

So you want to write an onomastic article?

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Abstract

This article is intended as a how-to guide for heralds who are interested in compiling onomastic data and turning it into an article which can be used as documentation for SCA submissions.

1 Sources: What to look for, and how to find it

The first thing you need to write an article is source material. There are many sources out there, but the trick is to (a) find them and (b) evaluate whether they are suitable. We'll discuss the latter first, since that has effects on the former. There are two qualities that a reliable source has: (1) dates and (2) original spellings.

Dates: If there are no implicit or explicit dates, then there is no way to demonstrate that the names meet the requirements of the General Principles of SENA. Explicit dates are, of course, always preferred: this gives you fine-grained information about the usage of names over time. However, implicit dates—for example, records identified as being from the reign of a king, duke, pope—are certainly an acceptable alternative, since they give a range within which the elements can be found. In cases like this, Wikipedia can be useful for establishing when a certain ruler or pontiff lived and reigned. Wikipedia is also useful when you are dealing with English documents which often have dates where the year is counted not from the birth of Christ but from the ascension of the current king, e.g., "5 Henry VIII" is the 5th year of the reign of Henry VIII, i.e., 1514.

Original spellings: We register the medieval spellings of names, not modern ones, so it is sources that retain the medieval spellings which are the useful ones. Unfortunately, many secondary sources, such as history books, do not retain the original spellings of names and so are not going to be useful. There are a number of ways of determining if the source has retained the original spellings:

1. Is there an editorial notice describing the transcription practices? Often the editor will say explicitly whether personal names and place names have been standardized to modern English forms or retained in their original form.
2. Do multiple spellings of the same name occur? E.g., *Katherin*, *Catherina*, *Kateryn*, etc. If so, then it is likely that the names have been left untouched.
3. If the source is French, does the spelling *Jehan* occur? This is the standard Middle French form of the name, which is not used modernly.
4. If the source is in Latin, are the given names likewise in Latin (identifiable by the *-us* ending, or the presence of *Johannes* (the Latin form of *John*.)?)

What sorts of sources have these qualities?

- Censuses.
- Taxation lists.
- Parish registers, recording births, deaths, and marriages.
- Cartularia (collections of charters).

Finding these sources online has never been easier, given googlebooks, archive.org, and a growing trend amongst libraries to digitize their collections. On the other hand, searching through the vast sea of knowledge that is now available looking for a good source for SCA onomastic purposes often feels like looking for a needle in a haystack. Many of the sources that I have come across I have found through serendipity, generally while searching for something that has come up in submission. When you have a particular element that you're looking for, be it a given name, a byname, a pattern, or the like, search googlebooks for that element along with either *filia* or *filius* or both. This will increase the chances that the hits you get are in Latin, or occur in a book which has hits in Latin, and these sources have a higher chance of containing period documents. If you are looking for something French, use *Jehan* instead. If you are trying to find evidence of a pattern, search for an example of the pattern using a common element from the target language. For example, I was recently looking for examples of Portuguese household names using *casa*, so I searched for "casa de Goncalves", using a moderately common Portuguese byname.

There are other places to look for sources too, such as the national archives of various countries, which are increasingly putting their materials online.

2 Data: What to collect, and how

Once you have a source, the next thing to do is to create a transcription of the full names, in sequential order as they appear in the source. This transcription will be useful in the future for answering any questions that may arise years after you've created the article, regarding spelling, gender, identification of given names as given names, spotting potential typos, etc. This list should record: the full name as it appears in the source, the specific date (if there is one), and any data which you might find useful for future re-locating of the name in your original source should that ever be necessary. If you are working from a cartularium, then the charter number is usually a good choice; if you are working from a census, the ward or region of the city is useful. If your source covers multiple years, and the entries are all ordered chronologically, then the date is probably sufficient on its own.

What names you want to include in this list depends on the source and your interests. You can collect: (a) only given names, (b) only given names of a particular gender, (c) only bynames, (d) complete personal names, (e) place names. In general (d) is going to be preferred, but if you have a source which, e.g., has normalized all the given names but kept the bynames and place names in their original forms, then (c) or (e) could be useful. Similarly, sometimes if you're working from a source which doesn't have much in terms of bynames, (a) or (b) might make more sense.

There are a number of ways that you can store the data; I prefer plain text files, because that makes it easier to convert the data into HTML, but others enter the data into excel spreadsheets or databases, or work in DOC format. Any of these methods is fine, using whatever works best for you.

3 Presentation: What to present, and how

Once you've got your data, now you can write the article. In this section, I'll assume that the data you've collected is complete personal names, given name plus byname(s); if the data you've collected is something else, then some of the recommendations here will not be relevant.

Introduction. In the introduction, tell the reader what they're going to see: What type of names (masculine/feminine given names, bynames, place names, household names), from what type of record (Latin, English; tax roll, charter, parish register), from what date(s). If there is any other relevant information about the source, include it here. The introduction should also say what type of modifications for the names you have done. For example, if your source was written in Latin, many of the names may have been recorded in an inflected form. If you have converted inflected forms to nominative forms, say so.

Given names. Given name should be sorted by gender (feel free to include an "uncertain" list if you have any about which you are uncertain), and then sorted within gender. The two most useful ways of sorting names are by frequency and alphabetically. It'll always be possible to provide an alphabetical list. Frequency lists are only possible when it is clear how many times the same person occurs in the records. Taxation records, christening records, marriage records, etc., are good for providing data that lends itself to frequency lists. Cartularia, on the other hand, often mention the same person more than

once, both within the same charter and in multiple charters, which can make it difficult to give accurate frequency counts for individual names.

Within the alphabetical and the frequency lists, there are further choices about arrangement to make: Do you group variant forms together? Do you group diminutives with their ‘parent’ forms? The choices here will depend both on the data that you have, and on your own knowledge (e.g., regarding what names are variants or diminutives of what). I generally group diminutives and variants together when giving frequency counts, but give a straight, unsorted alphabetical list.

Bynames. Except in rare cases, the bynames will be much more diverse than the given names, so giving both alphabetical and frequency lists won’t make sense. Instead, it is useful to provide as much information about the type/derivation of the individual bynames as you can, for example, whether they are patronymic, locative, descriptive, or occupational, and what they mean or what they come from. If you can identify most of the bynames as to their type, then you can present different alphabetical lists for each type. If you are uncertain, can only identify a few, or do not have very large numbers, then give a single alphabetical list, with notes where relevant. Whenever I am working with English bynames, I look them up in Reaney & Wilson, Bardsley, Watts, and Ekwall to find etymological information. (Among other things, this will increase your knowledge of English bynames incredibly.)

Sometimes your data set may contain mostly, if not exclusively, literal patronymics. Literal patronymics are great because they can often broaden the available given name pool. There are a number of ways the data can be handled. The simplest is to keep the literal patronymics separate from the given names, in their own list. Such a list is most usefully alphabetized by the patronym, rather than by the relational marker, especially if your source includes relational markers in various languages (such as a Welsh charter which might have both *filius* and *ab* in it).

If the patronymics are all single-generation, then you have the option of extracting the patronyms from them and treating them along with the actual given names; in such a case, they would then be omitted from the list of bynames. When you are dealing with multiple-generation patronymics, as occurs in, e.g., Welsh and Italian, then I caution against extracting the patronyms and combining them with the given names. This is because with enough generations, you might start seeing evidence of change in name pool, and could ultimately end up recommending as appropriate for a given time-period a name which actually fell out of use two generations before. One way to handle this is to keep track of which generation a patronym occurred. I have taken this option in *Names from Merioneth, 1453–1459* and *Welsh Names from the Proceedings of the Court at Castle Leon, 1497*.

Name patterns. A third section which can be useful, depending on the type of data you’ve collected, is information about the patterns of names. If everyone has one given name and one byname, then there isn’t much to say other than that. However, if some people have one given name and some have more than one, it’s useful to provide the relative percentages of people who have each type. If anyone has more than one byname, what percentage of people do? And what are the patterns that are found? For example, are locatives always last? Are there any examples of patronymics + descriptives?

Anything else you think interesting. This is self-explanatory, I hope!

Bibliography. Always provide a full citation of your source, including URL if it was a web source.

4 Handling tricky cases

4.1 Names in non-Latin alphabets

When dealing with names in non-Latin alphabets, e.g., Arabic, Hebrew, Cyrillic, etc., you can either render the names in their non-Latin forms, or transliterate them into the Latin alphabet. The latter is generally going to be the most useful for people who do not read the non-Latin alphabet. If you transliterate, be sure to pick a single transliteration scheme, use it uniformly throughout, and note which scheme you are using in your introduction. In general, more scholarly transliterations¹ are preferred over less scholarly ones, as they retain more information allowing an accurate reconstruction of the form in the original alphabet (if, of course, you are not providing both forms in your article). Wikipedia is a good source for different transliteration schemes which are currently accepted for various languages, but should not necessarily be trusted to give the schemes correctly.

¹Such as the schemes provided by the Library of Congress: .

4.2 Names from one language recorded in another language

This sort of situation comes up in two types of circumstances.

The first is the inclusion of a foreigner in a dataset which otherwise has names of locals. In this case, the foreigner is often marked explicitly, as a stranger, alien, Frenchman, Italian, etc. In this case, it is often useful to separate out these people into their own lists, especially if the marking is uniform, e.g., all of the people are called ‘aliens’ (a term with particular technical usage in medieval English), or all the people are Jews.

Sometimes however, the foreigners are not explicitly labeled, but the name in composition—both given name and byname—is markedly unusual for the linguistic context of the rest of the names. For example, in a 13th-century English archiepiscopal register written in Latin, I found *Paulina de Bologna*, *Matheus Spinelli*, and *Re(y)nerius de Florentia*. I have reason to suspect that all three of these are not English but Italian. First, *Paulina* is a rare name in English; I know of one 12th C citation, and that’s it. Second, *de Bologna* and *de Florentia* are ‘of Bologna’ and ‘of Florence’, respectively. Third, *Spinelli* is obviously not a native English name. While both *Matheus* and *Re(y)nerius* could be the names of Englishmen, they are, in terms of general frequency, equally plausible as the names of Italian. Given my suspicions, I included them in the general lists, but added notes indicating that I believe these are not the names of natives.

The second case is when there is a near-entire mis-match between the language of the record and the language of the name. Such cases include: The recording in English of baptisms and marriages of Dutch immigrants in the Dutch Reformed Church in London in the 16th C; the recording of the names of Finns in Swedish; the recording of names of any language in Latin; the recording of the names of Latvians in German. In this case, your introduction should make explicit the mis-match, and indicate that, given the culture of origin of the names, they cannot be taken as indicative of the naming practices for the culture of record; but likewise, because of the language of the record, they cannot be taken as wholly indicative of the vernacular used in the target culture. In these cases, if there is independent evidence about the vernaculars, it can be useful to include this information, for example as header names, with appropriate warnings about conjecturality. Where such information is not known, of course you can’t do this, but so long as you are honest about the limitations of the data that you have with regard to linguistic precision, there isn’t much more you can do.

5 What next?

The most useful article is one which is published on the web and hence easily available. The two most common formats for web publication are PDF and HTML. If you are comfortable with creating PDF or HTML, then go ahead and create a version of your article in either format. If you do not know, then send the article to me (email above), and I will HTML it for you. If you have your own website, then you can publish the article there, and if you send me a link to it, I will ensure it gets added to the Medieval Names Archive. If you don’t have access to your own website, the Academy of S. Gabriel is able to host onomastic articles on their server. One drawback of this is that make changes/edits to your article will be somewhat more difficult, since any changes would have to go through me (you wouldn’t have access to the article on the server directly yourself).