The Name

Bronwyn ferch Gwyn ap Rhys

"If you're going to be in the SCA, you've got to have a name."

"Have you figured out your persona yet? What's you name going to be?"

"I can't figure out what kind of name I want!"

Sound familiar? We don't know of many people in the SCA who haven't had one or all of these sentences used by or to them. Bronwyn was lucky. When she joined the SCA, she already had the given name she wanted, although it took almost eight years before she managed to come up with a full, registerable name. But most of us haven't a clue for months, sometimes years.

Today, we are used to a name that is constructed of a first name, a middle name, and a last name. Sometimes, because of religious beliefs, a person chooses another name, usually called a "confirmation name", which is then slipped in between the middle and last names.

In some places other than the United States, this structure varies. For example, in upper class England, it's not uncommon to have three or four first and middle names — it sometimes seems like the higher the class the longer the name, in fact. In Russia, a person's name consists of a given name and surname, but in between is a "middle name" that is actually formed from the first name of the person's father (More about those later). And the variations continue.

This article is designed to give a brief description of how names are built, mainly in period, but also, to some degree, now. We're not going to deal in cultural differences (except for some examples), only in the terminology a person needs to find what s/he wants in the scads of name resources we have available in the SCA.

First, A Definition

This is a strange place to talk about a definition of culture, but because culture plays such a huge part in the ways names are put together, we should probably talk a little about what the word really represents.

We constantly use the terms "nationality" and "culture," interchangeably even though they mean completely different things. Depending on where you were, the term "nationality" meant nothing until comparatively late in period.   Nations are a rather late development in many places, and even today barely exist in some places. But culture has existed since before homo sapiens became the dominant species.

An archaeology professor once defined the term "culture" as "an exo-somatic (i.e., outside one's body) means of survival." In other words, culture includes everything that a person or group of people do to stay alive: the way that they make clothes, build houses, make pottery, find or make food, all the other physical things they do to stay alive. It also includes the way people deal with each other — how they find mates, how their leaders are chosen, who lives next to whom, religion, taboos, social conventions, and who they talk to, and, of course, how they are named. Depending on where and when, the number of people who share the same culture can be quite small, maybe only a handful. Culture is not an agreed upon thing; it occurs naturally, without people thinking about it.

The study of culture is a subset of the field of anthropology, and is called "ethnography." If you want to learn about current cultures, you can find information in that part of the library. If you're interested in the cultures of people in the past, go to the area marked "archaeology." For literate cultures, you can also go to the history section. And we're going to talk about something that we can only find out because of historians and others who enjoy working with old documents.

But throughout your work with names, you must remember the definition of culture.

Language and Name Meaning

In the English-speaking world, most of us have divorced the meaning of the words we use for names from their use. This is not necessarily true in other cultures and languages. As the joke we relate below suggests, First American peoples, among others, knew what their names meant and, in fact, chose them for their meaning. The meaning of a name disappears the farther it gets from its language of origin. If the meaning of a name is important to you, you should seriously think about forming your persona in a culture where names are equivalent to words in the language spoken.

The Given Name and other things

Okay. Let's get down to what how names are formed.

Your first name is called a given name for an obvious reason: someone else gave it to you when you were a baby. It was probably your parents, but elsewhere and else-when, it could also have been chosen for you by a shaman, your community's headman, etc. Likewise, there is a variation of a name that we are very familiar with in the SCA because that's what this article leads up to. This is when a person takes a name later in life.[i] Even though this is a slightly different set of circumstances, we will still call the first part of a full name the given name. So far, we've have never seen a culture whose people did not use some type of given name. This doesn't mean it doesn't exist, but, after all, everyone needs to have something to be called.

Middle names can be lumped into this category for our purposes, too. However, we don't find middle names used in most cultures until late in period.

The Byname

We've been referring to "last names." Now, however, we're going to introduce a new word: **byname**. In period, especially early on, bynames were practically never inherited.

There are four different types of bynames:

- **Patronymic;**
- **Occupational;**
- **Locational; and**
- **Descriptive**

Let's examine these one at a time:

Patronymic Bynames

A patronymic is a name that is based on a person's father's name. It can take several different forms, depending on the language. The simplest form is <given name> <son/daughter> of <given name>. In some cultures, especially after Christianity was adopted, records were kept in Latin and we find entries in different manuscripts like "Johanus filius Gregorius." Of course, other languages, the form of the patronymic takes on different forms. In Norse cultures, we find patronymics such as "Olafsson"; in Russian "Ivanovich;" and in Scots "mac Gregor." There are feminine versions of patronymics, and, in some cases, we find a variation called **matronymic**, where the byname is made from the mother's name rather than father's. There are some cultures in which certain versions of this became inherited surnames.

Occupational Bynames

Some people were known by the kind of work that they did, e.g., "John the Blacksmith" or "Robert the Fisher." This type of byname is found in most cultures.

Locational Bynames

In the SCA, this is one of the most common forms of byname. Everyone knows someone with this type of name: "John of Jaravellir", for example. This form was also common in period, where we find names such as "Alexandro de Venitiano" (Alexander of Venice), "Francis d'Assisi", or "Robin de Lockesley." [The last, of course, is probably not the name of a real person, but it is a good example of a locational byname.] In France, and in England after the Norman Invasion, bynames of this variety used "de" to mean "of." Other cultures developed other terms.

Descriptive Bynames

The last type of byname is the descriptive. This form is usually based on a physical characteristic. They include names such as "Eric the Red," "John Lackland," or "Guillaume le Batârd."

The Surname

The last type of "last name" is the type we now use in the European-derived cultures: the surname. This is the only truly inherited form of name. It can be derived from almost any form of byname — occupational and patronymic being the most frequent. English is full of names derived from occupational bynames: Cooper, Smith, Fletcher, etc. And practically all Scottish names (at least all the "Mac" names) are patronymic in basis.

Surnames began coming into fashion beginning in about the 14th century, pretty well throughout Europe. By the beginning of the 15th century, the preposition "of" had disappeared in England, and names like "Margaret Broxton" had come into use.

You'll find this type of change throughout all cultures, although they won't always be the same thing.

Conclusion

You now should have a basis on which to delve into the mind-boggling number of articles and books out there that can assist you in creating your name, or helping others to create theirs. Good luck!

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[i] A favorite joke, albeit slightly off-color, deals with a 10-year old child who goes to see the shaman of his village. The shaman smiles at the child and says, "Do you need something?" The boy nods and replies, "My father told me that you are the person who gives us our names when we are born." The shaman nods back. "Would you tell me how you decide what name you'll give?" The shaman sat down next to the boy, and swept his hand out in front of him, gesturing at all nature. "Your name comes from the first thing that I see as you cry your first cry. If two herons fly across the sky, you would be named "Two-Herons-Flying." If the full moon has just risen and shows the old man, you could be named "Full-Moon-In-Sky" or "Old-Man-Rising." Does that answer your question, Two-Dogs-Locked-Together?" Cleaned up for general use.