

CHOOSING A NAME & CREATING A PERSONA

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What is a Persona?

A persona is the fictional person you wish to have been, had you lived during the period of time the SCA covers (Pre-17th Century).

Creating a persona takes some thought, a bit of time and a little research...but deciding who to be is the single most important process you will go through when first joining the SCA. This will be the name you are known by to all your SCA friends, and the background on which to develop many of your SCA activities.

Steps to Developing a Persona

1. Choose a Culture

To be able to select a SCA name for yourself and begin creating your persona story, you should first decide what culture you desire to be from. There are many means useable to determine what culture you ought to choose. Some people look at the clothes worn by many cultures throughout various times and establish a selection based on what clothes they want to wear. Other people will think about what activities and crafts they are interested in and base a decision on the cultures known for expertise in those areas. Still others will investigate their personal lineage and choose the background of their family heritage as their SCA culture. Yet others will pick their SCA culture based from a historical interest in a particular society. Whatever means you choose to use is quite acceptable.

2. Decide Upon a Time Period

This can be fairly easy if you already know there are certain styles of garment or armor that you like and want to create. Or if there is a particular historical occurrence you want your character to have been around for. Otherwise you will need to do some basic research into the various time periods of the culture you have selected and see what appeals to you.

The reason you need to select a culture and time period first is that it's easier to determine what names were in use at a particular point and place. If you choose a name first then you may find it difficult to fit with the culture you like. This in turn means you might have to settle for trying to shoehorn it into whatever culture you can manage. Not an ideal situation...it's better to decide upon culture and time first and save yourself a headache.

3. Select a Name

Once you have selected the culture and time period you wish to take on for your persona, you are ready to select a name for yourself. Each culture had its own naming practices, or manner in which names were given. To fit into the persona you are creating, you should investigate the culture, read history on the area and see what kind of names people associated with that era utilized. It is best to be as authentic as possible when selecting a name, because your name and persona are the foundation upon which your activities and accomplishments will be based. The research you do to

learn about names can also open doorways to activities and points of interest for you to investigate in developing your persona history.

Your kingdom's heraldic corps has name resources available to assist gentles in selecting names. Don't hesitate to utilize your local, regional and kingdom heralds.

4. Take the Name for a Test Drive

Try using a name for a while. Write the name down and have your friends pronounce it. Do you like the way most people pronounce the name? Does the name lend itself to joking comments and if so, are you comfortable with that? Do you find it easy to respond when hearing someone call you by that name? Are a large number of folks in your local group already using that name element, making confusion of who is who possible? All of these are factors to consider before making a final choice on a name.

5. Fleshing Out the Details

Once you've settled on a name, how much further you develop your persona is up to you. You already have the most basic of personas...name, culture and time period. You can stop there. For example, you may simply be Mary Smith, a 13th century English woman. Or you can focus your persona on who you are in context of the Current Middle Ages of the SCA. For example, you may simply be John FitzWilliam hailing from the Barony of Forgotten Sea, member of the House of the Red Sword and a member of the Calontir Brewers Guild. The choice of focus is yours.

Or, if you so choose, you can begin to add particulars to the persona story. Your character's history can be fairly simple, consisting of your SCA name, the time and place your persona is from, and a few facts such as occupation, social status and general family information.

Your persona's life story can also be more complex and include a variety of factors such as: area/time of birth; languages spoken; occupation & craft skills; behavior/manners; pursuits/hobbies; weapons skills; travels; significant events during life (both historical and personal) and area/time of death. To accomplish creating a more multifaceted persona will take time and research. But do not feel pressured to develop a complicated story right away. You can start slow and add more details to the chronicle as you go along.

Begin by discovering who some of the historical notables from your time period were and read about them. This will give you a sense of happenings in the world during the lifetime of your persona. And it may spark a new area of interest as well. Additionally, there are questions that you can use in your research to assist you in developing a very detailed history. Examples of a few of these questions are:

Would your persona have been literate in your chosen culture/time-frame?

What type of money did people of your culture/time-frame use?

How does your persona personally obtain goods (food, drink, clothes, etc.)?

How did people of your culture/time-frame tell time?

How did people of your culture/time-frame keep track of days?

What type of clothes does your persona normally wear?

What type of clothes does your persona wear for special occasions?

What were the eating habits of people of your culture/time-frame?

What does your persona eat in a normal day?

What types of wildlife live in your persona's area?

What kind of religion and religious duties would be required of your persona?

What does your persona know of history/science/medicine/geography?

How did people of your culture/time-frame deal with trade?

Concerning a Name

The best source to use when trying to find a first name is a book written about names that gives dates for the names. (This can include books written in foreign languages; all that is required is to find the name, followed by a date. If in doubt, copy the page and talk with your kingdom's heralds. They can assist in verifying the reliability of the information for you.)

History books are a good source for information on historical figures...however note that many authors use modernized or Anglicized forms of the names. An example would be the name, King Charles of Spain. Charles is the English form of the Spanish name Carlos. Carlos is the name that he actually used. Historians tend to prefer to use conventional modern spellings so that readers will be able to identify the name more easily. Thus, when using a history book, check any prefaces or Author's notes/introductions to see if the author discusses how they treated names in the book.

Books on period church records, parish rolls, consensus lists, or tax rolls are excellent sources.

No matter what culture or time period, there is a basic make-up to names. Each name is composed of a minimum of a first name (also referred to as a given name) and a last name (sometimes referred to as a byname or a surname). Some names can have more parts (middle names), but all require at least these two parts. You will need to select at least a first name fairly soon so that other SCA members know what to call you. The rest of the name can wait, if needed, until you've done more research/determination of your persona.

People were given last names to distinguish them from other people in the area with the same first name. These last names are generally known as either bynames or surnames.

Bynames were last names given to an individual, not a family, which were not passed from generation to generation. They were given by convenience and circumstance, not by birth. They were designators that were usually straightforward, chosen by the neighbors/family for the individual, not selected by the person themselves.

Surnames were last names that a family took and passed on to their offspring, generation after generation. Many surnames originated as bynames that the family kept. Surnames started in the 1300's in Western Europe and were in general use throughout most of Europe by about 1500.

Last names (whether a byname or a surname) fall into four basic types: relationship, occupational, locative and epithet.

Relationship names are last names that denote being connected to a family. Examples of such names are: Larsson (Norse for Lar's son); mac Domhnaill (Scots for Domnall's son); Haraldsdottir (Norse for Harald's daughter); Ivanovna (Russian for Ivan's daughter) or Mastroguilio (Italian for Guilio's servant).

Occupational names are last names derived from an occupation. Examples of such names are: Chapman (English for merchant); Cooper (English for a maker of barrels); Shumacher (German for shoemaker); Giardino (Italian for gardener).

Locative names are last names that denote a particular place or general area (usually based on the person's place of origin). Examples of such names are: Ursula of York (English for "from the town of York"); al-Maghrebi (Arabic for "North African"); von Bayern (German for "Bavarian" or "of Bavaria"); "du Nord" (French for "from the north") or della Torre (Italian for "from the tower").

Epithets are not really true names but phrases or terms which describe a characteristic of the person. (Although over time some epithets did develop into surnames.) Epithets can represent a physical characteristic, a character trait or even an event in a person's life. Examples of such are: Barbarossa (German for "redbeard"); Heppni (Norse for "prosperous, lucky"); Knockwalleddowne (English for someone who has knocked a wall down).

Last names that are relationship, occupational or locative in nature are fairly easy to locate. If you find a period example of a male name, you can use it as the basis for a patronymic (relationship-type last name based on using your father's first name). If you locate a culture's name for a particular occupation, it can (usually) be used as an occupational last name. If you determine a place that existed in period, you can be "from" or "of" that place. Be aware that you may have to make some minor grammatical changes to the name of the person, occupation or place when forming the last name, to be consistent with how a particular language/culture forms names. But for the most part, these last names are easy to find.

Epithets seem to be a very easy concept. After all, an epithet is merely a descriptive phrase added on after a first name. But they can be difficult to work with correctly. This is due to the fact that not every descriptive phrase is likely to have been used in period as a descriptive phrase. When looking for, or deciding on, an epithet, remember that epithets were not chosen by the individual but by the community. And the epithet was chosen for convenience, not for dramatic effect. You would likely find in a town two people named John the Tall and John the Short rather than John Wolfkiller and John Bloodyaxe. Also, as a rule, metaphors generally weren't used to describe people. To a medieval person, a last name like Drakenhand would not mean "He strikes with a dragon's hand." it would instead mean, "His hand looks like a dragon's claw." A wise person would have been called Thomas le Wyse not Thomas Quickmind.

There are many factors to take into account when doing something as simple as selecting your SCA name. But of all things the most important thing to remember is that you have help available. Most SCA groups have a herald's office with a staff waiting to help. Part of what they do is guide people in selecting names by providing information from books and lists of names compiled from SCA approved sources.

Helpful Hints

Be authentic/historically accurate in selecting your name. It makes the SCA experience more fun in the long run because it allows you to "get into" your persona better.

Do not name yourself after an actual historical personage, a legendary personage, a literary character, copyrighted character or favorite role-playing character. These names are problematic. Some are protected and will not be registered; others cannot be proven to be historically correct and cannot be

registered. Avoid trying to be an elf, satyr, vampire or other fantasy character. The SCA is a medieval historical re-creation organization and your focus in names and activities should reflect this.

You may not take any title of nobility, or take a name that denotes a rank (i.e. Earl).

You should not use a name that would confuse you with someone already in the Society. For example, if there is already a person in the Society who has registered the name William the Baker, you should not go by the name William the Baker. (You won't be able to register the name and folks may be confused when trying to determine who they need.) The heralds have a list of names already registered, called the Armorial, if you have questions whether about a name is already registered..

Names must include at least one given name and a last name [byname, surname or epithet. (i.e. John Longfellow or James the Tall)].

Realize that creating a fully authentic name requires more than selecting authentic name parts and "slapping them together". Names in the Middle Ages were constructed differently from the way they are now. For example, the Gaelic name elements of Seán, Tomás and OCorcran are all dated to the 14th century; however combining them to create the name "Seán Tomás OCorcran" would not be correct, as Gaelic names did not utilize middle names until after the time span the SCA covers. In fact, this was the case concerning the use of middle names, confirmation names and compound surnames for most European cultures. It was only very late in period that a few cultures had them.

No more than two languages may be used in a name and you can only use two languages if the cultures that used them had interaction in period.

Keep the size of your name in perspective. As a guideline a name should probably not exceed 52 characters, including spaces.

A name should fit your persona. A Chinese courtier named Sven Larsson just wouldn't work.

Avoid using "Name Your Baby" type books for names. Most of them list modern names that are not medieval in style. Check at Heraldic Consulting Tables held during events for books that are good sources for names or with your local herald.

When looking for a specific name, don't get caught up on details of the meaning of a name. Most medieval names weren't given because of their meaning.

Know that in period, the spelling of names did vary, but not randomly. Names were spelled to reproduce their pronunciation, but the sound assigned to each letter also varied from one language to another. To correctly determine period spelling variations, you have to understand how the letters correspond to sounds. Examples are: In medieval German, the letters "V" and "F" were pronounced the same. So the medieval German name Friedrich was also spelled Vriedrich.

Naming/spelling/pronunciation "rules" are not universal. A common mistake is assuming that modern English pronunciation and spelling rules can be applied to medieval names. Modern English pronounces "y" and "i" the same in many words, but in Middle English and Old Welsh, they represent different sounds.

Note that the Bible is not the best source for period names. While some names such as Adam, John, Joseph and Mary were definitely used, most biblical names did not come into vogue until very late or post period.

Be aware that some first names in use today, were not always in use. Some names that are used as first names today were used only as last names in period. Other modern first names are misinterpretations of period records. Yet other names were used in period only to refer to legendary people, not real people. Still other names sound period but are modern inventions. Other names, such as plant names, flower names and gem names did not come into fashion until the 19th or 20th century. Just a few of the problematical names to avoid include: Amber, Bethany, Branna, Brenda, Bruce, Corwin, Corwyn, Daisy, Eilonwy, Fiona, Ginger, Heather, Iris, Ivy, Jasmine, Korwin, Korwyn, Liam, Megan, Pearl, Ruby and Sapphire.

Consider the possibility of having your persona be from a more unusual culture. In the SCA there are a large number of Norse/Viking, Scots, Irish and Welsh personas. These are followed closely by French, Italian and German personas. English, while once fairly popular, appears to no longer be one of the leading cultures that gentles select for their persona. While these cultures make up a large majority of the personas in the SCA, they by no means cover all the possibilities. Many areas/countries that existed in period are no longer in existence. Others are just often overlooked by people developing their personas. Consider being from Aragon, Asturia, Brittany, Burgundy, Naples, Navarre, Northumbria, Poland, Portugal, Provence, Russia, Savoy, or Switzerland. Or select a time period for a country that is rarely explored, such as late-period Icelandic/Norwegian or early-period Russian. Investigate the cultures of people who were Arab, Bavarian, Belgian, Bulgarian, Byzantine, Carolingian, Danish, Dutch, Flemish, Frankish, Kentish, Lombardian, Merovingian, Moorish, Neustrian, Ottoman, Persian, Romanian, Skioldung, Slavic, Swabian, Thuringian, Transylvanian, Visigoth or Yngling. Explore the possibilities.

Concerning Sources

When browsing books and websites for name information, one needs to be careful about the reliability of the sources. Quality of research and focus of use of name sources can vary greatly and thus their value can differ as well. It is due to this factor that the SCA currently does not accept information from genealogical websites and databases for documentation at this time. When considering a name list, the signs whether it is reliable or unreliable as a source of medieval names are:

Unreliable

1. No dates.
2. No list of sources where the author found the names.
3. The title of the list includes the word baby.
4. There is a meaning given for every name.
5. Languages of origin are given with unscholarly terms like Teutonic or Celtic.
6. There is no variation in the spelling of names, i.e. every William is spelled the same.

A list of some names sources to avoid can be found at:

Names Sources to Be Avoided in Documentation

<http://heraldry.sca.org/laurel/admin.html#APPENDIXF>

WWW Names Pages for Medievalists to Avoid

<http://www.s-gabriel.org/names/arval/badpages.shtml>

Reliable

1. Gives a clear identification of the source of each name.
2. Gives a clear identification of the date, language, and other contextual information about the source.
3. Gives an indication if any editorial work has been done (e.g., expanding abbreviations, standardizing spelling, transcription conventions, if the original was not in the Roman alphabet).

Some webpages that are deemed acceptable for documentation of SCA names include:

SCA Laurel Sovereign of Arms Names Webpage

<http://heraldry.sca.org/heraldry/laurel/names.html>

[No copies needed from this site]

Academy of Saint Gabriel Medieval Name Archive

<http://www.s-gabriel.org/names/>

[Copy of article must be sent with submission]

Final Thoughts

A persona does not have to be stationary. It can change and grow with you. Don't be afraid to change your name and/or culture and/or time period and/or persona story (even after you've had it for a while). This can be a small change or changing it totally. Many folks begin in the SCA with a particular focus or goal and as time passes that focus changes. This can result from discovering new interests that one gets involved in, finding out the original area of interest just "isn't you" or wanting to mesh more closely with the personas of other folks you've become connected with. Do not let yourself be limited...feel free to change.

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