

## Personal Names

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### Roman Names

Ancient Roman names consisted of three elements: the *praenomen* (given name), the *nomen* (the family name), and the *cognomen* (nickname). Cognomina were generally acquired in adulthood or early youth, often on the basis of some exploit or physical characteristic. In some families, the cognomen itself became hereditary. Typical examples of cognomina are *Cicero* 'chickpea', *Plautus* 'flat-footed', and *Africanus* 'of Africa' (this cognomina was acquired by the Roman general Publius Cornelius Scipio on account of his victories in North Africa). These Roman names had a considerable influence on the subsequent naming systems of Italy and other Romance-speaking countries.

### Emergence of the Binomial System

Most people in the modern world bear a name consisting of two main parts – a given name (or names) and a surname. So strong and widespread is this binomial system that personal naming systems in cultures where it is not indigenous are nevertheless tending to adapt themselves to it. A typical surname is inherited from the parents, whereas the given name is chosen by them. Various conventions govern the use of both kinds of name. This modern binomial system arose in Europe during the late Middle Ages and is associated with the rise of a feudal bureaucracy, but it has now spread far beyond the boundaries of Europe.

In Europe itself, the system of hereditary surnames, discussed below, generally replaced an older patronymic naming system, in which an individual was known by a forename plus a given name identifying his or her father (which, in the case of women in patriarchal societies, was generally replaced on marriage by the given name of the husband). In the patronymic system, an individual was often expected to know not only his or her father's name but also the entire genealogy stretching back for several generations. A typical example is an individual in 18th-century Anglesey, Wales, who gave his name as *David ap William ap David Lloyd ap Thomas ap Dafydd ap Gwilym ap Dafydd Ieuan ap Howel, ap Cynfrig ap Iorwerth Fychan ap Iorwerth ap Grono ap Tegerin*. This genealogical name contains a mixture of English and Welsh forms (*David, Dafydd*), occasional

distinguishing double names (*David Lloyd, Dafydd Ieuan*), and epithets (*Fychan*, lenited form of *bychan* 'little'). Such a genealogical name, although no doubt valuable for such purposes as establishing inheritance rights in a society in which written documents were few, is self-evidently cumbersome for most practical purposes. It is therefore not surprising that it was replaced by the more streamlined system that is now used.

Patronymic systems were the norm in medieval Germanic and Slavic languages. In most parts of Europe, they were replaced by systems based on hereditary surnames between the 11th and 14th centuries, but survived as the norm in Scandinavia, Wales, and Ashkenazic Jewish communities well into the 19th century. This system is still used in Iceland, where hereditary surnames are still not established. Instead, an individual is known by a given name and a patronymic; for example, *Steinn Sigurðsson*. Given names often alternate from generation to generation, so the latter's father is quite likely to have been called *Sigurð Steinsson*. His sister Ragnhild is *Ragnhild Sigurðsdóttir* 'daughter of Sigurth.'

In Ireland and the Highlands and islands of Scotland, the ancient Gaelic clan system made for an easy transition to the hereditary surname system.

Many modern surnames represent patronymics that became frozen at some particular point in time; for example, *MacDermott* 'son of Dermot' in Gaelic; *Powell*, Welsh *ap Hywell*, 'son of Hywel'; and English *Wilson, Williams, Williamson, Wills, Wilks, Wilkins, Wilkinson*, all originating as 'son of Will or William.'

### Forenames

A forename (also called given name) is bestowed on a child by the parents, by a priest or other religious or social figure, or by a tribal group or clan. (The terms 'forename' and 'given name' are synonyms, but the latter emphasizes the role of parental choice in name giving.) Typically, the name is bestowed in a naming ceremony, for example Christian baptism. Naming practices are discussed in some detail in Alford (1988). In secular societies, registration at a registry office has taken the place of a religious ceremony. In European languages, the inventory of standard given names comprises a relatively small set of extremely ancient traditional items, the etymology of which may be lost or not widely known. Thus, the etymology of names such as *Elizabeth, Anne, Mary, Jane, William, Robert, Edward, David, and Matthew*, all of which are used throughout the English-speaking world and beyond (and all of which have cognate forms in