

A Ring of Re-enactors

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Guests

Eric Meulemans (US) and Steve Mijatovic (AU)

Introduction

This episode we're having a bit of fun and looking at an alternative kind of living history with two guests from the Middle Earth Re-enactment society. Join us to hear all about how the society started and what exactly they do in terms of living history, but also to listen in to discussions on the authenticity of re-enactment, maintaining a social group that's scattered around the world, and why the setting of a fantasy world enables a more diverse re-enactment experience. So pop the kettle on, and let's settle down for a listen along with second breakfast!

Transcript

It's the first Friday of the month, which means that it's time for the next episode of #FinallyFriday, bringing you insights and discussions from around the world focussing on experimental archaeology, ancient technology, archaeological open-air museums and interpretation.

Matilda: Hello and welcome to #FinallyFriday. My name is Matilda Siebrecht. Today I am joined by two very special guests from the Middle Earth Re-enactment Society. In its own words, the society is dedicated to the furthering of J. R. R. Tolkien cultural studies within the framework of historical re-enactment. Eric Meulemans is based in the US with an academic background in history and historic preservation. He has worked at various open-air museums, predominantly using his crafting skills in wood and metal, which he has honed through his company Meuleurgy. He came to re-enactment and living history primarily through interest in these traditional crafts and he is, of course, a big Tolkien fan.

Steve Mijatovic based in Australia and has a background interest in Anglo Saxon history and weapons-based martial arts, which led him into the world of Viking Age re-enactment. He is fascinated by all things historic, in particular historic poetry, and pursues this interest through living history as well as performative education. And he is, of course, also a big fan of Tolkien's works.

So welcome to both of you. Thank you so much for joining me here on this podcast. I have a very quick question to start you off. I guess one that probably you have a lot when people hear that you're part of The Middle Earth Re-enactment Society. How did such a society start and how did both of you become involved in it? Perhaps Eric, if you want to start us off?

Eric: Sure. I think it's probably not an unfamiliar thing for many of us to have spent our youth or our childhood running about the woods, pretending we're on adventures. And for some of us, we either never grew out of that or we grew back into it. And thanks to the internet, a lot of us ended up finding one another on a place called the Middle Earth Rangers Forum, which as you might guess from the name, was kind of focussed on the idea of Tolkien's Middle Earth Rangers, the Rangers of the North, the Dúnedain and the Ithilien Rangers and kind of following, replicating their clothing, footwear, cooking, woodcraft, arms and armour, martial feats, mostly wandering in the woods in costume and having a good time. And a lot of people that were in this forum came to it from different angles. Some were wholly interested simply in looking the part, others were more interested in the woodcraft or more specific aspects and diving deeper into it and I think some of us sort of clustered together and looked to form a more detailed approach. A few of us gathered in 2011, one of those being myself, went on to form the Middle Earth Re-enactment Society, which still is affiliated with the Rangers Forum, but we have established more - I don't want to say stringent criteria, it makes it sound like we're trying to be superior when we're not. It's just a more focussed branch that looks to ground itself in the specifics of Tolkien's writings and what is available rather than things like film adaptations or other sources that are outside of the original sources that he produced. So anyway, under that in 2016, we actually started producing our newsletter, which is ostensibly quarterly, it's really more like three times a year on average, but we've been busy with that ever since. A lot of us are solo participants out of necessity because we live far apart, but on just the group gatherings that we've had, our total distance covered cumulatively by our members is around 800 kilometres at this point.

Matilda: Well, and speaking of distant members...

Steve: Yes, I feel I'm the outlier here. I'm actually, I think, the society's newest member, though I've been following their exploits and the community for over 10 years now. As Eric mentioned, it is a little bit of a solo pursuit. I have a living history group where I get my social side of doing these sorts of adventures. But when it comes to the Middle Earth stuff, I operate on my own and that's not a bad thing, particularly with the Ranger mindset. The thinking is that, by and large, they were out there alone, sleeping in ditches, patrolling, that sort of thing. So it lends itself well to a solo pursuit. Coming from that living history background, I saw the Society, as Eric mentioned as being not, and again, not to sound elitist, but they were doing the level of recreation that I'm doing in living history. And I wanted to do that within this aspect of the hobby as well, or within this hobby. And so naturally it was something for me to aspire to and I was very delighted when I got an invitation to apply to become a member. You don't have to be asked to apply, you can just apply, but I was a little bit in awe of these particular individuals and was not in any hurry necessarily to apply. Even though when the chips then came down and I looked at it I was comfortably in the wheelhouse of where they're at.

Matilda: What's the main differences, would you say, between a fantasy-based re-enactment society, I guess it could be called, rather than necessarily a historic re-enactment society, because both of you have experience in the historic re-enactment and living history. Why start a fantasy-based one rather than, for example, one that is more related to the archaeological or historic background that Tolkien's work is based on, if that makes sense.

Steve: For my part, it's because obviously it allows you to sink further into the work than you possibly can by reading the book or watching a movie. When you're camped on the side of a mountain that you had to hike to in your hobbit clothes with your hobbit backpack and you wake up with a tree root in your back and you've really got that Frodo moment of like, oh god, I've let myself get really out of shape here. You're actually living it, which is similar to living history, you're in the moment and you're experiencing things as they would have experienced it. There's an aspect there whereby filling the void, by creating this fantasy living history group, we're able to live our own small version of the books and it's very difficult to put a price on that. I was lucky enough to camp in a little replica Stonehenge overnight and as the full moon came up with the fire there and it could have been anywhere in Middle Earth, could have been in Rohan, it could have been the Barrow-Downs and your imagination just runs with that and it's a fantastic way to get further into the work and to actually live in the footsteps of what we all, as Eric said, we all wanted to do it as children. We pictured ourselves running through the hills and many of us did run through the hills.

Eric: Yeah, I'll expand on that a little bit. For one, it's fun, that kind of encapsulates that. And I think we, as adults, we tend to discount the importance of fun in learning just experientially. From a young age even we're told: Oh, don't climb on that. Don't go there. Don't walk that way. Don't play, essentially. At some point in your life, you stop playing. It's a form of play, but

it's also, we take it seriously, although we don't take ourselves seriously, but I think, back to your question, one of the main reasons, and to speak to what Steve is saying, is that it's expansive, that unlike historical re-enactment where you're bound to what extant finds we have to work from, which of course we're also limited by when we're looking towards the historical past that we reference. We can sort of freely ask questions and pursue them in a way that you wouldn't want to do if you were presenting a historical past to, say, the public. And I think a lot of historical re-enactment at various levels does kind of tend to fall into a pitfall both from its participants and especially its audience of filling in those gaps with perhaps fanciful reconstructions sometimes that maybe muddy the water. That's not something we have to worry about because, I don't like to hand wave and say it's just fantasy, but it's not a cop out and saying: oh, we don't have to adhere to some perceived authenticity. It's something of a relief that we're not contributing to or damaging or dishonouring a historical past. That's how I feel a little bit about it.

Matilda: As someone who's part of a living history group, Steve, would you agree with that in terms of the kind of difference of being able to fantasise?

Steve: I do and to elaborate a little bit further, it gives you a freedom because with certain things, Tolkien's very descriptive in his work but then other things are done with quite a broad stroke. So we're able to go not necessarily into say, let's just say hypothetically you're a Viking re-enactor, we don't necessarily have to restrict ourselves to the Viking period. If we're looking, say, for a lantern or for some sort of light source, we can go further into the Middle Ages. So there's a freedom there as well. There's not that restriction. I'm able to wear as part of my Rohan assemblage, I can wear a hooded cloak and hooded cloaks are awesome, which I can't do in living history because of the lack of finds. So it gives you a freedom and it is quite liberating. You do have to make sure that when you go back to the living history world that the two don't ever bleed together because it can be very tempting to pop on my Rohan helmet and wear that to an event because it is a lovely piece of kit. Not that I don't find my living history fun, but it's where I get to loosen the strings a bit and have more fun and bring in fantastical design elements and think: well, I'm going to create a new shield, but I'm going to pull design elements from later in the period because I like that art style better and it works and things like that.

Matilda: Both of you have mentioned a few times using the source material or kind of having evidence for it. I assume you're just using then the written sources of Tolkien rather than, for example, taking inspiration from the films or the sets or anything. But in terms of the written sources, how much actual information in terms of kind of description, is there actually in there to work with?

Steve: There's quite a bit actually. The base texts themselves, so *The Hobbit*, is quite light on details, for example. Just because it's that sort of, not more simplistic...

Matilda: Like it's a children's book, right?

Steve: Exactly. But there's still little details in that. So for example, when the dwarves come to the party at Bag End, their hoods are described as the finest detachable party hoods. So then you're thinking, okay, so it's a two part assemblage. It's a separate cloak and hood. There are little hints even in the more basic books, and we were lucky to have a couple of members who are very, very versed in these. But you've got Tolkien's letters, you've got books like *The Nature of Middle Earth*, you've got *The Middle Earth Atlas*, you've got other reference books that have already done some of the work for us in that regard. They've sort of deep-dived into the works and pulled out elaborations of that and summaries. I found a new reference just the other day that... I've read that book four or five times. And I thought it was perfect for another society member and I sent it through and his reaction was the same. "Why have I never seen this?" There is quite a bit of information there. The counterpoint to that is that then sometimes there's either just a big void or there's just maddeningly little detail. Interestingly enough, some of the bigger things we do, such as costuming or garb, I guess you would say, it's one of the things that is not perhaps that well described. For Strider, for example, we know he had tall boots, a cloak and worn clothing... that's about it. So if you look at that, there's a lot of interpretation that can be done there. And that's when you start to take and bring in the history side of things and go with it. Just looking around now, my desk and everything is littered with books. So more than you would think, I guess, is the short answer that I was trying to get to.

Eric: I would add to that, as far as primary sources from Tolkien himself, there is more to come. So Steve mentioned his letters, which are just replete with clues and details and occasionally him answering direct questions about his writings from people writing in or just mentioning things, particularly to his son. But there are many of them that have not yet been published that the Tolkien Estate retains, which I believe may happen at some point. But besides that, he also left a fair amount of artwork, of visual renderings of places and persons. So everything from just very basic sketches to full-on paintings that he did depicting these things, there's a lot of detail that you can pull from those in terms of what he was envisioning, or at least how he could put it onto paper, and that covers everything from like landscape scenes to heraldry to particular scenes from his writings. So, that's an excellent resource also that a lot of people don't even know about, often. There's a common phenomenon where people will complain that Tolkien is too descriptive. And I always feel like they've never actually read Tolkien because he's evocative, in the sense that he paints a picture for your mind, but he doesn't really tell you much about it in detail. So between that and the fact that we don't have a lot of these details and we have sort of fragmentary pieces, it isn't very different than reconstructing, say an Iron Age culture, where you have one extant hood or whatever happened to survive and you're pulling from that and you're trying to reconstruct an entire society. You can't just look at those singular items. You have to look at the entire work and see what was happening culturally, kind of literally in our case, read between the lines and assemble these conclusions.

Matilda: I like the idea that there might be new findings, almost like “New excavations have come to light!” and we have new Tolkien's works. So I have to ask, in terms of kind of picking then which parts you re-enact, because of course it's not just humans in Tolkien's universe. Already in living history, even within one historic ‘culture’, inverted quotes, you have so many different classes, races, all sorts of things that you can focus on as your, for want of a better word, character. Speaking as someone who's never done living history, I'm not sure how it works in that respect. Is it, though, kind of similar in terms of you pick a character? Do you pick a type of person? Do you pick a region? How does it work kind of in practical terms, in terms of the living history aspect of the society?

Eric: Well, first of all, almost exclusively, at least our membership tends to either be human or a hobbit. I don't know - is anyone doing an elf portrayal? I don't think so. But basically the only requisite we have is that you reasonably be able to portray that person. One of the examples we give in our standards is that, you know, if you're six and a half feet tall, you're probably not going to make a great dwarf, which... it doesn't preclude you from doing it... But if you're the sort who would rather stay at home, maybe don't be a Ranger. But for the most of us, I think we tend to craft a persona around the skills and pursuits that interest us and that's what we develop it around so that we can pursue those things. The setting is fictional, but the things that we're working on really aren't, that the processes and the results that we derive from them aren't really any less real than they would be in any other re-enactment organisation.

Steve: I think it's a matter of just doing what you want to do within the scope of realism, of course, as Eric's example set out for the dwarf. But what I've found is if I tell people about this, what I call the dark side of re-enactment, tell them about my secret hobby, is everyone has a favourite part or favourite cultural race within the books. They will always “I'd love to be an elf” or “I've always wanted to do like a Gondorian guard outfit with the full surcoat”. So most people arrive at it with a predefined idea of what they're looking to get from the re-enactment. For me, it was Rohan, there was never any doubt. But the other one, which is really accessible for most people, is actually to do a hobbit. You don't necessarily need any adventuring gear, you don't need any weaponry, you don't need much at all really, you just need some fine trousers and a nice waistcoat, hairy feet would be ideal, and then you get to sit around eating pies and smoking pipes and drinking beer and that's perfect, that you have achieved peak re-enactorism right there. So it is accessible for just about everyone and there's not a restriction put on it. The Society does aim to have what we would call a small man, or a common man, bent. We don't necessarily encourage displays of nobility or named characters or items from the books. We can only handle one Aragorn running around, for example, or it's like, “I'm King Théoden”, because the other thing there too is you then don't get to create your own narrative. You're bound by what is already written. Whereas if you're Eofor of Rohan, a homeless wanderer, you then can put yourself in different places in the world, you can put yourself into the timeline where you like, you can put your gear where you

like. Maybe you're rich, maybe you're poor. So it gives you a lot more freedom. That's probably one of the only real restrictions I would think that we would suggest for most people.

Matilda: You mentioned that some of your members are hobbits. How authentically hobbit are they? Do they wear shoes?

Steve: I've just got to jump straight in and say that the hobbits in the books, if you go to the source material, they are recorded as wearing shoes.

Matilda: They are!

Steve: Sorry to bust the myth...

Eric: And many hobbits also live in houses as we would recognize them. The hobbit hole... it's not peculiar, but it is an older form that was being carried through. Yeah, there's all kinds of stuff like that...

Matilda: That's classic, I guess. The films by Peter Jackson were sort of such a massive thing. I guess they did do a lot of research in that in terms of looking at the historic background, but how much has the release of those films affected the interpretation that people go into? Has it affected it or are you able to remove yourself from that influence?

Eric: The written sources haven't changed, so I don't think it's changed what is possible to interpret from them. Of course prior to the release of those films, there were decades of widely varying visual representations of the characters and settings of Middle Earth and since the release of those films, for better or worse, that imagery is, for the most part, cemented in the public consciousness. I don't think any of us would say that it isn't a fantastic interpretation, but it's not *the* interpretation. We do run into a lot..., especially with the Rangers..., those film depictions that is what they look like for most people. So I don't think we have a problem escaping that, but maybe convincing others of an alternative viewpoint is certainly more difficult now.

Steve: Absolutely. Even if you were to Google any of the characters from The Lord of the Rings, you don't get a range of artistic depictions. You get people who've drawn Viggo Mortensen as Aragorn or Ian McKellen as Gandalf. That is a testament to how well-cast the movie was. It's 20 years old now and how well it's aged and how endearing it is to people. But Eric's spot on. In some areas it's spot on and yet in others it's really wide of the mark. We'll often get comments... my researched kit, which has a gear passport, like a living history one, it has references from the text back up why I've got these items. And I will constantly be told that, "Oh no, that's... everyone in Rohan wore green". No!... sort of things. So it's both inescapable, but in many ways, we wouldn't have the interest in the hobby or the scope that we have without it being out there, and if it's the vessel that brings people in, and some stay at that level, and that's fine. There's lots of levels within this hobby. Obviously

we're the Middle Earth Re-enactment Society, but there's Cosplay, there's LARP, you can do a Ranger in the SCA, you can fully go down that path. So there are different ways to pursue Middle Earth re-enactment in the broad church. So if it's the gateway to get people in and then they look at the branches in front of them and say: I'd really like to do this more serious version, or, what do you mean that my armour is not correct, what do you mean by that? And then they stay in that camp, then it's done its job. It's gotten people in the door.

Eric: Yeah, I'm sure there's just a bit of a generational influence of course, because a lot of us actually came to Tolkien's works before the films were released. We watched them in wild anticipation and loved them to varying degrees. Some of us take issue with some of their aspects, but like I said, I think overall, they're still excellent films that have stood the test of time and are a cultural phenomenon. And of course, if you're of a certain age on their release, they are your image of that world. So a lot of people did come to this hobby through those films.

Matilda: I guess you could say the same thing about living history in a way. I'm sure, for example, since the release of TV series Vikings, there've been so many more Viking Age re-enacted. Even within archaeology of Indiana Jones, as difficult as it is in terms of archaeological authenticity, I'm sure there's a whole generation of archaeologists who became archaeologists because of Indiana Jones, basically. In that way, I suppose it's also not that different from other aspects of re-enactment and living history.

Steve: It does spark off some, not heated debates, but some interesting debates. For example, a common one that comes up is the sword worn by Aragorn in the movies, is a long sword. So naturally, when a lot of people enter in, that's the vision that they've got in their head and they all want the long sword. And then they go out into the wilderness and they find that it's really not that practical for crawling under bushes and into holes and they realise that their \$3,000 Albion sword is going to rust very badly if it gets rained on. It does bring up these debates that we have between members of the Society or people who are out there actually doing this experimental archaeology side of it, where we're out there and we're testing the gear and we're like: look, this just doesn't work it looks great in a movie but it doesn't work in the real world and you can tell the ones that have never actually worn their kit out into a rainstorm. Because they're the ones with the strongest opinions that aren't actually very valid.

Eric: This brings up the distinction we generally draw between costume and clothing and a wide array of other arguably semantic issues. But a lot of people who are into this sort of thing, they get into to quote 'costume' and maybe they do that for a Ren fair or a photo shoot or a convention. Or maybe they're playing around in the backyard with some friends and all of those things are absolutely fine. When you actually live in it and you spend several days in it in all kinds of weather and performing all kinds of tasks, it's a completely different story. You will quickly come to realise just like Steve says, what works and what doesn't, what's in your way, what you thought you obviously needed you don't need, or the things that you didn't

even think of you obviously do need. It takes learning, it takes practice and knowledge that's gained through that experience to understand how these things function. I could give one example from sort of a practical versus academic contrast. I was heavily into slinging, traditional Balearic style slinging. I would read these academic reports that would give energies or ranges or other performance characteristics of the sling. And I'm like, are you kidding? They were terrible because they were based on someone who had never used the thing before going out and playing around with it for a few hours. So it's not very good, obviously, is the conclusion. But then you look at their use in hunting and warfare for millennia, and clearly they were effective. It's just something that takes a lot of practice. And if you're good at it, it's effective. It was supplanted by things like the bow for other reasons, but... it's a disconnect between that practical knowledge and an assumption in a lot of cases.

Matilda: We've had actually quite a lot of our guests on this podcast saying very similar things about other aspects of experimental archaeology as well.

Eric: I'd like to clarify. As a disclaimer, I don't think we would generally describe what we do in the strict sense of experimental archaeology. I don't think we're generally documenting our processes or results to that degree, but that we are seeking to examine, explore, and hopefully preserve ancestral skills, maybe through a lens of Tolkien's works. We do report our findings in our newsletter, but it's not the level of an academic experimental archaeology report where we would have necessarily XRF results or something on our metallurgy, you know...

Steve: I'll put a caveat in there that there's a little bit of where if we have something made and it is a historic replica, and we happen to use it in a Middle Earth setting, then the testing with it is still in my opinion - if it's not impacted by other out of period pieces of equipment - it is still a form of experimental archaeology. Two examples: a friend made a replica of the Gokstad backpack, which I think works quite fine in Middle Earth, and I also had a Varafelder cloak commissioned for my living history, and I used both with the Middle Earth re-enactment as well. And there was one particular event where I was in a very heavy snowstorm. What I found with the Varafelder would have been the same if I was wearing Anglo Saxon shoes instead of Middle Earth boots, for example. So it is still valid in that regard. But yes, if you're bringing in various items from different time periods and skewing the results, then obviously it couldn't be considered experimental archaeology. The Gokstad backpack was a catastrophic failure: the leather got soaked through from the snow and it actually sort of semi-collapsed and had to be stashed in a ditch until I returned. So we learnt from that. We learnt that it needs to have the Osea rods in there to prop it up. You can't just make a leather tube. So I would put that little caveat on there that sometimes we do sort of push ourselves into testing of historical gear.

Matilda: There's a whole debate about what is experimental archaeology and what should it encompass and everything... I wonder how many people who do historic re-enactment, like living history re-enactment rather than fantasy, would still say the same thing about what they do as well. So I find it really interesting to look at it through that lens. In terms of the kind of practical runnings of the club, I'm also just curious, because of course, as I say, I have never done living history myself, I'm not sure how it works in practice. My idea about it was that it was sort of a group of people who live close together and they meet up and do what they do. But as you mentioned at the very beginning, you're of course an international society. So you do have occasional meetups, but indeed we have one of our guests here, Eric is in US and Steve is in Australia. So how does that work in terms of the actual kind of practical running of re-enactment and the society and the sort of interactions within it?

Eric: We mentioned at the beginning, it's often a solo endeavor. Frankly, I think it suits a lot of our characters, our personal demeanor. Maybe a lot of us are a bit solitary, but we do enjoy the company of others. If I'm going to put it into a US-centric context, the mountain men coming down to the rendezvous a couple of times a year and trading goods and having a good time and then going back off to wilderness. We've always been an online community, and we interact through the forum and messaging and more recently regular group chats on Discord, which have actually been really interesting and productive. But like I said, we've always been few and far between. The nearest members to me, who I do visit a couple of times a year, it's about 8 hours for me, about 700 kilometre drive. The online aspect brings us together more than we would be if we had to rely on in-person meetings, for sure.

Steve: Having been in living history groups, some people need to be in that meeting every month, in person. They need that to keep engaged and to keep moving forward. But we could not have a meeting for six months and we don't stop. We don't just sort of sit around waiting. So I'll be working on something, he'll be working on something, Greg will be working on something. We're all quite self-motivated and when we do come together, it's not so much for motivation. We more share what we've been working on and what we've discovered and that sort of thing. I hesitate to say it because it makes it sound like we're not a cohesive group, but at times it feels like we're more a scattering of like-minded individuals. The mountain man analogy is probably really good, where we come together every now and then: look what I've done. Oh, wow, that's great. Have you considered doing this? And you're like: why didn't I say something sooner? So you go away and you refine it and so on. And time difference-wise, for me, it's not too bad. I'll wake up and then in the morning I've got messages there of people who are working on new woven straps for their bedroll and whatnot, and we just reply in our own time. I'll send a reply and if I don't get a response there for a day because they're asleep it doesn't really matter. We're all all on the same page and all working towards the same goal, just in different parts of the world.

Matilda: I wonder how many other living history societies or similar sort of re-enactment groups, especially during the pandemic when everything was sort of forced to be online, had to do a similar thing? If anyone's listening in who had that experience, please do let us know,

because it would be really interesting to hear if that's sort of something common that other people are doing now as well, sort of online re-enactment societies.

Steve: From a local aspect, the living history community really took a hit. Here in Australia we had some of the most severe lockdowns, I think. If there's someone out there listening, who can correct me on that, feel free, but I know in Melbourne, for example, in Victoria they were locked down for 300 days or something like that. That community has never really bounced back. There were people who just didn't come back to it or who moved on during that time. So our largest gathering here re-enactment-wise is held biannually and it's about a thousand people, which for Australia is a pretty mean effort. The ones since the COVID pandemic have been roughly half that. So that hobby has not bounced back in the same way. Whereas the Middle Earth stuff, because it was entirely online, and we were all stuck at home with lots of time to craft things, it actually probably did us the world of good.

Eric: We actually often have activities through the forum that kind of bring us together. We've done archery contests, or for several years we did a cutting contest, where someone issues a challenge to perform a certain sequence of cuts with a sword or other edged weapon and then you film the challenge and then everyone who is participating seeks to emulate that challenge and they either can or cannot. And then whoever does it first or whatnot gets to issue the next challenge. And you kind of keep that going until nobody can do it anymore. We also do an annual Yule exchange, basically a secret Santa where we draw one another and make gifts appropriate to one another's persona. And we send them often with handwritten letters, sometimes in runes. A bit of a puzzle game there sometimes. Yeah, it's nice. It's kind of in universe, but also incorporating people's crafting abilities and adding to each other's kits for things that we're looking for.

Matilda: That's so nice. So even Steve in Australia is able to get a secret Santa gift.

Steve: The postage costs are horrendous. I made a small wooden casket, similar to the Fyrkat chest, and I engraved and kolrossed runes all over it because it was for a member of the society who's very selfless in his contributions, and I thought, oh, I'm going to go above and beyond, and the cost to send that was... we kind of sort of suggest that there should be a, I think it's what... a \$50 or \$20...

Eric: It's not even that much and we always go over it.

Steve: Oh, wow, that year I blew it out of the water. I'm glad that I did. But the past couple of years since I've gone quite small in size, not in value to try and offset that.

Matilda: Like a picture on a piece of paper.. hand drawn!

Steve: Well, we do. We have some fantastic artists. They will send a physical and a digital copy of an artwork that they've done. I've got some fantastic arrows over there that are hand fletched were my gift last year. The thing to touch on how great this community is, in my

opinion - obviously I'm biased - is often, someone will say: I can't do the Yule gift exchange this year because I'm either abroad or I've got family commitments. And they always get a gift. Someone always randomly makes two and sends them one and then you get: oh my god, I'm so excited. Because you get this package in the mail and it takes you back to being a child. You get this package in the mail and it'll be addressed to Eofor of the Black Tusk, then underneath my name in brackets and you open it up and there's a letter with it that's in Dwarven runes and you have to get your copy of The Hobbit out to translate the letter, and it's written in character, and tells you a little tale as well, and it's illustrated. Then you unwrap the gift, and it's this beautiful handmade leather pouch, which is to the standard of any work I've seen anywhere. We see more traffic on the forums at Yuletide than the rest of the year put together because it's just so exciting!

Matilda: That does sound nice. One thing that I do have to ask, because of course, one of the issues that is often raised in terms of general re-enactment and living history is just because of the kind of people who can A, afford to do it, and B, have the time and kind of possibilities to do it. The diversity is never fantastic and that might, you know, also skew how diversity is represented in the past. I guess in terms of sort of Tolkien's work, there's hobbits and elves and things and there's all sorts of different cultures. And I did notice indeed, on your kind of rule charter, that there's very specific mention that race is not an evident issue. But I do know that there's quite often been the point made that Tolkien's work, just because of the time it was written is, of course, quite male focussed in terms of character, plot development - I know I didn't do very well in picking the guests because I've got two male guests here now as well to talk about it. But I'm just actually curious, do you have much diversity in the group? Do you find that there are also women who are interested in the re-enactment side of things or is it still more male dominated would you say?

Eric: It's not a secret as you've just proclaimed that the hobby is generally overwhelmingly male, but we do have a number of female participants. I personally don't ascribe that to being a factor of Tolkien's works themselves. There's quite a large non-male following in the fandom for his works. We mentioned earlier about common characters. I think only about 18 percent, if I remember right, of the named characters in Tolkien's works are female. Most of those, I think, are hobbits. But we don't portray named characters. We're seeking on the common people, the common folk, and they're largely unknown and unseen, and we can safely assume that at least half of those are not men. So, I hesitate to make this comparison, but in some ways, we're presenting an opportunity a bit like fan fiction. And I mean that in the best sense, we have the freedom to write in these characters that we know are there, but just don't get any press, any recognition. So, that window is open.

Steve: The other thing I'd add too is that when we talk about Middle Earth re-enactment, we're not necessarily saying The Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings. We're talking about the entirety of Middle Earth re-creation. So you could go back to the Silmarillion, and there are some amazing, strong female characters in the Silmarillion, Haleth for example, who rises to become leader of her people and fights and fights and fights and fights. And then when she

dies, she's given this huge funeral very reminiscent of the one Beowulf gets. We do have that entire range of history of Tolkien's works to choose from, and even down to if someone was to want to explore the Fourth Age, so the time after the events of the War of the Ring, when King Elessar, King Aragorn then basically goes forth and deals with Mordor and deals with the Southrons and that region there moves into a time of peace in a similar way to an age of enlightenment, I mean, we've just seen Éowyn kill the Witch-king. So would there be a change of gender roles? Would there be more women welcome in the army? Would there be more women welcome out into the Rangers? We don't restrict in that regard. If someone wanted to do that, but then they did that within the framework of the evidence that we've got, that would be fantastic. What we wouldn't like necessarily to see is someone to come in and create a completely artificial role in the scope of the work that's already there and disrupt that. So, if suddenly someone was trying to pitch that half of the Riders of Rohan at the Battle of Pelennor were female... we do have written work, that is not the case. So for my part, I would encourage them not to do it, but to look elsewhere. So while the Riders went off, who defended the lands... or go to that Fourth Age or go a little bit earlier, that would be my encouragement for it. There's scope within the works for us to have all genders, all races. It's just a matter of going to where that's appropriate within the works.

Eric: For our listeners that aren't aware, the period of time in Tolkien's works that we're most familiar with, the Third Age, which is the War of the Ring and the events of the Lord of the Rings. That by his reckoning and this comes from one of his letters, was more than 6,000 years ago. So it is by Tolkien's own admission, an actual mythological, forgotten period in our own history. It is actually earth and it covers a span, just that one Age of a little, I think it's like 3,100 years, so over 3000 years. So it clearly doesn't fit neatly into our scale of time in terms of archaeological period, but you are looking at a large span of time, which would cover a large shift in cultural and technological change and that's just one Age. They actually get longer the further you go back and shorter as you come forward. So we're currently in like the 7th Age probably, he said Sixth or Seventh when he wrote that when he was still alive, which is 50 years ago. In terms of the diversity question, it's an imagined past, but it is our past, and I'm speaking for myself - and hopefully the Society here - that I say that it belongs to all of us, no matter your background. So, it's as diverse as our historical past, and there's room for all no matter one's visible or invisible personally identifying characteristics. Frankly, if someone doesn't agree with that, then they don't need to play with us. I don't expect that they would stick around very long anyway. So it's self-regulating in that sense, I think.

Matilda: Well, that's good to know, hopefully anyone listening in who was thinking: Oh, I'd like to, but I don't know if I'd fit. You'll find your niche!

Eric: Well, I hope so. We welcome new inquiries. Steve mentioned this earlier about feeling... we get this a lot, that we're maybe not approachable, not for those reasons, but because we're too, again, I put air quotes around a lot of the words I use, but quote, 'authentic' and that's intimidating for a lot of people. But when we look at what they're doing, we think: Oh, that's really good. We do have a tier system. It's not like you have to start out of

the gate 'highly authentic' - again, in quotes - for whatever that means to us. But it's about the endeavor. It's about trying to be true to the source material that we have and interpreting that in a way that makes sense through the scheme of the work.

Matilda: That sounds good. Well, thank you very, very much, both of you, for chatting to me today. One final question to wrap things up. Do either of you have any exciting plans or events or experiments coming up, or kind of an exciting experience, I guess, that you'd like to share, if there's new future plans? And also how do you think that those listening in in the EXARC community, can kind of help make a difference what I usually say, but I guess that's not necessarily the case in this one, but what can they do in relation to the theme of today in terms of kind of fantasy re-enactment? Steve, do you want to go first?

Steve: The list of things that I've got on the boiler could go for the entire length of the podcast! I'm going to be doing a four day canoe trip, I bought a little clinker built wooden boat recently, and I've got a four day trip down one of our famous rivers here in Australia. And that's going to be a 100 percent authentic. If I can't flint and tinder it, I'm going to eat cold food. So that's coming up in a month or two, and I'm desperately trying to get fit enough for it. Beyond that, I have a couple of mythopoetic artefacts, which I'm having created by some craftsmen. So I'm having a horn of Rohan made, not the one in the text, but inspired by and it's gonna be a very high-end piece. Beyond that, I'm working on a new shield and it goes on and on and on... As to what the community at large can do I'd say: just get involved if it's something that you're interested in. You can look at it as a novelty and it absolutely is in many ways. And if that's how you want to engage with it, then that's fine. It could be something as simple as on the professor's birthday inviting some friends over for a hobbit style feast. Grab a copy of the book, read through what they have at that first meeting at Bag End. There's seed cakes, there's chicken, there's wine, there's beer. Tell everyone it's a hobbit party. And people light up. It can actually spark a fresh love of living history as well, because you're getting this fun outlet over here. And then when you've got to go back over here and count stitches, then all right, well, I'll do this now, but then later on, I'm going to go back and be a hobbit... I think many re-enactors and living historians grew up reading these books or watching the movies and this was a lot of our introduction - whether it was this or Robin Hood - and if you want to be a part of this, it doesn't have to be with the Society, come and have a look at the forums or have a look at the Facebook page, just get out and do it because it is so much fun and it reminds you of how fun dressing up and running through the woods can be.

Eric: Just like Steve, I always have a pile of stuff on my bench waiting to be given attention. I have some brooches I'm finishing up, some oil lamps cast in bronze. Another of our members has been designing a buckle, which I will probably, hopefully be producing. I'd like to actually get back to doing some experimenting with clay moulds. I usually use more modern investment material, but I have horses. So I have an abundance of horse manure, which begs to be used for making traditional clay moulds for lost wax casting. So I will probably be doing those and some other other fittings. In terms of what EXARC could do... I

probably don't need to tell anyone in the community this, but I would encourage you to play. If you've ever, whatever your craft is, your endeavors, if you've wondered: well, what if I do this, give yourself a chance to try that. It may not fit within the work you're doing officially, but in your own time, do that. If nothing else, it's fun. I'm not expecting a eureka moment, but it's a different perspective. So enjoy yourself.

Matilda: Which I think is a wonderful note to end on for today. So thank you so, so much, Eric and Steve for joining us today and sharing your experiences and yeah, encouraging us to play and have fun. I think that that's a lovely message to end on. Hopefully our listeners enjoyed it and maybe you'll get an influx of new members coming soon. And thank you to everyone else for listening to this episode of #FinallyFriday by EXARC. If you would like to become more involved with EXARC, after all, online international societies, as we've just heard, are lots of fun and we're a really great society, so why not become a member?

Alternatively, if you'd like to support us in other ways, you can, for example, make a small PayPal donation through the website, or you can also come and volunteer for us, so do get in touch if that's something you're interested in doing. Also, don't forget to come and continue on the conversation from today's podcast episode in our free online community Discord server, open to both members and non-members alike.

Join us next month for another episode of #FinallyFriday and learn more all about the world of experimental archaeology, ancient technology, archaeological open-air museums and interpretation. Don't forget to follow the show through exarc.net and our associated social media channels. See you soon!