

Onoma 55
Journal of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences

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

Personal naming customs and the reconstruction of medieval mentalities: The example of Southern Germany

Rosa Kohlheim, Volker Kohlheim*

To cite this article: Kohlheim, Rosa & Kohlheim, Volker. 2020. Personal naming customs and the reconstruction of medieval mentalities: The example of Southern Germany. *Onoma* 55, 99–109. DOI: 10.34158/ONOMA.55/2020/6

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.34158/ONOMA.55/2020/6

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Article history
Received on 12 February 2020.
Final form accepted on 15 June 2021.
Published online on 28 July 2021.

Personal naming customs and the reconstruction of medieval mentalities: The example of Southern Germany

Abstract: If we want to reconstruct the mentality of medieval people, name-giving customs provide an ideal source. On the one hand, we possess a broad spectre of data in the form of documented names. On the other, personal names are not bestowed in an offhand manner and therefore their bestowal gives evidence of deep-rooted mentalities and their changes. In our paper, we shall concentrate on two aspects: firstly, on the so-called "discovery of the individual" from the 12th century onwards and secondly, on the strife between the remains of an early medieval, "barbarian" mentality and a more civilized, "Christian" mentality in the Late Middle Ages. In order to illustrate our point of view, we shall analyse two different phenomena of medieval name-giving: the adoption of new, religiously motivated

* Schlosshof Birken 11, 95447 Bayreuth, Germany, rvkohlheim@t-online.de

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given names from the 12th century onwards and the rise of descriptive personal nicknames which in the course of time developed into hereditary family names.

Keywords: Medieval mentality, personal names, name-giving customs, discovery of the individual, saints' names, bynames, change of values.

Habitudes de nomination des enfants et reconstitution de la mentalité médiévale : l'exemple de l'Allemagne du Sud

Résumé : Pour tenter de reconstituer la mentalité médiévale, les pratiques de nomination des enfants représentent une source idéale. D'une part, nous disposons d'un ample éventail de données (noms datés et localisés), d'autre part les noms de personne ne sont pas attribués à la légère : leur choix témoigne de mentalités profondément enracinées et de leur évolution. Dans notre étude, nous nous centrons sur deux aspects : d'abord la « découverte de l'individu » à partir du XII^{e} siècle, ensuite le conflit entre les restes de la mentalité « barbare » du haut Moyen Âge et une mentalité plus civilisée, « chrétienne », à la fin du Moyen Âge. Pour illustrer notre point de vue, nous analyserons deux phénomènes de l'onomastique médiévale : l'adoption de noms nouveaux, choisis pour une motivation religieuse à partir du XII^{e} siècle, et l'apparition de sobriquets individuels et descriptifs d'où proviennent certains noms de famille héréditaires.

Mots-clés : Mentalité médiévale, anthroponymes, pratiques dénominatives, découverte de l'individu, noms de saints, surnoms, changement de valeurs.

Personennamengebungsgebräuche und die Rekonstruktion mittelalterlicher Mentalität: Das Beispiel Süddeutschland

Zusammenfassung: Für den Versuch, die mittelalterliche Mentalität zu rekonstruieren, stellen Namengebungsgebräuche eine ideale Quelle dar. Einerseits besitzen wir ein breites Spektrum von Daten in Form dokumentierter Namen, andererseits werden Personennamen nicht in einer leichtfertigen Weise vergeben, sodass ihre Verleihung tief eingewurzelte Mentalitäten und ihren Wandel bezeugt. In unserem Beitrag beschränken wir uns auf zwei Apekte: Erstens beleuchten wir die sog. „Entdeckung des Individuums" vom 12. Jahrhundert an und zweitens das Ringen zwischen den Resten einer frühmittelalterlichen, „barbarischen" Mentalität und einer zivilisierteren, „christlichen" Mentalität im Spätmittelalter. Um unsere Thesen zu veranschaulichen, analysieren wir zwei unterschiedliche Phänomene mittelalterlicher Namengebung: die Annahme von neuen, religiös motivierten Rufnamen ab dem 12. Jahrhundert und das Erscheinen deskriptiver persönlicher Übernamen, die sich im Lauf der Zeit zu erblichen Familiennamen entwickelten.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Mittelalterliche Mentalität, Personennamen, Namengebungsgebräuche, Entdeckung des Individuums, Heiligennamen, Beinamen, Wertewandel.

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Onoma 55 (2020), 99–109. DOI: 10.34158/ONOMA.55/2020/6

Personal naming customs and the reconstruction of medieval mentalities: The example of Southern Germany

ROSA KOHLHEIM AND VOLKER KOHLHEIM

1. Introduction: Name-giving customs and mentality

In this contribution, we shall try to show how far the analysis of personal naming customs is able to reconstruct medieval mentalities, at least partially. Before doing this, it seems necessary to explain what we understand by the term "mentality". The mentality is the deepest layer of the collective psyche of a given population, widely conditioning its thoughts and behaviour, its interpretation of the world and the way it practices its religious rites, formulates its juridic system, expresses its ideas in art and literature. Remaining largely subconscious, the mentality of a population cannot be described or defined by its members (Graus 1987: 17). Therefore the "mental disposition" (Sellin 1985: 597) of a population at a given time can only be deduced indirectly from its behaviour and its actions (Raulff 1989: 11).

In order to catch a glimpse of the medieval mentality, one might assume that literary and especially autobiographical texts were valuable sources. Such texts exist, but, as Aaron Gurjewitsch (1994: 145–146, 242, 304) has convincingly explained, those autobiographical texts do not show the personalities of their authors, but rather tend to hide their personalities behind traditional and accepted clichés and stereotypes. Medieval authors did not aim primarily at giving a true portrait of themselves but wanted to show that their lives followed a model as laid down by the Holy Scriptures or hagiography. On the other hand, literary texts like epics, chivalric romances, or poetry must be used with caution: A wide chasm existed between the poetic ideal and everyday reality. Therefore, Gurjewitsch (1994: 171) is of the opinion that it is not written texts, but the immediate communication between individuals that serves as a source for the reconstruction of mentalities. Direct traces of such acts of communication are personal names, i.e. given names and bynames, as we find them in large quantities in medieval records. And it is just the availability of this great quantity of names, datable over large periods of time, which makes personal names so valuable for research into the history of mentalities. Indeed, mentalities do not change overnight, but are phenomena of the *longue durée,* the long duration (Raulff 1989: 12). Moreover, at least from the 12th century onwards, not only the names of the ruling classes are preserved in the documents, but also the names of serfs and tenants belonging

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to the estates of the church and nobility as well as those of the inhabitants of towns and cities. Thus, the recorded names refer to members of all levels of medieval society. This is important because the history of mentalities is interested in all social layers and not only in the élites of a given society. Moreover, the bestowal of personal names can be considered as a very relevant activity, which may tell us a lot about the mentality of the period in question, i.e. the High and Late Middle Ages in Western Europe. It can be assumed that names for children were not given in an offhand manner; therefore, the way in which these names were chosen should reveal something about the mentality of the name givers. Considering all these facts it is astounding that historians of mentalities or of everyday history, apart from occasional side remarks (cf. Gurjewitsch 1994: 72, 91, 106, 150; 1997: 53), practically ignore name-giving as an important and promising source. As an exception from this rule the work of the late German medievalist Ernst Schubert must be mentioned, wherein personal names certainly are considered, but under too limited a perspective (cf. Schubert 2002: 169–176).

As it is not possible to give an all-round characterisation of medieval mentality in this paper, we shall concentrate on two aspects: Firstly, on the so called "Discovery of the Individual" (Morris 1987) from the 12th century onwards and secondly, on the strife between the remains of an early medieval, "barbarian" mentality and a more civilised, "Christian" mentality in the Late Middle Ages. In order to illustrate our point of view we shall analyse two different, though somehow connected phenomena of medieval name-giving: the diffusion and adoption of new, religiously motivated given names from the 12th century onwards and the rise of descriptive personal nicknames which in the course of time developed into hereditary family names.

2. The diffusion of saints' names and the "Discovery of the Individual"

Until the 12th century, single names of Germanic origin, mainly bithematic, dominated the German name landscape almost exclusively. These names had their origin in early Germanic times at least some centuries before Christ (Sonderegger 1997: 13). In order to indicate kinship two main strategies were used: alliteration (*Stabreim*) and name variation, in which single name elements were passed down from one generation to another. Occasionally these elements were taken from both parents (Wilson 1998: 76), but strong patrilinear tendencies prevailed (Le Jan 2002: 34). From the end of the 4th century onwards, the custom of transmitting the complete name from grandfather to grandson and, for the second son, from father to son, is documented, *Eucherius,* the Vandal *Stilicho's* only son, being the first example (Wagner 1984: 276). This principle of name-giving had its origin in the naming customs of late antiquity where it was deeply rooted (Wagner 1984: 282–283).

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In the following centuries it was adopted widely by the continental Germanic tribes. By the 12th century transmission of the complete name (*Nachbenennung*, *vernoeming*) was the standard way to indicate kinship through naming; among the nobility, a more or less strictly followed system of leading names was established (Wilson 1998: 80–85). Nothing shows better the significance of this traditional naming system than the lines from the Old High German *Lay of Hildebrand,* dating originally from the 8th century, in which Hildebrand asks his adversary to inform him about his kindred. "If you just tell me one [name]", he says, "I know the others" (v. 12; "ibu du mi enan sages, ik mi de odre uuet"). Here Hildebrand is shown decisively as a member of the early medieval world in which "the individual experienced himself and was chiefly defined via his or her adherence to a certain group" (Dinzelbacher 2017: 130). We need not go further into the special traits of this system, suffice it to say that by the beginning of the 12th century name-giving was rather mechanical, regulated by a more or less rigid system of name transmission.

This name-giving system was threatened and finally overcome by the diffusion of names with a Christian connotation, principally biblical and saints' names. The process of this diffusion has been thoroughly investigated for Italy, France, and Germany (cf. Kohlheim 2013: 60–67). Certainly, successful Christianisation and the intensified worship of saints, typical of the Late Middle Ages, were prerequisites for the adoption of these new names, but these cultural phenomena did not cause it, at least not in Latin, Western Christianity. The origins of this new way of name bestowal lie in Byzantium, where it had become the norm as early as in the course of the 5th century (Ainiala et al. 2012: 150). The acceptance of the new, linguistically foreign names in Western Europe started considerably later, actually in the 9th century, in the Italian areas dominated or influenced by Byzantium – Bari, Amalfi, Ravenna, and Venice (Brattö 1953; Ainiala et al. 2012: 150; Kohlheim 2013: 60–67). The new names spread out rather slowly across Western Europe according to the laws of social and geographical innovation diffusion (Kohlheim 2011). The acceptance of the new naming system was not easy as it meant a radical rupture with traditional ways of name bestowal which, as we have seen, consisted in name transmission and were aimed at indicating kinship. Basically this traditional way of name bestowal reflected the preponderance of the group over the individual, characteristic of the early medieval world view. That this world view from the 12th century onwards gradually made way to a new conception of the individual has been shown by many medievalists, especially by Colin Morris in his influential book *The discovery of the individual, 1050–1200*, published in 1972 (cf. Dinzelbacher 2017: 280). He and others (cf. Dinzelbacher 2017: 130–134) have presented abundant evidence from the fields of literature, art, and religion showing that about this time a new tendency towards individualism and self-consciousness came into existence, at least among the educated classes (Dinzelbacher 2017: 131). But what about

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the other levels of the population? We think that a way to demonstrate the diffusion of this new conception of the self among the population at large is the study of the acceptance of the new name-giving practice. The traditional principle of name transmission clearly reflected the early medieval conception of man defining himself as member of a group, in this case the clan or the family. The parental choice of a biblical or a saint's name for the newborn child signifies an essential rupture with this custom; the child is no longer seen primarily as a member of the family, but as an individual proper. Thus, we hold that the study of given names can provide important material for the reconstruction of medieval mentalities.

3. The adoption of personal bynames and the prevalence of a new mentality

In Western Europe, since the 12th century the given name was increasingly accompanied by a second name, which by and by became hereditary. What does this signify with regard to the mentality of medieval society? In the first place the bestowal of a second name, which is not taken from a given set of names, as is the case with first names, be they traditional Germanic names or be they new saints' names, indicates a sharpened sight of the individual, which is designated by this second name. In the early and high Middle Ages everyone understood himself primarily as a member of a definite group, as a knight, a cleric, a merchant, or a peasant. What mattered was the type, not the individual (Gurjewitsch 1994: 243). This view slowly underwent a change from the 12th century onwards, together with the acceptance of the nominalistic philosophy. Admittedly, three of the four main categories of second names still regard the named person as belonging to a group: second names derived from first names (*Arnold, Heindel, Nickel*), predominantly patronyms, see the individual as a member of a definite family. Second names derived from the names of places or geographical features (*Allgäuer, Kehlheimer, Bühler*) identify their bearers as belonging to a group of people who came from or lived at the indicated places. Finally, second names derived from occupations (*Becker, Müller, Schuster*) quite clearly identify the respective name bearers as members of a social group. But then we have a fourth and very important group of second names: names which are derived from nicknames or bynames. Here, obviously the singular person is seen as an individual with special salient traits. As the characteristic features by which a person may be defined are practically unlimited, the features which were finally selected are important signs of what medieval name givers regarded as relevant. And as many of these bynames have survived in our modern family names they tell us even today what medieval name givers considered to be significant in a person, which character flaws they blamed and which virtues they praised.

It is generally recognized that after a change of mentality has taken place

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there always remain traces of the earlier mentality (Gurjewitsch 1994: 27–28; Dinzelbacher 2008: XXXVI). The mentality of what he calls the "barbarian society of the 5th to the 8th centuries" has been thoroughly analysed by the Austrian historian Georg Scheibelreiter (1999). He describes the "barbarian" man of the early Middle Ages as inclined to unlimited violence, to unreflected and uninhibited behaviour, as envious and greedy, prone to showing off, bare of any ethical principles (Scheibelreiter 1999: 144–167). It is conspicuous that especially these traits play an important role in the nicknames contained in our material from Southern Germany. Therefore, Scheibelreiter's definitions may well serve as a model for the categorization of the nicknames found in medieval sources. The nicknames examined were taken from the documents of an important city (Regensburg, cf. RUB I, RUB II), a small town (Bayreuth, cf. StB1), and two rural areas (the surroundings of Bayreuth, cf. LB, and of Hof, cf. HU) and date mainly from the 14th and 15th centuries. While the analysis of single nicknames does not lead to reliable results, the analysis of groups of nicknames referring to particular traits and their counterparts may indeed.

Many nicknames documented in our material were intended as criticism of the violent disposition or the quarrelsome behaviour of the first name bearers. Thus we find nicknames such as *Schelle* (MHG [= Middle High German] *schël, -lles* 'noisy, irascible'[1]; RUB I, No. 1193), *Sturm* (MHG *sturm* 'noise, storm, violent emotion'; RUB I, p. 743 and HU, f. 69a), *Duner* ('noisy, violent person', MHG *doner* 'thunder', early NHG [= New High German] *donen* 'to shout, to roar'; HU, f. 172a), *Tossel* ('one who gives vent to his anger', Bavarian *dōßen* 'to roar; to give vent to one's anger', cf. Schmeller 1872, column 547; RUB II, No. 906), and *Råuffår* ('roughneck', MHG *roufen* 'to become violent'; RUB II, No. 197) referring to a noisy, irascible, violent person. A whole group of nicknames refers to quarrelsome persons, namely *Pofer* (MHG *baffen* 'to quarrel'; RUB II, No. 191), *Streyter* (MHG *strīten* 'to quarrel', RUB I, No. 409), *Zånkel* and *Zänker* (MHG *zanken* 'to quarrel'; RUB I, No. 608; HU, f. 15b), *Hefdenstrit* ('one who starts a quarrel', MHG *heben* 'to beginn, to start' + MHG *strīt* 'quarrel', RUB I, p. 730), *Vrlewg* (MHG *urliuge* 'quarrel, war'; LB, p. 350), *Haß* (MHG *haȝ* 'hatred'; LB, p. 350), and *Veintel* (MHG *vīent* 'enemy', HU, f. 39a). On the other hand, there is a group of nicknames, though less numerous, denoting the opposite traits, i.e. gentleness, lenience, friendliness, generosity: *Senft* (MHG *senfte* 'gentle, lenient, friendly'; RUB I, No. 1250), *Cheurel* (MHG *gehiure* 'gentle, delightful, pleasant'; RUB I, p. 730), *Gemach* (MHG *gemach* 'pleasant, considerate', RUB II, p. 486), *Sůzze* and *Sussman* (MHG *süeȝe* 'sweet, lenient, friendly'; RUB I, No. 117 and HU, f. 119a; LB, p. 216), *Milt* (MHG *milte* 'friendly, generous, merciful'; LB, p. 356). These examples point out that a change of mentality was taking place: quarrel and violence, though still an

1 The etymologies of the name elements are based on Götze (1967), Grimm & Grimm (1999, = DWB), Lexer (1869–1878), Schmeller (1872, 1877).

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integral part of late medieval behaviour, were no longer regarded as positive traits, particularly as they came into conflict with Christian qualities like self-control, compassion, and gentleness.

A noticeable change of mentality since the early Middle Ages is indicated by two further groups of nicknames. According to Scheibelreiter (1999: 152), roughness, coarseness, and rudeness were characteristic features of the earlier period. In the 14th and 15th centuries, however, politeness and courteousness were increasingly seen as desirable qualities. Thus coarse, ill-mannered people were harshly criticized. They were often compared to a piece of wood or to a clump of earth. So we find *Knebl* (MHG *knebel* 'gag; coarse person'; RUB II, p. 491), *Chnödel* (MHG *knode* 'knot', also 'dumpling'; RUB II, No. 536), *Chnüttel* (MHG *knüttel* 'knotty piece of wood, club, cudgel'; RUB I, No. 524), *Knaur* (MHG *knūre* 'coarse person'; StB1, No. 47), *Kolb* (MHG *kolbe* 'club, mace'; RUB II, No. 42 and LB, p. 149), *Prügel* (MHG *brügel* 'club, cudgel'; RUB II, p. 483), *Raitel* (MHG *reitel* 'short, thick pole; club'; HU f. 97b), *Schlegel* (MHG *slegel* 'tool for beating/knocking; hammer, mallet', early NHG *schlegel* 'coarse person'; RUB II, No. 888 and HU, f. 38b) or *Schrolle* (MHG *schrolle* 'clod of earth, lump'; RUB II, p. 480) and *Knoll* (*knolle* 'clod of earth, clump', HU, f. 12a). Some were unmetaphorically characterised as rough or bad-mannered with names like *Vnbehawen* (MHG *unbehouwen* 'rough, rude'; LB, p. 197) or *Unsit* (MHG *unsite* 'bad manners, violent temper'; RUB II, No. 829). In contrast, praising nicknames were rare, *Höbsch* (MHG *hövesch, hövisch* 'courtly; well-mannered'; RUB II, No. 906) being the only example in our sources.[2]

Also typical of the "barbarian" mentality was, according to Scheibelreiter (1999: 153), its fondness for glittering and precious objects, for pomp and splendour. This mentality, which had obviously survived until the Late Middle Ages, was bound to come into conflict with Christian values like modesty and humility. Nicknames like *Pochner* (early NHG *pocher* 'boastful person'; RUB I, No. 737), *Pranger* ('boastful person', MHG *prangen* 'to boast'; RUB I, No. 982), and *Pfawe* (MHG *phāwe, pfāwe*; RUB I, No. 527) 'peacock', a symbol of vanity, allude to this situation and criticize boasting, showing off, and vanity from a Christian point of view.

The earlier negative attitude towards labour had undergone a substantial change during the Middle Ages, not least because of the development of trade in the thriving towns and cities (cf. Kohlheim 1998: 240–241; Kohlheim 2009: 489–490; Kohlheim & Kohlheim 2014: 160–161). Meanwhile industriousness and ambition were regarded as positive values. This development is suggested by nicknames praising lively and efficient people: e.g. *Hiuzzo* (MHG *hiuʒe* 'lively'; RUB I, No. 81), *Chekch* (MHG *këc, quëc* 'lively, courageous'; RUB II,

[2] Of course, praising nicknames could occasionally have been bestowed ironically or as an act of mockery. But this does not alter the fact that a name like *Höbsch* as a "proprial lemma" (Van Langendonck 2007: 7–8) was understood as representing a positive value.

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No. 1084c and LB, p. 245), *Resch* (MHG *resch(e)* ‘quick, lively, active’; RUB I, No. 982; LB, p. 338 and HU, f. 93a), *Snell* (MHG *snël* ‘quick, lively, skilful, strong, brave’; RUB II, No. 906), *Wakcher* (MHG *wacker* ‘awake, vigilant, active, lively, efficient, brave’; RUB I, No. 247), *Zanger* (MHG *zanger* ‘sharp’, figuratively ‘fresh, lively, active’; RUB I, p. 740). At the same time, late medieval society disapproved of idleness and laziness, as we can observe in nicknames like *Vaulschinkch* (‘lazybones’, MHG *fūl* ‘rotten, foul; lazy’ + MHG *schinke* ‘thigh; lower leg’; RUB II, No. 414), *Feyerabent* (‘lazy tradesman’, MHG *vīrābent* ‘evening before a feast’, later ‘time after work’; RUB I, p. 734), *Veyrer* (‘idle person’, MHG *vīren* ‘to celebrate; to be idle’; RUB I, p. 743), *Vozz* (early NHG *foß* ‘lazy’; RUB II, No. 506), *Lazzl* (MHG *laʒ* ‘weak, weary, lazy’; RUB I, No. 881), *Lainǻr* (Bavarian *Lainer* ‘idle person’, Schmeller 1872, column 1477; RUB II, No. 906), *Musser* (‘idle person’, MHG *muoʒe* ‘leisure, comfort, idleness’; RUB II, No. 906), *Můssigsprot* (probably meaning ‘one who enjoys leisure’, MHG *müeʒec*, *müeʒʒic* ‘idle’ + MHG *brōt* ‘bread’; RUB I, p. 758), *Seltenstich* (‘lazy tradesman’, e.g. tailor, shoemaker, cobbler, MHG *sëlten* ‘rare’ + MHG *stich* ‘stitch’; RUB II, No. 1084), *Spet* (‘one who is always late’, ‘late-riser’, MHG *spet* ‘late’; LB, p. 281), *Strantz* (‘lazy person, layabout’, MHG *stranzen* ‘to laze about’; RUB I, p. 752).

4. Conclusion

Parting from the hypothesis that name-giving customs may indicate salient traits of the mentality of the name givers, two aspects stood in the centre of our observations concerning the reconstruction of medieval mentalities: The discovery of the individual and the overcoming of the “barbarian” mentality in the Late Middle Ages. The spread of saints’ and other Christian names, which in any case were chosen individually for each child anew and not given according to fixed rules as was the habit in the earlier Germanic name-giving system was interpreted as a sign of the rise of individualism. The strife between an older, “barbarian” mentality and a more civilized, “Christian” mentality could be observed from the spread of new, individual bynames referring to qualities which were regarded as vices or virtues respectively. Thus, the rich material of personal names which we find in medieval documents may serve as an important source for the reconstruction of historic mentalities.

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