

Onoma **55**
Journal of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences

ISSN: 0078-463X; e-ISSN: 1783-1644
Journal homepage: https://onomajournal.org/

Personal Names and Cultural Reconstructions: Introduction to the volume

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To cite this article: Hämäläinen, Lasse & Raunamaa, Jaakko & Virkkula, Johanna. 2020. *Personal Names and Cultural Reconstructions*: Introduction to the volume. *Onoma* 55, 9–14. DOI: 10.34158/ONOMA.55/2020/1

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.34158/ONOMA.55/2020/1

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Article history
Received on 12 February 2020.
Final form accepted on 28 December 2020.
Published online on 28 July 2021.

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Onoma 55 (2020), 9–14. DOI: 10.34158/ONOMA.55/2020/1

Personal Names and Cultural Reconstructions: Introduction to the volume

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Personal names are an indispensable part of all human cultures. No culture has yet been identified in which individuals would not or do not have personal names. The ways of naming, however, vary greatly between different cultures. Therefore, examining personal naming systems can reveal characteristics of the cultures themselves.

Personal names can be utilised for cultural reconstructions in both historical and contemporary contexts. Names often comprise a notable part of historical documents, and therefore, they serve as a valuable source of information for those branches of science that aim to reconstruct past cultures. In a globalising world where persons from different backgrounds are increasingly intermixing, people's names might tell about their ethnic, religious or other cultural background. Names might preserve people's cultural identity, but they might also expose minorities to discrimination. Nevertheless, personal names might provide important material for several sciences, for example social and cultural studies.

On the other hand, most contemporary personal names have their roots deep in history. The European naming systems, for instance, are heavily based on Christian names, many of which originate from the nomenclature used in the Middle East approximately 2000 years ago. Similarly, modern name giving is connected to the past. Naming children after their predecessors has been and continues to be one of the most common universal naming practices.

1. The conference

In order to strengthen scholarly knowledge and dialog related to these aspects of anthroponymy, an international conference with the theme 'Personal Names and Cultural Reconstructions' was organised at the University of Helsinki on 21–23 August 2019.[1] The conference also ended

[1] A blog post with photos of the event can be found at https://www.nordicsocioonomastics.org/the-conference-of-personal-names-and-cultural-reconstructions/ (accessed 2020-05-11).

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the research project *Personal name systems in Finnic and beyond: Reconstructing the concepts of name giving in cultural layers of prehistory*, funded by the Academy of Finland.[2] Seventy-six scholars from 28 different countries participated in the conference.

The conference had three keynote speakers. In the opening plenary session, Ellen Bramwell (University of Glasgow) presented findings from socio-onomastic studies on personal name choices in several northern Scottish villages as well as among refugee and Pakistani immigrants in Glasgow, emphasising the influence of cultural background and life situation. The second keynote presentation by Frog (University of Helsinki) examined the ancient Finnic personal name system from a folkloristic point of view, stating that personal names often have connections to local mythologies. In the final plenary talk, Aleksandar Loma (University of Belgrade, Serbian Academy of Sciences) discussed problems related to conducting research on prehistoric personal names, taking as examples names with the meaning 'horse' and 'wolf' in several Indo-European languages.

The conference programme also included 46 general papers and nine poster presentations. The studies assumed a wide range of different approaches to the conference theme. Most studies focused on a certain country or smaller cultural area, but some studies also focused on larger regions (the Baltic Sea area, Scandinavia, Central Europe, etc.). Most papers dealt with a certain historical period, but a notable number also examined contemporary personal naming practices. The studies represented a multidisciplinary approach to the topic, as the studies used not only the methods of onomastics but also archaeology, digital humanities, folkloristics, geography and history.

Altogether, the conference was deemed successful. Even though no decision was made on whether to organise a similar conference in the future, the participants expressed a clear hope that such a conference would take place sometime in the near future.

2. Articles in this volume

This *Onoma* volume presents an extensive collection of 14 articles related to the conference theme. Most of the articles are based on papers presented at the conference. They are arranged in an approximate chronological order, starting from early history and concluding with explorations of the present-day situation.

The volume begins with Aleksandar Loma's article, which takes the

[2] For more information about the project, see https://blogs.helsinki.fi/personal-name-systems/ (accessed 2020-05-11).

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reader to the roots of Indo-European languages and peoples. His paper concentrates on Indo-European dithematic names containing the elements 'horse' or 'wolf'. His findings suggest that use of the word horse as a personal name element referred mainly to its possession or to the use of it in combat or races, whereas wolf as a name element was mostly connected to war and the military.

The second article, written by Frog, focuses on Finnic personal names and mythology. He presents examples of Finnic personal names containing mythological aspects and compares them to the related gods and deities. He concludes by claiming that mythological names can offer a better understanding of ideologies in the past, and vice versa.

The next two articles focus on ancient Germanic personal names. Caterina Saracco compares the personal naming systems of two Germanic peoples: the Vandals and Icelanders. The study reveals that personal names had many common features among these two groups but also multiple differences. The author suggests that the differences can be explained by the fact that the studied names are from different centuries and by the external contacts that the Vandals and Icelanders had with neighbouring groups.

Sofie Laurine Albris's article, in turn, studies personal names from the Scandinavian Iron Age from the perspective of visual art from the period. The author compares personal names from the Iron Age period to animal art depicted on weapons, jewellery, horse harnesses, drinking vessels, furniture and textiles. She concludes that animal art and many personal name elements represented similar aspects of expressing and negotiating identities in Iron Age society.

Rosa and Volker Kohlheim reconstruct medieval naming customs and mentalities on the basis of personal names mentioned in documents from southern Germany in the 14th and 15th centuries. According to the authors, the emergence of new, religiously motivated personal names and the rise of new kinds of descriptive nicknames are examples of changes in the medieval mentality.

Oliver Blomqvist's article deals with Finnish names found in various types of old Swedish documents. According to the author, in many instances Swedish scribes used the Finnish forms of names and Finnish case-endings in a conscious manner. Based on this finding, he suggests that the scribes were more proficient in Finnish than previously thought.

An analysis of how individuals are named in documents from multicultural medieval Prussia is provided by Darius D. Ivoska. His article discusses the impact of Slavonic and Germanic binominality on Baltic naming and that the trend of using German or Christian names instead of Lithuanian and Prussian names is an example of how cultures interacted in this period.

Daiva Sinkevičiūtė's article takes a closer look at some Christian name stems of compound names in medieval sources on Lithuania. Her study engages with earlier scholarship on whether or not Orthodox Christianity

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influenced the pre-Christian Baltic region. Based on her material and analysis, she draws the conclusion that the adoption of some Christian name elements, earlier thought to be Eastern Slavonic in influence, could have travelled into Lithuanian naming through Polish instead.

Birgit Eggert examines names of Viking origin and how they were passed down through the generations, with particular focus on a collection of documents from 1743 onwards and how the documents relate to contemporary name use. While Viking names were still in use in Denmark, in earlier sources they tend to be lost amidst the large number of names of Christian origin. However, the article shows how digitisation may change what we know about the complex origin of personal names, which has been difficult to study previously.

Lars-Jakob Harding Kællerød investigates Danish female names created from masculine ones with the suffix *-ine*. Using three case studies, the author shows that the phenomenon became increasingly popular in Denmark during 19th century, and it was used quite creatively and diversely, especially to pass on ancestors' names in families.

Anna-Maria Balbach writes about names of Afro-Americans in the US with the help of compelling source material – newspaper articles from the 17th to 19th centuries and the information they provide on fugitive slaves and their names. The paper shows that naming indeed reflects societal change and power relations. Although the paper deals with historical material, societal change is still needed to ascertain that human life is valuable regardless of cultural background and physical appearance. We look forward to future scholarship, including from the field of onomastics, that will help further basic human rights everywhere.

The remaining three articles in the volume deal with personal names in contemporary society. Bertie Neethling examines personal names among the so-called Coloureds in South Africa, a minority population with mixed ethnic backgrounds. Despite their being rather questionable as an ethnic group because of their diversity, the collective name is still used in, for example, administrative contexts. Neethling discusses several issues related to the names and identity of Coloureds, noting that some of the tendencies are somewhat similar to the names of African-Americans in the contemporary US.

Anna Choleva-Dimitrova, Maya Vlahova-Angelova, Nadezhda Dancheva and Gergana Petkova discuss recent developments in ethnic Bulgarian naming practices, with an emphasis on first names, examining whether or not names still reflect a Bulgarian identity. Currently, Bulgarian naming practices simultaneously display international and inherently Bulgarian traits, and the range of names to choose from is currently larger than ever. This has an effect on patronymics, a part of the Bulgarian name formula.

The final article of the volume takes us back to the roots of the

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contemporary Western personal naming system. Malka Muchnik examines the renaissance of biblical names in contemporary Israel. Even though the country is becoming increasingly secular, biblical names have gained in popularity during the last few decades. This applies more often to male than female names, partly due to the lack of females mentioned by name in the Bible. Many names of male characters are nowadays given as female or unisex names.

This *Onoma* volume reflects both the multitude of anthroponomastic research being done today and the multiple understandings of what cultural reconstructions might mean in the field of onomastics. As the volume shows, reconstructing an onomastic system is both a synchronic and diachronic, historical and contemporary, practice – and our ever-changing perception of what constitutes traditional naming practices, or what in fact change means in anthroponymic systems, will, we hope, inform future onomastic research.



Figure 1: Participants in the Personal Names and Cultural Reconstructions conference. Photo ©: Oona Raatikainen.

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