

Who Are You: The Art of Persona Development

An Overview of "Character Creation" Within the SCA and Other Re-Enactment or Role-playing Groups

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"What did you eat for breakfast this morning?", "What do you use for toilet paper?", "Do you have servants, slaves, or do you do your own dishes?", "What kind of underwear do you wear?"

Persona development is a depth-analysis of another human being. That a persona is typically fictional doesn't detract from it being as three dimensional as you or I. Providing that depth and dimension enables us as re-enactors, players, or dramatists, to get inside the headspace of our creations, and breathe life into them. We can think about them in the same terms that we might think about a family member, a friend, a co-worker.

Regardless of whether you are a newcomer to the SCA, a SCAdian lifer with an interest in doing school demos, someone who does live-action role play, or someone who spends time on the stage, you have an interest in creating a strong persona. Your intent is to create a complete being, one who can withstand odd and unusual questions, and come back with answers that fit that persona.

This leads a lot of people to ask, "How do I go about developing that much detail in my persona?" Admittedly, there are a large number of SCAdians who don't develop more than the rudiments of a persona – perhaps just a name and country of origin, sometimes not even that much. The process of developing a persona, however, often starts from such simple groundwork.

For those with an interest in finer detail in their personas, there are a number of areas that you can research in order to expand personal histories.

Part 1: Starting with the Basics

The first step in defining a persona is identifying who you are, when you are, and where you are, or where you are from. Typically, in the SCA, this information is the minimum we all provide by way of introducing ourselves. We need a name, and a place to match it (or a really good justification for an Irish-Gaelic name in the court of an Italian Renaissance Duke), and a general sense of your personal era. Some people may never get past the "Hi, I'm Guf, and I'm a Viking" stage, and that's okay, too. But for more depth and scope, consider answers to the following set of questions:

Who are you? What is your name? Do you have a nickname, a patronymic, or clan name? What are your parents' names? Do you use your parents' names in your own? Are they alive or dead? Do you have any brothers, sisters, or children? What are their names? Are you single, married, widowed, separated?

These questions provide the foundation for a "family history". From here, you can start to widen the scope of the picture you are creating:

Where are you? What do you call your land, your village or town, your part of the country? What do other people call it? Have you ever traveled somewhere else? Where? How far was it, and how long did it take you to get there? What kind of structure do you live in? Is it in a village, town, city, or countryside? How many people live there? Are they related to you?

Often through history, locals knew their area as something different from what outsiders knew it as, perhaps by a nickname. The sort of residence you place your persona in provides a lot of clues into your personal wealth and stature, as well as your place in a very localized hierarchy.

When are you? How do you record dates? What holidays do you celebrate? Who is the current "reigning royalty" in your area, and what kind of interaction do you have with them? What major events (natural or manmade) have occurred in your lifetime?

Your placement in the historical timeline dictates everything from how you might dress, to what you live in, to the sorts of names and titles you might possess. There are a number of general periods within the SCA context that might help steer your choice: Barbaric times (commonly called the Dark Ages, after the fall of Rome in the West), the Byzantine and Frankish Empires, The Norman Conquest and the Gothic period, the era of the first Black Plague (14th Century), the Italian and German Renaissance, the Tudor and Elizabethan eras, the Restoration (which leads up to the time of Cavalier King Charles in England in the early 1600's). Bear in mind these time periods are generalities only – each era has many "sub eras", marked out by wars, reigns, advances in art or science.

More questions defining who, where, and when you are might include:

When are you? What time is it? How do you keep the time? How is your day divided? What do you eat? What did you have for breakfast? Lunch? Dinner? How do you store food, or do you? Where do you buy food, and how do you pay? Do you have any hobbies? What does your house look like?

What are you? What do you do for a living? What kinds of tasks does that entail? What kind of education do you have? If you have a trade, how did you learn it? Do you get time off? For what reasons? What do you do in your free time? How many hours a day do you work? How many children do you have? What are their names?

Part 2: Personal Life, Home & Hearth

Now we look at specifics of your "personal history". Children are fascinated by the details of the persona's daily life, if those details appear convincing to the presenter. They want to know everything about you. To convince them, you have to know everything, too!

One of the key visual factors in persona development is dress. What kind of clothes do you wear? What accessories are proper for you? SCAdians in particular can typically answer both questions, but often, little details are overlooked, and it's the little details that make the "big picture" presentation work, and often have the biggest impact. Even basic research can often ferret out the most interesting information on what sorts of accoutrements will work for your persona.

Frequently, you will find that styles of dress also serves as a deciding factor in what kinds of activities your persona engages in. While this is often a more critical factor for women than for me, it bears consideration on both sides. Women aren't likely to play racquetball in a tight corset. Huntsmen aren't likely to wear tight hose and lacy Renaissance placket sleeves.

What sorts of past-times are available to people of your station, in your area and era? Do these hobbies require any sorts of specialized equipment? Can you cite examples? How do you acquire this equipment? How did you learn this activity? Does everyone in your family do this? Is it limited to particular ages, society levels, or genders?

Perhaps looking at hobbies is putting the cart before the horse, but often, children want to know what games you play before they ask what you do for a living – it's certainly a question of audience priorities ☺ .

In the SCA, unless you choose otherwise, you are assumed to be of noble birth, though the Royalty as recognition of merit grants rank and title in the SCA, rather than acquired by heritage and inheritance. Many personas develop as tradesmen, crafters, and artisans, developing a particular area of skill, and acquiring rank and title through recognition of that skill. In this respect, the SCA seems to foster an unspoken recognition of a "Guild" approach. Some questions in this area:

Are you noble, or are you a tradesperson? If noble, do you rely on your rank for wealth, or do you perform some duty (ambassador, clerk, military posting) to guarantee income? What is your rank in noble society? If in the trades, are you practicing as an independent, or part of a Guild? What is your ranking within the Guild, and what work can you produce to justify that ranking? How do you rank your actual

skills in your selected trade or craft? (apprentice level, journeyman, master)

There are often some weird and wonderful stories concocted within the SCA to explain how a married Norman woman has learned the erotic forms of Middle Eastern dance, for example ☺ . It is also common to develop a demo or public persona that is different from your SCA persona, so long as you don't confuse the details in a demo! For instance, my noble Lancastrian demo persona is married to an ambassadorial clerk, with four living children and three dead ones. When I do a demo with a Norse female persona, I invent on the fly an entire family and homestead history. In both cases, I have enough "stuff" to strengthen either presentation; both in terms of my clothing and in terms of artifacts I bring for show & tell.

Artifacts are a good support for persona development, especially for new people just setting out down this path. There are lots of young men out there who bought huge shiny swords even before they had proper clothes to wear, and proceeded to model persona development around the sword. Usually we advise that once you have an idea of where you want your persona to go (development-wise), start acquiring a few suitable items for your period, location, and station. Learn what you can about these items, how they were produced, how they came into your possession, and you've got a good starting point for general cultural references.

Two more areas of interest are your persona's family, and the buildings you live in.

Do you live in a castle? A fortified tower? A hill fort? Wattle and daub hut? Crenellated manor house? Townhouse? Venetian palazzo? How many rooms in your home? How is it heated? Where do you keep livestock animals? Do you have pets? Where do you keep them?

Sometimes a basic idea of the kinds of furniture you would have also comes in handy, from ornate Tudor and Renaissance gilded chairs to fur-covered sea chests of the Norsemen, it never hurts to know what you sit your backside down on when you sit down to eat!

Do you have a big family or a small one? Are you married? How old were you when you married? How many times have you been married? Are you the head of your household, or

where are you in the hierarchy? Are you one of the children, do you have children? What do most of the deaths in your family occur from? What do the various members of your family do?

It may help to keep "cheat sheets" of relevant data, until you are familiar enough with the persona to carry it off in your head alone. For years, I kept such a sheet for review before every demo, to remind myself of my children's names, and which ones were alive, and which ones dead. (To this day, I'm still not entirely sure Ragnarr, for example, knows the names of all his brothers, nor am I certain they stay the same from one demo to the next ☺ .)

Part 3: Persona Philosophies

What do you think of? Do you believe in God? Do you like your King? Do you think slavery is wrong?

Now we take a look at some of the more cerebral aspects of persona development: the development of personal "philosophies". This encompasses such boggy ground as personal religion and politics, and the admittedly fuzzy line between "persona" beliefs and those of the modern person playing those beliefs.

Start with some basic questions regarding your persona's religion:

Do you live in a Christian era and area? If you are Christian, what denomination? (Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, Lutheran) If you are not Christian, what religion are you? If not Christian, what deities do you worship? Have you been exposed to Christianity? What rites of worship do you practice? What, if any, "formal rites" exist for your religion? Can you practice these openly where you are now? Do you wear or bear any external symbols of your faith? (cross, rosary, Thor's hammer) Does your faith invite any sort of "pilgrimages" to places of special religious significance? Have you ever taken one? Is there any kind of organized hierarchy within your faith? How does one become involved in that hierarchy?

Many cultural beliefs, even within the SCA's medieval period, vary wildly. In the realm of the LARP system, belief systems wander out into

the realms of fantastic, but often fairly clearly defined and well developed. Because religion in any form has such an impact on any culture's expected and acceptable codes of ethics, behaviours, morality, it is an area of study ignored at your own risk. In many cultures, everything from festivals to what you can eat on certain days is dictated by the prevailing religion, your personal religion, or compromises between the two (if different, as with Jews living in Christian Europe in the Middle Ages).

For instance, devout Christians in the Middle Ages had a "saint's day" for almost every day of the year. Often, a child's birthday was of less importance than his saint's day, in which both the child and the saint names as his/her protector were honoured. The Church dictated hairstyles and clothing fashions for much of the Christian Middle Ages, and royal sumptuary laws were often based (to some extent) in these church-based restrictions. In many cases, the Church was exempt from secular sumptuary laws, but clerical orders had their own equally rigorous and restrictive sumptuary laws.

Religious pilgrimages were one of the most widely condoned form of "social travel" throughout the height of the medieval era, in which both men and women were free to travel from one religious site to another. What little news or knowledge a persona has of the world might come from such a trip, along with an excuse to possess interesting language skills or articles not normally found in the home area.

The "news of the world" issue leads to the next area of persona philosophy – personal politics, Outside the obvious historically noted wars of your chosen time period, here are some other issues to ponder:

Has there been any strife in your country or close to your lands during your life, your father's life, your grandfather's life? What side of the strife are you on? What side has your family traditionally sided with? What might cause you to change sides? Have you or has your family ever taken part in any sort of political upheaval? Does your family maintain any kind of "clan warfare" of "family alliances" with other families, clans, or political factions? Are you pledged in support of any ruling or rule-hopeful nobility? Have you or any of your family ever held a "ruling position" in the area where you live (reeve, mayor, sheriff)? How did you achieve that position? Was it by appointment or electoral process? Did you campaign? Who could vote? To whom do you owe personal allegiance? To whom does you family owe allegiance?

Also consider these questions, as they reflect the time in which you have chosen to set your persona, and the politics by which you would be living:

Are there any particular races, social classes, or religions to which you are not allowed to speak, or prefer not to speak or have social dealing with? Would you still conduct business with any of the above? Are there any of the above against which you would historically hold a social prejudice? (For example, through most of the High Middle Ages, the Jews were shunned as social pariahs, as they were frequently wealthy and definitely non-Christian) Is there any way of "moving between" social classes in your time (marriage, political advancement, and mercantile wealth)? Have you any urge to do that, and how would you accomplish that?

Many cultures are based on a very strong extended-family/clan concept, in which people – family and those married into the family – with similar loyalties constitute the vast majority of an individual's world. Allegiance is owed FIRST to the clan, THEN to anyone outside the clan (including reigning monarchs). Many of these cultures are also less focused on the differences between the social classes, placing more importance on winning one's wealth and arranging a bountiful and profitable marriage.

(Author's note: the difference between "kin" and "clan", to the best of my knowledge, is that "kin" refers to a relative of the immediate or direct bloodline, while "clan" or "clansman" refers to anyone of the clan, be they of direct bloodline, or not of the blood at all. One can be "clan" without being "kin", but one can't be "kin" without being "clan" ... at least, not without a good fight 😊 .)

Many cultures are also hereditary in nature, where if your family didn't do it for generations before you, chances are you won't either. Marrying above or below one's station did happen, but was generally frowned on if not actively discouraged. Only in the very close-to-the-throne circles of nobility was it a regular practice to acquire new titles – usually at the expense of the head currently claiming that right.

Often these clan or familial relationships dictate who you can associate with, who you can and can't marry, who you can trade and do business with, and so on. Because of the far-reaching effects of personal

politics, it's often a good idea to be very well aware of both the political climate of your chosen time/location, as well as your persona's (and familial) position on those politics.

Part 4: Presenting Your Persona

Do you have a coat of arms? What kind of furniture do you sit on? What do you wear in court? How did you get here today?

We have finally reached the moment of truth. You have spent time and energy creating a persona in some detail, and your attention turns to the question, "Yeah, but now what do I DO with it??"

The first issue to look at is the contentious problem of reconciling all your diverse interests within a single persona. Something that is both the bane and the beauty of the SCA, for instance, is that there is So Much To Do. Your persona may head in one direction, but you have or develop interests which may lead in another – like the early-period Irish sailor who suddenly discovers a love of Middle Eastern hand drumming, or the Restoration lady who discovers a passion for the forge and anvil and Japanese kite flying.

*What are YOUR personal interests, within the scope of the SCA/LARP/whatever? How many of them are outside the scope of your persona's time period or world knowledge? What would your persona's interests be in period? Is there any overlap? How many of those personal interests can be justified within your persona by means of a **believable** story?*

Concocting a story to explain how a Scottish piper winds up his Laird's emissary to a Japanese court (for example) is one way of justifying what seem to be conflicting interests. After all, an "anachronism" is something that is out of place in time. These stories are the most common means of explaining irregularities in persona activities within the SCA. Another approach is to simply take these interests for what they are, and not bother to justify them within the context of the persona. A third approach involves the creation of another persona.

For many with conflicting interests, the majority of responses fall into the second or third categories. For example, a Norse persona with a

keen interest in fencing might decide not to change persona, but simply to acquire the right garments for the task, while remaining true to the core persona at all other times.

Many people treat the SCA as a geographical location, exchanging time for physical distance. This enables an Elizabethan gentleman, for example, to travel to the Laurel Kingdoms and pass time at an event drinking with a Norman knight, a 14th Century Venetian spice merchant, and a lowly Japanese house cook. This melting pot also provides ample opportunity for individual personae to encounter and pick up interests not native to their own lives, and also enables them to offer homage to kings and barons not their own.

Treating the SCA as a separate geographical entity makes it easier on those who have to deal with the public while "in persona". For example, school children at demos often ask How We Got Here. My standard response is, "Well, I sailed from Dover some 3 1/2 weeks ago, and I came across country from the lake port by your local conveyances." My persona is fascinated by all the local marvels of modern south-western Ontario, but no more than she would be by all the marvels to witness in 15th C Vienna, or Padua, or Addis Ababa.

So, once you start to wrap your head around the idea of using the SCA as a fixed locale on the map, consider these questions:

Does your persona view the Laurel Kingdoms as a geographical entity, or do you consider yourself to be at home in your own local, overlooking the variances in other persona's dress and habits? Do you prefer to think that your persona's homeland is simply being "invaded" by other cultures? Do you offer homage to any local (SCA) rulers? Are there any restrictions in your persona that would prevent you from doing so? What is an "event" to you? A day at court? A town market day? A clan celebration? What do you enjoy about vents? What do you not enjoy? What does your persona enjoy, or not enjoy? What do you AND your persona require at events to both be comfortable and display status?

Not everyone can afford a grand sort of display, granted, especially not right off the starting block. But there are simple ways of accomplishing that sense of "presentation" or presence, and it often starts with heraldry, or some other recognizable visible symbol.

Do you have a coat of arms? Do you have personal/family/clan/household heraldry (including clan tartans) you can wear or display? How would it be appropriate to display that? For early period personas, is there some symbol you use which represents you? Can you put any of that symbology on a garment, on a box or banner, on cushions? What would your persona normally travel with, when visiting or going on extended trips? (Think both in terms of accessories and in terms of bigger items, like furniture) Would you carry trunks, benches, chairs for comfort? Would you use anything to cover them (a good place to display your heraldry!)? How much gear can you afford to carry in your mundane vehicle? (This is often a limiting factor for many)

A small sturdy trunk or chest makes for both practical seating and storage. Collapsible or folding chairs can be covered with fabric to provide a simple and comfortable place to sit, and are easy to transport. Many designs exist for simple period chairs and tables if you want to build your own, or you can cruise second-hand shops for treasure finds.

An advantage to travelling with "stuff" is that you can claim an area of the hall as your own, and depending on the quality of your setup, it adds a great deal to the atmosphere of the event. It may be as simple as a Norseman travelling with a couple of sea-chests covered in sheepskins, or it could be a Lancastrian lady travelling with most of her household goods – folding screen and fabric, folding chairs and cushions, folding table, embroidery stand and frame, jugs and pottery tableware, rugs for the floor ... hmm, that all sounds very familiar...

While all of this began as an exercise to help SCA demo staff create mostly-unshakeable personas, the underlying ideas for anyone trying to create a fully developed identity. The bottom line, as I have said in many places, is that the details **do** count. Remember that each element you add contributes to the overall effect and strength of your persona. Whether you travel in grandiose style or simplified comfort, in Tudor glitz or peasant rags, all these questions will guide you in the act of creating a persona every bit as detailed as you are. I warn you now that each question will lead to dozens more.

From simple groundwork comes what can be as simple or as complicated as you allow it to be. A little research goes a long way, and in the end, you will have created a whole new person that you can present for the enjoyment and benefit of all.