

In Persona Historical Storytelling

This essay is a voyage in to how to recount historical events accurately from the viewpoint of your SCA persona.

Introduction

There is a kind of glory and immediacy about a “no shit – there I was” story that makes it popular and easy to tell. The teller is often a witness to what they describe or else they know the people involved in the tale and that connection brings an immediacy and emotional depth to their telling of the tale. Because the event is real, both the teller and the audience feel involved and engaged. The reality of the event allows the teller to draw on the emotions from the actual experience – and allows the audience to connect and share the emotional experience – the feeling of being in it together – and that makes all the difference for a spectacular performance.

Creating a new story from an actual medieval event and telling it in the SCA can be a challenging task. There are a lot of things to consider when creating something from whole cloth. It becomes even more challenging to incorporate an imaginary person (yourself) into the story to make the story more approachable and more immediate.

In this essay, I’ll try to give you insights – ways to create this kind of story and saturate yourself in it – so that it feels real to you – and that reality will infect your telling and your audience’s imagination. Hopefully this will bring both pleasure (a good tale) and the “medieval mindset” (what we seek in the SCA) to you and your audience.

Background

I’m lucky – my persona is a 13th Century Knight in England – and I found Matthew Paris – a garrulous English Benedictine Monk from the same period. He’s a renowned, verbose and opinionated chronicler, a talented artist and a keen observer who documents my time period in a wide variety of amazing ways and reveals his own personality in his writing. And to top it all off – his work is available in translation thanks to a 19th century scholar named Reverend John Allen Giles. How cool is that? His chronicles have provided me with many a story and great insights into the medieval period. He is one of my many muses.

What Are We Creating?

I use the word “story” or “tale” interchangeably in this text, but of course, I’m using the bardic definition: it’s a poem, a song, a tale, a story, a lecture, a rant, a performance piece or perhaps just casual conversational gambits in social settings (e.g., Campfire Stories). I am talking about any kind of personal presentation that engages the audience in an emotional and entertaining manner.

The **goal** is to keep the story accurate to known historical information, make it immediate to you in your persona and to enhance it to make it more compelling for your audience.

For this text, I will use “you” and “your persona” somewhat interchangeably. It’s hard enough to talk about the past as if it were the present while you are researching it – but it’s also hard to keep straight the parts that are “you telling the story” and “your persona living through the event”. The major goal is to make the performance more real for your audience by presenting it as if your persona were actually living through the event. Kind of metaphysical – I know – but you’ll see how this works as we go through the steps.

Overview

What follows here are some things I’ve learned in following this muse. I hope that what I share here is helpful in crafting your own bardic presentations in a manner consistent with your persona and your personal interests. Feel free to amend them with your own experience and preferences.

There are six main elements that guide this process of creating a new performance piece. Once you have these – the tale should spring into existence – it becomes real enough that you can then “go with it”.

- **Start With Something** (You need to find something that is the seed for your tale, some place to begin your crafting process.)
- **Learn Facts About It** (Apply modern science and study and knowledge to gain a deeper understanding *and* work to gain the medieval mindset and opinions and expectations for your “starting point”.)
- **Choose Your Role** (Pick how your persona fits into the story.)
- **Choose The Story Path** (Pick how the tale unfolds – choose the narrative elements to include.)
- **Presentation** (Work on making the presentation awesome.)

Each of these steps brings more knowledge and understanding for the story you tell – even modern knowledge fills in the emotional impact of your creation – thus making a better performance.

Start With Something

You need a muse – a place to begin.

I am going to assume that you know a bit about your persona's period. If not – go find something. Find a friend or someone you know that has knowledge of your period and ask them for help. Find another bard/singer and have them give you suggestions. Go to a museum and see if you can find something that sparks your interest. There are myriad starting points – just pick one.

In general, pick something that you already know or have read about. You must already “know” about a famous battle or a specific person or some lesser martial, social, royal or religious event from your time period. Perhaps you have a replica Sutton Hoo buckle that you use on your armor or your belt. Perhaps you have a tune that drives your interest, or perhaps a poem or ballad. Perhaps there's a favorite person in your time period you have a crush on. Perhaps you already have an idea and are looking to flesh it out in a period fashion.

If you don't have a starting point that you like (or can't think of one you know) then **go find one** (or invent one). Do research, think about what you do know, listen to stories, read about the period. Find something totally new!

Truly, there is something somewhere that will inspire you – if you let yourself explore the world your persona inhabits.

Find Sources

Once you have a concept - you need to find a specific thing (source, artifact) that is accessible and “close” to your starting point. A 19th century semi-historical recounting of a tale of lost love in the medieval period makes a good story, but it is a far-removed artificial creation. What you want is a chronicle, a history, a document, a ballad, an artifact or some other thing that is from the time period to start with. You need a root source - a place to grow outward from.

You could think of this as the first volume in your library (or museum) that you are building around your story. It could be a picture of the Staffordshire Hoard, a picture of a misericord in York Cathedral, a broadside ballad recounting a specific song or tale

or event, a monastic chronicle, a set of household accounts, a copy of the Magna Carta, a single Italian florin or Roman coin, or a poem written to commemorate a battle. The idea is that the starting point has enough of an anchor in the period that you can use it as a foundation for your creative process by providing a focus point. **It doesn't even have to appear in the story** – it merely has to help you **create** the story.

Pick Something You Like

Make sure of one important thing: pick something you like. Actually – pick something you love - you will need to *love* this particular source (or topic or story or whatever) – because you will spend a lot of time with it – fleshing it out – eating, living, breathing it. You want that to be fun. You will need the drive to follow it where it leads you – and the determination to do the necessary boring or repetitive or labor-intensive work to “get” the story or song or tale or performance that you desire. In addition, you may have to live with it alone for a while because your friends and closer associates may get bored with your continuous fascination with one specific author/event/whatever. My friends and children kid me about Matthew Paris ... But I still find new stories – and tell them – because it is fun, educational and people seem to really enjoy the tales.

Actual Period Sources vs Actual Period Artifacts

Obviously, written histories, chronicles, documents – provide proof and facts and some details. Launching your voyage from one of those gives you a body of work to pore over and read and reflect on. If you can find one of these - you are working from the words and writings of the people of the time. Can't get better than that!

On the other hand, pictures of specific people, objects or the objects themselves can inspire as well. An artifact could be something that your persona earned or something you found or something you made. Holding it – looking at it – admiring it – wondering about how it was made and what it signified to the original owner – these are all leads that feed your curiosity and drive to learn something.

I even believe that it's possible to get a launching point from someplace random – even from a bad scene in a movie or a random comment in a podcast. Anything that inspires you to find a period idea or period artifact is useful as long as it helps you find your starting point.

Learn Facts About It

Let's assume you have a starting point. You need to understand the thing you have. You need to become aware of the knowledge that you have about your starting point, and you need to increase that knowledge.

For instance, each person carries a lot of concepts and knowledge – both specific and implied - that informs his or her understanding of even subtle events. That is, things that we see are interpreted within a context and that interpretation triggers a whole set of memories and facts and emotions. This brings color, context and understanding to the thing that you see. Sometimes you only need to see a small fraction of some event – and you can intuit the rest of what must be happening. For example – imagine that you see a man in a tuxedo walking in a park with a woman in a white dress accompanied by a group of people in nice clothes. It's clearly a wedding party – on the way somewhere. A two-second snapshot view and you know EXACTLY what is happening and you can imagine all of the pre-steps and all the post-steps of this frozen moment.

This same process happens for things that happen in the past – the people in the past also have a set of memories and concepts that they bring to an event or that are used when they see an object. The goal is to recreate that same knowledge in your own head using what you can learn today - to help you “get” what was happening then. If you don't understand what something is (e.g., an eclipse), then it's hard to get excited about its appearance in your tale.

In period, the people at the time may not have understood some of our modern concepts or have our modern knowledge. However, those were people, and people are observant. If you know a lot about something – you can recreate their view or certainty because you understand it too. E.g., if you've never kneaded dough in real life, you won't really be able to reference it in your tale and make it feel real.

Bring Modern Knowledge To Your Tale

By soaking yourself in the modern knowledge and the modern interpretation of the medieval point of view, you can help your modern audience get what the story is about. In addition, you can do it in a way that reveals the modern understanding while being ignorant in the telling of the tale.

To put it in another way – your persona doesn't know what you know. When your persona talks about something – they might not understand or be concerned about the significance of what they say. However, if you craft it correctly – dropping enough hints, making a few side comments -- your modern audience will “get” what the larger

context is that your persona doesn't chose to convey or perhaps can't convey. It's like talking about genetics - we understand how that works, but in medieval times, they just knew that selective breeding could get different results.

The goal is to bring the "ah-ha" moment to your audience and *that* allows them to believe that they are "there" listening to the tale/song/performance and they get drawn in - because they want to know how the period people dealt with the events.

Digging into modern research about the time can reveal things that the people at the time didn't really know. In addition, modern writing can reveal the social norms, the habits, the roles of people from the period as well as facts about the environment - all those add realism in your head - and allow you to bring that realism to the table. Do your modern research - figure out what we know that maybe they didn't know - and use that to enhance the story.

Examples

For instance, if the starting point is a coin - what is its value in period - what is it made of? What do the specific icons on the coin mean? Who was that person on the coin? What's he wearing? Each of those facts makes its place in the period more real and allows you to add that knowledge to your story. For instance, if the face on the coin is an emperor you hate, then the coin is distasteful - or perhaps the icon is from your homeland and it makes you reminiscent about life there. There's probably no such opinion expressed about the image on the coin by people in the period, but it makes a great way to start a tale for your persona.

If the starting point is an existing story - what archeological or social theory exists today that helps illuminate the tale? What hard science could explain what they are seeing/doing? We know exactly how food spoils - in the medieval period they only knew that it *did* spoil. Today we know wax seals and their color became an important part of class distinction and document importance - green being special until copper pots were made - then green sealing wax was "common" (easy to make). The people in period knew this - but we have to rediscover it - because people didn't "write about it" in period.

One of the tales I tell depends on understanding the concept of a "volcanic winter" - the people of the time didn't know about volcanic eruptions half a world away - they just knew that the continuous rain destroyed their crops. I preface this tale with a bit of modern research to help explain what seems very very strange in the period.

Bring Ancient Knowledge To Your Tale

The story that you tell sits in a historical environment. It's important that you do the reading and research to understand some of the larger forces at play when you tell your tale. A battle, a fire, a wedding, a procession, a murder, an astronomical event – all of these events occur within a political and social framework that cast their shadow on the event. Battles are usually part of an ongoing disagreement. Weddings that are documented usually involve political intrigue. Fires destroy livelihood and usually priceless items (e.g., manuscripts). Processions are part of a social display by the powers that be – and so the procession includes a message. Murder is never about what it appears to be about – and astronomical events usually are assumed to be portents of things about to happen.

Here's where research can bring a real ring of authenticity to your tale/performance. The goal is to place the tale in the context of the period – and carefully embed contextual facts into the story. This does three things. First, it helps educate those audience members that “didn't know that” – it enriches their experience. Secondly, for those that *did* know the factoid – they are appreciative and it makes your presentation resonate with their own knowledge. Thirdly, it adds a whole layer of complexity and intimacy to your tale – thus carrying it along in a stronger manner.

To say it in a different way - details make the story stronger. The background knowledge helps you choose phrases and descriptions and segues between parts of your tale. The tale becomes richer if you fold those details into the telling – it becomes more immediate to both you the performer *and* to your audience.

It's sometimes hard to do this part – some tales really are buried in the collective mindset of the era. That is, it's not possible to understand an event's significance without the background. This requires reading histories of the period – at least enough to get the setting. It requires learning more about what led up to the event or thing or concept that your tale is about.

Example

In one paragraph of his *Chronicles*, Matthew Paris describes an elephant being given to the King of England (Henry III) by the King of France (Louis IX).

So - how did Louis happen to have an elephant? How did it get to France? How did it get to England? Why did the Louis give an elephant away to Henry? Did you know it was a Christmas Present?

Did you know that menagerie's were the normal prerogative of Royalty? And did you know that giving each other animals for the other's menagerie is intended to show friendship? People in period knew that.

The two kings spent Christmas together in 1255. Did you know that the Queen of England was the sister of the Queen of France? Everyone else at that time period knew that relationship. So you need to know that backstory too – to make it feel more relevant to your audience.

You can mention these facts – by explaining how the two Kings happened to be sharing a Christmas celebration – presumably organized by their wives and that Louis was being generous to Henry – having gotten this specific elephant himself as a gift from activities during his most recent Crusade to the Holy Land.

Choose Your Role

How do you show up in the story that you are telling? If you have created a tale from some original source, you need to choose how it's presented.

Who are you in the story?

You need to pick a role for your persona as part of the tale. There are three principal roles–

- You were “there” and you are sharing your experience.
- You “heard” the story from someone that *was* there.
- It's a work that “stands alone” and you are presenting it.

Each one of these settings introduces stylistic elements to how you tell the tale/write the song/sing the words. This choice becomes an important element of how you prepare your tale.

For instance, if you “were there” – you need to be appropriately emotional and reflective and excited and be able to “see” the event. You have to convey a sense of immediacy in how you tell the tale with respect to your persona's life. For instance – it could have just happened – or it could have happened earlier in your person's life – either way – it impacted you enough that you want to tell the story. Bury yourself in that part of the tale. It is important that you visualize what you saw and/or did and convey the immediate first-person experience to your audience. If you actually participate in a major event (e.g., a battle, or a parade, or a bar-brawl) it was important

to you and you color it with your opinions and beliefs. All of those opinions and beliefs are informed by the research about the event/item/journey that you describe.

If you “heard it” from someone that was there - you need to get ruminative about the original teller and then get lost in the tale itself. You have the freedom to tell it anyway you prefer – it doesn’t have to be personal – but perhaps how you heard the tale and its meaning to you are an essential part of the tale. The tale itself conveys its own importance and relevance to your audience. Just be sure to put your persona’s “take” on it – how does your persona feel about this tale – disgusted, happy, regretful, perhaps sad. Those subtle elements add realism to the tale. A Frenchman describing a tournament between teams from England and Germany as well as France will clearly have opinions. Presumably he would root for the French knights – and perhaps despise the English. This attitude creates an emotional reality that comes across to the audience. They hear the tale – but they also hear someone from the period “opining” about the tale.

If what you create is a set piece – e.g., a song, a poem, some kind of performance piece that can be reproduced by others (e.g., *The Battle of Brunanburh*), you still can convey your persona’s take on things by the attitude you show and demonstrate. In that specific piece, it’s a matter of pride that the Saxons united to drive off the Norse and Scots invaders. Assuming your persona is Saxon – there’s pride – and love of the individuals mentioned in the poem. Something that you create like that poem has a similar social setting and a personal connection to you as the performer. The audience needs to hear that – they need to see the tears in your eyes from your victory, the gentleness of your movements that reverence the slain, the fierceness that allowed your people to drive off the invaders.

Use your own personal knowledge and experience

This is an important choice – and a liberty. If you never actually have travelled to some far foreign land then it’s harder to tell it first person because there’s no visceral experience. I’ve been to York, I’ve been to London, I’ve been to Scotland, I’ve been to France – all short stop-throughs, but I’ve actually been to those places. So it is easier for me to “feel like I am there” when telling a story. If you have read a lot about a place and time – or seen a lot of cinema related to that place and time – you can use those to envision yourself there. Sometimes, you just have to know the name of the place and your story – because the setting isn’t as important. (Just be sure you pronounce the name of the place correctly!)

For example – have you ever stood in cold windy weather on a mountain-side? Or stood near the ocean’s edge during a storm? Have you spent an afternoon in a quiet forest or an early morning sunrise in a meadow? Ever stood on the parapets of a wind-blown castle? Those events and realities transcend time – and you can use your own memories to create a place that matches the story you tell.

Remember - Use your persona’s history

If your persona wasn’t the travelling kind and yet you want to tell a period tale from some foreign land – then your *persona* could have *heard* it from a traveler at an inn. Or perhaps your grandfather travelled and told you this story. In this case – since you are “telling” something you “heard”, your persona’s telling is soaked in how the story was told – and the things emphasized by the original teller of the tale. And you can convey your opinions as part of the tale. Perhaps in your grandfather’s time, the French were enemies – but in your time – they are friends. That would color the tale quite dramatically.

Another element is making sure that your persona story is self-consistent. Make sure that the stories you tell overlap or are plausible. Be sure that you validate how your persona could have gotten the knowledge and experience. For instance, if you are a minor lord of an outlying Scottish land, how is it that you know the details of London Politics or events in the Holy Land? Did you travel? Did the local monk get a letter from one of his Order? Did your sovereign tell you about his travels there? Use your persona’s environment to place your listeners into the right frame of mind.

Choose Your Story

Now that you are saturated, you can “live” in the moment when this “thing” happened. You know what was happening, why the story is important, who the players are, et cetera. Now – choose a path between all those facts and impressions and environmental variables.

This is where creativity comes in – where you do the magic.

Each person’s skill and desires takes them through different paths in creating something from whole cloth. Here’s a small list of essential points that I try to keep as part of my storytelling.

- Pick a beginning – without it you can’t start your tale.
- Pick an end – without it you can’t get to the end of your tale.
- Pick someplace specific to go – without a middle, there’s no tale at all.

- Focus on key moments in the tale – make them vivid.
- Keep the entire tale focused on the story itself – no side-trips.
- Help your audience – provide context for important parts of the story.

Please feel free to add your own ideas here – these are just some that help me create my tales.

Some Examples

For the Matthew/Elephant story, I start my story with surprise – for the very first time in my life I have seen an elephant! It happened as part of a larger social experience – people waited in lines to see it (or must have). So did I – and as a Knight of the period – perhaps I got better access to the elephant. This is immediate – and I sputter and ramble about my experience. It's fractured and hits highlights (like how they would be great weapons of war – like they *do* have knees unlike what the bestiaries say) in a semi-random order. This conveys the immediacy and excitement of the event.

For a story about meeting a 13th century Italian mathematician (known today as Fibonacci) – I start my tale recounting how I was traveling through Pisa (where he lived) – and how some people mention him to me in casual conversation (e.g., at an Inn). So - I look him up – and visit him – and I recount some of his teachings and some trick puzzles he gave me (including the famous rabbit Fibonacci Sequence). This is a more linear recounting.

For the Matthew/Volcano story (where a massive two or three year famine caused by a volcanic winter killed nearly a quarter of the population of London), I start by giving a brief description of what we know now – and then revert to the story by coming in from a corner of the performance area and announcing to the people present that that “all is well now – I have letters from my people saying that things are better with the weather”. Then I stop and “realize” that others in the room/performance space don't know what I'm talking about – since it happened far away. So I backtrack and tell it from my personal experience – and I recount all of the horrible local details that I learned from Matthew's chronicles, amended by my own modern knowledge of what had to have actually been happening.

Presentation

There are some rules of thumb that I try to stick to when telling a tale and especially when creating one from whole cloth like this.

First make no apologies, don't deliver a prologue, and don't spend time "setting up" the audience experience. If your tale is vivid and rich, the audience just wants you to get started. Give absolutely no introduction if at all possible – just get started!

Second, deliver the tale in a manner consistent with the material you are covering. If it's an "immediate experience" story – don't tell the tale linearly – run the facts together – back up and tell the start after you've given the middle of the story. When you are excited – you tell a tale all jumbled up. On the other hand, if it's something you were "told" – that you are "recounting" – then you have to deliver it linearly – because that's how it makes sense. It's the whole point of the performance.

Third, cut out everything that doesn't add value. The story is about the event, the moment, the feeling and/or the facts. Providing backstory that doesn't move the tale along makes it boring and will drag out a good story and turn it into only an "ok" story. For my Matthew/Volcano story – I try to make the prequel as short as possible.

Fourth, leave yourself out of the tale as much as possible. This is a subtle point – and it is possible that this doesn't work for everyone – and certainly not for every tale. Persona stories (persona histories) don't usually make a good single story – they are the "back story". *Moments* in a persona history make good performances. Besides, let's be honest – when your performance is about something that **actually** happened you can't be the star – you have to tell it from the sidelines and provide a personal take on the events themselves. This is the gift you give your audience. If the story is about you – it doesn't allow them to "be there" seeing it with their own eyes. You have to provide the story as an eye-witness – perhaps with attitude – but you need to limit your own personal role.

Fifth, if the story actually is about your place in the past – if the story is intimate and adjacent to a well-known event – and it *is* about you – and the things you did – then **go for it**. Tell it directly – stay focused on the story – stay focused on the emotional part – stay focused on the important turning points in the tale. Feel free to reminisce, recount your role (you actually served the Baron at High Table – and you actually spilled an entire pitcher of wine onto his lap), go for the intimacy. Remember to bring in the larger historical context and the setting – so that your audience is actually watching you do this thing.

Sixth, use the language and idioms of the period. Don't reinterpret them. Soak yourself in how the original author wrote the piece. Read multiple translations if necessary; use period phrases and words; retain the formality of the original story. All of these add depth and consistency and power to your tale. My favorite example is the Norse tale

Thrymskvida where the Giants steal Thor's Hammer. The original text is short, sparse and full of hard words. It's only 32 sentences in the original. If you can keep that feeling when you tell it as a Norseman, then the tale is more authentic and feels better to your audience.

Summary

Pick a starting point. Learn about it both from our current point of view, and from your persona's point of view. Craft a tale that's about the story and stays focused on the key elements. Bring all that new knowledge into how you tell the tale - and reveal (in your performance) the emotional impact it had on you at the time (in the tale).

Many of these are the seeds of crafting *any* performance. To strengthen the historical accuracy of your tale, you have to bring the facts from the period into your story. You have to help your audience by educating them - teaching them. This will give them the same wonder that you have for the story - and as a result, everyone has a good time!

Good Luck! Go for it!

-- Sir Michael of York

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