Using Google Earth in the SCA
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There's a handy tool that the current military uses regularly to scope out the lay of the land called Google Earth. It's an easy download that gives a layered look at the globe. Those of us using it have enjoyed the pictures that people upload of the places across the Earth as they appear in uploaded photos. So how can we use this to help us out with our medieval selves? The two biggest ways are by seeing the shape of the land and by seeing the sights in the places.

I should make a big caveat right now, that with the change of sea levels and the silting of rivers and all, that the lay of the land isn't exactly what it used to be. That's okay – we're not using Google Earth as documentation, just as a starting point for further persona story research (rather like Wikipedia, eh? Use cautiously!)

Maybe an example would be appropriate at this moment. We fly to the Tyrolean Alps south of Munich and there we are. Type the place name "Innsbruck, Austria" into the search box in the upper left. Modern-day, it's a cosmopolitan center with autobahns zipping by. But look at the lay of the land: mountains around a sheltered valley and the Inn River. Follow the road south, and you get to see the Brenner Pass to Milan and Venice. Follow the road northeast and you get to Munich. This was a major European artery of traffic since the Neolithic Age! Zoom right into the mountains to appreciate what it would take to travel this route with a wagon or a caravan of wagons laden with goodies for the market. This gives you a feel for scale that you can't get from text alone.

Let's try another one. Go to northern England and type "Newcastle upon Tyne" into the search box. There it is, near the coast. Now close in until you're at an altitude of about 20 kilometers. (Altitude is in the lower right corner of your screen.) You can see the Tyne River in dark blue, so you can follow it inland and see just how much countryside is served by this watery avenue. Water made for easy travel to the port for exporting your wool, so you can see how far or close to the shore you can be and still bring the goods to ships bound for the Hanseatic markets.

What else can we use? Ah! Pictures are neat – let's look at them. Now it's time for another caveat, though. Since Victorian times, lots of places have been dressed up for the tourist market, so the perishable items like wooden houses aren't useful for documentation. Here's an example of that: Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Germany. It is south-southeast of Frankfurt, west of Nuremburg and north of Munich. When you type the name into the search box, the pin appears just east of the Old Town, or Alt Stadt. Zoom right in there, to an altitude of 750 meters. Boy, are we close in, now!

This is probably the loveliest town Clothilde and I ever visited, but the modern is very visible. Alright, you see the parking lot just west of your location? That's for tourist buses. There's a blue picture icon just west of that labeled "Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Deutchland" to click on. There you're looking

at the curtain wall around the town. Looks great and medieval and junk, doesn't it? Well, as it turns out, that bit of wall was destroyed in World War II and rebuilt by donations. Still, it certainly wasn't fancied up – just rebuilt. There's a road there going west-southwest into the heart of the old town. Follow it a quarter mile to an open plaza (using the Tool called Ruler, if you're really into it), until your cursor is over the coordinates (see the bottom center of the screen for coordinates) 49 degrees, 22' 37.5''N and 10 degrees 10' 44.5''E. That's the big marketplace. The pictures here will show you lovely buildings. The stone ones have definite construction dates that you can look up. The wooden ones have an age, too, but remember that they've been remade and repainted, and there's a lot of wood! Still, it gives you an idea of what a cobbled market can look like when it's full of people. Use the images to think about how you go about your day in a medieval town, buying and interacting in the streets. Now try the same thing with Florence or Venice, Italy or Seville, Spain. Use Google Earth along with the usual internet sites as a visual companion. Tourists have uploaded pictures from all angles of each building, bridge or castle!

Finally, there's that Ruler tool I mentioned. You can use it to estimate road and river distances. Rather than use just the straight "Line", though, use the "Path" to mark winding roads to figure out just how far you really have to walk or ride to get from Vienna to Venice! You'll see that where there's a village, it was probably a good place to spend a night when you're on campaign or pilgrimage going over or around obstacles.

Google Earth is a handy, fun tool, but it does have its limitations. Its greatest use is to allow us to visually appreciate the lay of the land around where we claim to be from. Still don't believe me? Go south of Salzburg, Austria, and type in "Werfen" to find Hohenwerfen Castle. Now zoom in on the Alps around it. Whoa! Vertigo! It really gives you an appreciation of the heights one must scale to bring the herds up to their summer pastures!

Play with it a bit. Snoop out some locales. Have fun!