Medieval Bynames

A Brief Introduction to Medieval Bynames

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A "byname" is a type of surname. In particular, it's a surname given to an individual in order to describe him in some way. Bynames contrast with the inherited surnames which are pretty much universal in the modern world. Individual bynames, on the other hand, were the most common style of surnaming used in most of medieval Europe. In the late Middle Ages, individual bynames began to give way to inherited surnames, so that a man's surname no longer literally said anything about him. 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].

Bynames basically come in four flavours: patronymic, locative, occupational & status, and nicknames. These four types of bynames are found in almost every medieval European culture, though of course the relative frequency and grammatical construction varies considerably from one language to the next [2]. We'll illustrate the four categories with medieval English examples, just because they will be easier to understand.

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.

Patronymic bynames identify you as your father's child. (English and some other cultures also used metronymics, bynames referring to your mother; they do _not_ connote bastardy. Not all cultures used metronymics.) 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, who was probably the son of a man named <Anketil>. Later you get forms like <Thomas Richardes> 1327, corresponding to modern <Richards>, and also like <Robert Willeson> 1324 'Will(e)'s son', corresponding to modern <Wilson>. (This last type is usually constructed, as here, 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.)

Locative bynames identify you by the place where you live, work, or were born. 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. 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 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'. (In these cases I wonder if it isn't actually a too-literal translation of documentary quasi-French forms like <de la Felde> 1188 and <del Feld> 1190.) 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 names <Atwood>, <Attwater>, and <Underhill>.

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.

Occupational & status bynames identify you by your occupation or rank. Up to about 1400 these are often found with the definite article, which is almost always the French <le> or <la>. (This appears to have been a documentary convention; it's unlikely to have represented spoken usage.) Some typical examples are <Ysabelle la Lauendere> 1253 'the laundress', <le Fithelare> 1275 'the fiddler', <le Horsmongere> 1279 'horse-dealer', and <le Bakere> 1177 '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 c. examples of the byname <Kyng>. Obviously Agnes and Henry weren't Popes; but something about their behavior, perhaps, led people to give them that byname.

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. The most common nicknames were very simple and concrete: <Henry Bigge> 1177, <Hamo le Reed> 1296 "the red", <Roger le Wis> 1203 'the wise'. Others were more abstract: <Gilbert Wysdom> 1243, <Walter Boost> 1327 'boast'. More complex names existed, though they were less common: <Wythe Berd> 1297 'with the beard' (actually mis-spelled <Wychthe Berd), <Braz de fer> 1205 'iron-arm'; <Smalbyhind'> 1379 'small behind'. Some other examples: <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; and so on.

Other 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. Similarly, <Thomas Mayle> 1296 could have been a maker of mail armor and <Geoffrey wythe Hameres> 1303 'with the hammers' a maker or user of hammers rather than a man who owned some notable hammers. <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 cryptic nicknames are rare.

Particularly interesting are the 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'; <Gobytheweye> 1327 '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.

The Difference Between Typical SCA Bynames and Medieval Bynames

Consider the hypothetical SCA bynames <of the Misty Lowlands>, <of the Flowing Rivers>, <of the Silver Stallion>, and <the Fey Wanderer of Ealdormere>. We made up these examples, but you've probably met people with similar Society names.

The first name is a bad attempt at a topographical locative. It has several problems. First, <of> is unlikely. Secondly, <misty> is extremely unlikely (though <Mis Tor> in Devonshire is apparently 'mist hill') and <lowlands> is even less likely. We haven't seen the term in period nomenclature, and it's far too unspecific to be a useful topographic address. Thirdly, the name is much more complex than medieval examples. There are authentic bynames that include a modifying adjective, but they're much more definite and straightforward, e.g., <atte Fayrehope> 1332 'at the fair valley'. This is the sort of thing that we'd suggest if someone actually came to me with <of the Misty Lowlands>; other possibilities are <I'the Medewe> 1280, <in le Holwe> 1279, <atte Hamme> 1296 'at the flat, low-lying land beside a stream', and the unattested <atte Dernedyngle> 'at the secret or hidden deep dell or hollow' and <atte Dernhole> 'at the secret or hidden hollow'.

The byname <of the Flowing Rivers> is of the same type and has exactly the same problems. In particular, it's useless as an address. Loudwater in Berkshire was <la Ludewatere> 1241 'loud-water', and we might well suggest a byname like <de la Ludewatere>. Similarly, <Henry atte Lude> 1275 'at the loud (one)' lived by a loud (and therefore presumably fast-flowing) stream.

The byname <of the Silver Stallion> is basically an attempt at some kind of nickname, unless it's to be taken as a sign name (from an inn or the like). The latter are much rarer in English than most people realize, and most use an unmodified noun, like <atte Dragon> 1374, the byname of a brewer. Still, <William Sevensterre> 1355 'seven stars' probably took his name from a shop or inn sign, so the basic construction isn't actually impossible, though <of the> would need to become <atte> (or be omitted entirely). In medieval form the name would be <atte Silverstaloun> (or <-stalun>, or <-stalon>). However, <stalun> 'stallion' was a borrowing from French that seems not to have been particularly common until at least the 14th c., so it's not likely to have been used in an inn name. Much likelier here is the attested <del Whithors> 1273-74 'at the White Horse'. (When applied to a person the term <stalun> meant 'a begetter, a lascivious person'.)

The other interpretation of <of the Silver Stallion> is that it is intended to signify ownership of a silver stallion. Here, too, one would expect the more prosaic <Whithors> 'white horse' (also <Whitehors> 1331-32). There are in fact quite a few attested nicknames of just this type. Most of them didn't use a preposition. When they did, it wasn't <of>, but <with>, as in <Wythehogges> 1316 'with the hogs', probably a swineherd, and <With the Botoun> 1338 'with the button'. By our experience <Wythe Whitehors> is improbably complex, but at least it follows attested syntactical patterns.

Finally, <the Fey Wanderer of Ealdormere>, like the others, is too complex. It also uses a non-period SCA cliche, <the Wanderer>. Why do so many SCA folk want to stigmatize themselves as rogues, vagabonds, or petty thieves? (That's a rhetorical question; the term has a romantic connotation in our modern culture that is quite opposite its medieval implications.)

Doubtless <Fey> will strike most people as questionable, but there actually is a <Margaret le Fey> in record in 1332. <Margaret le Fey de Eldermere> (giving the place-name a medieval instead of Old English spelling to match the rest of the name) is a possible documentary form, but it's too complex to have been a name in the everyday sense. She might also have appeared in record as <Margaret de Eldermere dictus le Fey> 'called the Fairy'. <Wanderer>, however, is completely unattested in English, though the idea can be expressed authentically. For instance, there are bynames that were given to pilgrims, including <pilgrim> itself, as in <Pilegrim> 1185, <Pelrim> 1221, <Peregrine> 1243, and <Pegrin> 1275; another is seen in <Cristiania la Romere> 1274 'the Romer, one who had made a pilgrimage to Rome'. There are also some indirect bynames, among them <Dustifot'> 1221 'dusty foot', for a wanderer, especially a travelling tinker.

Notes

[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 Society folk 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.

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