

The History of Names

The history of names is so ancient that no one knows the beginning of the story. Since written history began, and as far back as oral history reaches, people have had names. It is therefore impossible to do more than guess at how the earliest given names were chosen. Most names appear to have had some sort of original meaning, usually descriptive, rather than being simply a pleasing collection of sounds.

These descriptive names developed both from nouns and adjectives. Examples of name descended from nouns are the Irish Gaelic names Conan "hound, wolf" and Aed "fire." Irish Gaelic names derived from adjectives are such names as Fial "modest, honorable, generous" and Finn "fair, bright, white." A more elaborate descriptive naming practice is exemplified in the Bible, when Rachel names her last son Benoni or "son of my sorrow" and his father Jacob renames him Benjamin "son of the right hand" (Genesis 35:18).

Many early names were compounds. For example, the following Frankish names are compounds: Sigibert (victoryshining), Childeric (battlepowerful), Fredegund (peacebattle) and Radegund (counselbattle). Sometimes such compounds in pagan societies referred to their gods. For instance, the ancient Norse had many names which were compounds containing the name of the god Thor. Among the male names were Thorbjorn, Thorgeir, Thorkell, Thorsteinn and Thorvald, and among the feminine names were Thordis, Thorgunna, Thorhalla, Thorkatla and Thorunn.

Early in prehistory some descriptive names began to be used again and again until they formed a name pool for that particular culture. Parents would choose names from the pool of existing names rather than invent new ones for their children. As time went on the language changed and in many cases the words that formed the original name passed out of use, leaving the fossilized form in the name. This is why we do not recognize the meanings of many names today. Their origins are in ancient languages from words that have passed out of use. For instance, the name Edwin was originally composed of the Old English words ead, which means "prosperity, fortune, riches"

and wine, which means "friend." Both of these words have passed out of the language in the intervening thousand or so years. On the other hand, a word which has not radically changed forms the first part of the Old English name Wulfgar. The word may have changed spelling somewhat, but the word wolf is still recognizable. (The second element gar means "spear.")

With the rise of Christianity, certain trends in naming practices manifested. Christians were encouraged to name their children after saints and martyrs of the church. The oldest of these names were Jewish and GrecoRoman names. The names of the apostles and other prominent early Christians mentioned in the New Testament were often Jewish, such as Mary, Martha, Matthew, James, Joseph and John. The early Christians lived in the Roman empire, and it is among the other peoples of the empire that they first began to convert non-Jews. As a result of the persecutions in the early centuries, many GrecoRoman names entered the Christian name pool in commemoration of the martyrs and saints, such as Anthony, Catherine, Margaret, Mark, Martin, Nicholas and Paul.

These early Christian names can be found in many cultures today, in various forms. These were spread by early missionaries throughout the Mediterranean basin and Europe. At the same time pagan nations newly converted to Christianity did not abandon their original name pool. Native martyrs and saints soon arose in every culture and their names would be added to the pool of Christian names available to Christian parents. The Christian name pool sometimes preserved names that would have otherwise fallen out of use. For example, most AngloSaxon names fell out of use within two centuries of the Norman Conquest of England. One that did not, because it was the name of a famous saint, is the name Edward, which is still in use today.

By the Middle Ages, the Christian influence on naming practices was pervasive. Each culture had its pool of names, which were a combination of native names and early Christian names that had been in the language long enough to be considered native. The naming pools did

continue to evolve, so that a selection of ninth century Frankish names bears little resemblance to a selection of twelfth century French names. The interesting thing is that the "early Christian names" changed the least in most name pools.

The pool of names in use in England changed radically with the Norman conquest in 1066. Previous to this, dithematic (compound names with two elements) such as Bealdwine, Cuthbert, Eadgyth, Ethelwine, Etheldreda, Wilfrith and Wulfgar predominated. With the political ascendancy of the Normans, French names of Germanic origin became prevalent within two or three generations of the Conquest. As a result names like Emma, Matilda, Richard, and William, became constants in English nomenclature. At the same time a few Old English names, like Edward and Alfred, were preserved because they were names of saints or prominent kings; others were preserved because they were reinforced and modified by Germanic names from the Normans like Robert.

Surnames developed from bynames, which are additional identifiers used to distinguish two people with the same given name. These bynames tend to fall into particular patterns. These usually started out as specific to a person and became inherited from father to son between the twelfth and sixteenth century. The aristocracy usually adopted inherited surnames early on and the peasants did so later. Some of the specific types are: the patronymic (referring to the father or mother), a locative or toponymic (indicating where a person is from), an epithet (which describes a person in some way) or a name derived from occupation, office or status. Most cultures use surnames developed from one or more of these types of bynames.

Patronymics are common in almost all European cultures. These are usually formations that mean "x son of y" or "x daughter of y". The parent indicated is usually the father, but the mother's name may also occur in some cases. Patronymics were formed in various ways in English; Johnson, Richards and Henry are representative. Johnson shows the full development; it obviously means son of John or John's son. The "son" could also be understood, by the position in the name, so Richard's son Martin might be called Martin Richards instead of Martin Richardson. At the same time, Henry's son Martin might be known as Martin Henry, because to the medieval mind the position of the

name Henry would imply that Martin was Henry's son. Other cultures used different ways of indicating patronymics. In Welsh, the usual form was ap X. If the father's name (X) was Rhys, it would form ap Rhys. Over the centuries this form yielded the names Reese and Price. In Scotland and Ireland the typical patronymic form was mac X, yield names such as MacAndrew, MacDougall, MacGregor and MacLeod.

Locative and toponymic bynames are another common form of byname. Locatives are very typical of the aristocracy in England and France. A locative byname indicates that you are from some named place. Typical forms in Old and Middle English are: aet, atte, de, of. For example æt Lintone, atte Homwode, de London, de Ebor. Sometimes the name of the place followed the given name directly, without a preposition, thus forming the bynames Linton, Homwode, London and York.

Toponymic bynames are derived from topographic or other local features of the landscape. For example, a man dwelling near a prominent beech tree might use "atte Beche", "de Beche" or "de la Beche" as his byname. A man dwelling on or near a hill might use "del Hill," "atte Hil" or "of the Hill." A man dwelling near marshy ground might use "atte Fen" or "del Fen." Names of this type are quite common in England. Eventually, of course, these usually wore down to Beech, Hill and Fen.

Epithets are bynames that refer to some personal characteristic of the bearer. In the Middle Ages, a person acquired this from friends and acquaintances. An appellation of this sort can be complimentary, uncomplimentary or simply descriptive. Nicknames can take various forms: descriptive of physical characteristics of some kind like Blakloc, the Small, Armstrong or Grenehod, or descriptive of character or mental or moral characteristics, such as Wastepenny, Slyman, Careless, Bonfaith, Longhand, The Short, Wrymouth (crooked), Longshanks (tall), The Stammerer, The Younger, The Fair, The Fat, The Lamé, The Bald, Forkbeard, Bluetooth, The Blind. Sometimes a nickname can be metaphoric (i.e. "John is like a ") yielding names like "Peppercorn" for a small person and "Fairweather" for a cheerful, sunny person. Color and complexion are responsible for some names such as Fairchild, Liliwhite, Whitelock. Military prowess created some names and nicknames like Longespee (longsword), The

Fearless, Skull-Cleaver, The Victorious, The Bold, The Lion. Some, however, are misleading. Crouchback was not an indication of a deformity but rather that the bearer wore a cross on the back of his tunic. Personalities are reflected in nicknames such as The Pious, The Chaste, The Great, The Dark, Hotspur, The Gracious, The Outlaw, The Catholic, The Wise.

Occupational names are often the most obvious in origin. Baker, Brewer, Weaver, Taylor and Smith are fairly obvious in meaning. Some of these occupational bynames also have feminine versions which became hereditary surnames. For example, the feminine of Baker is Baxter, the feminine of Brewer is Brewster and the feminine of Weaver is Webster. However, more than half of the recorded people with these feminine surnames are male. Occupational surnames as a class are considered to also contain office names. Examples of office names are those such as Marshall (a tender of horses, or an office of high state) and Steward (a manager of an estate) and Abbott (the head of an abbey).

So, what's in a name? Much.