foundational terminology, concepts, and historical contexts do you need to understand for your subject?

- What are the most significant primary and secondary sources (authors, researchers, journals, museums, etc.) to become familiar with and monitor?

FINDING SOURCES: DATABASES & SEARCH ENGINES

How to Find What You Want to Find

- **Know What to Look For:** What terms are you using? Are there specific terms professionals use (do you even know, yet)? Can you be more specific or more broad with them? Are there foreign-language equivalents?

- **Know Where to Look:** It's typically more efficient to begin with Academic databases and search engines for scholarly works and museum and archival sites to reference primary sources and extant artifacts.
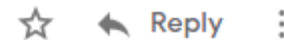
Het dagboek van Otto van Wijhe uit 1574   Inbox ×   🖨 ⬈

Hans van Wijhe
to me ▾   ☆ ← Reply ⋮

Dear Will Phillips,

Our book "Het dagboek van Otto van Wijhe uit 1574" is still available.

We will send you the book after receiving € 32 euro (including postage and package costs) on our
account NL 95 INGB 0750479744 accountholder : J.A. van Wijhe (all bank charges are at your expense).
De BIC/SWIFT code of our ING-bank is : INGBNL2A.
Adress :
ING Bank N.V.
Foreign Operations
PO Box 1800
1000 BV Amsterdam

You will be the first American ordering our very special book!
Unfortunately our website cannot be reached at the moment.
In a few weeks we will have a brand new website.

Sincerely Yours,
Hans van Wijhe
Vrienden van de Wijenburg

Don't be afraid to email professors, historians, librarians, and archivists.

Most are happy to help!

On Dealing With Foreign Languages

Tools for Deciphering Foreign-Language Sources can be Helpful

- IMTranslator (http://imtranslator.net/Translator-for-Chrome-Imtranslator.asp)

- Google Translate (https://translate.google.com/)

- Wiktionary (https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Wiktionary:Main_Page)

- Language-English digital dictionary and grammar (Also consider near-contemporary dictionaries if you are researching the early modern period.)

FINDING SOURCES

Databases, Search Engines, & Useful Websites

Academic Papers, Journal Articles, & Theses

Public-Facing

- Google Scholar (https://scholar.google.com/)*

- Academia.edu (https://academia.edu)

- CORE Open Access Papers (https://core.ac.uk/)

- Springer Link (https://link.springer.com/)

- RefSeek (https://www.refseek.com/)

Academic Papers, Journal Articles, & Theses

Requires a Library Card, University Access, or Subscription

- JSTOR (https://www.jstor.org/)

- EBSCO (Academic Search Elite)

- History Reference Center
  (https://www.ebsco.com/products/research-databases/history-reference-center)

- Academic Publishers & Journals

For Books and eBooks

Searching for Scholarly Press-Only Books Requires Discretion

- Google Books (https://books.google.com/)

- EMU's Scholarly Presses Search (https://guides.emich.edu/alt-texts/ups)

- WorldCat Library Search (https://www.worldcat.org/)

- Library Extension (https://www.libraryextension.com/)

- Plus: CHECK YOUR BIBLIOGRAPHIES!

For Extant Artifacts: Museums & Archives

Your go-to archival resources will vary!

Consider the following types of organizations in locations or specializations relevant to your own research:

- Museum Collections – Many Have Been Digitized

- Local, State/Provincial, and National Archives

- Historical, Archeological, Genealogical, and Preservation Organizations

Possibly Relevant Museums & Archives

- The V&A (http://collections.vam.ac.uk/)

- British Museum (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection)

- Rijksmuseum (https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/search)

- Germanisches Nationalmuseum (https://www.gnm.de/en/collections/collections/)

- Muséum national d'histoire naturelle (https://www.mnhn.fr/en/collections)

- Larsdatter (http://www.larsdatter.com/)

There are so many more! And so many are hard to use!

VETTING YOUR SOURCES

Primary or Secondary Sources

- **Primary:** Eyewitness or immediate accounts of an event, person, or object – including the extant objects themselves. Scientific experiments also count as primary sources, which is relevant for the experimental archeology of the SCA.

- **Secondary:** Uses primary sources (and often other secondary sources) to summarize, analyze, or make commentary on a subject. Can be written for popular or general audiences, trade or industry professionals, or other scholars.

Types of Secondary Sources

- **Popular:** Written to entertain or inform the general public, using easier-to-understand language. Often includes flashy graphics and/or spectacular headings. Rarely includes sources and is only vetted by the editors.

- **Scholarly or Academic:** Specific, usually narrowly-focused subject matter that incorporates specialized terminology scholars in the field will recognize. Usually presents new findings, interpretations, or analysis of the subject matter and is subject to a peer review process by other scholars.
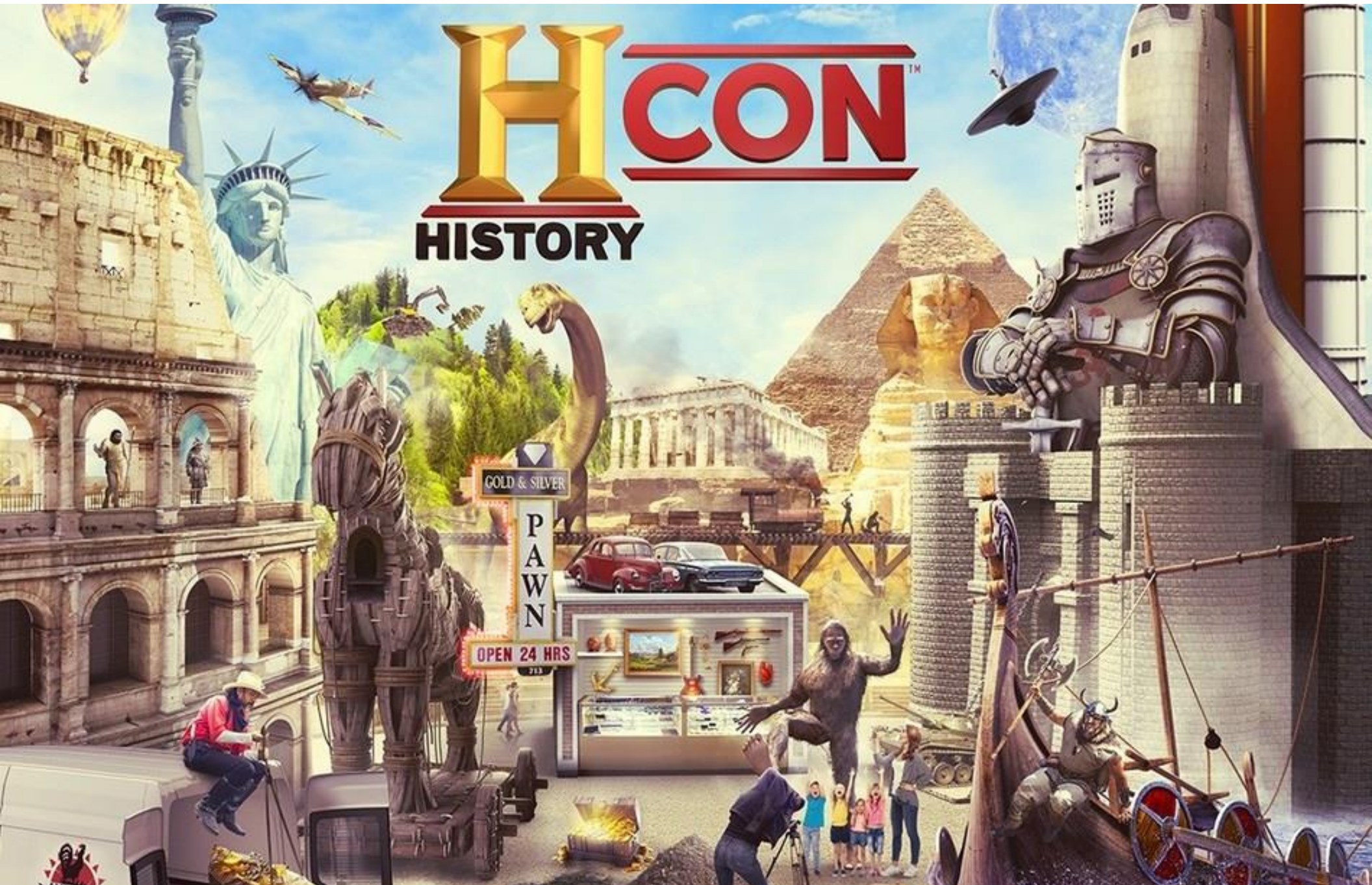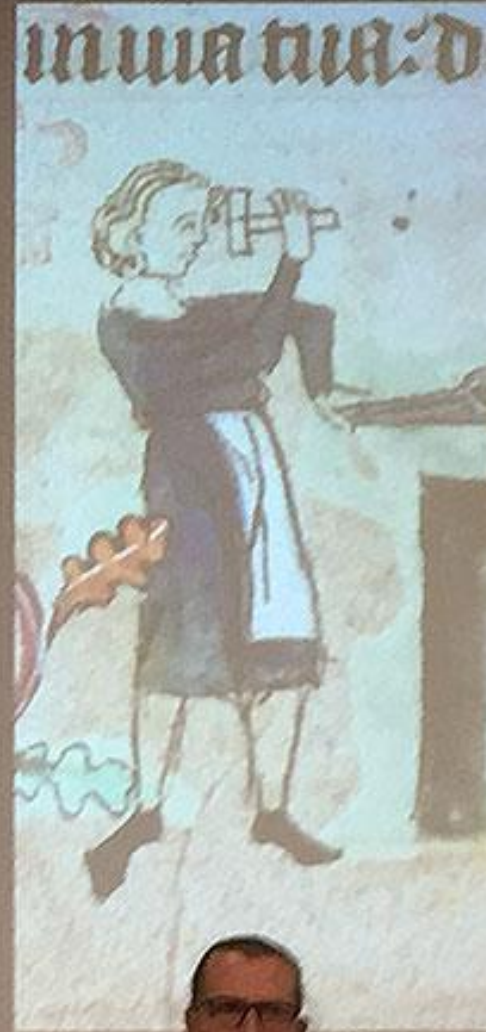
That's not to say "don't use Wikipedia." Use it, enjoy it, and tell me all about the Bactria–Margiana Archaeological Complex after reading about it at 2:00am!

But, **use those Wiki articles to build a base level of information and specific terminology to leap into their sources and other works.**

Vetting Your Secondary Sources: S.A.T.

- **Substance:** What is the source of publication or home of this item? Is it affiliated with a university or museum? Does the information cite itself and include a bibliography?

- **Authorship:** Who wrote or created this? What are their qualifications, and who or what are they associated with? Do they bring obvious or strong biases to their work? *For primary sources, how different is their worldview?*

- **Timeliness:** When was this written or created? Is it out of date, or is there more current scholarship with a different, evolved understanding that reflects new discoveries?

Evaluating Art and Extant Objects

- **Form:** What is the shape, construction, or purpose of use?

- **Dating:** Is this a contemporary item or depiction, or one representing a past event or in the style of the past?

- **Social Context:** Who created this? Who was the intended audience or users of this art or item?

- **Veracity:** Is this an authentic artifact (see the pros on this)?

(Interpreting art and historical artifacts is really a separate class altogether – and one I'm not equipped to speak to in depth.)

A Brief Aside About Pinterest

I love Pinterest! But it's more dangerous than Wikipedia when it comes to using it as a sole source for research!

- Follow image links back to their source, when possible.

- Context menu "Search Google for image" to try to find a better, academic source when you can't.

TAKING & ORGANIZING YOUR NOTES

On Notetaking

- **This single subject can be a class unto itself – and has been! See my "Organizing Your Research" class notes for a longer breakdown of my system.**

- Look for themes and commonalities in your sources

- Systematize and *centralize* your notes & sources, but don't let perfect be the enemy of good. Use something. Tags, categories, folders, headings in Word docs, etc.

- Keep a "to-track" list of new sources, people, and sites

Types of Notes

From text sources:

- **Summarize:** When there's a lot of contextual information

- **Paraphrase:** When the source is too long or uses too much specialist terminology (a real issue for research in the SCA).

- **Quote:** When you need to communicate specifics

From art, extent objects, and field observations:

- Descriptions, questions, and interpretations

SCREENSHOTS & PHOTOS ARE A TRICK. Try it!

IN SUMMARY

If You Remember Nothing Else, *Remember This:*

- Research is "organized curiosity" that helps us make better informed decisions about the historical accuracy of our work.

- You have to have a basic foundational understanding of your subject to begin! Use Wikpedia; it's cool. We won't tell.

- Finding primary sources and quality, academic secondary sources is key – there are better tools than a basic Google search to find what you're looking for.

- Be smart about your sources. Think critically and vet them.

- Put your notes to work for you. Create a system you can reference and use better than a mish-mash of notes everywhere!

The End
Thanks for joining me today!

Thank You!