A Brief Introduction to Medieval Bynames

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A byname is a surname. In particular, it is a non-hereditary surname given to an individual in order to describe him in some way. Bynames contrast with the inherited surnames which are almost universal in the modern world. Individual bynames, on the other hand, were the most common style of surnaming used in most of medieval Europe. Over the course of the Middle Ages, individual bynames gave way to inherited surnames, so that a man's surname was no longer a literal description except by coincidence. This shift happened at different times in different places, but by the end of our period, inherited surnames were typical of most Western European cultures[1].

Most medieval bynames were simple and straightforward: your father's name, your home village, your occupation, or perhaps some notable personal characteristic. Sometimes the same kinds of ideas were expressed in more elaborate ways, but the ideas remained very down-to-earth.

Bynames basically come in four flavors:

- patronymic;
- locative;
- occupational and status; and
- nicknames.

These four types of byname are found in almost every medieval European culture, though of course the relative frequency and grammatical construction vary considerably from one

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[1] This paragraph consists of very broad generalizations, and the rest of this article will continue brazenly along the same lines. There are exceptions to almost every absolute statement we will make. For example, there are parts of Europe that are particularly popular with Societyfolk where inherited surnames did not develop by the end of our period: the Gaelic areas of Ireland and Scotland, some parts of Scandinavia, and the Muslim world. However, we believe that this article is a good general guide to medieval naming. Those interested in names particular times and places will obviously need more specific information, and we invite them to contact us.

language to the next.[2] We've chosen to illustrate this discussion with medieval English examples, but the general principles apply to most medieval European languages. The indented paragraphs delve a little more deeply into English naming practices, and don't apply generally. An appendix lists good sources for choosing bynames from other medieval languages.

A **patronymic** byname identifies you as your father's child. Patronymics are an old and common type of byname in most period European cultures. English and some other cultures also used metronymics, bynames referring to your mother; they did _not_ connote bastardy. Not all cultures used metronymics, though, and patronymics were always more common.

There are three main types of patronymic in English. The earliest style in English simply used the parent's name as a byname, e.g. Geoffrey Anketil 1209 was the son of a man named Anketil. When the father's name was used as a byname without modification, we sometime call it an unmarked patronymic. Later you get forms like Thomas Richardes 1327 'Richard's Thomas' or Robert Willeson 1324 'Will(e)'s son', corresponding to modern Richards and Wilson. This last type is usually constructed, as in this example, from a pet form of a name that was popular in the Middle Ages, not with full forms of those names or with names carried over in modified form from Old English.

A **locative** byname identifies you by the place where you live, work, or were born, or by the land you own. There are two broad categories of locative: toponymic and topographical.

A toponymic byname refers to a named place, i.e., it incorporates a proper noun. Up to about 1400 the usual English form is de X, where X is the name of a town, though in speech de was probably replaced by of; examples are de York 1324 and de Brunnesley 1198. After c.1400 the preposition was simply dropped, and indeed it wasn't always used even in earlier records (e.g., Richard Wangeford 1296).

Topographical bynames refer to features of the local landscape, either natural or man-made. In a sense, your byname is your address: It tells people where you live or where you work.

In general, someone was named after a large place only after he left it: The name Simon Welsche 1279 wouldn't distinguish a man from every other Simon in Wales; but it was apparently a good identifier in Bedfordshire where Welshmen were rare. People were usually named after large places when they had moved a long distance. On the other hand, Richard Overthegate 1327 would hardly have been a useful identifier if Richard ventured more than a few miles away from the gate for which he was named.

By far the most common preposition in medieval English usage was at, generally combined with the definite article as atte 'at the' (or some minor variant). Typical examples are Attewode 1243 'at the wood' and Attemille 1242 'at the mill'. Many other prepositions

[2] Some cultures used some types of byname very rarely or not at all. For example, Gaelic names very rarely include locative bynames. Gaels used patronymic bynames almost exclusively, but essentially never used metronymics.

also occur: Vnderegge 1194 'under edge', for someone who lived at the foot of an escarpment, Overthebek c.1270 'over the beck (i.e., stream)', Bithewaye 1243 'by the way', for someone who lived by the road, and in theffelde 1333 'in the field' are good examples. Just about the _least_ common preposition is of, though it does occur once in a while, e.g., othe felde 1327 'of the field'http://www.s-gabriel.org/names/arval/bynames/ - note3.[3] In most cases the preposition (and article, if present) were eventually lost; the full forms are rare after c.1400. In a few cases they were fused with the noun, as in the modern namesAtwood, Attwater, and Underhill.

Occupational and status bynames identify you by an occupation or rank. In this category we include both literal identifications, like John Smith for a man who was a smith, and figurative descriptions, like Agnes le Pope c.1230, who certainly was not the Pope! Something about her behavior led people to give her that byname, which could well have been sarcastic or even insulting.

Up to about 1400 these are often found in English with the definite article, which is almost always written as the French le or la, though that probably doesn't represent spoken usage. Some typical examples are Ysabelle la Lauendere 1253 'the laundress', le Fithelare 1275 'the fiddler', le Horsmongere 1279 'horse-dealer', and le Bakere1177 'the baker'. Bynames referring to rank and station also appear with the article, as in le Freman 1221 'the freeman', le Erl 1255 'the earl', and Agnes le Pope c.1230 'the pope', but there are also many early examples without it, e.g., Henry Pope 1296 and any number of 13th century examples of the byname Kyng.

An important category overlaps between locative and status bynames: ethnic bynames. These are bynames which identify you by your nationality, religion, or ethnic group. In many cases, they are based on much smaller regions than the nationalities we used in the modern world, right down to cities and towns.William le Bret 1230 was a Breton or Briton, while Hugh le Pycard 1276 was from Picardy in northwestern France.

Nicknames are a grab-bag of all bynames that don't fit into any of the first three classes, but some common types can be identified. In this class we include nicknames describing physical, mental, or moral characteristics of the bearer. Many were derogatory and others were ironic: although they appear to be complementary, they were not. For example, Henry Bigge 1177 might have been a small man. The most common nicknames were very simple and concrete: Hamo le Reed 1296 'the red', Roger le Wis 1203 'the wise'. Others were more abstract: Gilbert Wysdom 1243, Walter Boost 1327 'boast'. A common category was metonymic bynames, which identified your occupation by naming a tool you used or a product you produced or sold. Thomas Mayle 1296 could have been a maker of mail armor

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[3] It is even possible that such examples are over-literal English translations of documentary quasi-French forms like de la Felde 1188 and del Feld 1190, though there is probably no way to be sure.

and Geoffrey wythe Hameres 1303 'with the hammers' was a maker or user of hammers rather than a man who owned some notable hammers.

More complex names existed in some languages, including English, though they were always less common. Here are some interesting English examples: Wythe Berd 1297 'with the beard' (actually mis-spelled Wychthe Berd), Braz de fer 1205 'iron-arm'; Smalbyhind' 1379 'small behind'; Shirloc 1159 'bright-lock, i.e., fair-haired', now Sherlock;Yrento 1209 'iron-toe'; le Oneyede 1293 'the one-eyed'; le Long 1290-92; Cunteles 1219 'cunt-less'; le Lechur 1249 'the lecher'; Wysheued 1327 'wise-head'; le Gidye 1219 'the mad' (now giddy, with much weakened sense); Wytelas 1275 'witless'; le Gode 1212 'the good'; le Cruel 1251; le Wilfulle 1275; Notegood 1375 'not good';Swetemouth 1327 'sweet mouth'; Foulmouth 1286.

Other English descriptive bynames refer to articles of clothing, e.g., Wytebelt 1307 'white belt', Wythemantel 1297 'with the mantle'; Scortmantil 1312 'short mantle'. In some cases, like Gilbert Hodde 1225 'hood', such bynames may be occupational rather than physically descriptive: Gilbert may have been a maker of hoods. Robert Rotenheryng 1297 'rotten herring' was probably a fish-seller!

Other conditions not falling into any of the foregoing categories can be described by nicknames: John le Wyfles 1327 presumably had no wife. Occasionally one finds nicknames apparently commemorating a particular event, like Falinthewol 1301 'fall in the well', though this particular name is found often enough to make us wonder whether it embodies some popular expression; perhaps it refers to a dreamer or a very clumsy person. Perhaps a better example is the rather cryptic Latethewaterga 1242 'let the water go', about which one could produce endless conjectures! In general, though, these complex, cryptic nicknames are rare. They didn't exist in every language.

Particularly interesting are the English nicknames of 'Shakespeare' or 'pickpocket' type: Brekelaunce 1334 'break lance'; Hakkeches' 1227 'hack cheese', for a cheesemonger; Makepais 1219 'make peace'; Mangeharneis 1228 'eat harness, i.e., armor'; Singgemasse 1187 'sing mass'; Brekebac 1269 'break back'; cuttepurs 1275 'cut purse'; John Fillecunt 1246 'fill cunt' (who might have had difficulty with Bele Wydecunthe 1327!); and Strokelady 1327 'stroke lady'. Other types of phrases, sometimes even more elaborate, were sometimes used: Agnes Singalday 1309 'sing all day', John Brekaldoun 1327 'break all down'; Drink al up 1282 'drink all up'; Gobytheweye1327 'go by the way'; Haldebytheheved 1301 'hold by the head'; Potfulofale 1302 'pot full of ale'; Adam Fayrarmful 1246 'fair armful'; William Fayrandgode 1301 'fair (handsome) and good'; William Aydrunken 1279 'always drunk'; Badinteheved 1275 'bad in the head'; and the mysterious Elias Overandover 1311 'over and over'.

In conclusion we can't resist mentioning Henry Lytilprud 1301 'little worth' and his wife Hawisia Crist a pes 'Christ have peace!'; her byname probably records a favorite expression of this apparently long-suffering woman.