

Articles About Persona

Concerning a dream

The Society is, among other things, a joint fantasy, and one that is very difficult to maintain. The true magic comes when within a Society event we believe, if only for an instant, that we are truly in the Middle Ages. Take that away and what remains is only dross, no more than a gathering of twentieth century people who like to dress up and talk about history—or dress down and hit each other with rattan.

Many things can break a fantasy. A zipper cannot, if it is discreetly hidden, but talking about zippers at an event, whether defending or attacking them, can and does. So does discussing motorcycles. So, more subtly, does every attitude and tone of voice that reflects the feelings and beliefs of the twentieth century, hidden behind a colorful disguise. For the fantasy to work we must, each and all, believe in it as best we can while it is happening.

One of the most serious temptations is the opportunity to make a joke out of the contrast between our medieval reality and the twentieth century reality surrounding it. It is always easy to get a laugh by introducing a contemporary idiom into a medieval speech or juxtaposing an armored knight and an automobile. Easy and deadly; every such joke cracks the illusion, drains a drop of life blood from the fantasy.

Even if we all make the effort, it is difficult to maintain the fantasy in the face of its own inconsistencies. An Anglo-Saxon lady could not co-exist with a courtier from Renaissance Italy or Tudor England. Here again, by making a point of these clashes (“Perhaps you are my great-grandmother”) we make it harder to integrate the inconsistent elements into a single whole. Perhaps the best solution is to imagine that, because of our personas' limited historical and geographical knowledge, we interpret different times as if they were only different places. My friend Aelfwine comes from Anglo-Saxon England, which is somewhere off that direction; Michael of York comes from over there. Anglo-Saxon England and Norman England in fact did not coexist, save briefly and bloodily, but they could have coexisted, in different places, and in the Current Middle Ages (which have, after all, no geographical location of their own in the world of the first Middle Ages) they do. Here we all are, drawn from different lands (some of which happen to have the same names but different dates, a peculiarity we would do well to ignore), met together in a land that has no particular place and time save its own.

Additional inconsistencies are forced upon us by the presence of the modern world in the middle of our fantasy. Sometimes they can be ignored, sometimes mastered by creative naming. “Dragon” for automobile is one such attempt, although not an entirely fortunate one. It is well enough to call something a dragon when it comes roaring by, but prudent folk do not travel to a feast in the belly of a dragon. Perhaps “wagon” or “wain” would be better. “Car” would be entirely proper if we were all attuned to its archaic and not its current meaning, which alas we are not.

The quest for authenticity, while an eminently worthy part of our activities, poses dangers of its own, to which I, for one, have too often succumbed. One cannot, within persona, criticize anything—food, clothes, poetry—for inauthenticity. Being oneself a medieval person, one has no basis from which to recognize it as inauthentic. One tempting solution is to disguise the criticism as a question. “I have never seen anything like that, my lord, where does it come from?” The hearer may take the question as question (although, if he really is being inauthentic, he has no answer within the fantasy) but the questioner knows well enough what he is about. He has broken the fantasy for himself, within his own mind, if nowhere else. Better to leave all such

questions for conversations the next morning, between mundane persons inhabiting those same fleshly shells that walked some hours before as lords and ladies through the enchanted lands.

In accordance with which principle, as this letter could not have been written by a medieval Moor, I must sign myself

Sincerely Yours

David Friedman

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Staying In Persona and Other Things: An Opinion

In observing and talking with other people in the Society, one area where I find a good deal of disagreement is the subject of staying in persona. The disagreement is often stated in terms of being for more or less authenticity, but that is, I think, a mistake. The controversy is not about how much authenticity one is in favor of but about what dimensions of our activities in the Society we are to be authentic about.

It is useful, in discussing this issue, to distinguish between the question of whether authenticity is desirable and the question of whether, in any particular case, it is desirable enough to be worth what it costs to get it. A simple example is the matter of wearing eyeglasses. Suppose you have an Anglo-Saxon persona. Further suppose you are very nearsighted and the two things you most like to do in the Society are fighting and archery. You may decide that being authentic in the matter of eyeglasses, while desirable, is not desirable enough to be worth giving up the things you are in the Society to do. Authenticity is a good thing, but in this particular case it costs more than you are willing to pay. I would use the same terms to describe the situation of a sixteenth century persona who chose to wear modern eyeglasses instead of buying a special pair of medieval looking ones—because she had more important things to spend her limited income on. In one case the cost is in money, in the other in inability to do things, but the principle is the same.

Having made that preliminary point, I next wish to discuss the question of why authenticity is valuable. There are several reasons. The simplest—and, I think, the most important—is that we are playing a game in which we imagine, while we are playing it, that we are medieval people living in a medieval world. Your inauthenticity, if sufficiently obvious, makes it difficult or impossible for me to play the game. It is hard to imagine oneself in the Middle Ages while flashbulbs are popping or radios blaring rock music.

A second reason is that we are amateur scholars engaged in studying the life of the past by trying to live it—sometimes described as experimental archeology. Authenticity is a way of getting the experiment right—and the outcome of the experiment gives us further insights into what really was authentic. To take a simple example, one could make a rough estimate of the size of a medieval loaf of bread by trying to make a recipe that specifies other ingredients by weight and bread crumbs by the number of loaves used.

A third reason, and one that is important for many members of the Society, is that trying to be authentic is itself a game (too often a highly competitive one); in this context the rules are essentially arbitrary, but there have to be some rules in order for there to be a game, and historical authenticity is the rule we have chosen.

If these are the functions that authenticity, whether in speech, dress, or behavior, serves, then we can compare the authenticity of different dimensions of what we are doing by seeing to what degree, in each, our inauthenticity prevents us from achieving the objectives that authenticity is intended to promote.

Consider clothing as an example. Think of the lowest level of authenticity—level one—as clothing that would be obviously inauthentic even to someone almost completely ignorant of the Middle Ages, such as an occasional reader of *Hagar the Horrible*. Blue jeans and a T-shirt would be a good example. Level two is the sort of vaguely medievalish clothing that we see a good deal of—a long dress of indeterminate origin plus something on the hair for a lady, a belted T-Tunic and pants for a gentleman. Level three seems authentic at a casual glance—the zippers are hidden and the pattern and material not obviously modern. One could go on to discuss higher levels, but for my present purposes it is not necessary.

What is wrong with level one clothing is that it breaks the effect for everyone. Level two does the same thing to a lesser degree for those who know something about medieval clothing. The higher levels do not seriously interfere with other people's enjoyment, although anything short of perfection may fail fully to achieve the objectives of recreational scholarship or authenticity as a game.

The question to ask, with regard to clothing or anything else, is not “how authentic should we be;” putting it that way suggests that there is some level of authenticity that everyone must achieve and which there is no point in surpassing. More authenticity is always better than less—up to the point where a professional scholar could distinguish the garment from an original only by its age. What we differ in is how much authenticity we are willing to pay for, given its cost. Someone who likes dressing well, is good at making clothes, and has lots of money to spend on handwoven fabrics, will quite properly choose more authenticity in garb than will someone with the opposite characteristics.

Where the level of authenticity is very low, one person's inauthenticity makes it harder for other people to play and enjoy the game, so it is generally most important to improve authenticity in the areas where it is lowest. Getting people to wear tunics instead of T-shirts is a significant step in making it possible for us to imagine, at least for a few minutes, that we are really in the Middle Ages; replacing costume jewelry with jewels that are made out of silver, gold, and real gems is mostly a matter of one person playing the game more perfectly for its own sake. Both are desirable, but the former should probably have the higher priority.

If we try to apply this common set of standards to the many dimensions of the Society as it now exists, what do we see? In clothing, level one—blue jeans and T-shirt—is rare and frowned upon. Most people at events are in level two or level three clothing, and a healthy minority are doing better than that. The situation is similar but a little worse with regard to armor; there is more obviously out of period armor on most tourney fields than obviously out of period clothing surrounding them. It is worse still with regard to cooking; while the situation varies from kingdom to kingdom, blatantly modern foods are much more common than blue jeans at Society feasts.

Let me now go to the other extreme, to something with regard to which almost all of us are and always will be at level 1: language. My persona ought to speak Arabic, Berber and perhaps Latin; others should be fluent in Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse, etc. It would be nice if we all knew those languages (provided most of us had a language in common—Latin would do for most educated personae). Imagine how much more real the Society would feel. Unfortunately, learning to speak a foreign language is a great deal of work. Most of us, myself included, are simply not willing to put that much time and effort into achieving even a very low level of

authenticity in that particular dimension. We content ourselves with trying to use a few archaic words and locutions—the equivalent (for other than late English personae) of wearing a long shirt outside our blue jeans and belting it in to make it look a little like a tunic. It is not that authenticity with regard to language is not valuable, merely that it costs more than we are willing to pay.

Authenticity is valuable in all the dimensions of what we do, most valuable when its lack is obvious to those around us and so threatens their ability to believe in the game while they play it, but our willingness to be authentic in various dimensions is limited by what it costs us, in time, effort, and money. This brings me finally to the subject of staying in persona.

With regard to staying in persona—what we speak about, what we know, what our expressed opinions and attitudes are—most of us, most of the time, are at the blue jeans and t-shirt level. This is true, in my experience, across all kingdoms and most groups. Someone almost completely ignorant of the Middle Ages could walk once across the feast hall or field of an event and tell, by the conversations around him, that he was in the twentieth century. In most events, a majority of the conversations he would hear would be obviously out of period; certainly there would be more conversations which sounded sufficiently modern to seem strange to the medieval ear (language aside) than conversations that sounded sufficiently medieval to seem strange to the modern ear.

This would be an unavoidable situation if staying in persona were as difficult as learning a new language. Many of those I have discussed the matter with seem to think it is; their argument is that while a few people may have the resources of scholarship and verbal fluency to “pull off” a medieval persona, most of the Society cannot do it, or at least not without devoting so much effort to the attempt as to take the fun out of the Society for them.

This argument confuses the step from level one to level two with the step from level one to level five. It is as if we excused blue jeans and t-shirts by assuming that the only alternative was a handsewn outfit made from handwoven material colored with period dyes. I am not suggesting that we should all become professional scholars or professional actors, specializing in our own personae—only that we should make at least some minimal attempt to act like the people we claim to be.

The first step is to avoid saying those things that we all know are inappropriate to the medieval context. No computers, no cars, no football games. It will require a little effort the first few times, but it takes no skills or knowledge that we do not all already have. A good second step would be to introduce into our conversation or behavior some element that seems appropriate for our medieval persona and inappropriate to our mundane one. For an Arab that might mean eating with only the right hand, for a Norseman swearing by Thor, for a medieval Christian crossing himself at appropriate occasions.

These things would not constitute doing a “good job” of staying in persona, any more than a belted T-tunic and pants is a “good job” of dressing mediievally. The latter is about the minimum level that we feel should be acceptable in dress—what we expect of a new member or permit ourselves when we are being sloppy and casual—and the former are the equivalent in persona. The one is about as difficult as the other, and they have comparable effects on the overall feel of an event.

[An earlier version of this was published in the *Crown Prints*]

The Little Things

Staying in persona does not mean saying you are a different person. It means being a different person. One of the hardest, and most interesting, parts is getting the little things right. Before you worry about inventing ancestors for seven generations and an elaborate personal history—things which few people tell strangers in any case—it is worth first learning as much as possible about the little things that anyone from your time and land would have known. The more such details you integrate into your medieval self, the better you can convince others (and yourself) that you are your persona.

One way of doing this would be as a group project, involving two successive gatherings a few weeks apart, both held out of persona. In the first, each person tries to stump the others with questions their personae could have answered without thinking—the sort of questions that you could answer without thinking if they were asked of your twentieth century persona. The questions must be ones for which the answer can be learned; invented answers are not allowed.

I suspect that most of us, myself included, would find that we did not know the answers to a majority of the questions. Those who were sufficiently interested could then go home, or to the library, and try to find the answers to as many as possible. In the second gathering, we would come back together to report to each other the answers we had succeeded in finding.

I have not actually participated in such gatherings, but I have spent some time thinking up questions—to some of which, for my own persona, I do not know the answers. Here they are. All are intended to apply to your persona prior to your arrival in the Current Middle Ages.

What kinds of money do you use? What are the relative values of the different kinds? How much does dinner at the inn cost? How much does a horse cost? How much does a skilled worker make per month?

What system do you use to describe what time it is? When does one day end and another begin? How do you tell time (sundial? clock?)?

What system do you use for describing dates? What is your calendar like?

Can you read? If so, what have you read? What poems, tales, etc. have you heard told?

What do you know about history? Have you heard of Alexander the Great? Julius Caesar? Charlemagne? Vergil? Saladin? What do you “know” about each?

What do you know about geography? What is the most distant country you have heard of? The most distant country you have met someone from?

Who is your immediate overlord (title and/or name)? Who is your ultimate overlord?

What is your religion? What duties (prayers, fasts, dietary restrictions, etc.) does it impose? What do you (your persona) know about its doctrines and history?

What do you eat for breakfast? Lunch? Dinner? What do you drink? Where do your food and drink come from? How is the food cooked (style of cooking, tools, how does the oven work, etc.)?

What sorts of wild animals live in your area? Which are dangerous? Which are good to eat? How are the latter hunted?

What clothes do you wear? What are they made of? Where do they come from?

What crops are grown in your part of the world? What goods, if any, are exported, and how are they transported? What goods are imported?

What language(s) do you speak? What language(s) do other people in your town (city, barony...) speak?

If you or one of your friends wrote a poem, what form would you use? What about a song?

What “mythological” beasts do you know about? Which ones do you believe in? What do you believe about them?

Most of these questions are specific to your persona and so may seem to violate the requirement that the answers be researched instead of made up. But in most cases, although research may not tell you for certain what would be true of your persona, it will limit you to a few alternatives. A twentieth century American might plausibly have any of a number of different things for breakfast, but there are far more things that he would not have.

One final remark. Some of you, after reading the list (and perhaps making some additions of your own) will conclude that only a professional scholar can stay in persona. There are few things that must be done perfectly in order to be worth doing, and staying in persona is not one of them. The more such questions you can answer the better a job you can do. Finding the answers—recreational scholarship—is one of the things the Society is about. And fun.

A few Answers:

"Beer, manchet and fish or meat were the usual breakfast of the members of the Percy family, according to the Northumberland Household Book of 1512. The parents were served with a quart of wine as well as a quart of beer, but wine was evidently thought unwholesome for the children, who received beer alone." C. Anne Wilson, *Food and Drink in Britain*, p.376. She also asserts that pottage was a common breakfast, especially for the poor, in England in the middle ages.

“... the Caliph’s breakfast was served him, of the remains of the previous evening’s supper, cold lamb or chicken, or some such dish.” Eric Schroeder, *Mohammad’s People*. The reference is to the Caliph Mu‘awia.

“There are others who sprinkle ground pepper over the food when it is cut for eating; this is a practice of the Christians and Berbers.” From *Manuscrito Anonimo*, a 13th century Andalusian cookbook.

Implausible Persona Story # 1

Born in Muslim North Africa. As a teenager accompanied his uncle, a diplomat in the employ of a minor local ruler, on trips to both black Africa and Constantinople. Kidnapped by Christian pirates and sold as a slave in Italy, where he converted to Christianity and became a protégé of the Pope.

This is a real person; what is his name?

Some Tricks

To stay in persona is convincingly to be another person. The first one you must convince is yourself. To do so, I find it useful to deliberately adopt certain tricks of behavior in order to remind myself that I am now Cariadoc and not David.

Some are ways of speaking. I do not speak Arabic (and hardly anyone at an event would understand me if I did) but I can and do adopt medieval Muslim locutions. One example is the practice of always following the name of God with some admiring comment—most commonly “The Compassionate, The Merciful,” but sometimes “He that upholds the Heavens without pillars above us” or some other phrase borrowed from period sources. Another is following the name of a good Muslim who is dead with “on whom be peace” and the name of a prophet or a particularly holy man with “on whom be the peace and the blessing”—and adding to the name of a notable non-Muslim the phrase “curses on him for an unbeliever.” (I usually omit that one, out of consideration for the perils of being a Muslim in a predominately Christian society.)

Medieval (and modern) Arabs eat only with the right hand, using the left for all unclean purposes. I think it likely that a medieval Moor, coming from a similar culture and one heavily influenced by the Arabs, would do the same. Cariadoc does not use his left hand in eating. The practice is not only (I think) authentic; it also provides me with a silent reminder of who, at the moment, I am.

For similar reasons, I do not wear glasses at events. Doing without glasses when I am in persona is not merely a matter of being authentic—it is also a striking way of reminding myself that I am in a different world. Fuzzier. As an adult, Cariadoc has never seen the stars clearly and cannot recognize a friend across the length of a hall. Those are some of the ways in which he is a different person from David.

These tricks are mostly ways of convincing *myself* that I am a different person, although they may help to remind other people as well. Most of them are specific to my persona. The equivalents for your persona I leave for you to discover; they almost certainly exist.

Yakub bin El-Leyth Es-Saffar, having adopted a predatory life, excavated a passage one night into the palace of Dirhem, the Governor of Sijistan. After he had made up a convenient bale of gold and jewels and the most costly stuffs, he was proceeding to carry it off, when he happened in the dark to strike his food against something hard on the floor. Thinking it might be a jewel of some sort, a diamond perhaps, he picked it up and put it to his tongue, and, to his equal mortification and disappointment, found it to be a lump of rock-salt. Throwing down his precious booty, he left it behind him and withdrew empty-handed to his habitation.

Next day the governor’s treasurer was alarmed to discover that a great part of the treasure and other valuables had been removed; but on examining the package which lay on the floor, his astonishment was not less, to find that not a single article had been conveyed away. The Governor had it proclaimed that if the thief would announce himself, he would be pardoned and rewarded. Yakub, relying upon the promise, presented himself before the governor, and explained that having by inadvertance tasted the Governor’s salt in his house, and so become the Governor’s guest, he had been unwilling to violate the laws of hospitality by stealing from his host and had therefore put down his booty and departed. The governor appointed him to an office of importance, where he gradually rose in power until he became the founder of a Dynasty.

(Based on an anecdote in *Arabian Society in the Middle Ages* by Edmund Lane).

Some Sources for Islamic Persona

Not all, not even most, Muslims were Arabs. Islam may have been the first world civilization; in period it stretched from Spain to Malaya. Muslims might be Arabs, Berbers, East or West African Blacks, Indians, Kurds, Mongols, Persians, Turks, They were all united by a common religion and a common religious language, but divided by numerous religious factions, languages, and cultures. In order to be a medieval Muslim, you will find it necessary to learn about both medieval Islam and the particular culture your persona belongs to.

You will find yourself learning two sorts of things: physical and historical details and what it felt like to be a medieval Muslim. The best way to learn both, but especially the latter, is to read books that your persona might have read—or written. Such books give you both detailed information on the world your persona lived in and a first hand view of how it looked to people who lived in it. So I will start my list of sources with primary sources—things written in period.

Primary Sources

The Koran: This is the one book that every educated Muslim knew. Islamic literature and conversation was full of Koranic references, and Islamic Law was in part based upon the Koran.

The Thousand and One Nights. The story of Scheherezade, which provides the frame story for the Nights, is mentioned by al-Nadim in the 10th century; the surviving texts are considerably later, possibly 15th century. The Burton translation (16 volumes!) is a delight; Payne is also supposed to be very good. Anything under eight hundred pages and calling itself the Arabian Nights is likely to be an abbreviated and bowdlerized version, intended for children. The stories give you a sample of period fantasy fiction and, along with the footnotes, provide a good deal of information on period Islamic attitudes and society.

The Fihrist of al-Nadim, tr. Bayard Dodge, Columbia University Press 1970. This is something between an annotated bibliography and an encyclopedia. It is a list of every book al-Nadim has read, organized by subject—I think the total is in the thousands. It is not easily read through at a sitting, but dipping into it gives one a good picture of the intellectual world of an educated tenth century Muslim.

The Table-Talk of a Mesopotamian Judge, by al-Muhassin ibn Ali al-Tanukhi, D. S. Margoliouth, tr. Al-Tanukhi was a tenth century judge who found that the anecdotes people were telling were no longer as good as the ones he remembered from his youth and decided to improve the situation by writing down all the ones he could remember. The book is a wonderful first person view of the Middle East in the tenth century.

An Arab-Syrian Gentleman and Warrior in the Period of the Crusades: Memoirs of Usamah ibn-Munkidh, Philip Hitti tr. Usamah was a Syrian Emir; his memoirs, dictated in his old age, describe events during the period between the first and second crusades.

The Shahnamah. This is a famous Persian epic by Firdouzi, which any late Persian persona would be familiar with. *The Epic of the Kings*, Reuben Levy tr., revised by Amin Banani, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London: 1967,1973,1977 (ISBN 0 7100 1367 1) is a prose translation, with some omissions. *A King's Book of Kings*, available from the Metropolitan Museum in New York, contains copies of the miniatures from an extraordinary illuminated manuscript of the Shahnamah and is a good source for late Persian clothing.

Khalila wa Dimna: This is a collection of beast fables in Arabic, based on a Persian translation of an Indian collection (The *Panchatantra*).

The Travels of Ibn Battuta: Ibn Battuta was a fourteenth century Islamic world traveller who traveled at least as far as India and claimed to have made it to China. *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, by H.A.R. Gibb, (Cambridge: 1958, 1962, 1971–the final volume was completed by C.F. Beckingham after Gibb's death and published in 1994) is the only complete English translation of his memoirs. The account is detailed and filled with interesting anecdotes; it describes travels to or through East and West Africa, Arabia, Iraq, Persia, Anatolia, Constantinople, Southern Russia, Afghanistan, India, China, Andalusia and points between.

The Maqaddimah of ibn Khaldun, tr. Franz Rosenthal, Princeton University Press, Princeton (1967). This is the introduction to a world history by a famous Moorish scholar c. 1400. It gives you a picture of the world as seen from that time and place. It is also considered one of the first great works of modern political science.

Arab Historians of the Crusades, selected and translated from the Arabic sources by Francesco Gabrieli, translated from the Italian by E.J. Costell, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969, 1978. This is a collection of extracts from contemporary Arabic accounts of the crusades.

Books of Traditions. Islamic law is based on the Koran and the Traditions of the Prophet—accounts of things that Mohammed said and did. The attempt to collect traditions and verify their authenticity was a major scholarly project for many centuries. Some of the most famous collections are those of Al-Bokhari and ibn Muslim. They are useful both as things your persona might have known and as snapshots of Arabic life at the time of the Prophet.

Saracen Archery by J.D. Latham and W.F. Paterson, Holland Press Ltd., London 1970. This is a modern annotated translation of a period treatise on archery. It is useful as a source of information on both Islamic archery and an archer's life in Mameluke Egypt.

Secondary (and out of period primary) Sources

Mohammad's People, by Eric Schroeder, The Bond Wheelright Company, Portland, Maine (1955). This is something between a primary and a secondary source—a history of the early centuries of al-Islam made up of passages from period sources fitted together into a reasonably continuous whole. It is very readable and gives you a feel for the history of Islam as your persona might have known it.

The Modern Egyptians by Edward Lane, 1860 (facsimile from Dover). This is a detailed account of Egyptian life in the early nineteenth century. If it were only period, it would be exactly what an Islamic persona needs. Given that Islamic society has been relatively conservative in recent centuries, large parts of what it describes are probably accurate for our period—the problem is that, without additional evidence, one does not know which parts. Still, a guess is better than nothing—and the next book provides some of the author's expert guesses.

Arabian Society in the Middle Ages, by Edward Lane, Curzon Press: London, Humanities Press: N.J., 1987 reprint of 1883 edition, edited by Stanley Lane-Poole, based on the notes to the 1859 edition of Lane's translation of the 1001 nights. This is a readable and entertaining description of Arabian, in particular Egyptian, society in our period. While Lane is careful about details such as the dates of introduction of tobacco and coffee, it is not always clear how much of what he is saying is based on period sources and how much on his observations of early 19th century Cairo, described at greater length in *The Modern Egyptians*. He cites period sources but rarely dates them, and never cites translations—probably because they did not exist when he was writing.

Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah & Meccah, by Sir Richard F. Burton, Dover,

N.Y. (1964 reprint of 1893 edition). This is another first hand account of part of the 19th century Islamic world, by a famous English adventurer, scholar, and linguist.

A History of the Maghrib by Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, Cambridge University Press, London 1971, *The Berbers in Arabic Literature* by H.T. Norris, Longman London & N.Y., 1982. These two books contain a lot of interesting information on the history and culture of the Maghrib–North Africa and Muslim Spain.

Arab Painting, Richard Ettinghausen, Macmillan, London 1977. Lots of pictures, so a good primary source for clothing.

“An Introduction to Arms and Warfare in Classical Islam,” by David Nicolle, in *Islamic Arms and Armor*.

The Crusades Through Arab Eyes by Amin Maalouf, translated by Jan Rothschild, Schocken Books, N.Y. 1985. This is a history of the crusades from the Muslim side, based on contemporary Arabic sources.

Everyday Life in Ottoman Turkey, by Raphaela Lewis, Dorset Press, N.Y. (1971).

Social Life Under the Abbasids, 170-289 Ah, 786-902 Ad by, Muhammad Manazir Ahsan.

Cookbooks

The primary sources we know of are listed at the beginning of the cooking section of this book, along with non-Islamic cookbooks. Two secondary sources are:

A Book of Middle Eastern Food by Claudia Roden, Alfred A. Knopf, 1972. This is a good modern cookbook that contains some information about period cooking and a few period recipes.

In A Caliph's Kitchen by David Waines, Riad El-Rayyes Book, 56 Knightsbridge, London SW1X 7NJ (1989). So far as I know, this is the only substantial collection of worked out period Islamic recipes in print, other than the book you are now reading. In addition to the recipes, it contains an interesting discussion of the historical and cultural background.

You may also want to look at articles on related subjects elsewhere in this book.

A certain Arab sold a woman from his share of the spoil of Iraq for only a thousand dirhams. But she was of high birth; and people laughed at the man for selling her so cheap.

But I never knew there was a number above ten hundred! cried the Arab.

From *Mohammad's People* by Eric Schroeder

Adjusting to Reality

The Society is real. That is one of its most attractive and, initially, least obvious features. You do not become a great warrior by rolling dice or by showing up at a meeting and announcing that you just defeated ten vikings, three knights, and a giant. You become a warrior by taking a clumsy sword in your hand, strapping a heavy shield to your arm, and spending many hours getting sweaty, sore, and bruised. Eventually, with reasonable luck, you are a competent fighter—but probably not a great one.

The same is true of everything we honor and respect. A poet or storyteller is judged not by how good he tells us he is but by the poems he composes or the stories he tells. The Society is real; it is not merely a children's game of “I'll tell you how wonderful I am; you tell me how wonderful you are.”

This feature of the Society is one of the reasons for my reservations about elaborate persona stories. Many, although not all, seem to be attempts to claim credit for deeds the teller has not actually done and skills he does not actually have. The authors of such stories fail to recognize—or attempt to deny—the reality of the Society. To the extent that they succeed they convert it, at least for themselves, into a much less interesting game.

Persona development, to me, is not inventing a story about what you have done but figuring out who you are. To do so, you need to know something about your history, but not a great deal. The difference between one upper-class early twelfth century Berber and another is, in many dimensions, small compared to the difference between either and a late twentieth century American professor. I can figure out most of the differences between myself and my persona without first working out his life story. I have not yet decided exactly where in North Africa my persona was born—and I have not yet run out of unanswered questions about my persona whose answers, if I can find them, will not require that information.

In part, my reservations about elaborate persona stories are a matter of personal preference; there is no reason someone could not have both an elaborate personal history and a well developed persona, and I know a few who I suspect do. One reason it is only a suspicion is that a real medieval (or modern) person is unlikely to tell people his life story. I have in mind a Norman knight I have known for many years. My sole evidence of what I suspect to be a well worked out persona history is that on one occasion, when I was telling William Marshall stories, my friend mentioned that in his youth he had once met the Marshall.

When someone I have just met tells me about his extensive journeys, implausible parentage, and incredible accomplishments, I conclude that he is more interested in being the hero of his own novel than in learning what a real medieval person would be like. My persona, after noticing that the great warrior's performance on the tourney field does not match his war stories, concludes that he (like, no doubt, some real people in the Middle Ages) is better at bragging than at fighting.

A Dying Dream

It is not surprising that different members of a large volunteer organization have different opinions as to its purpose and nature, nor is it surprising if, as a result, one group of members feels that others are “doing it wrong” while others feel that the first are “making a fuss about nothing.” In the case of the SCA, I believe one can distinguish two different and incompatible views of what we are doing.

According to one view, the SCA is a group of Twentieth Century people whose hobby is the past. Many of the meetings of the group are loosely modeled on such historical events as tournaments or Twelfth Night revels, and at the meetings the members wear costumes designed to show off one of their interests—historical clothing. It is entirely appropriate that at such meetings people discuss their researches, interests, and activities, and hold contests in which the members compete for prizes based on the authenticity and quality of costumes, cooking, and the like. Individuals choose personae as a way of specializing in some particular place and period, while feeling free to study any other part of the past that strikes their interest. In addition, the creation of a persona allows some members to exhibit their ability to invent an interesting or entertaining fictitious history.

According to the other view, SCA events are not meetings of Twentieth Century hobbyists but joint fantasies. At an event you are your persona, and your knowledge and viewpoints are those your persona would have had, modified, perhaps, by your contact within the society with other personae. While it is appropriate to show how well you can play the game by wearing attractive and authentic clothing or cooking from period cookbooks, it is entirely inappropriate to discuss the authenticity or inauthenticity of the result *at an event*. At an event you *are* your persona; you can hardly discuss the inappropriateness of rayon or potatoes when you do not know such things exist. Nor is it appropriate to introduce yourself to a new acquaintance with a lengthy history of where you were born and who your parents were and how you happen to have the friends and relatives you do—any more than it would be appropriate to recite your life history when you meet a stranger at a cocktail party. Such discussions can occur only in other contexts—baronial meetings, planning sessions, or conversations before or after events among the Twentieth Century persons whose period personae attended.

Of course, the distinction between the two viewpoints is not as sharp as I have made it sound. Those who believe in the second viewpoint are likely to complain that those who believe in the first view events as costume parties, but even in a costume party there is room for some playacting. The same person who spends most of the event discussing his mundane job and car troubles with his friends may attempt to play a medieval role for a minute or two when being presented in court. And even the strictest believer in staying “in persona” will find himself mixing persona and Twentieth Century person in borderline contexts—at a fighting practice, for example, where he uses his medieval name but discusses the suitability of various modern materials for making body protection. Similarly, an article in *Tournaments Illuminated* may be either a communication by one medieval persona addressed to others or an article written by and for Twentieth Century people interested in the Middle Ages; one can even mix the two modes to the extent of producing a medieval article with modern notes. Nonetheless, I believe that most of us, most of the time, fall fairly clearly into one camp or another—with some of us wincing when the Queen announces in court that the King is not present because he is home in bed with a heating pad, while others grow increasingly frustrated when a friend not only refuses to answer simple questions about what books he got his information out of and what time period his costume represents, but even refuses to admit he understands them.

It is worth pointing out that the disagreement is not about whether one is for or against authenticity. In many areas the first view may lead to as much or more authenticity as the second; a Twentieth Century hobbyist making costumes to enter in a costume competition may know more about how such costumes were made and do a better job of making them than someone who lacks both knowledge and skill but is doing her best to believe, for the evening, that the outfit she faked up from an old square dancing dress and some pieces of scrap cloth was really made from silk bought at the Troyes fair from a merchant who claimed to have brought it all the way from Constantinople. The one area in which the second area can be expected to lead to greater authenticity is in behavior—but even there, one may be trying very hard to act medieval and yet have very little idea how medieval people actually acted.

It is probably clear by now that I myself view the Society in the second way, that I believe events ought to be (but seldom are) joint fantasies in which all present try to act, and so far as is possible think, as though they were, for that evening, truly in the Middle Ages. While I believe that the Society has many attractions as a framework for recreational scholarship and a place to meet diverse and interesting people, I consider that its primary attraction is the opportunity to live, occasionally, in a different world as part of a different sort of society, seeing out of a different pair of eyes and understanding and acting on the basis of a different view of reality. I find it unfortunate that this view of the Society seems to have become rarer and rarer over the years, to the point that many members have not so much rejected as never considered it—and to the point where there are almost no events at which there is any serious attempt to maintain the illusion, save by a few scattered individuals.

Why has this happened? One reason is that staying in persona, however much fun it may be, requires a continuing effort. Even aside from positive actions—doing and saying things your persona would do and say—it requires continual attention, especially at the beginning, *not* to do and say things your persona would not. It requires even more effort when you receive no external support, when the people around you, instead of helping to build and maintain the fantasy, are by their words and actions shattering it, reminding you of the Twentieth Century world around you and expecting you to respond to them as a Twentieth Century person. I believe that many people who join the SCA are inclined to view it as I do; that is why they joined. That, if you can remember that far back, is why most of you joined. It is in new groups that one is most likely to find some belief in the reality of what we are doing. For new members of the Society, the very fact that they are wearing medieval clothes makes them feel that they have left the modern world. For old members, and for old groups, dressing up in fancy clothes and hitting each other with sticks is what they always do on weekends - why should they act or feel any differently than they do the rest of the time?

This brings me to a second reason why the Society as a joint fantasy is dead or dying. For me to stay in persona is at most a minor, and perhaps amusing, aberration for those who view a tournament as a costume party. But for them, and especially those of them who are taking public acts—making announcements, giving awards, doing business before the throne—to speak and act as the Twentieth Century people they are is about as consistent with what I am trying to do as a ringing alarm clock is with sleeping. Ten Twentieth Century people wandering through a medieval crowd can talk about their cars and computer programming in perfect comfort while creating a substantial problem for those present who do not wish to know that either exists; ten personae in a crowd of Twentieth Century people whose hobby happens to be the Middle Ages are limited to talking to each other and trying to pretend that the other people, or at least their words and acts, do not exist. Hence the attempt to treat SCA events as joint fantasies is very much more vulnerable to unintentional sabotage by those who disagree than is the alternative approach.

Can and should anything be done to alter the direction in which the Society has drifted? Whether

you believe it should be changed depends on whether you agree with me about what the Society should be. If you do, there remains the question of whether and how a change might be made. My own opinion is that the only way is for a substantial number of people to discover that staying in persona, making events real, is simply more fun than the alternative. It is difficult for a single individual to either stay in persona or show others what a real event could be. Perhaps a group of friends, a household or something similar, could make a deliberate effort to come to events in persona, support each other in their roles, and gradually ease the people around them into doing the same. Perhaps a small group, a new shire, could decide to make its own events as real as possible, and gradually spread the idea through the kingdom. Perhaps at some mass event such as the Pennsic War a group of true believers could fence in a patch of enchanted ground for their encampment and let it be known that whoever came inside was undertaking to join them while he remained. Perhaps the idea would spread. Perhaps.

[*Tournaments Illuminated*, No. 63, Summer 1982]

Enchanted Ground

I will be organizing an authentic encampment at Pennsic. The objective is not merely to have an encampment that looks medieval, but to create an area where the twentieth century does not exist--where everyone is trying to stay in persona all of the time.

If you are interested in participating and would like more information, write or call:

David Friedman
(Duke Cariadoc)
921 Fern St.,
New Orleans, LA 70118
504-861-3585

Several newsletters, Spring 1986

(The Caliph Mu'awayya) was proverbial for his forbearance. When a certain Arab said to him: By God! thou hadst better do right by us, Mu'awayya, or we'll correct thee, be assured of that! the Caliph simply asked: How will you do that?

With a stick! said the man.

Very well, Mu'awayya replied, I will do right.

(Quoted by Schroeder in *Muhammad's People*)

The Enchanted Ground: A Progress Report

Perhaps a group of friends ... could make a deliberate effort to come to events in persona, support each other in their roles, and gradually ease the people around them into doing the same. ... Perhaps at some mass event such as the Pennsic War a group of true believers could fence in a patch of enchanted ground for their encampment and let it be known that whoever came inside was undertaking to join them while he remained.” TI No. 63, Summer 1982

One of the attractions some of us find in the Society is the opportunity to imagine, for at least a few hours, that we are actually medieval people in a medieval world. One problem with doing so is that many other people are playing a different and inconsistent game. It is hard to be a medieval person while answering questions about the sources for my clothes or my food, or even while the people next to me are conducting such a conversation.

Some years ago, I came up with a possible solution for this problem. Set up an encampment within which everyone stays in persona all of the time. Those who wish to discuss D&D or fighter aircraft can do it somewhere else. Those who would like to be medieval people for half an hour but not for a week can visit. If treating the Society as a joint fantasy is, as I believe, more fun than treating it as a costume party, they will enjoy themselves and the idea will spread.

I sketched the idea in a TI article, in the hope that someone would try it. So far as I know nobody did, so eventually my Lady Wife and I decided to try it ourselves. The encampment has now existed at four events—the twentieth year celebration and the last three Pennsic Wars. This article is a report on what we have learned from that experiment.

While our central objective was authentic behavior—being in persona—we felt that it would be easier to achieve that against an authentic background. One does not have to worry about how to deal mediievally with Coleman lanterns and boom boxes if there are none. Our first requirement was that participants be willing to stay in persona; our second was that their equipment be reasonably period in appearance.

We located people interested in participating partly by personal contacts and partly by running ads in kingdom newsletters. At TYC, our encampment consisted of the two of us plus one household of our friends. Our first Pennsic encampment consisted of us, two members of that household, and two other couples. The encampment has remained small; at the latest Pennsic it involved fourteen people.

The geography of our encampment is very simple. Our boundary is a gold rope. At the entrance is a sign; the current version reads:

Gentles: Within these bounds the twentieth Century does not exist. You are welcome to join us. We only ask that you restrict your conversation to topics suitable to your persona.

What Works?

The idea of a clearly defined boundary works well in both directions. People who come in usually understand what we are doing and try to be a part of it. Occasionally someone who came in without noticing the sign starts talking about something inappropriate. We cannot explain the problem without ourselves dropping out of persona. The usual solution is to ask the visitor if he will take a walk with us, lead him out of the encampment, and explain the situation there.

For those in the encampment, the boundary provides both a symbol and a safety valve. While we are inside it, it reminds us of what we are doing. If we have to discuss something out of persona,

we can always go out of the encampment to do it. We have not yet held an opening ceremony with a formal exorcism of the twentieth century, but I do follow a policy of not putting up the sign until the pavilions are up and the cars gone.

Another thing that works is the bardic circle, which we try to hold most evenings. Darkness hides a lot. Poems, songs, and stories performed by medieval poets, singers, and storytellers help strengthen the illusion. Most important of all, the essence of the encampment is people not tents, and around the fire at the bardic circle we are interacting as medieval people.

What Doesn't Work

My first surprise was how few people chose to participate. The fundamental reason is not the difficulty of producing period tents and gear—there are many more authentic tents outside our boundaries than in. Nor, I think, is it the lack of people interested in being in persona—as witnessed by the number of evening guests at our bardic circles. The real problem comes from one of the great strengths of the Society, the fact that, like any feudal order, it is founded on strong local bonds. Most people at Pennsic want to camp with their friends.

That cuts both ways. We may not be local, but we are friends; our encampment has become its own local group, almost its own household, even if only for one week a year. Our recruitment has been less than I expected, but our stability has been more.

It is sometimes suggested that an authentic encampment should be isolated, located far away from everything else to preserve its purity. In our opinion, that is a serious mistake. People in our encampment, like people in every other encampment, come to Pennsic to do things—help with the Chirurgeons, merchant, fight, herald. They do not intend to simply sit in the encampment looking authentic. The farther the encampment is from where everything is happening, the less willing people will be to participate in it.

A second reason we do not want to be isolated is that the encampment is intended, in part, as a demonstration of how we think the game should be played, a way of convincing other people that being a medieval person is more fun than being a twentieth century person talking about the Middle Ages. The farther away we are, the fewer people drop in for conversation during the day or to visit our bardic circle at night.

The greatest weakness of the encampment is that it tends to die during the day. With most of us off merchanting or heralding, there are not enough people to bring our tiny medieval society to life. At the most recent Pennsic we thought we had a solution—a series of in persona classes and conversations, loosely modeled on the Platonic Academy of Lorenzo de Medici, to be held in the encampment in the afternoons. Unfortunately we arrived only a week early, and as a result found ourselves camped on a hill more than half a mile from the rest of the war. That the bardic circle survived despite our isolation is a tribute to the stout hearts and strong legs of those who came to join it, but we gave up on the Academy until next year.

For the Future

Our encampment has survived and slowly grown—to that extent it has been a success. To really succeed, however, it must expand beyond one encampment at one war. The fundamental reason for starting it was to create a pattern that other people could use, develop, improve upon.

You need not come to Pennsic to be part of what we are doing. Get a long piece of rope and dye it gold. Put it around your encampment, wherever that may be, and hang a suitable sign at the entrance, facing out; the people inside do not know what the twentieth century is, and so need

not be told that it does not exist. Let your tents be period or nylon as you please. The essential idea of the encampment is not period tents but period people.



David Friedman
(Cariadoc)

(Tournaments Illuminated Summer 1989)

If you want to be part of our encampment at Pennsic, write. If you run your own in persona encampment, let us know how it works out. The badge shown above is registered in my name but intended as the symbol of an in persona encampment. Any such encampment is free to use it. Its blazon is “Azure, a candle inflamed within an annulet or.”

After this article was published we made a second and more successful try at running the Academy, and have continued it at later Pennsics.

Concerning Consistency or Ignorance is Bliss

One of the things I enjoy about SCA events is the opportunity to be in persona—to act and speak as the medieval person I am pretending to be. In discussing the subject with other members of the Society, one issue that is often raised is the problem of consistency. How, it is asked, can one function as a medieval person at an event? Time travel is not a medieval idea, so how can one medieval person interact with others from hundreds of years before and after his time? How can I, as a North African from 1100 A.D., learn Italian dances from the sixteenth century or cook from a fifteenth century English cookbook?

What is wrong with all of these questions is that they confuse what I know with what my persona knows. I know that my wife’s persona is several hundred years later than mine. My persona knows only that his lady wife is a foreigner and a Nazarene. David knows that the gentleman in the starched ruff is from the sixteenth century. Cariadoc knows, having been told, that the gentleman is from a Frankish tribe called the English. Cariadoc also knows that, like most other Franks, the gentleman in question does not face towards Mecca to pray, does not wear a turban, and does wear funny clothes. None of that is in any way inconsistent with what Cariadoc knows of the world—foreigners are like that.

Cariadoc comes from a culture far from the SCA mainstream, so it is easy for him not to know the difference between a tenth century Englishman and a sixteenth century Englishman. But while the average SCA persona may not be quite as ignorant of other people’s times and places, he is still much closer, in that regard, to Cariadoc than to David. Most medieval people did not know very much history or geography, and much of what they did know was wrong. If you meet a stranger who is wearing odd clothes, it is much more natural to assume that he is from a distant country, or even from a part of your own country where local styles are a bit unusual, than that he is from a different century.

One obvious response to this is that Cariadoc does not have to recognize sixteenth century clothes in order to know that the gentleman he has just met is from the sixteenth century—after

all, the gentleman has just responded to my query of “what are you” by answering “a sixteenth century Englishman.” But this is an inconsistency that comes not from being in persona but from being out of persona. Real medieval people did not start conversations with strangers by asking them what century they were from. All we have to do in order to avoid problems with temporal inconsistency is to talk as our personae instead of about them—and not mention any dates.

This brings up a related point—conversation. Some people seem to assume that, in order to be in persona, you must spend most of your time talking about current events—“have you heard the latest news about the crusade/Henry VIII/the Norman Conquest?” If so, then conversing for more than a few minutes would require quite a lot of specialized knowledge, and a conversation among personae from different times and places would rapidly become either obviously inconsistent (“What crusade/Henry who/what’s a Norman?”) or very confusing.

But consider, for a moment, your ordinary twentieth century conversation. How much of it is about events that will appear in the history books a thousand years from now? The answer, surely, is very little. Mostly we talk about what is happening around us or in our lives—and two people with very different personae are still attending the same event. If we do mention current events, they are likely to be something like the latest Welsh border raid or last year’s bad harvest—neither of which comes attached to a date.

It is sometimes suggested that, in order to do a consistent persona, one would have to talk only with others from the same time and place. One wonders how medieval travelers managed. When Ibn Battuta, a fourteenth century North African, traveled through Anatolia and Southern Russia to India, where he spent several years as one of the chief judges of Delhi, did he have trouble maintaining a consistent persona? The people he traveled among were as foreign to him as my fellow feasters are to me—yet somehow he managed to interact with them while remaining himself. Indeed his experience, like mine, seems to have been that strangers are often more interesting to talk with than people from the next village over.

A different sort of consistency problem is raised by the institutions of the Society itself. Knights, Dukes, Seneschals, Knight Marshals, Masters of the Laurel and Pelican—how do all of these things fit into Cariadoc’s world? And, equally puzzling, how does he fit into them—what is a Berber doing marshalling a tournament or ruling a Kingdom full of Englishmen, Vikings, et multae caetera?

The answer, again, is that I am obviously a foreigner. The Middle Kingdom is not the Maghreb. It is not much stranger for a North African Berber to be Earl Marshall of the Middle Kingdom, as I was many years ago, than for another North African Berber to be the chief Malikite Judge of the city of Delhi in India. It is no stranger for me to have ruled over the mingled populations of the Middle than for Robert Guiscard de Hauteville, a Norman adventurer, to have ruled over the medley of Moslems, Byzantines, Italians, and Jews inhabiting what was to become the Norman Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. The customs by which the Middle Kingdom chooses its kings are indeed very odd—they will make a fine traveler’s tale for my hearers to scoff at, if I ever make it back to the Maghreb.

Another problem that some people see with being in persona is the problem of being stuck with your persona’s quarrels. How can we conduct a civilized event if Vikings and Celts, Normans and Saxons, Guelfs and Ghibbilenes, Saracens and Crusaders, feel obliged to kill each other in the middle of the dance floor? Is it not necessary, in order to conduct our affairs in relative quiet, to impose an ahistorical ban on period persona violence?

The simple answer is that such a ban is not in the least ahistorical. In period, “enemies” interacted peaceably quite a lot of the time. The Irish and the Norse may have had their little

troubles, but that did not keep them from trading, allying, and intermarrying. One of my favorite bits in the memoirs of Usamah ibn Munqidh, a Syrian Emir who was an older contemporary of Saladin, is the part where he is trying to avoid offending a Frankish friend while turning down the friend's offer to foster Usamah's son. One has the impression that Usamah is about as eager to have his son fostered among the Franks as a nineteenth century Englishman would be to have his son raised by cannibals in darkest Africa—but, being unwilling to say so, he politely explains that, much as he appreciates the offer, the boy is the apple of his mother's eye, so Moslems and Christians might fight to the death on the walls of Acre, but in Norman Sicily they got along well enough—so well that one of the most famous of the successors of the Norman Kings, the Holy Roman Emperor Frederic II, was suspected by some contemporaries of being a closet Moslem.

Nothing I have said here answers the question of whether being in persona is more fun than other ways of enjoying the Society. Nor have I said much about the techniques by which one convinces oneself and others that one is, for the moment, a medieval person. Both are subjects I have discussed elsewhere. But I hope I have convinced you that there is no inherent impossibility, no glaring inconsistency, in attending an event as a medieval person at a medieval feast rather than a twentieth century hobbyist at a costume party.

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I have never looked into the causes of any rebelling against me, said (the Caliph) Mamun, without discovering that oppression by my Governors was at the bottom of it. Nor was I ever so embarrassed by anything as I was by the answer of a certain Kufan, whom the citizens of Kufa had sent up as a deputy to complain to me of their Governor.

You are lying, for the Governor of Kufa is a just-dealing man, was my reply to his complaint.

The Prince of the True Believers is undoubtedly telling the truth, the deputy answered; and I am undoubtedly lying; and this being so, surely when you appointed this just man Governor of Kufa it was to the prejudice of all other cities. Pray appoint him to some different city now, that he may overwhelm them with his justice as he has overwhelmed us.

Be off with you, I'll remove him, said I.

In the year 138 the fugitive Umayyad prince, Abd al-Rahman, reached Spain and conquered it for himself. He had the heads of Mansur's appointed Governor and his lieutenants preserved in salt and camphor, and labels affixed to the ears. These, with Mansur's diploma and the black gubernatorial banners, he had put in a sack, borne to Qayravan in Africa, and left by night in the market place.

Thanks be to God for putting the sea between me and such a foe! Mansur exclaimed, when he heard of it; and one day thereafter he asked in audience this question: Who deserves to be called the Falcon of Quraysh?

Yourself, surely, Prince of the True Believers.

No, the Falcon of Quraysh is Abd al-Rahman, who wandered alone through the deserts of Asia and Africa, and had the great heart to seek his destiny, with no troop at his back, over the sea in an unknown land.

(From *Muhammad's People* by Eric Schroeder)