

CHOOSING A NAME

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Introduction

To get started in the SCA, you will need to create 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). 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 as to all your SCA friends.

Your persona story can be simple, consisting merely of your SCA name and the time/place your character is from (i.e. John the Smith from England in 1200AD). You can also make your persona story complex as time goes on by adding details of your character's life story, if you choose.

To be able to select a SCA name for yourself and begin creating your persona story, you must first decide what culture you desire to be from. There are many means useable to determine what culture you should 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 on a particular society. Whatever means you choose to use is quite acceptable.

Once you have selected the culture 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.

Concerning A Name

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.

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 the Kingdom Heralds. They should be able to verify the information for you.) Another good source are history books. 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. 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. An exceptional on-line source is the Academy of Saint Gabriel Medieval Names Archive, located at: <http://www.s-gabriel.org/names/>

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"); Knockwalledowne (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. Each SCA group has a herald's office with a staff waiting to help. Part of what they do is to guide people in selecting names, by providing information, books and lists of names.

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.

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

You may not use a name that would confuse you with someone already in the Society. (i.e. You can't be John James Smith if there is a person in the Society named John James Smith). The heralds have a list of names already registered, called the Armorial, if you have questions about a name.

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

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.

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. Others 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. Just a few of the names problematical names are: Bethany, Branna, Brenda, Bruce, Corwin, Corwyn, Eilonwy, Fiona, Korwin, Korwyn, Liam and Megan.