

Documentation, Data, and Research

Introduction

In the SCA, research may be done to produce an object or to further our understanding of medieval life. The principles for research are the same whether you are writing a paper or knitting a hat. This guide exists to explain expectations around SCA research and provide some suggestions for best practices.

Topic

SCA Documentation at its most basic form is "how did a medieval person do something AND how did you do that thing?". Advanced questions and documentation can have a focus such as: "Mustard sauces are assumed to have flour as a thickener, but in some cases the thickener may have been other foods".

It may be your life's goal to understand everything about a subject, however for the purposes of display or competition it may make more sense to narrow your topic down. Find a smaller sub-topic that asks a specific question. If you've started making or doing things instinctively and haven't thought about what your question is, don't worry. Most are asking themselves a question intuitively when they make something, the question doesn't have to be particularly complicated.

Once you've identified your field of interest, or topic in question, the next thing you need to find and evaluate are sources.

Sources: primary, secondary, and tertiary

(even tertiary sources need love)

Primary sources are firsthand accounts of an event, object, or person in period. Or they may be an actual object or archaeological find, e.g. the works of Matthew Paris regarding the Sutton Hoo burial. These are the best references, but they may need translation or further explanation from secondary sources. Pictures of extant artifacts may not have the resolution necessary to make a source useful. Context will also be needed to get the most data out of an artifact. While plaids have shown up in China, without context we do not know if they were produced locally, or if they were trade goods.

Secondary sources are discussions of primary sources or other secondary sources, and will typically provide context and analysis. They may have technical data or interpretation by experts that you would not be able to obtain yourself, e.g. mass spectroscopy, electron microscopic imagery,

close up photos of threads or weaving.

Tertiary sources are compilations of data from secondary sources, e.g. encyclopedias. These should not be relied on as a primary source of documentation, **HOWEVER**, they are useful in certain circumstances. These may list primary sources you are unaware of, or help you in finding factual information and getting an overview of a topic. Factual information such as biographical information, taxonomy of living creatures, maps, timeline information, are all acceptable to obtain from a tertiary source. Cross-checking primary sources is highly recommended, to make sure the tertiary source is up to date.

Translations fall somewhere in between primary and secondary sources. It is a primary source, but you are relying on the expertise of the translator to accurately represent what was said in period.

Some sources are both primary and secondary. Paintings are primary sources for illustration, and secondary sources for clothing and hair styles, because you are relying on the painter's interpretation of what they saw, or they may not be working from observation.

Source Choice

Uses/limitations: No one type of source is entirely bad or good. All three have valid uses and limitations. Primary sources for textiles tend to favor expensive items that were carefully preserved, and not necessarily articles of daily wear. The gown of the Queen of England is certainly beautiful, but may not answer questions about the style of a middle class lady. A secondary source may give important supporting information on what middle class women wore, and in conjunction with extant upper class garments, we can find out what weaving and sewing techniques were known at the time. A tertiary source may help you find the names and biographical dates for a period tailor whose work you are trying to imitate.

If you find yourself using only one category of source, you may want to back up or go forward a level of source to double-check your research and add depth.

How many sources should you use? It is SCA custom that you will be expected to reference at least one primary source. Multiple primary sources are generally considered better than fewer, as long as the data they bring to your research is relevant. Use the sources that support your argument or documentation. If a work or object doesn't have relevance, don't include it just for the sake of having a longer bibliography. Fewer quality sources will make a better impression. Multiple secondary sources are good for larger projects; the more you have read on the topic the more you will be aware of what the community has found to-date on that topic. A collection of multiple primary and secondary sources demonstrates that you studied the topic thoroughly.

Sources: Evaluating

Once you find sources, you will need to be able to tell which ones are trustworthy. Not all sources are made equal.

Publishing Date: New information is being discovered all the time and newer sources may provide critical information in some fields. Older publications, such as those from the Victorian era, are more suspect. Books from that era perpetuated a significant amount of misinformation. Older texts have value but should be referenced cautiously. Online reviews may be useful to see if there are known inaccuracies or if modern researchers still quote it.

Publisher: When evaluating a source, look at who is putting out the information. Institutions such as museums, universities, historic societies, or other academically-based groups will typically have good quality control. University presses and academic journals are usually of consistently higher quality than other publications because of feedback like peer review. These works are usually held to a higher standard for their documentation and research. Personal blogs, crafting DIY pages, and self-published books can contain quality information, but need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Not all online sources can be taken as fact. See Citations for how to evaluate individual sources.

Topic: If the purpose of the text is to teach a craft to a modern audience, be wary of the generalized statements about the historic use of the craft. These books often are excellent for learning a technique, but frequently contain major errors regarding the historic usage. Try to use texts which are more academic and cite multiple extant examples to support their claims.

Citations: If the text uses formal citations and cites many other sources, this is a good sign. It also means that you can try to track down the cited sources to confirm the accuracy of a statement. If the majority of sources cited are peer reviewed or more academic in nature, this is also a good sign. If a work relies heavily on secondary sources that are not academic, you should probably use the work cautiously.

Peer Reviewed: Peer reviewed means that the source has been examined by other scholarly experts in the topic and that they have approved it for publication. Ideally, this means that if a source contained serious errors or misinformation, it would have been caught. Academia relies on various types of such community policing. Because non-academic texts are not necessarily reviewed, they're not considered to be completely trustworthy sources. Mistakes get made in academia, but on average those sources are less prone to misinformation.

Sources: Types & Finding Them

Finding sources is one of the best uses of a secondary or tertiary source. Because these sources reference many primary sources, you can steal a bibliography and use it as a checklist of references to read. In some academic databases you can also find out who cited another author and trace research backwards and forwards in time.

Local Libraries: Libraries have free book loans, internet access, and, often, online catalogs. Local libraries can borrow books from larger libraries and get them to you via inter-library loan. Some libraries will also have free online journal access. Don't forget to talk to your reference librarian.

Community College Libraries and Four-Year Colleges: The amount of access to these that you can get will depend on individual policies. You may be able to get free internet access. They tend to prioritize people actually researching. Check their websites or call them for info.

Large Regional Libraries: May have some resources for people in the larger region. Check city libraries in places like Boston, NYC, Chicago, etc.

Retail: Amazon & eBay. If you have a budget, there are booksellers who buy books by the pound from thrift stores, they sometimes sell these for as little as a penny. **Thrift stores and book sales** are also amazing.

JSTOR is a database service that has access to many different journals. It has free sign-ins with very limited access, but older things are more likely to be free.

Journals will sometimes publish their articles for free online. You'd be surprised what you can get free as a pdf.

Museum Publications: Some museums will put out catalogs or books of a display that they had at one time. These are usually books, but are sometimes released digitally. They may be exceedingly hard to find. If you visit the actual museum, go to their book store, you never know what they have sitting around. If you write a museum specifically they may have extra copies of these that they don't bother to sell online.

Museum Collections: Museums are increasingly digitizing their collections. The British Library is scanning and digitally publishing many medieval manuscripts for free. Other libraries have photographs of objects. This also helps museums that have limited space and may not have the ability to display the whole collection at once. Also, even if you have been to a museum, you haven't seen their whole stash. Museums will also let you look at things in storage if you ask really nice and have a good reason.

Private Collections and Auction Items: Occasionally objects surface which are held in private collections, or are up for auction. Auctions are a good way to find pictures of an artifact and

information on its provenance. High-end auction sites, such as Christie's, are more reliable.

Flickr: Not everyone can travel, but many people who travel take photos. Search key words for pictures from museums and ancient architectural sites.

Pinterest: This app has many images from many different sources. Some are scanned references from books that may be prohibitively expensive to find or buy. **HOWEVER.** Know something about the images you are looking at. There is a lot of mislabeling on images on Pinterest. It is possible to find other researchers on Pinterest who have evaluated, sorted, and corrected the image information. I would suggest finding out where the image is originally from and double-checking that it is a valid source.

Data: Management

(Help, I'm lost in a pile of books)

When researching, I recommend researching before you craft. Even if you have informally researched an object, I recommend writing down the documentation first.

Managing sources is the primary job of the **bibliography**. Normally we only think about a bibliography as something we provide for an audience of research, but it has far more use than that. Make your bibliography early and it can be a checklist of books to use. You can also start the process of citing authors early.

The **annotated bibliography** is a good tool for research AND teaching. When you read a book make notes about WHY the book was useful: high resolution pictures, contains nice timeline, large bibliography. Keep a listing of all your valuable sources in a file, and you can take years between reading and using a book without needing to re-read the book completely.

Spreadsheets are also a lovely way to manage data. I use them to compile lists of citations across multiple authors. This lets me pull together class handouts and research papers in a fraction of the time. You should only have to do a complete read-through of a book once. Spreadsheets can also be organized by one column of data. If you need to search and prioritize a list of things different ways, this is a good tool.

Notes provide a couple of functions. They may help you to understand and retain information. Or they may pull together information into a shorter list than the original document. If pulling a few quotes from a book means that you can put the book away faster, that may be the way to go. Notes can also consist of to-do lists or eureka moments that you have while working.

Personal shorthand: I have a couple of graphic things I do when reading a source. I use an asterisk to designate something as an action item that I need to look into later. It lets me scan notes quickly and hone in on hotspots.

Figure out what works best for you. It may be any combination of the methods discussed, or it may be things that are not listed.

Data: Preservation

(How to have your research survive a house fire)

Back up everything separate from your computer. Use an external hard drive if you have a laptop. Google drive, Google photos. Or at least e-mail it to a friend.

If you are working in hard copy only, photograph your pages. Send those to a friend/upload them to Google photos or another cloud-based program.

Documentation

Documentation can be **any means of communication** that explains how/why what you did was pretty darn medieval: verbal, video, written, diagrammatic. Anything goes, so long as it explains your point. Some competitions will have limitations on what is acceptable documentation, so check first and comply with the rules. The SCA tends to default to written documentation, but that may not be engaging or a good choice for all types of Arts & Sciences. Pictures, sound clips, or even video may help explain things better than a text summary.

How Much: You don't want so many words that you lose your audience in reading your documentation, but you don't want so little that they can't follow your train of thought. Get a test reader to tell you if you've got too little or too much.

Your Story: The five Ws will cover your bases (who, what, where, when, why, how), but explaining your thought process helps an audience find the material more interesting. The most fun parts of the Arts and Sciences happen when we reconcile theory with the reality of doing or making something. Sometime we find out that our assumptions about medieval life were wrong. Sometimes we find that our own ways of doing them are inaccurate. Either way we learn something important and that's the real joy of this process. Good documentation will talk about the process you went through. It will point out failures, changes of opinion, and growth of your knowledge and wisdom.

Explain rather than assume. Mention the things you normally don't mention. What sources did you consider and NOT include? If you have to make assumptions about how something was crafted, why did you make those assumptions? Even if you don't have a source for a choice you made, there was still a logical reason for that choice. Explaining your logic will help you get credit for your thought process.

Documentation: Write Up

General terrain: Describe your field in general in order to situate your work within the greater context. Know other work within the field other than yours. Understand the cultural context of your work within the period of history you are talking about. Discuss what the scope of your project is. Explain what your specific question is. What's your niche? What are you doing in particular, and how are you going to answer the question that you are setting for yourself?

Scope: You're allowed to have limits as to why you didn't do everything exactly as per medieval period. But you need to explain why you didn't. "I didn't use period paints, because I don't have the money for them at this time" or "I did not spin my own thread because this project is focused on weaving." Some competitions may dock you points, even if you do have an explanation, but it is still better to admit that the limitations exist rather than ignore them.

Methods & Materials: How and why are you doing what you are doing? Discuss which sources you are using. Include photos of the creation process.

Conclusion: What did you do? What did you find out? Charts to help organize results are good. Diagrams and illustrations are also great. If you had an unexpected answer, be sure to highlight this. People love to hear how a failure provides more information and future questions.

Future Plans: Explain where you are taking your work in the future. What you are going to explore next, how you may make your current work more accurate or more creative?

Citations

Citations tell a reader where you got your information. Bibliographies and citations come in **different styles**. Pick one and be consistent. Don't worry too much about which one is most acceptable. Find one that suits your style and needs. You may prefer to cite within the body of your text, or put notes at the end of the page, or the end of the document. As long as your reader can figure out where you found your information, you are fine.

In-text citations are good if you don't want to wrangle footnotes on each page. They are also good for attributing a quote or data to a source, but will not have the entire source listed. The whole source should be either at the bottom of the page in a footnote, or at the end of the text. If your word processing program isn't very good, this style may work well for you.

If you don't want to interrupt your text with this many words, a **footnote or endnote** style may work better.

A **bibliography** doesn't have to be monolithic. It may help to make different bibliography lists for your primary sources separate from your secondary and tertiary sources. If you do not know how to write up a citation for a bibliography, there are websites that will format sources for you. See the

end of this document for links. The basic information you will need is: author, title, journal/publisher, date, place.

The basic idea is that you need enough information so that another reader can track down the sources you worked from. If citations and bibliographies are a stumbling block for you, remember that the most important thing is that you can show where you derived your source information from. For more informal displays or competitions you may be able to bring in the books or articles you used and put sticky notes on pages that are the most important. I would recommend that you check with an organizer or judge before doing this.

Sources: Books & Articles

World Cat: <https://www.worldcat.org/>

A library catalog that will look up a specific book and find the nearest library that has it.

Google Books: <https://books.google.com/>

Many free books, though not all are free. You can create a free account to keep track of your books

Project Gutenberg: <http://www.gutenberg.org/>

Free books viewable online, or downloadable in a reader format (Kindle).

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.com/>

Search engine for journal articles. Not all articles are free, but there are links to free versions.

Academia.edu: <https://www.academia.edu/>

This site has an extensive collection of scholarly articles on SCA topics, especially archaeological reports across many time periods and locations.

Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ): <https://doaj.org/>

This site allows you to search for scholarly work written on a topic that is free to the public.

Directory of Open Access Repositories (OpenDOAR): <http://www.opendoar.org/>

A sister-project to DOAJ, this allows you to search through a different interface.

Sources: Institutions

The British Library: <http://www.bl.uk/>

Many medieval manuscripts have been digitized. Viewable online.

National Gallery of Art: <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection.html>

Photos of collections online for free. High res if you have computer access. Unsure of how good interface will be for phones.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC: <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications>

Contains free publications. Requires download.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: <http://www.mfa.org/collections/publications>

You can view photographs of some of the items in the collections for free.

Dallas Museum of Art: <https://www.dma.org/collection>

Free photographs online of their collection. Searchable by date, culture, artist, etc..

Citation Styles

APA:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>

Chicago:

http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html

http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

MLA:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>

<https://style.mla.org/>

Data Management & Storage

Bibliography Creator:

<http://www.citationmachine.net/chicago/cite-a-book>

<http://www.bibme.org/>

<http://www.easybib.com/>

Reference Management:

<https://www.zotero.org/>

<https://www.mendeley.com/>

Data Storage:

<https://www.google.com/drive/>

<https://photos.google.com/>

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