

MIDDLE EASTERN PERFORMING ARTS RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION IN THE SCA

By Mistress Sindokht Bayat al-Herati

1. Research Problems and Issues

This class assumes that the participants understand the basic principals of doing research on historical subjects. This class will discuss the problems and issues unique to research in a Middle Eastern subject. The main issue is the language barrier. Finding period documents that have been translated into English can be a difficult task. The French, Germans and Russians have done a lot of research into many topics in the historical Middle East. Should the researcher be able to read any of these languages, it will greatly enhance their ability to find information on their chosen topic.

However, it is indeed possible to find English translations for many documents. Certain subjects have a wealth of such documents and others a great lack. The performing arts tend to fall into the latter category. Due to the Islamic religious beliefs certain of the performing arts were valued greater than others. Each type of performing art faces it's own challenges.

Music:

This may well be the easier of the arts to find primary source documentation. In music, both instrumental and vocal, primary documentation is a written score of the piece to be performed. Depending on the culture and time period chosen to perform within, finding written music is possible. For instance, Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent was a composer of music. In the Ottoman court it was considered part and parcel of being a gentleman. There has even been a cd released of this music. So if one chooses to perform music from that period, primary source documentation is not impossible to find.

Another issue is the difference in musical notations from the modern era. In some instances, the musical notation form used is not translated into modern notation. This means that the artists must either learn to translate the notation themselves or wait until a scholar does so.

Some cultures simply did not employ a written format for their music and others chose to perform primarily in an improvisational format and so few pieces of music were written down. These cultures provide a more difficult or impossible challenge. While it is totally acceptable to research these areas and perform your interpretation of what this music might have sounded like at a court, hafla, or other general SCA venue. This issue makes these selections difficult if not inappropriate for A&S competitions.

I would never advise someone to cease to pursue such an interest. More and more academic research is being done in this area and being published in English. Never give up looking. Often what can't be found this year will be found in the future. Even if the academic community isn't actively doing research, translators are. The very thing you are looking for may have been documented in the country of origin and just not translated into English yet.

Look for books that deal with the courts or list the names of musicians, singers and poets. Scour the academic publications. Often the cutting edge work is being done at conferences and in journals, which publish papers. Become familiar with organizations and publications that might cover your subject. Even if the time period or culture isn't exactly what you're looking for, a clue might be found. Come at your subject from all angles. You just never know where you're going to come across that citation that leads you to the find of a century!

Dance:

Dance is particularly difficult to research in the Middle East. Written choreographies are unheard of and the religious prohibition against dance means that little was recorded. However, even this difficult field is not impossible.

Dance is by its nature a visual art. Even with a written choreography, the researcher is going to want to look at visual references. Without written choreography, descriptions and visual references are all you have. Therefore in addition to your religious issues, you bump right into the edict that discouraged the representation of the human form in artwork. In certain cultures this truly leaves the researcher handicapped!

However, there are cultures that did not follow the strict interpretation of the religious customs. Those cultures did depict the dance in various mediums and if you are working late enough in period, you will also find some European representations. None of this is easy to track down, but it is possible to do so.

Therefore your "primary" documentation becomes the artists rendering of the dance. There are many problems inherent in this. The first being that an artist's rendering is not truly primary documentation. Technically, it is secondary. However, that is as close as you get in this art and within Meridies is considered acceptable.

It does leave you with several issues to cover. The main point is how you developed your interpretation of the images that you have found. In other

words, why did you decide to put the poses together in the way you did? This point usually involves an explanation of period descriptions, music analysis and sometimes a comparison with the modern form of the dance.

Most of the time the main image source for dance is illuminations and paintings. Sometimes ceramics, etchings and woodcarvings will also be useful. So mainly, you're looking at art books. In certain cultures there is a wealth of art books and in others not much at all. The main point is to keep looking. It is impossible to ever say that you have seen every pose available. Often new art becomes available as pieces in private collections are made public.

Poetry:

Poetry was a major art form during the SCA period in the Middle East, both writing poetry and reciting it in a performance. Many times the poems were turned into songs. Many concepts that we associate with the Middle Ages, chivalry and courtly love, were brought back from the crusades and adapted from the Islamic Courts by the French troubadours. This is one of the easier forms to research, as many books on Islamic poetry have been published and translated into English. Research in this field within the SCA is currently lacking.

2. Keeping Your Records

The first thing you need to do is to create a filing system and place for the information that you find. Even if you only need one file and you tuck it in with your books on the bookshelf – do it! Don't let your research stay in your memory, because it will fade and then you will have to do it all over again. This system doesn't have to be elaborate, but make sure that you get the following information from each source: Title, author, publisher, copyright date, place published, ISBN number, issue, volume and web address. I generally make copies of the title page, front and back of all books and this goes with whatever specifics I take from the book, notes or copies of pages or photos. This is paper-clipped or stapled together and then filed. That way two years from now when that new lord or lady asks you where you found your information, you can answer them!

In doing Middle Eastern research, your filing system is even more important. Often times you are putting together small clues and by the time you find the next piece, you will have forgotten where you found the first clue and what it was! Chose a method to compile your research: by subject area, culture, or time period. Whatever works the best for you.

3. Documentation for A&S Entries

Most A&S entries require you to explain to the judges what you have created and why you did it the way you did and used the materials you chose to. Then you want to provide the judges with a list of your sources. Here is where that filing system comes in handy! You always want to use sources that are closest to your period. In other words if you have to choose from a great book written last year or one written in 1429 about your topic – go with the one from 1429. The amount of information needed for any one entry varies, but in general you don't want to overwhelm your judges. After all they are judging. They don't have time to read a 30-page research paper. Illuminations or photos are great for giving them the idea without a lot of reading. However, if you know going into the competition that few judges are knowledgeable about your craft, then you will need to have enough information to educate your judges as well as inform them.

The amount of documentation required for an entry varies also depending on what level of competition you are entering. Is this a local A&S competition? Usually the event A&S Officer can let you know what to expect and it is always a good idea to call and ask rather than assuming and getting it wrong. A Regional A&S will generally want documentation according to Kingdom A&S rules. If you have never entered before, call the Faircrat and ask about requirements or ask someone who has entered in that category before. Do your homework! Don't just show up and assume they'll let you enter your great piece with a 3x5 card that says, "It's period". Kingdom A&S is by far the strictest, and your documentation will definitely affect the score that you receive.

Spend some time presenting your documentation in a pleasant easy to follow format. Type and proof your documentation and if you have more than one page; put it into a folder or binder. I recommend using page protectors, you never know when the event will be rained out or your best friend will spill water on it.

Performing artists have a special issue with their entry and that is the presentation. Static entrants must rely just on what is written in their documentation. Performing artists have the chance to inform their judges of special things to take note of. This presentation is part of your entry and you should practice it just like you do the entry itself. You will want to be well spoken and brief. Don't have a presentation last longer than the entry!

Another consideration for performing artists is setting and costume. While no one expects you to recreate a complete setting, you will want to bring as much of the ambiance of the place and time as possible to your performance. Part of that is performing in a costume appropriate to the time and culture of the piece. Costume is important in all the performing arts, but especially so in

dance. So take some time to think about setting and costume for your piece. Invite some friends to stand about and create your musicians or the period audience. Bring a cushion and some rugs for your performance and set them up. Get together with other artisans and have live music for your vocal performance, poetry reading or dance. This is part of your performance. Performing artists don't perform in a vacuum!

Research and documentation is not everyone's cup of tea, but it is not that difficult, just time consuming. However, this isn't a race. You have years to learn what you want to learn and don't forget to start with good teachers, if possible. There is no sense in recreating the wheel! If Mistress So and So is an expert, seek her out. Ask questions or for a source to start with. That is the job of the Laurels to help people learn about the arts and sciences. Set a time and place to talk with the person and come prepared to learn. Don't expect them to stop their work in the kitchen or to hold class in the middle of court or feast. Be patient and ask questions.

Good Luck In Your Studies!