

Film meets fact – why is historical accuracy important?

[Sam Wallace](#) takes a look at why historical accuracy is both important and useful in the production of film and television series

Wednesday 13 January 2016

Image: Jonathan Hessian

Image: Jonathan Hessian

I'm pretty sure many people have sat down to watch a series or film based on the past at some point in their lives – *Rome*, *Downton Abbey*, *Fury*, *Sharpe*, whatever takes your fancy. These sorts of media bring to life a piece of the past for you to enjoy. But a lot of them, although based on the past, take a lot of liberties with it and can be downright inaccurate. There's no real excuse for it, artistic licence or not.

Now obviously there's a line to be drawn here. I don't expect every film or series based on a period of history to be 100% accurate, as that would be ridiculous, but it's where the mistakes are easily avoidable or just glaringly obvious that they should really be criticised. History Channel's *Vikings* is a serial offender here, especially its costuming department. It's well known from manuscripts and finds what Viking warriors would have worn but the show completely ignores these, taking a ludicrous amount of liberties for no reason other than 'it looks cool'. Rather than wearing kirtles (a knee-length garment made of wool or linen), accompanied by linen/woollen pants, buckled shoes and mail armour, we have something that looks like it's from *Sons of Anarchy*: leather armour and clothing (often in black too, a hugely expensive dye), high-top boots and gratuitous amounts of fur. Fine for a fantasy series, but this is a show supposedly based on the past, and one we know a great deal about. For a fairly high budget series like this, one would expect they could at least get the costumes right.

But why is it an issue? Well, to put it simply, it's entirely misleading. If you're going to proclaim that your series is a historical fiction, I expect to see some form of history in it. If you aren't presenting things as they are known to have happened or were, you are deceiving your audience. The sorts of myth that are often bandied around by the average person may indeed have some basis in history, but Hollywood perpetuating them doesn't help. The film *Enemy At the Gates* is a good example of this. In one scene, Russian troops defending Stalingrad are told by their Commissars to charge German machine gun positions head on, many of them without rifles, while NKVD troops watch to make sure none of them retreat. Paints a grim picture of being a Red Army soldier, doesn't it? Well, it would if it were true, but instead the film merely crams all the common myths into one scene: no rifles, no tactics, no retreat. Really, *Enemy at the Gates* only gets a few things about the battle right: the date, the location, and the inevitable defeat of the Sixth Army. It's a drama with a sort of shoddy historical veneer to it. There's nothing wrong with the plot per se, as we don't exactly know what happened in the battle on a personal basis, but did they have to sacrifice the historical backdrop for it? Not in the slightest.

It does seem like sometimes series simply throw a historical background out for a story because they think it'll look cool. A wholly invented plotline or character is often thrown together with just the flimsiest evidence that the show is supposed to be set in Imperial Rome or wherever else takes their fancy. But why? I mean, why write a totally-made up story when you have history to draw upon? Rather than some shoddy action piece (and I know I'm straying into the territory of gaming here, but whatever) like *Ryse*:

Son of Rome, why not use one of the many, many interesting tales from the past? The amount of murder and betrayal in the lifetime of Belisarius and Justinian for instance, way surpasses *Game of Thrones* (whose author regularly draws on history for inspiration, I might add), and best of all, it actually occurred. If you wanted gore, Justinian herded thousands of rioting chariot-race supporters into the hippodrome, and then killed 30,000 of them. For cunning, check how Belisarius took the city of Naples from the Ostrogoths. These are just part of the rich tapestry of history that a series could base themselves on, and find a great audience for. In a lot of instances history provides better tales than any author could ever create on their own.

Just in case I've run around in circles, I'd better sum up the points I've tried to make. Basically, historical accuracy in our media, especially if it claims to be historical, is important because it can shape people's perceptions of what parts of history were like. Victorian opera was responsible for that stupid myth about horns on Vikings' helmets for instance, and that's still around now! But there's also an element of faithfulness to it. Like a film based on a book, if you don't pay your dues to it properly, you're doing the source material a disservice, especially if it's something you could easily have gotten right. If history is the source for a series, they have an obligation to get it right too.



35 comments

Mim Carrington

16 Jan '16 at 12:33 pm

Black dye can be made with oak galls (or iron filings on leather) - not hugely expensive - another myth ;-)
Monks wore black/brown/white (i.e. undyed) not only to show their vow of poverty, but also because no-one else wanted the drab colours - bright colours were preferred.

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Paulie'sgirl

16 Jan '16 at 4:54 pm

What that gives you is a fairly dark brown. Repeated dyeing to get a deeper colour is the expensive bit. Even then, it's not black as we consider black now, using a modern azo dye - it still has an odd warmth to it.

[Report](#)

Anonymous

16 Jan '16 at 5:33 pm

Yeah, black wasn't difficult to get, it was difficult to keep. the re-dyeing, as Paulie's girl said, was the expensive part. Black faded quickly with washings.

[Report](#)

Anonymous

17 Jan '16 at 7:41 am

And on top of all that the iron mordant and strong tannins tended to be very harsh on natural fibers, reducing the life of the garment.

[Report](#)

Anonymous

18 Jan '16 at 1:17 pm

True black dye, rather than a shade, was incredibly expensive, to the point that the Duke of Burgundy

(different period I know, but still relevant) wore a full jet black outfit to display that he was one of the wealthiest rulers in Christendom.

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Gulliver

19 Jan '16 at 1:30 pm

Out of this whole essey its the cost of dye that you find issue with?
All well and good if thats your area of interest.

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Anna

16 Jan '16 at 5:39 pm

We know, also, that the Vikings traded cats right across to and from Constantinople for pest control on ships and for fur – one Norwegian Forest Cat would give you enough fur for a very luxurious hood and mittens, unfortunately for the cat...!

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Ego

17 Jan '16 at 2:53 am

Why was it unfortunate for the cat? Their hair grows back.

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Susan

17 Jan '16 at 3:20 pm

Because they weren't spinning it....ever heard of catskin gloves?

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Ego

17 Jan '16 at 11:33 pm

Yeah, but the comment was about fur, not leather/skin, which are different things.

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KevFox

18 Jan '16 at 1:03 pm

No, fur is the product when it is still attached to the skin, the term is hair or fleece when it is shaved, and wool/yarn when it is spun

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Dave

16 Jan '16 at 6:18 pm

I'm not sure that the black dye is the biggest issue to be honest

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Sam

19 Jan '16 at 11:32 am

I wanted to use the Vikings more as an example of bad costuming, and then save my complaints about plot inaccuracy for a different period that I'm more au fait with, so I didn't make any glaring

mistakes.

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Ælfhild Ragnarsdóttér

16 Jan '16 at 7:20 pm

We don't know as much as you'd like to think. Since in terms of archeology recently discovered a Scandinavian tunic frozen in ice. Very few pieces of clothing from the era of going on Viking has been uncovered and we can only ASSUME what we wore in 500 - 800 AD since we didn't really record things until about 1100. Natural dyes didn't cost, we sent the slaves to gather ingredients and work. But to be quite clear all written records from other countries state how beautiful and well dressed the Scandinavian men with some wearing silks and sporting blonde dyed hair with amber and pearl jewels. Many Anglo Saxons and Normans followed the fashions.

The show does focus on points where they are off to Viking. Yes leather would be worn as it's cheaper than linen or any other fabric, will keep warmer, and is easily dyed from night raids as well as holds a stain. So while your knickers are in a twist try and flip the coin. I would rather see people get curious and learn more about Ivar, Sigurd, Bjorn, and the sons who surpassed Ragnar in his life. Learn how the history of Scandinavians helped found Iceland, Russia, the Normans, on and on. If a bit of Hollywood gets them to know we, Norse Scandinavians, came to America first so be it. Besides it's nice to see ancestors no one cared about a few years ago become popular just because they've been made modern day sexy.

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Rebecca

17 Jan '16 at 12:53 am

Isn't the Viking Age ca. 800-1100 CE? So while the Lendbreen tunic is a fantastic find, it's dated to the 3rd-4th century, so I'm not certain what relevance it has here?

The thing I always found interesting that there is an emphasis on leather, when multiple layers of wool underneath are ignored — you would want those woollen layers when out on the water, because not only does it provide a way to trap an air layer for insulation, but wool will keep you much warmer than leather when wet. (The hypothetical leather outer layer, however, would be wind-proof, which is also important.)

I suspect the problem being alluded to, is not that people are inspired to learn more about Scandinavian history from watching the show, but that the show perpetuates myths that aren't corrected.

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Tove

16 Jan '16 at 11:33 pm

If they wanted a deep black colour then they had to dye the fabric dark blue with a lot of woad and over-dye it with madder. So it would have been extremely expensive to do it.

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Anonymous

17 Jan '16 at 4:16 am

Not sure how easily they would obtain madder. Madder was traditionally used in carpet dyes in Persia and Afghanistan, not sure if it can be grown in Scandinavia. Sure they traded extensively and raided all over the world, but that still would keep the cost of madder fairly high. Maybe use beets instead for a red dye?

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Anonymous

17 Jan '16 at 7:34 am

Madder is common in England, wich many of the vikings had frequent dealings with (both friendly and hostile.) Beets are not even slightly light fast. Fabrics dyed with beetroots fade to a wimpy greyish-tan when exposed to sunlight very rapidly.

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Susan

17 Jan '16 at 3:22 pm

No, beets dye grey.

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Anonymous

18 Jan '16 at 1:19 pm

Constantinople, most likely.

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Norsely

18 Jan '16 at 6:25 pm

But now it's Istanbul

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Belinda Kate

16 Jan '16 at 11:52 pm

"Blonde died hair" ? You mean lightened to blonde? Or it was blonde, but had been dyed another colour? The latter I can understand- but if you mean the hair was lightened, then how did they achieve that?

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Anonymous

17 Jan '16 at 7:38 am

Lightened to blonde. Lighter hair was considered a desirable trait for the vikings. They believe it was achieved with lye soap, for both beards and head hair.

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Dianne Penn

17 Jan '16 at 1:21 am

The White Queen a much anticipated and very rare era to be on our television screens, about the Wars of the Rose (not Tudor for a change) spoiled for hundreds who eagerly awaited it because of silly and easily avoided costume errors - zips, corduroy jackets, Norman armour, the same green dress worn by Anne Neville for YEARS, no head dresses on the women, Victorian drainpipes, windows, furniture and NET CURTAIN in the castle windows to name just a few. The Battle of Bosworth filmed in a wood, with snow on the ground when it actually happened in August in wide open fields all made it a great disappointment, even more so when major characters were not even mentioned and events mixed up or worse still - invented. History is hardly taught in our schools now so this would be a perfect way to get children interested in our history but only if it is accurate.

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Dianne Penn

17 Jan '16 at 1:28 am

England's Bloody Crown with Dan Jones has turned out to be a laughing stock because of blatantly obvious wrong armour. Set in the 15th century, soldiers look as if they have strayed from a Robin Hood set next door, wearing Norman armour, beards and short hair. We are all familiar with the portrait of King Richard III, yet he is portrayed with short hair and a beard! The Earl of Warwick and King Edward IV were shown fighting at the battle of Barnet with not a piece of armour between them, just flapping cloaks and swinging greasy hair. Main battles and events not even mentioned. No excuse.

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Anonymous

18 Jan '16 at 10:10 am

I saw the first episode, didn't bother any further

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Arthur Blartfast

17 Jan '16 at 8:48 am

The simple answer is they just don't care...they'd rather it was "cool" than correct!

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Anonymous

17 Jan '16 at 10:32 am

Agree with historical sentiments. Blsack duye is easy. Good black dye is another matter, hence it onnly really becomes a status dye colour in the English Tudor period.

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Jonathan Waller

17 Jan '16 at 10:36 am

Perhaps instead of discussing the merits of his counter points etc. we could look at what he is actually saying... People in the Viking era didn't look like they do in Vikings. or the Last Klingdom. Troy doesn't represent, anything to do with the the time it is supposed to b st min when it was written or even classical Greece. Arthurian stories, with people wearing the clothes out of a romance novel! Accuracy has improved in many areas, but there seems to be a cut off... somewhere in the 1700's in general, where the desire to be accurate suddenly gets thrown out the window and degenerates in to anachronistic fantasy

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Ulrik

18 Jan '16 at 1:10 am

Well for inaccuracies. When they show ragnars ex wife in Denmark, there are mountains in the background. We don't have any mountains here :-). If we did you would not have the yearly pilgrimage of Danish people travelling north or south for skiing.

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Martin

18 Jan '16 at 3:56 pm

The worst thing on "Vikings" was the assumption that Scandinavia was somehow cut off from the rest of Europe and that the norse didn't know of Britain. That is as big a mistake as you can possibly make. The anglosaxons where partly of Danish descent (jutes - settled Kent) and the rest was North german (angles

and saxons) from the base of the Jutland peninsula - neighbours to danes. A "viking" might actually have Family living in Britain...

And then comes all the rest of the errors (Fl. Kattegat is not a landmark location it's a part of the Baltic Sea)! It's entertaining, but it's certainly not historical in any way.

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Gulliver

19 Jan '16 at 1:43 pm

As a lifelong history student and teacher this article hits one of my pet peeves really hard. That is what most people think is history but is really fiction. The viking horns for one has made me laugh and wince for years.

I was watching Sons of Anarchy when Vikings started and i stopped watching both after a few episodes of the later. I relgated watching them on Netflix once each series concludes. Vikings is exciting, even entertaining, but the historical inaccuracies piled on too deep.

As for why such shows dont embrace historical accuracies, thats easy. Research is hard and often boring. Taking a backdrop of names, places, and color and making the rest up out of whole cloth is easier and cheaper. Pity though. There are many tales i wish the general public could see. But watching Abraham Lincoln-Vampure Slayer is more fun then watching a Ken Burns documentary, ive been told.

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Gaston de Flebus

19 Jan '16 at 6:09 pm

I watch vikings for its gratuitous violence and nudity, I don't let the history errors get in the way.

Game of Thrones is not historical fiction, it is fantasy so has no place in arguments about historical accuracy.

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therealguyfaux

9 Apr '16 at 4:29 am

But we DO know Game Of Thrones is (very) loosely based on The War Of The Roses and you would imagine that a certain period-authenticity for the 15th C. would need to be employed to suggest that. You can't have them going TOO mediaeval on yo' ass.

[▲ Report](#)

Yagmur

26 Feb '16 at 8:35 am

To mention another film, which hat brilliant props and used it only for the background charakteres, "Kingdom of Heavens" the protagonists where mostly dressed wrongly, afghan tribal jewelery and leather pants for example, but the ordinary soldiers were as if they came right out of "Men at Arms" from Osprey. This was something I will never ever understand. 15th century persian helmet for Saladin and a historical (nearly) correct outfit for a tribesman or average soldier.....

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