



A Page From the Boke: Italian Names

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1 Introduction

This article is the first in a new 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 first discuss Italian names.

2 Language

Italy in our period did not speak a single unified language. Rather, different dialects were spoken in different regions. The three main families of dialects are northern Italian (such as Venetian), central Italian (such as Florentine), and southern Italian (such as Sicilian). A broad map of these dialects can be found in [8]. Currently, data on central Italian names is much more accessible and common than data from northern or southern Italian names, so I have focused on central Italian names in this article. A name built from this article would be appropriate for an Italian person from Florence, Pisa, Perugia, Arezzo, and surrounding areas, from roughly the 13th century to the 16th century.

3 Given names

In 1427-1429, a census of Florence was taken. This census provides us with a substantial list of men's and women's given names. In this list, the 10 most common men's names are [5]:

1. Giovanni
2. Antonio
3. Piero
4. Francesco
5. Iacopo
6. Bartolomeo
7. Niccolo
8. Domenico
9. Lorenzo
10. Andrea

In the same census, the 10 most common women's names are [2]:

1. Caterina
2. Antonia
3. Margherita
4. Piera
5. Nanna
6. Bartolomea
7. Lisa
8. Cecca
9. Giovanna
10. Francesca

4 Bynames

There are three main types of bynames that were used in this part of Italy in the latter half of the Middle Ages.

4.1 Patronymic bynames

A patronymic byname indicates what your father's name was. There are two main ways of constructing these bynames. The first is to use the preposition <di> followed by the father's

given name, e.g. <di Giovanni> 'of Giovanni'. The second is to put the father's name in the genitive (possessive) case, and use no preposition, e.g. <Francesci> 'of Francesco'. These bynames are identical whether the bearer was a man or a woman.

4.2 Locative bynames

A locative byname indicates from where you are. There are two main ways of constructing these bynames. The first is to use the preposition <da> followed by the (Italian) name of the city, e.g. <da Firenze> 'of Florence'. The second is an ethnic byname, such as <Fiorentini> 'the Florentine [man]' or <Fiorentina> 'the Florentine [woman]'.

4.3 Family names

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, inherited family names (like modern day surnames) were also used. Some family names were originally patronymic bynames, and so derived from given names, while others were from occupations, or descriptions. References [5] and [4] contain lists of family names from Florence and Arezzo, respectively.

5 Name patterns

Until the last century or so of our period, the use of more than one given name was extremely rare. Towards the end, double given names begin to show up, but are still quite uncommon. In most cases, the second given name was the name of a saint.

It was not uncommon for a person to use both a family name and a patronymic, e.g. <Antonio di Giovanni Carducci>. Other examples of complex bynames can be found in [4].

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