



# A Page From the Boke: Old Norse Names

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## 1 Introduction

This article is the second in the mini-series to be published in my usual 'By the Boke' column, in which I discuss at a very rudimentary level the most common naming practices of a specific culture. These guides are not meant to be all-encompassing or conclusive, but rather provide a 'skeleton' from which you can start building your own name. These guides deal only with the most common types of naming practices in the cultures under consideration; I will not be discussing obscure or rare practices. In an effort to keep each of these guides to a page or less (for ease of photocopying and distribution to all interested - each article will carry at the bottom a disclaimer giving permission for said reproduction), many details will be glossed over; however, I will try to provide references for further information. With these caveats in place, I'll now discuss Old Norse names.

## 2 Language

The term 'Old Norse' does not actually refer to a language that was spoken during medieval times. It is used modernly to refer to a scholarly standardized and regularized form of 13th-century written Old Icelandic. Old Icelandic at this time differed very little from Old Norwegian, but both of these West Scandinavian dialects had by this time diverged from Old Swedish and Old Danish, the corresponding main East Scandinavian dialects. Therefore, the Old Norse forms that I am discussing here will be appropriate for people living in Iceland or Norway, but not necessarily Sweden or Denmark.

More information about these dialects and their histories can be found in [3]. Because of the limitations of standard Word-processor character sets, I am using {o,} to represent the Old Norse o-ogonek; it is an <o> with a reverse comma hook hanging from it.

## 3 Given names

The best source for Old Norse names from the Viking era is the *Landnámabók*, the book of the settling of Iceland. The surviving versions of *Landnámabók* date from the 13th c., though it has been suggested that it was composed in an early form by Ari Þorgilsson (1068-1148). The settlement of Iceland largely took place between 870 and 930, but *Landnámabók* definitely mentions descendants significantly later than the actual settlement period, at least into the 11th century.

The 10 most popular masculine names in this work are: [2]

1. Þorsteinn
2. Þórðr
3. Þorkell
4. Þorbj{o,}rn
5. Þórir
6. Þorgeirr
7. Helgi
8. Þórarinn
9. Ketill
10. Bj{o,}rn

The 10 most common women's names are:

1. Þuríðr
2. Þorgerðr
3. Þórdís
4. Helga
5. Þórunn
6. Guðrún
7. Þóra
8. Valgerðr
9. Yngvildr
10. Vigdís

## 4 Bynames

There are two main types of bynames that were used by these settlers.

### 4.1 Patronymic bynames

By far the most common type of byname was the patronymic byname, one that indicates what your father's name was. In all formal circumstances, these bynames were used, even though other bynames might have been used in informal circumstances.

A patronymic is formed by putting the father's name in the genitive (e.g. possessive) case, and adding either *-son* or *-dóttir*, depending on the bearer's gender. A brief guide to the formation of the genitive form of most names with standard endings is as follows [1]:

Nominative ending	Becomes	Genitive ending	Given name	Masculine	Feminine
-i	>	-a:	Snorri	> Snorrason	- Snorradóttir
-a	>	-u:	Sturla	> Sturluson	- Sturladóttir
-nn	>	-ns:	Sveinn	> Sveinsson	- Sveinsdóttir
-ll	>	-ls:	Ketill	> Ketilsson	- Ketilsdóttir
-rr	>	-rs:	Geirr	> Geirsson	- Geirsdóttir
-r	>	-s	Grímr	> Grímsson	- Grímsdóttir
-ir	>	-is:	Grettir	> Grettisson	- Grettisdóttir

Names that end in *-dan*, *-endr*, *-fredr*, *-frøðr*, *-gautr*, *-mundr*, *-røðr*, *-undr*, *-un(n)*, *-urðr*, *-varðr*, *-viðr*, *-vindr*, *-þórðr*, and *-þrøndr* form a genitive with *-ar*, e.g.: *Auðunn* becomes *Auðunaron* or *Auðunardóttir*

For example, *Þuríðr* daughter of *Þorsteinn* would be *Þuríðr Þorsteinsdóttir* and *Helgi* son of *Þórðr* would be *Helgi Þórðsson*.

### 4.2 Descriptive nicknames

This catch-all category covers all other types of bynames used. These informal bynames could indicate a person's occupation, physical characteristics, mental characteristics, social skills, notable events in life history, place of origin, and so on. Norse bynames often were quite unflattering, such as *beigaldi* 'weak, sickly', *meinfretr* 'stink-fart', *hmappraz* 'button-arse', as well as others whose meaning I won't print in a family newsletter.

The 10 most common bynames in the *Landnámabók* are:

1. inn gamli `the rich [man]'
2. goði `priest, local leader'
3. inn hívti `the white [man]'
4. inn sterki `the strong, powerful [man]'
5. inn auðgi `the rich [man]'
6. inn rauði `the red [man]'
7. inn spaki `the wise [man]'
8. inn svartí `the black [man]'
9. inn digri `the stout, fat [man]'
10. inn rammi `the strong [man]'

Note that all but one of these have [man] in the gloss. These are the masculine forms, and are appropriate, in these spellings, for men only. When used by women, the definite article *inn* changes to *in*, and the final *i* changes to *a*, e.g. *in gamla* `the old [woman]'

Other examples of bynames can be found in source [4].

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## References

- [1] Fleck, G. (aka Geirr Bassi Haraldsson), *The Old Norse Name*, Studia Marklandica (series) (Olney, Maryland: Yggislr Press, 1977).
- [2] Friedemann, Sara L. (Aryanhwy merch Catmael) "Viking Names found in the *Landnámabók*" (WWW: Self-published, 1998-2003) <http://www.ellipsis.cx/~liana/names/landnamabok.html>
- [3] Scott, Brian M. (Talan Gwynek) "A Very Brief History of the Scandinavian Languages " (WWW: Academy of S. Gabriel, 2002) <http://www.s-gabriel.org/names/talan/scandinavianlang.html>
- [4] Uckelman, Sara L. (Aryanhwy merch Catmael) "Viking Bynames found in the *Landnámabók*" (WWW: Self-published, 2004) <http://www.ellipsis.cx/~liana/names/vikbynames.html>