

On Households in the SCA

I have been asked by several people to discuss what types of Households there are, what makes them tick and how to deal with them or form one.

This article has two parts. The first part is a simple set of questions and answers about Households. The second section is an attempt to talk about the types of households that exist and how they are made up. I am indebted to many members of the Barony of Ynys Fawr for the input they have had in this article.

Section One: Questions and Answers

What is a Household?

A Household is a group of people who have decided to join together at SCA events (and usually for at least some time outside them). They do so for a wide variety of reasons, which will include such things as mutual support and help (such as getting to events or running them), common goals and interests (fighting, teaching, being early Welsh in a Late Italian world), or that they already live together (such as University students in shared housing). Households often spend a lot of their time travelling, socialising or eating together as is natural for a group of friends or a close family.

Here it is important to distinguish between a Household and a war unit. A war unit is more like a football team while a household is more like a family. With the football team you arrive at a place to work towards a common goal, sometimes with relations, sometimes with virtual strangers and when you are finished training or play you go home to your family. Thus, with a war unit there is a common goal of an approaching battle and training is directed towards this. After the battle is over the unit splits up and heads back to their Households or, like many football teams, to the tavern for refreshment before going home.

How do they form?

Often Households form because a group of friends realise they have been doing things together for some time and think that it would be a good idea to formalise the relationship. This often comes to them when someone asks what the name of their House is.

Some Households form around a single couple and get added to as they have children or 'adopt' them (while at SCA events) into an extended family. This is a common form of Household with the founders taking the traditional parental role and eventually become grandparents as people they have introduced bring others in. These Households usually have few formal rules and act just like a large family. They can be friendly and supportive (and they can also smother). Many Households of this type are founded by Laurels, Pelicans or Knights who take on students (apprentices, protégés or squires) and they (and their partners) form the Household.

What use are they?

Households can be very helpful to belong to. They can give someone access to a wide variety of resources and backup as well as providing experienced people to help a person learn about the SCA. On the other hand a Household can stunt a person by forcing them into a restrictive mould that does not permit them to grow in new directions and explore new skills. Generally though Households are like a family in supporting and helping care for their members. This can be very important at large camping events where it is good to have someone cooking while you are at a meeting and then you wash up while they go to a battle.

From the point of view of the group the Household exists in, a Household can be very useful as (among other reasons) they are usually used to cooperating and can jointly and smoothly run a larger event better than a single person is able to.

How do I join one?

If you are interested in joining a Household, you need to know how to get in. I have heard of people who have hung around with a Household for several years and been wondering why they were never invited to join. At the same time the members of the Household were wondering why that person had never asked to join. Therefore, if you are interested in joining a Household, do not be shy about asking a member about how people join it.

If a person is asked to join a Household it should be remembered that joining is always voluntary. No one can force a person to join one, nor should anyone try and pressure him or her into joining. By the same token no Household can be forced to accept a new member. If members of a Household feel, for any reason, that a person will not get on with them (or vice versa) then they are best not allowed in.

How do I start one?

One person cannot be a Household. You need to find another person (and preferably more than one) with whom you get on well and who has some common interests with you. Once you have done this all you need are a name and (preferably) a badge. No one has the power to tell you that you cannot form a Household and you need seek no one's permission to do so. They are not a part of the official structure of the SCA and so are less bound by the rules. You will need to work out why you are forming the House and what rules it has.

Households and Heraldry

Unlike individuals or branches (Colleges, Shires and Baronies), households do not have a single coat of arms. What they can and should have is a badge, which is registered to one or two people in the Household and can be used by any member of the Household. These badges should still follow the same guidelines as individual arms. They should follow period practice and be good examples to others. Households should avoid modern artwork as it gives a poor picture of their Household to others. At the same time they should not try and tell a story with their badge¹ but keep it simple and show that they are an example to others.

Section Two: Household Types

The SCA contains many Households – groups of people who band together for a wide variety of reasons. Some Households exist only as social groups of friends who decide to attend events together, often to share resources such as transport or tents. Others are more closely aligned and spend a lot of their time (both SCA & mundane) together. Some of these groups are beneficial to those around them, whilst others have a deleterious effect upon the Barony or Kingdom that shelters them.

There are nearly as many types of households as there are actual Households. Having said that, they are far less variable than individuals and can, like any other form of organization, be investigated and described. All of the dimensions that I discuss are not dichotomous and very few will be 'ideal' or pure examples of any of these archetypes.

The first dimension of Households is openness. This describes whether a household is open to its members belonging simultaneously to other Households or not, and whether if you join another you suffer sanctions in your first Household. Probably the exemplar of the open Household in Lochac is House Spon (also our first Household). As a drinking and fun Household it existed to promote the consumption of alcohol in a convivial atmosphere complete with silly rituals. A person could belong to any other Household they wanted and Spon (as a group) did not care. Many Households are open and their members belong to one or more others without affecting their functionality.

In a closed Household there are still degrees of closure and exclusivity. For example the early Lochac Household of Kraftholt² used to have one (non-SCA) night a week when the members all had dinner together and talked, mainly about things of interest to the Household both within and outside the SCA – not plotting about how to run the group at large. It is to be noted that this exclusivity was not carried into an SCA context and, although the members camped together they did not have exclusive tables or even ban non-members from camping with them.

Some Households that I have seen give a perception, whether they realise it or not, that they only care for the company of other members of their Household. It is not important whether this is true or not. It is a social truism that what one perceives as real is real to us. If a Household is seen as cliquey then, from my research, it is automatically harmful to the group that surrounds it, regardless of what intent the members have.

The second dimension is measured by the decision making process in the group. At one end of the spectrum we have collegial³ Households. In these, regardless of whether there is a titular head of the House or not, decision-making is done by the group as a whole. All are heard, all are listened to and a consensus is reached. Such groups may only contain people without any title, have plain armigers, be made up entirely of Peers or a mixture of any of these. On the other end is the hierarchical group where 'your Count votes' and only the leader or leadership couple actually make the decision. They may (or may not) have an inner circle who have

¹ An example of this would be a group saying that they like fighting, music and alcohol so they will have a sword, a lute and a jug on their badge and put a lion in the center because it is fierce.

² Its members included most of the 'power group' of Lochac or Rowany – nearly the same thing at that stage.

³ Collegiality is a concept which implies that all members of the group have a right to input in the decision making process as they are all stakeholders with valid points of view and that decisions should be reached through a process of consensus.

more input than others with lesser status, but in the final analysis it is the leader(s) who matter. Such groups are often headed by either a Knight or by Royal Peers.

Hierarchical decision-making is a hallmark of Industrial Period organizations that are post-period and were almost incapable of any other form. Thankfully it is now realised in organizations that, whilst they can sometimes be useful, such hierarchical organizations are often less productive than the alternatives. Pre-Industrial organizations had a mix of collegial and hierarchical decision making processes, with the exact point on the axis depending on task, place and personalities. In the purest sense collegial decision-making owes its name, and its genesis, to the rise of Universities. It is a feature of most post-modern organisational forms. Despite being post-modern, the SCA chooses to confer a hierarchical status on its rulers in a reflexive fashion (through its nature as an unscripted co-operative ‘play’ – a loose script with few rules to govern the next lines to be uttered), but gives a nod to Collegiality in the oaths of Peers et al where it their duty to speak if they see a need – and the Crown must listen (although not always follow the advice given in the Western Rite Kingdoms).

There is no absolute right or wrong form of decision making for SCA Households. There are equally benevolent and beloved dictators who lead by example and there are harsh, arbitrary and restrictive ones that people stay attached to for reasons of habit or perceived prestige. By the same token there is responsible collegiality and there is anarchy. The solution that each Household will settle on will depend on the personality, experience and situation of the Household members and will probably change over time as circumstances change.

The third dimension seen in Households is their focus. This can be either inward or outward. Is the Household focussed mainly within itself and its activities, or is it more concerned with the health and wellbeing of broader group – even if the Household suffers? An inward looking group acts as if the Household had primacy over, and is more important than the group(s) that provide them with a milieu in which to operate. An outward looking Household focuses on what is happening outside it. Kraftholt was a good example of this and it focussed on little internally except mutual care, support and (particularly) feeding.

Despite appearances an inward looking Household may be far better for the group at large than an outward looking one. It’s members may sit quietly, play nicely and be benign while an outward group may be made up of people who like to play with power in the larger group for their (or the Household’s) sake or ego. On the other hand, a closed and inwards looking Household, particularly where its members make up a significant proportion of the group around them⁴ will automatically cause problems because, even if its focus is inward, because of its size and (usually) monolithic nature, all of the rest of the group must take account of it and actions tend to revolve around the Household, drawing attention away from the Shire or Barony.

The fourth dimension is strength. Obviously this is from strong to weak and is simply a measure of the power of the group to influence what is happening around them. Of all the dimensions I feel this is, strangely, the least important in determining if a Household is a boon or not. It simply affects how far their effect is felt as an influential body.

I call the fifth dimension the ‘moral touchstone’ of the Household. This is whether the group is either selfish or altruistic. Note that these do not equate with good or bad – a good and beneficial group can do things for their own selfish reasons while an altruistic group can ... well the road to Hell is proverbially paved with good intentions. An example of a good selfish Household could be one where, for their own reasons, all of the members of the Household want to earn a Peerage (of different sorts). They work hard at this, supporting each others efforts etc so that the group around them ends up with a good supply of well-backed up and capable officers, well-run events, skilled artisans who are willing to teach and a ready supply of fighters to rally to the cause. Having said that, the best Households ask what they can do for the Barony, not what the Barony can do for them.

Sixthly we see the cultural focus of the group. By this I mean is the group monocultural or is it pluralistic? An entirely Tudor dancing group or a fighting Household is often monocultural. Such groups with a narrow focus are actually less resilient than more broadly based ones to shocks and external changes⁵. One that encourages diversity within its members is better placed to relate to the world outside and to survive both shocks and negative impacts (external or internal). Note specifically that this does not mean that all the members need to be unfocussed in this respect, but the group as a whole may benefit from an internal diversity of interests.

⁴ My experience suggests that a Household with a quarter to a third of the numbers of the overall group is significant – even if it ‘just sits’. Once a Household reaches the level of around half of a group they are no longer significant, but become dominant.

⁵ If anyone wants a lecture on Emile Durkheim, I could insert one here. Suffice it to say that he enabled us to show how diverse groups and cultures are more resilient than ones that are more narrowly focused.

Having said this, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with a Saxon household (or even a Tudor or Norman one) as long as the members keep as broad a spectrum of interests as is possible without prioritising some to the exclusion of others. We often see Households proudly calling themselves ‘fighting households’ without realising that this automatically places any non-fighting members (and this often reads as the females) as a second-class member who is relegated to a supporting role. These second-class members are always left to cook (for instance) while the real business of the Household (fighting) is done. Their interest in (for instance) the arts and sciences is automatically de-emphasised, as it is not aligned with the Household’s cultural focus.

The seventh dimension is visibility. A Household can be so low key that no-one knows it exists outside itself⁶. Others can be so in-your-face that newcomers have difficulty distinguishing the Household from the exterior group as they see as much of one as the other. Most of the best Households are fairly low key, but this is probably a case where the median is the best for the group around the Household. Being invisible makes it harder for a good household to serve as a positive role model to others and makes it much easier for a bad one to hide its activities. A Household that is ‘in your face’ automatically risks devaluing the larger group at its own expense. Outsiders see the Household and may not see beyond it to the wider picture or to alternative, and quieter, Households which may suit them more.

The eighth dimension that can be seen is the courtesy level of the Household. This has nothing to do with the period that the majority of the Household feel that they are emulating or acting out. Despite Hollywood, many of the barbarian cultures had more highly tuned levels of courtesy (within their defined rules) than, say the immediate pre-modern societies of the late Renaissance. We, however, are not actually from these periods and are playing within the SCA. Under our rules (the Corpora) a certain level of courtesy is expected from us all. This is not always seen from all Households. Partly this will stem from the exclusivity of the group – how they define Insiders and Outsiders – but it has mainly to do with how they decide to treat ‘the Other’.

The ninth dimension of Households is their geographical spread. Some Households form and exist around a group that lives in a single shared house. Others have members spread through several Kingdoms. The first of these will also have a single physical address; while the second, due to its spread, may one have a virtual one. Geographical spread will often affect the openness of the Household. It is hard to be very close and inward focussed if there are only one or two members of the Household in each Barony of the Kingdom.

Looking at mundane cultures briefly, the Rom (or Gypsies) have a very strong internal structure of taboos and mores, but traditionally none of these applied to ‘the Other’ and so they developed a reputation for tricks and theft. Analogous Households exist within the SCA. Individuals may hold themselves as honourable (act that way on the field of combat) and courteous both individually and within their Household, but they apply (often unconsciously) a lesser standard outside ‘their’ group.

The final dimension that I am talking about here does not exist on its own. It is the fruits of the Household and is a summation of all of its other attributes. The ends of the scale for the fruits I am calling Creative and Destructive. By this I mean that a Household exists somewhere between being a good force (or the light side) and being on the dark side within the SCA. It either helps create harmony, good feelings, joy and growth within the group as a whole (not just the Household) or it can destroy trust, happiness, courtesy and the group around it.

I need to remind people here that I am discussing ideal types – an expression that means pure forms. None of the dimensions I have listed here are dichotomous. They do not exist in a simple black/white choice. Each presents us with a spectrum of choices to chose from (or default to if we are unwilling to make a conscious choice of direction). When looking at starting a Household, people do not (I hope) sit down and say: “let’s make a destructive group”. Indeed, rarely do people consider the directions that they want their Household to take. What I am suggesting in this article is that new, and existing, Households should sit down as a group and work out what they are, what they want to be and especially what they want to be remembered for. This is not a one-off process, but one that should be done annually as change does occur and focus shifts. As well it may provide people with something to think about if they are asked (or think of asking) to join a Household. It gives them a set of standards to look at and should provide questions to ask of the members and of non-members about the group they are thinking of joining.

Summary of Dimensions

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⁶ Our Household of The Solar is unfortunately an example of this. On being shown a draft of this article one member of our Barony replied that they did not know we had a Household.

Openness	Open	Closed
Decision making	Collegial	Hierarchical
Focus	Outward	Inward
Strength	Strong	Weak
Moral touchstone	Altruistic	Selfish
Culture	Monocultural	Pluralistic
Visibility	Invisible	Omnipresent
Courtesy level	High	Low
Spread	Geographically tight	Widespread
Fruits	Creative	Destructive