

Historically, a seneschal was an official in the household of a sovereign or great noble, to whom the administration of justice and entire control of domestic arrangements were entrusted. The word "seneschal" has also been used to refer to the governor of a city or province, and of various administrative or judicial officers. (This is, sometimes verbatim, from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.)

We got the word "seneschal" from the French in the 1300's, but it can be traced further back through Latin to old Teutonic, where its "parent-word" meant, simply, "servant." The older English equivalent of the French word "seneschal" is "steward." You might read that the origin of the word was "sty ward," meaning "keeper of the pig sty." The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*the dictionary for historical use*) mentions this story and disclaims it, saying that the first syllable is from an ancient word meaning "house." The word "house" in medieval times referred to more than just the building, it was the whole place. A pig sty was a place for pigs, or a house for pigs. The "keeper of the pig sty" was called a swineherd.

In Scotland in early times the first officer of the King of Scots was called the Lord High Steward of Scotland. He was given control of the royal household, great administrative powers and the privilege of leading the army into battle.

In England a steward was an official who controlled the domestic affairs of a household, supervising the service of his master's table, directing the household servants and regulating household expenditures. The word could also refer to one who managed the affairs of an estate on behalf of his employer, or an overseer of workmen. After the Norman conquest the words "steward" and "seneschal" were used interchangeably. In Italy and Spain a steward was called a "major domo" (chief of the house). In the Spanish-speaking communities of northern New Mexico the major-domo [1] is the official in charge of an irrigation ditch. He collects the ditch-tax and regulates and schedules the use of the water. The less common and less glorious English term is "ditch-rider." I digress.

In SCA Practice, we parallel those medieval seneschals by being servants in charge of mundane and everyday matters. We see that our masters' estates (abstract though they are in the Society) are run properly and efficiently. We take care of routine paperwork so that the royalty and nobility we serve can see to other more pressing matters, and so that they will have time to enjoy some of the privileges their positions afford them.

