

Taking the Waters – A History of Bath (England) and Personae

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Shire of Wurmwald, Middle Kingdom, Known World

For this class, I wanted to give the history of Bath but give it a window dressing of why it is good as a location for an SCA persona and by extension, what kind of things one can look for when choosing a location for one's own persona.

Just like choosing a persona, choosing a location is a highly personal decision. Depending on one's desire, almost any place could be chosen. My opinions on where to be from are that: my opinions. They are intended to help someone who isn't sure where to be from and why to be from that place. If you have a good idea where you want to be from and why, then that is much more important than any opinion I have. That said, I recommend choosing a place like Bath for a variety of reasons.

One could be from a small village or just the countryside. The problem with this in my view is that there is little reason for you to interact with anyone else. In general, people tend not to leave small places and there is little reason for trade to come to those places. Likewise, one could just say one is from a large area, a region, France for instance. To me, this is too amorphous; it doesn't really define you. Similarly, large cities are out. There are 100,000's of people in London, Rome, and Paris. It doesn't say much about the person to be from there. Again, there are perfectly good reasons to choose small nameless manors and large faceless cities. But small but important towns and cities add excellent color to a persona. And in my opinion, Bath is perfect for just about any English persona regardless of the time period.

Reason 1: History (legendary and actual)

One reason to choose one place over another is its history, real or imagined. You may want to tie into that history for your persona. For Bath, the history extends from pre-historic times to beyond our period. I will attempt to do this in chronological order.

The legendary history of Bath goes back to 863 BC. In Geoffery of Monmouth's history [1, 2], Bladud, son of Hudibras, the eighth king of the Britons was sent to Athens to study and while there, contracted leprosy. Upon his return, he was imprisoned but he escaped and got a job incognito as a swineherd. He noticed the pigs liked to cover themselves with the warm black mud near where the Rivers Avon and Severn met. The skin diseases of the pigs would be cured by the warm mud. He then covered himself with the warm mud and found that his leprosy was cured. Free of disease, he returned to his father's court and founded the city of healing on this site, named Aquae Sulis in honor of the local goddess Sulis. When he became King, he moved his court to this place. On a side note, Bladud's son was King Lear from Shakespeare.

Bath's pre-history goes back even further. There is evidence of Bronze and Iron Age forts nearby [3]. There is also evidence of Celtic use of the springs at Bath. From digs, many coins were recovered from the mud and soil near Bath. These include 18 silver Celtic coins, a Gaulish minim, a quarter-stater of the Durotriges, and coins of the Debunni. The coins are in near mint condition which suggests that they were not in circulation and therefore were deposited in the silt around the time that they were minted. There is no evidence that the Celts did any construction at the site of the spring itself which is not surprising given that they tended to revere natural areas [4].

The formal history of Bath goes back to the Roman times [5]. Under the city of Bath, there is evidence of Roman military fort works. These pre-date the Temple complex. It is likely that this fort was along the Roman frontier at the time. Roman town of Aquae Sulis (the waters of Sulis) was built over a Briton shrine to a local goddess Sulis [6]. It would be shortly after Boudica's rebellion, around 60 AD. The Romans associated this deity with Minerva and built a classical temple with a large open district and open pool on the site. Over the next several hundred years, the formal baths would take shape. The Romans built a hot bath, two pools, and all the standard equipment of *tepidaria*, *frigidaria* and *hypocausts*. These hot baths and its source yield over 1,200,000 litres of water daily at more than 46 °C [7].

In the Roman baths, offerings were often given to Minerva Sulis or sometimes simply to Sulis herself [8]. Offerings found are over 12,000 coins, libation vessels, various trinkets, and about 130 curse tablets. The curse tablets are inscribed lead tablets that call on the goddess to punish some transgressor. Examples are [9]:

"Solinus to the goddess Sulis Minerva. I give to your divinity and majesty [my] bathing tunic and cloak. Do not allow sleep or health to him who has done me wrong, whether man or woman or whether slave or free unless he reveals himself and brings those goods to your temple."

"I have given to the goddess Sulis the six silver coins which I have lost. It is for the goddess to exact [them] from the names written below: Senicianus and Saturninus and Anniola."

"Docimedis has lost two gloves and asks that the thief responsible should lose their minds [*sic*] and eyes in the goddess' temple."

"May he who carried off Vilbia from me become liquid as the water. May she who so obscenely devoured her become dumb"

"..so long as someone, whether slave or free, keeps silent or knows anything about it, he may be accursed in (his) blood, and eyes and every limb and even have all (his) intestines quite eaten away if he has stolen the ring or been privy (to the theft)."

At sometime around 122, a new addition was added to the temple district. A *tholos*, or a round, open air columned temple, was erected, possibly commissioned by Emperor Hadrian himself [10]. Around 300 AD, the complex was completely restored, a retaining wall built, and the springs enclosed.

Roman Bath was an economic center as well as a religious one. The Temple and baths brought in pilgrims who needed services and healing. There is evidence of combs and spinners so Aquae Sulis may also have engaged in the wool trade. Primarily though, Aquae Sulis was a tourist spot [11].

If you believe in King Arthur, Bath might have been near the site of the Battle of Mons Badonicus. This battle is where the Britons halted the advance of the Saxons, at least for a while. Gildas [12] gives the leader of the Britons as Ambrosius Aurelianus and describes the Battle of Mons Badonicus thusly,

“... From that time, the citizens were sometimes victorious, sometimes the enemy, in order that the Lord, according to His wont, might try in this nation the Israel of to-day, whether it loves Him or not. This continued up to the year of the siege of Badon Hill (*obsessionis Badonici montis*), and of almost the last great slaughter inflicted upon the rascally crew. And this commences, a fact I know, as the forty-fourth year, with one month now elapsed; it is also the year of my birth.”

Bede [13] also mentions the battle. He describes the “siege of Mount Badon, when they made no small slaughter of those invaders.” This occurs 44 years after the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons which Bede puts after the reign of Valentinian. So, Bede estimates that this occurred circa 500 AD.

Nennius gives us the Arthur hook. In the *Historia Brittonum* [14], Nennius describes the 12 battles of Arthur and gives us this:

"The twelfth battle was on Mount Badon in which there fell in one day 960 men from one charge by Arthur; and no one struck them down except Arthur himself".

Then the author of the *Annales Cambriae* [15] gives us:

"The Battle of Badon, in which Arthur carried the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ for three days and three nights upon his shoulders [or shield] and the Britons were the victors."

But it is Geoffrey of Monmouth [16] who finally tells us it is near Bath. In Geoffrey narrative, he tells us that Merlin predicted that Badon's baths would lose their hot water and turn poisonous.

During this time period, the name of Bath morphs from Aquae Sulis into several different variants. As Christianity spreads through Roman Britain, the name morphs into Aquaemann (combination Latin and Welsh) [17]. The Anglo-Saxons called the town Baðum, Baðan or Baðon [18]. It is easy to see the connection to Badon and then to the more modern Bath from there.

Bath may have seen a population decline between the Fall of Rome and the early 7th century. The Anglo-Saxon poem *The Ruin* is mostly probably about Bath. *The Ruin* mentions “. . . a hot spring gushed in a wide stream; a stone wall enclosed the bright interior; the baths were there, the heated water; that was convenient. They allowed the scalding water to pour over the grey stone into the circular pool.”

These were all features of Roman Bath. If *The Ruin* is about Bath, it is around this time that it would have been written [19].

Regardless of whether Arthur existed and whether Mons Badonicus was near Bath, Bath re-enters the official record around 577 AD. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle [20] relates that the Cuthwine and Ceawlin finally pushed the Romano-British out of Gloucester, Cirencester, and Bath at the Battle of Dyrham. Around 675 AD [21], Osric, King of the Hwicce, a sub kingdom of Mercia, grants land around Bath to Abbess Berta to establish an abbey. It may have even been a "double-house" where monks and nuns lived under one leader [22]. About a century later in 757, Offa, King of Mercia, rebuilds the monastery [23]. Then around 787, Offa gains direct control of Bath and has the Church to St Peter built.

Bath becomes increasingly important in Saxon England. Cunliffe has this fragment, "In 797 King Ecgrith issued a charter from oet Baðun" [24] and in 864 Burhred, the last King of Mercia, holds a council meeting at Bath. Alfred drives the Danes out of Wessex in 878 [25]. Bath becomes part of Wessex. Bath is made a *burh* as part of Alfred's defensive plans. According to the *Burghal Hidage*, the walls of Bath were 1375 yards long so around 1000 men were needed for its defense. Edward the Elder establishes a mint in Bath and those coins have "BAÐ" on the obverse. Then in 973, Edgar the Peaceable, King in my time, is crowned King in Bath Abbey. This ceremony is the basis of the current coronation ceremony. Edgar's consort is also crowned as the first Queen of England at this time. Edgar is also recognized as overlord by the kings of Wales, Scotland and Stratclyde. The assembled kings supposedly rowed Edgar up the River Dee as a sign of their vassalage [26]

Bath is also mentioned in other sources. Nennius has in his History, a "Hot Lake" in the land of the Hwicce along the Severn, and "men may go there to bathe at any time, and every man can have the kind of bath he likes. If he wants, it will be a cold bath; and if he wants a hot bath, it will be hot" [27].

Bede also describes the area in the prologue of his History [28].

Throughout the 10th century, Bath was a small but prominent town. It had four churches, three springs, a mint, and a well-regarded monastery. Cunliffe estimates that the religious community covered about 13% of the walled area of Bath [29]. Good quality pottery, whorls, and spindles have also been found in Bath. Even under the Viking rulers of the 11th century, Bath seemed to be unchanged.

However, under the Normans, Bath did suffer. In 1088, Odo led the Norman bishops rose in revolt against William Rufus, supporting his brother Robert. They based their rebellion in Bristol but ravaged Bath since it contained many royal holdings. The rebellion was a failure but enough damage was done to Bath that a complete reorganization of its political leaders and city layout was possible [30]

In 1091, William Rufus granted the city to a royal physician, John of Tours, who became Bishop of Wells. He moved his pontifical seat to Bath with the King's permission. As was typical of Norman sentiment, John disliked the English. He planned to totally remodel the city. A Norman style cathedral was built with cloisters, lodgings for the bishop and prior, and a collegiate school. This is the school that Adelard

(see below) was a part of [31]. New baths were built around the three springs. In 1106 Henry I visited Bath and John confirmed his rights to the revenue of the city and permission to hold a fair at Bath [32]. This may be where King's Bath (one of the three baths in current Bath) gets its name. In the Gesta Stephani, it was said that "sick persons from all over England go there (Bath) to bathe in the healing waters, as well as the healthy, who go to see the wonderful outpourings of water and bathe in them [32, 33]. So Bath once again becomes a tourist-center of healing.

Bath also became part of the English wool trade. Bristol was the primary port that wool and cloth were exported but records show that weaving, dyeing, and fulling of wool occurred in Bath [33, 34].

For the rest of the 12th through the 14th century, Bath remained a center of wool and ecclesiastical activity. It was important for its springs, but it was not a major player in most of the events of these centuries. During this time frame, the bishops of Bath move their see back to Wells and gain the title of Bishop of Bath and Wells. As we near the end of our Period, the quality of the abbey and its monks decline.

By the 15th century, Bath's abbey church was badly dilapidated and Oliver King, Bishop of Bath and Wells, decided to rebuild it on a smaller scale in 1500. Not just the building itself though, Bishop King found, "discipline was, to say the least, lax. There was feasting in the refectory, the monks were idle, and women were often to be seen at unseemly times about the precinct of the monastery [35]." In 1535, a report given to Thomas Cromwell, minister to Henry VIII, stated of Bath, "we found the Prior a right virtuose man . . . a man simple and not of the greatest wit, his monks worse than any I have fownde yet both in buggerie and adulterie . . . the house well repared but foure hundrethe pownds in debt [36]." The new church was completed just a few years before Bath Priory was dissolved in 1539 by Henry VIII. However, the dissolution meant that much of the church property was sold off and gutted. [37].

At the close of our Period, Elizabeth I grants Bath a charter of incorporation. Many of the functions that were previously fulfilled by church authorities (recall John of Tours) pass now into a mayor, council, and alderman. These new men of power in Bath worked to restore the city as a resort spa and restore various buildings and symbols of status. Elizabeth granted special taxes to restore the abbey, hospital, and almshouses. The newly rebuilt abbey was dubbed by Elizabeth as the "Lantern of the West" for its beautiful and numerous stained glass windows.

As the city improved, the wealthy and influential returned to Bath. In part, it was marketing. In part, the knowledge that bathing was healthy was coming to the fore. Dr Turner, published a book in 1557, stating, "I have also written so well as I can of the bath in Baeth in England to allure thither as manye as have need of suche helpe as almighty God hath graunte it to gyve." John Jones' in 1572 titles his book, "The Bathes of Bathes Ayde wonderfull and most excellent agaynst very many Sicknesses, approved by authoritie, confirmed by reason, and dayly tried by experience." [38]

Bath would remain a popular and interesting place throughout modern times. Part of the English Civil War would occur there, Georgian and Victorian Era Bath would be the spa for the rich and famous. Jane Austin would set her books there.

Reason 2: Importance

Another reason may be the importance of the place. In general, places with a detailed history will also be important in some way, but there may be a specific importance you are looking for. In Bath's case, it was a place of healing, a house of worship, a fort, a mint, a trade hub, and a place of political power. It is the site of Kings, Queens, and charters.

It is tied to the legendary founding of Britain, King Lear, King Arthur, and Shakespeare. Edgar the Peaceable, Henry I, Elizabeth I, Queen Anne of Denmark (wife of James I), and Queen Henrietta Marie (wife of Charles I) all visited the site.

Reason 3: Geography

A third reason maybe geography. You want your persona to have connections to specific cultures or regions. You might therefore choose a place that is geographically near where those influences are.

Bath is in Somerset England and not too far from the regions of Cornwall and Wales. In fact for part of its history, Bath was in Wales and later in Mercia before finally becoming part of Wessex and of course England. The cities of Gloucester and Bristol and Exeter are fairly close, even in terms of medieval travel. Bath is a great crossroads city for those who want to sprinkle a bit of another culture into a base persona. My Anglo-Saxon personae is part Welsh as a result. My 16th century personae is also from Bath.

Reason 4: Economy

A fourth reason may have to do with a specific economic activity. You may want to be near where the art you like to practice is well known.

For Bath, it would be known for its cloth as part of the wool trade, its scribal arts due to the Abbey, and coinage due to the mint. And of course, it would be known for its doctors and healers.

Reason 5: People

A fifth reason may be to connect to well-known figures from the Middle Ages. Some of these were already mentioned.

- King Arthur

- Various Anglo-Saxon kings
- Adelard of Bath - astronomer, philosopher and mathematician
- John of Tours,
- Henry I
- Henry VIII
- Elizabeth I (visited the baths twice)
- Anne of Denmark (visited twice for whom the Queen's Bath is named)
- Henrietta Marie (Charles I queen)

Reason 6: Uniqueness

A sixth reason may be something unique about the area. That uniqueness may rise from a mixing of other reasons.

By far, what makes Bath unique is its hot springs. But as a result, it is then more unique due to the previous factors. It has been a place where history was made. It would crumble to ruin as a whims of history would decide but the Waters of Sulis would continue to bubble up and inspire a renewal.

To conclude, there are perfectly good reasons to be from anywhere. But just like your modern birthplace, whether you identify with it or not, your persona is from somewhere. By being specific, you can then add an array of interesting tidbits to your persona's story. Making it an important small city gives you leeway to explain why things are the way they are and why you are part Welsh, travel the Known World, weave, shoot, and write.

References:

[1] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*

[2] know-britain.com/cities_towns/bath_history

[3] Cunliffe, *The City of Bath*, pp 7-13

[4] Cunliffe, pp 14-15

[5] Cunliffe, pp 16-18

[6] Cunliffe, p 21

[7] [Unesco.org/city of bath](http://Unesco.org/city_of_bath)

- [8] Cunliffe, p 24
- [9] various secondary sources compiled at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bath_curse_tablets
- [10] Cunliffe, p 32
- [11] Cunliffe, p 42
- [12] Gildas, *On the Ruin of Britain*
- [13] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*
- [14] Nennius, *Histroria Brittonum*
- [15] Harleian MS. 3859. Op. cit. Phillimore, Egerton. *Y Cymmrodor* 9 (1888), pp. 141–83. **(Latin)**
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- [17] buildinghistory.org/bath
- [18] Bath360.co.uk/history-of-bath.html
- [19] Cunliffe, p 47-49, *The Ruin*.
- [20] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*
- [21] Davenport
- [22] Davis, p 33
- [23] Charter
- [24] Cunliffe, p 52
- [25] Asser, *Life of Alfred*, p?? A-S
- [26] check
- [27] Nennius, *Histroria Brittonum*
- [28] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*
- [29] Cunliffe, p 62-63
- [30] Cunliffe, p 63
- [31] Davis p 39
- [32] Davis p 40 and Cunliffe p 72.

[33] Davis p. 43-45

[34] Cunliffe p 89 -91.

[35] Cunliffe, p. 91.

[36] Davenport, p. 171

[37] Davis, p. 49.

[38] Cunliffe, p 93 - 102

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