

The Rise of Christian Names in the Thirteenth Century: A Case Study of the English Nobility

David Morris
University of St Andrews

An individual's given name is among the most important components of his or her identity.¹ Consequently, one can learn much about a particular society by its naming patterns: this collective body of information can shed light on underlying trends, norms and values. Most important to the historian is the capacity large numbers of names have for indicating social, cultural and even political change. In this vein, medieval England offers a particularly instructive example. The Norman Conquest irrevocably altered England's traditional naming practices. Within a few generations of the Conquest, the repertoire of continental names was fast replacing that of Anglo-Saxon, or 'insular', origin. By the thirteenth century, the great mass of English peasants, especially men, shared common names such as *Robert*, *Henry* or *Richard* with the largely Francophone aristocracy that ruled England after 1066. This transition is of great importance if one is to understand adequately the process of cultural interchange that defined and continues to define English culture since the Norman Conquest. It also allows one to probe the matter further, specifically into the question of when and how 'Christian names' began to assume a prominent place in medieval England alongside the Continental Germanic variety brought by the Normans, perpetuated by a French-speaking regime and adopted by its English-speaking subjects. The growing popularity of religious names was a European-wide trend, but because of its unique experience and its excellent records, England offers a wealth of insights into this issue.

In order to comprehend this process more fully, one must look at

¹ I am grateful to Professor Robert Bartlett of the Department of Mediaeval History at the University of St. Andrews for both his helpful comments in preparing this paper and his encouragement in seeking its publication.

specific examples of how naming practices changed in England from the twelfth century onwards. Only then can one gain a greater appreciation of the context in which Christian names were to become more popular in the thirteenth century. Given the scheme of European history, it is not so surprising that English naming patterns underwent a dramatic change after the Norman Conquest. Indeed, the very Continental Germanic names the Normans introduced from France were originally the product of comparable circumstances: names such as *Richard*, *Henry*, *Robert* or *Geoffrey* were all borne by the various Germanic peoples who settled in France, Spain and Italy as the Western Roman Empire was disintegrating in the fifth century. Over time, the indigenous Roman, Latin-speaking populations in these areas came to adopt these names and make them their own.² A similar process took place in twelfth-century England. At the time of Domesday Book, people who had Continental Germanic names were almost certainly non-English. Over the next several decades, this distinction steadily eroded. Tenant surveys at Burton Abbey at Appleby Magna from about 1114–1128 show that although most people still had Old English names, virtually all the cottagers (*cotseti*) had given names of continental origin.³

The pace of this transition was by no means uniform from region to region, but nevertheless, it was readily manifest throughout the whole of England by the mid-twelfth century. By the 1160s, only about a quarter of the names listed for Canterbury were of insular origin, and Winchester recorded an even lower proportion by 1148.⁴ Admittedly, these were two cities likely to draw substantial Norman and other French settlement, considering that Winchester was one of the largest cities of the realm, while Canterbury was the seat of the English

² J. Moorhead, *The Roman Empire Divided, 400–700* (London, 2001), p. 144.

³ D. Postles, ‘The changing pattern of male forenames in medieval Leicestershire and Rutland to c.1350’, *Local Population Studies*, no. 50 (Spring 1993), 54–61 (p. 55).

⁴ C. Clark, ‘The early personal names of King’s Lynn: an essay in socio-cultural history. Part 1—Baptismal names’, *Nomina*, 6 (1982), 51–71; repr. in *Words, Names and History. Selected Writings of Cecily Clark*, edited by P. Jackson (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 241–57 (p. 251).

Church. Yet the shift was also apparent in other, less obvious, places: by the mid-thirteenth century, only one-fifth of men's names in Newark remained of Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Scandinavian origin.⁵ Indeed, for Norfolk as a whole, only a quarter of all recorded names were insular. Some regions were slower to adopt the new continental forms. Cecily Clark examined the sources for the town of King's Lynn, with its extensive trade contacts with the Low Countries and the Baltic. She found that even into the late-twelfth century, its naming patterns remained relatively conservative compared to other locations: insular names here represented forty-five per cent of the sample from the Pipe Roll for 1166.⁶ Women's names too were more likely to retain the old insular forms for a longer period of time than their male counterparts; on balance, the shift from Old English to continental names among women tended to lag about a generation or so behind men.⁷ Nevertheless, despite such uneven progress, this trend came to affect all of England and resulted in the replacement of the stock of English and Anglo-Scandinavian personal names with those of Norman-French origin by the thirteenth century. One manorial survey from about 1245 lists nearly 500 tenants and virtually all of them had Continental Germanic names.⁸ By this time, every social stratum in England had adopted the names that a century-and-a-half earlier would have distinguished the Anglo-Norman elite from the rest of the population.

The replacing of English names for continental varieties was a process that also coincided with two other trends affecting English naming patterns. First, over the course of the twelfth century, the active stock of names had declined sharply so that there was a greater concentration among only a few selected names. Whereas there were as many as 500 names in common usage during the twelfth century, the

⁵ *Ibid.* As late as 1177, about sixty per cent of the insular names in Newark were of Scandinavian origin (*ibid.*, p. 249).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 250. However, Clark also points out that the Pipe Roll may well have dealt with only the senior burgesses of the town, many of whom would have been born before c.1120 and thus would be less likely to have Norman names.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁸ Postles, 'The changing pattern of male forenames in medieval Leicestershire and Rutland to c.1350', 56.

number rapidly diminished over the course of the thirteenth century as more and more people were given stock names such as *William* or *John*.⁹ This development is interrelated with the second trend, which is most important from the vantage point of this study: the growing importance of religious names throughout the thirteenth century. At the time of Domesday Book, few people in the Norman aristocracy were named after saints, biblical figures or other elements indicative of a quintessentially Christian repertoire. In general, most of the great land-holders listed in 1086 bear names of the Continental Germanic stock, which had been prevalent in France from Merovingian times onwards. However, the increasing frequency of religious appellations in England is an unmistakable trend that first begins to emerge under the last Anglo-Norman kings, Henry I and Stephen. Among the earliest examples that illustrate this development are two surveys of the burgesses of Winchester, the first carried out in 1115 and the second in 1148. The 1115 survey shows that only six per cent of the non-insular names borne by the burgesses were Christian, a figure consistent with other findings: another survey from Sussex records only seven per cent of the non-insular forms being of religious origin.¹⁰ By 1148, the share of Christian names for the Winchester burgesses grew to sixteen per cent, a substantial increase in little more than three decades.¹¹

Yet apart from isolated surveys and Pipe Rolls, how can one determine the progress of this trend throughout England into the thirteenth century and beyond? One of the most interesting possibilities is to use the Inquisitions Post Mortem that abound from the 1230s onwards. Inquisitions Post Mortem were records made of the properties of the king's tenants-in-chief after they died. In general, they determined the extent of the holdings of the deceased tenant and listed his or her heirs. Analyses of the Inquisitions have been used for a variety of purposes

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ C. Clark, 'Battle c.1110: an anthroponomist looks at an Anglo-Norman new town', *Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies*, 2 (1979), 21–41 (p. 28); repr. in *Words, Names and History*, edited by Jackson, pp. 221–40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*; cf. R. Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075–1225* (New York and Oxford, 2000), p. 540.

relating to social and cultural history. For example, some social historians have employed detailed analyses of these tenancy records as a possible means of determining the mortality rate of the Black Death.¹² Others have applied the data to women's history as well.¹³ For our purposes, the importance of the Inquisitions rests with the simple fact that they provide an extensive list of the names of virtually all people who held land directly from the kings of England. Therefore, unlike isolated manorial surveys, with the Inquisitions Post Mortem, posterity has a continuous source that allows one to determine the ebb and flow of specific trends in naming practices spanning the course of decades, generations and, if one is ambitious enough, centuries.

There are, to be sure, some reservations about using this type of source as a tool for making generalisations about medieval England as a whole. The most obvious is that the Inquisitions, by their very nature, pertain to the uppermost stratum of the landholding classes. In most circumstances, it can be dangerous to apply the conclusions one can draw from the Inquisitions to a broader segment of medieval English society. Nevertheless, in this particular instance, it is not inappropriate to look on the development of naming practices amongst the tenants-in-chief as being potentially instructive of the trends shaping the rest of English society. In light of the steady dissemination of continental forms from the Anglo-Norman elite to the rest of the English population, one must understand the entire process as an essentially 'trickle-down' affair. Very often developments within the upper classes portended future developments among lower social strata. For this reason, it is important to gain an awareness of how naming practices changed by looking at documents that focus on a particular class of people in relative isolation from the rest of society. This is especially the case with an upper class that had such a profound effect on naming practices.

¹² J. Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy 1348–1350* (Hampshire and London, 1977), p. 22. In this instance, Hatcher finds that out of 505 listed tenants-in-chief, 138 perished by 1350, suggesting a Black Death mortality rate, among the aristocracy at least, of about twenty-seven per cent.

¹³ See for example J. B. Post, 'Another demographic use of Inquisitions Post Mortem', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 5 (1974), 110–14.

For this study, all of the Inquisitions Post Mortem filed under three kings were analysed: Henry III (1216–1272), Edward I (1272–1307) and Edward II (1307–1327).¹⁴ Why these particular monarchs? The Inquisitions do not become prevalent until the reign of Henry III, particularly from the mid-thirteenth century onwards. Indeed, the first one listed in the *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem* dates only from the twentieth year of Henry's reign.¹⁵ At the other end of the timeline, the Inquisitions filed under Edward II would have, in many cases, pertained to the last generation that was born and had its formative years in the thirteenth century. Taken together, the records compiled under these three monarchs span the course of nearly a century, from the second quarter of the thirteenth century to the second quarter of the fourteenth. The total number of subjects for Inquisitions filed under each monarch was as follows: 830 for Henry III; 1,722 for Edward I; 1,266 for Edward II.

If one tallies the personal names listed, the distribution of certain forms becomes readily apparent. Under Henry III, names that could be called 'Christian' in origin, that is, biblical or the names of saints, represent 29.8 per cent of all occurrences (Table 1). This figure includes both men and women, who were the subject of ninety-seven Inquisitions, or 11.7 per cent. After 1272, one sees a substantial increase in the proportion of religious names. Under Edward I, they represent 41.7 per cent of all occurrences. Christian names become even more prevalent among the Inquisitions filed in the later years of Edward's reign and this trend continues into that of his son: under Edward II, the religious form accounts for 47.5 per cent of all occurrences. These data clearly lend strong credence to the assertion that Christian names were becoming increasingly popular during the High Middle Ages and later.

The growing importance of religious forms can be seen from another perspective as well. In Table 2, the occurrences of the most common male names are ranked for each of the three monarchs. Under Henry III, one finds that the most common name is, by far, the Con-

¹⁴ *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem and Other Analogous Documents*, vols 1–4 (London and Hereford, 1904–10).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 1.

tinental Germanic *William*. The next most popular name is *Robert*, followed by the biblical *John*. Yet four of the five next most commonly occurring names are, like *William* and *Robert*, of Continental Germanic stock: *Richard*, *Ralph*, *Roger* and *Henry*. Among Christian names, there is a very high degree of concentration. The leading example, *John*, is more than twice as common as *Thomas*, which in turn is more than twice as common as *Nicholas* or *Peter*. By the time of Edward I, *John* has surpassed *William* and *Robert* while *Thomas* has moved from being the joint sixth most common name to the fourth. Other Christian names, such as *Nicholas*, *Peter*, *Philip* and *Adam* are also well represented. Under Edward II, the rank in total frequency for the two most popular Christian names, *John* and *Thomas*, remains the same while other religious forms continue to become more popular, with *Peter* rising from twelfth most frequent to tenth and *Nicholas* from joint tenth to seventh. Throughout this era, the high degree of concentration seen in Christian names becomes even more acute: by the time of Edward II, *John* is nearly three times more frequent than *Thomas*, which remains more than twice as frequent as the next most common Christian name, *Nicholas*. The prevalence of both *John* and *Thomas* may well be explained by the importance of the saints who had these names. *John* could refer either to the Baptist or to the Evangelist.¹⁶ *Thomas* could refer to the apostle Thomas Didymus, but in the English context, it was more likely Thomas Becket.

Another distinguishing feature of these data is the growing number of Anglo-Saxon names. Although the overall proportion is minuscule throughout the period under consideration, the percentage rises significantly from 0.4 per cent under Henry III to 1.4 per cent of male subjects under Edward II (Table 1). The growing number of English names used by the aristocracy is due chiefly to the rising popularity of the name *Edmund*. Indeed, there are fifteen occurrences of English names among the Inquisitions of Edward II and fourteen of these are

¹⁶ See Stell's discussion of various theories as to why the name *John* was so popular: P. M. Stell, 'Forenames in thirteenth and fourteenth century Yorkshire: a study based on a biographical database generated by computer', *Medieval Prosopography*, 20 (1999), 95–128 (pp. 102–03).

Edmund. Names like *Edmund* or *Edward* are difficult to classify. Should one see their rising popularity among the tenants-in-chief as a sign of an emerging sense of ‘Englishness’? Such a path is unwise considering that several members of the royal family had these names; this fact may well have influenced other people’s decision to give such names to their children. Henry III was the first king of England since the Norman Conquest to give his sons Anglo-Saxon names, *Edward* and *Edmund*. Yet his decision to name his sons thus does not necessarily stem from any real sort of nascent Englishness. Instead, he named them after two of England’s most important saints, Edmund the Martyr and Edward the Confessor. Hence, people listed in the Inquisitions with such names may have been given them for any number of reasons: the example of the royal family, an assertion of English identity, or devotion to the saints who happened to bear names of Anglo-Saxon origin.

As for women’s names, any statement about them must be qualified by the fact that since there are far fewer samples, measurements of the frequency of certain names are bound to be less reliable than their male counterparts. This unfortunate reality has hampered other studies in medieval onomastics.¹⁷ Nevertheless, one can begin to plot some of the more common occurrences of names found in the Inquisitions (Table 3). Under Henry III, the most frequent occurrences are of the Continental Germanic *Matilda* and the biblical *Isabel* (of course, a variant of *Elizabeth*).¹⁸ However, by the reigns of Edward I and Edward II, *Joan* records the most occurrences, paralleling the growing popularity of the masculine *John*.

These findings are consistent with other studies that examine English naming patterns at a later date, farther down the social pyramid. Stell has analysed tens of thousands of personal names from

¹⁷ Postles, ‘The changing pattern of male forenames in medieval Leicester and Rutland to c.1350’, 54.

¹⁸ I found identifying female names as being of a particular form relatively difficult. Stell’s article proved to be very valuable in this regard. He categorises *Matilda* and *Alice (Adalheidis)* as Continental Germanic names while identifying *Agnes* as Christian (‘Forenames in thirteenth and fourteenth century Yorkshire’, 99).

Yorkshire in the later Plantagenet era. The first period of analysis draws its data from a tax list of 1284 and the lay subsidies of 1297 and 1301. After surveying 15,938 men's names and 1,550 women's names, Stell found that the four most common men's names are *William, John, Robert* and *Thomas*—identical to the distribution of occurrences in the Inquisitions Post Mortem of Edward I and Edward II, save for the reversed rankings of *William* and *John*.¹⁹ The second collection of data Stell employs is gathered from the poll tax rolls of 1379 and 1381, which together name 31,182 men and 17,331 women.²⁰ In these returns, the primacy of Christian names is strongly suggested: two of the three most common names, *John* and *Thomas*, are religious and *John* alone is more common than the next two put together.²¹ In sum, it appears that the name *John* surpassed the Continental Germanic stock over the course of the thirteenth century and that its ascendancy was fully established during the fourteenth century, thereby assuming its current place as the most common given name in the English-speaking world.

An obvious question emerges from this discussion: what accounts for the growing popularity of religious names in this era? Ultimately, the twelfth-century origins of this unmistakable trend have deep-seated cultural reasons, but Patrice Beck suggests that the role of the Church may well have enhanced this development. The growing consolidation of the Church coincided with the increasing frequency of religious names. These developments can be linked by two institutions: the sacrament of baptism and the growing importance of godparents.²² Because the Church held sway over both, it came to have a formative impact upon the evolution of naming patterns throughout Europe. Beck sees this connection as a sign of the Catholic Church's increasing consolidation in the late-twelfth and early-thirteenth centuries: ‘The

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 118–22.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 123–27.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² P. Beck, ‘Personal naming among the rural populations in France and the end of the Middle Ages’, in *Personal Names Studies of Medieval Europe: Social Identity and Familial Structures*, edited by G. T. Beech, M. Bourin and P. Chareille (Kalamazoo, Mich., 2002), p. 148.

clerical impact upon personal naming was undeniable: it was a sign of the success of a Church triumphant from this time on, fully-organised and endowed with solid institutions for social supervision'.²³

The issue of names was and is of enough importance to warrant official ecclesiastical policies to govern the selection process undertaken by parents and godparents. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of the sanctity of the baptismal name²⁴ and suggests the selection of a saint's name, or a name invoking a Christian mystery or virtue.²⁵ The *Codex Juris Canonici* is even more adamant: 'Parents, sponsors and the pastor are to see that a name is not given which is foreign to Christian sentiment'.²⁶ The extent to which the Church affected the naming patterns of medieval Europe is open to debate, but it appears reasonable to say that the Church's support reinforced any nascent trends toward religious names. The records taken together, especially the Inquisitions Post Mortem, offer posterity a great insight into the overall developments that mark this intriguing element of social history.

Table 1: Types of Personal Names in Inquisitions Post Mortem

	<i>Henry III</i>	<i>Edward I</i>	<i>Edward II</i>	
Total Subjects	830	1,722	1,266	
<i>Personal Names</i>				
Religious	247	29.8	718	41.7
Anglo-Saxon (male)	3	0.4	15	1.0
Female Subjects	97	11.7	226	13.1
			192	15.2

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2158.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2156.

²⁶ *Codex Juris Canonici*, can. 855; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2156.

