

## Finding Your Persona

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Here's the blessing and the curse: You can be almost anyone from before 1600, from anywhere in the Society's scope: Europe, Africa or Asia. This gives us a lot of leeway to choose. Other historical recreation groups, like the American Revolution or French & Indian or Civil War people have an advantage, in that they get told the year and place and names and even the clothes of the people involved with no guesswork involved. So how can we possibly choose among a thousand choices, all of which are fun?

(At this point, I'm going to give a caution: Don't be so worried that you're stuck with this persona forever. People do change personas sometimes! We're just looking at what you might enjoy for now.)

We need to narrow it down a bit. First, let's narrow down the whole Earth. Are you more intrigued about investigating Europe, Asia or Africa? If you had to read three books and write a long paper about the history of one of these continents, which one would thoroughly engross you first? Write that place down now. We'll get back to it.

Cool. Now stop for a brief second to think of something else. What sort of person are you interested in portraying? (Note: I'm not asking you what sort of person you are at the moment. If you're a bookish accountant, but you want to be more like Merida from *Brave* or Thomas More or Sir Galahad, then that is what we're shooting for. The skills will come in times to come. Trust me.) Do you want to be a sort of self-sufficient person without a lot of gold but looking to earn a title? Are you thinking of a far-traveled person, wise in the ways of many cultures? Do you want to be from peaceful or turbulent times? I ask this to begin to narrow down *when* you come from. For some, that's easy; they thumb through picture books of clothing and shop based on what they want to wear. Easy answer! For others, they want to look at the times that they grew up in.

Each region of each continent went through different sorts of phases. I'll use Western Europe as an example. There were the Romans, right? Big empire, cash flowing about, trade, merchants and learning. Then –boom-. The so-called Dark Ages. This is sort of a time when individual craftsmen and warriors were highly prized. One didn't travel a whole lot alone, since the roads were perilous. 'Far-traveled' meant that you once went to the next county or crossed the English Channel or North Sea to see the weird alien people in the next tribe over. Kings and queens changed, and one could go from rags to riches by one's own deeds more easily. If there was trade, it

was by barter, and a city was something rarely seen. Few people were literate, and were usually clergy. Food was local produce and only had local salt or herbs for seasoning.

Around 1000, things were more calm, but not really *safe*. People were inheriting their titles from family and succession was sometimes more peacefully done (your mileage may vary). One could still make a name for oneself, and even a serf could become a noble (see *ministerials*), but the continent was settling into three basic classes: Those Who War (knights and nobles and such), Those Who Pray (village priests, monks and nuns, bishops, et cetera), and Those Who Toil (the rest of the working world). There were some in between, such as bishops who led armies (I'm looking at *you*, Ulrich von Augsburg!) or serfs who fought (again, look at *ministerials*), but a lot of Europe was considered either well-born or not. We have a choice, and all people in the SCA are considered *gentles*, or from a well-born family. This doesn't give us a title, but it does mean we treat each other with respect and recognize the potential in each to become ennobled.

During and after the Crusades, trade opened up again to get the nice goodies from The East: spices like cinnamon or cloves or peppercorn, fancy silks, and, of course, more gold. People were also beginning to get copies of the old classical literature that reminded people that laws used to be codified and uniform over large areas and people used to inquire into the nature of the universe. Universities were founded. Cities began to grow and flourish. Some countries even had more than one or two cities! There was the beginnings of what we sometimes call the middle class: townspeople, tradesmen, guildsmen, and doctors.

Enter the Renaissance! Starting in the Mediterranean and radiating outwards, we enter a time of learning, trade, established nobility, and fancy hats. It's a bit harder to rise in station, since Those in Power are supported by established wealth. On the other hand, one could travel from one end of the continent to the other with less chance of dying outright. People could make a living as a specialist artisan, too, without having to have a noble or clergy patron. Guilds and mayors got actual power to influence politics, and cities and towns maintained their own knights and warriors.

Different parts of the globe went through their own 'dark ages' and their own golden eras of prosperity, but for now just think about if you prefer a time when there was rugged independence with more self-sufficiency but less prosperity, or an era with flourishing arts and literature and trade and such. Write down your first thoughts about that just under the continent you picked.

Great! Now we're going to narrow it down even further. You're going to think about nations. This doesn't mean 'countries', as much as it means 'cultures'. Are you thinking about trying out the Middle East cultures? Romance cultures (Italy, Spain, France), Celtic folks (Brittany, Cornwall, Wales, Scotland or Ireland), Byzantine? Germanic or Scandinavian? We're just making broad generalities, now. For African cultures, think basically between the ancient North and Northeast with its ties to the Middle East, the sub-Saharan kingdoms of Mali or Ghana, venerable Ethiopia, or the Swahili trading coast, or Great Zimbabwe in the south. The Middle East has Mediterranean coast, Arabian Sea, the fertile Mesopotamia and the craggy highlands. Asia can be the vast steppes, Mongolian desert, the lush Indian lands, the mountain kingdoms of the Himalayas, any of the Chinese lands, Southeast Asia's temple lands, the Chosun Kingdom or Imperial Japan.

Write down a general area. It's going to get a little harder now. Let's say, for instance, that you chose what we now call Italy. These countries really weren't in existence as such. The average person on the street very much identified with their region. A Tuscan would certainly never consider themselves the same as a Sicilian! The city folk of Milan would never suffer to be lumped in with people from Rome or Venice! Likewise, a Bavarian wasn't a Saxon and no Swede would take being called a Finn! If you have an idea about which region you want to be from, we write it down and move on.

If you're like most people and undecided, then consider the following exercise: Think about the look of the place you grew up. Was it on the water? A pond, stream or river or seacoast? Were there hills or mountains? Wild forests or lots of farmland? This may help you pick a region. What sorts of people were there? Few and far between? Villages or towns or city-folk? Were they on a major trade route or off the beaten track? Did people get around by boat or horse? Write down your thoughts. Now look at some maps by searching for the key words you already wrote down, like "map of Italy in the Renaissance" or "map of medieval Japan." I bet you can find some place that resembles the geography you just described. Sometimes, you have a choice. If you wanted a big English city by a river, you could pick London or York. If you wanted a wealthy German castle, you might look on the Rhine River or by the rich salt mines near Salzburg, Austria.

So you sort of know where and when you came from and the type of settlement. Before you pin yourself down, let's do something easier: figure out your parents. You can give them names and it's not as big of a deal as picking your own name. What was their status among the other people? How did they earn their food and clothing? Warriors also hunted. Merchants also

had to defend themselves. Gypsies came from somewhere and might be bound for somewhere else. Thinking about your parents helps you to envision the way you grew up. What holidays mattered to your parents? What superstitions or ritual observances did they teach you? How did each season differ from the other? (Usually, summer was when people went abroad, if they did at all. Winter was for hunkering down.) What crafts did they try to teach you? What was considered respected or ‘respectable’ in that village or town? Extend the family. Did you have an over-achieving brother or sister? A bratty one? A weird aunt or uncle? Family was very important, for it was the first support group, and sometimes the only one. Who was your best friend?

Make some notes, as they occur to you, but you might be looking at all those questions and saying “Well, heck – I don’t know what they did. If I did, I wouldn’t need this article.” Here’s where we talk about how you can dig up more about the region and its people. Firstly, generic histories will do for a start. Thumb through the History of Spain or Mongolia or whatever. Get a feel for when they were turbulent and when they were prosperous. If you page through an atlas or Google Earth looking at the way the land looks, remember that a lot of forests were knocked down over the centuries. France now has farmland all around the Loire Valley, where once were wild forests with a few reclusive cottagers. You may find historical atlases more useful.

Take a look at travel shows, like Rick Steves’ Europe on YouTube. Travel shows love to talk about how old a place is or the interesting things that once occurred there. They can spark the imagination. I have to warn you, though, that, like the History Channel, their version of ‘history’ might be a bit colored by storytelling. It’s always good to check up on the stories you hear.

Likewise, check out who actually published the websites or articles you read. Do they have an agenda? Many oral histories can be verified by independent means, and if they can’t you might want to take their story with a grain of salt. It doesn’t mean they are automatically untrue, just use caution. We know a lot about druids by Julius Caesar’s accounts. The shame is, he was their enemy, so what he said is suspect, just as is any accounts that try to make druids out as complete and utter heroes who could do no wrong ever. People were always people. (Mind you, I have no firm documentation that people were always people.)

Now you are absolutely in the best position to start thinking about picking a name. Since you already thumbed through some histories, you probably came across some typical names. You want one that was used back in the day by those folks, but you can’t claim to be an important big-wig

from then. Sure, you can be Henry from London, but you can't claim to be King Henry III. That name is taken, and he's dead. Your local herald can help you – he or she knows people that are good at this stuff. Also, don't get too married to one spelling. Sure the history books talk about Henrys and Georges in Germany – lots of them! – but their parents probably named them Heinrich or Georg (pronounced Gay-org, with hard 'g's.)

Last names didn't get inherited through the generations until later in our period. You might well have a *byname* that tells which Elsa or Mario or Eleanor you are. Often these were physical descriptive names like Erik the Tall or Martin the Short or Eleanor the Fair (which just means you have light-colored hair), or occupational names like John the Carpenter or Zachary the Smith, or names that said whose kid you were, like Thomas, Eddie's son or Matilda Einursdottir (Scandinavia says dottir = daughter. Too easy) or you could have a *locative* to say where you come from. Some are specific, like Jack of London, Michael of York or Irving of Berlin. Some just describe where you come from, like Joan Rivers (she comes from the river folk) or Amy Pond or James Woods. Just don't say you're Willie of Chester, living in Chester – ALL the Willies in Chester are Willie of Chester, so you're not helping anyone narrow it down! You can be Willie of Chester living in Dover, and that's probably fine. Different cultures have their own variants, so consult your local herald for help and keep an open mind.

To sum up, think broadly about where and when you come from, then shop around a bit for a time or place that you might intriguing. Think about what sorts of things you wanted available as a child and what you were taught. You need not worry about the hobbies you choose in the SCA. If I grew up in 12<sup>th</sup> century Alsace (like I did), met a lovely lady and we married and ran off to the East Kingdom's Barony of the Bridge (like I did), then I can, indeed try fencing. I don't say "Well I didn't grow up with that weapon, so I'm not going to admit it exists!" I've come to another land where they use many sorts of tools and weapons and have neat things in their markets. I adapt. My persona's upbringing, though, informs me how I observe my holidays, play games, swear, what I consider 'comfort food', and what clothes seem natural for me. That's all there is to it! Have fun!

## Persona 101/102 Homework

Where were you born?

Find it on a map and in a book. See pictures of the land.

Who were your parents?

Into what position were you born?

What is your birthday?

How many children in your family (lived)?

Who were the potentates (earl/duke, bishop, king or pope)?

So what? How did they affect you, if at all?

Was there war or peace?

What kinds of people were you exposed to?

What people lived in your area?

Were there any trade routes?

What goods and skills were there?

What is a lot of money?

How much would you earn?

Who did you work for and with?

How and why do you camp?

What kind of tent, food or lighting do you use?

What's wrong with night vision?

How do you say:

Hello

Goodbye

Please

Thank you

Sign your name