



Book Review

Personal Names and Naming Practices in Medieval Scotland. EDITED BY MATTHEW HAMMOND. Woodbridge, United Kingdom: Boydell Press. 2019. Pp. xix + 293 (Hardback). £95.00. ISBN 13: 978-178327428-4.

For the student of British medieval personal names, a change is afoot. The value of names has long been acknowledged by the historian but, in the last two decades, it seems to have been taken up with renewed vigor. Studies appear to be more frequent and to employ a greater variety of theoretical approaches to their diverse pool of data. *Personal Names and Naming Practices in Medieval Scotland*, the product of a conference held at the University of Glasgow's Centre for Scottish and Celtic Studies in 2014, marks one such manifestation of this new impetus.

At the heart of this collection of essays lies the *People of Medieval Scotland* project (*PoMS*), a prosopographical and relational database of circa 21,000 individuals who appear in over 8,600 documents written between 1093 and 1314 (3). Produced by King's College London's digital humanities team, just as the *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England* (*PASE*) before it, this marks a colossal and applaudable achievement. It is yet again testament to the value of the digital humanities and to the rich interplay between prosopographical works and onomastics.

Matthew Hammond's introduction briefly contextualises the monograph within the long and storied history of name studies in Britain. A clear focus on Scottish scholarship is of particular value; in fact, the entire work stands as an ever-needed reminder to those in England that British onomastics is more complex, and more diverse, than our siloed studies often assume. It is testament to the increasing interest in medieval personal names that the literature summary that accompanies this introduction might be expanded with a

ans-names.pitt.edu

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

Vol. 73 No. 4, Winter 2025

DOI 10.5195/names.2025.2853



Articles in this journal are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Pitt Open Library Publishing
This journal is published by [Pitt Open Library Publishing](https://openlibrarypublishing.com/).

number of new and important studies, most notably those conducted by James Chetwood (2016; 2018; 2022).

In the essays that make up the bulk of the volume, it is the welcome variety of contributions that strikes the reader. A range of forms of onomastic data is examined: forenames, surnames, and (sadly infrequently) nicknames. These are drawn from a range of types of medieval documents (legal texts, chronicles, literary narratives, etc.) and cover a gratifyingly broad chronological span. Most pleasingly, a productive variety of methodological lenses is employed to explore this data. In what follows, it is worth grouping the collection's chapters together by their shared methodologies and focuses.

Several chapters are more straightforwardly onomastic in their form and motivation; this, of course, is no weakness. Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh examines Gaelic names and name-elements in Scottish Latin-language charters from the reign of Malcolm III to that of Alexander III. The chapter falls into two halves: the former a broad but illuminating exploration of the variety of the onomastic data in the *PoMS* database; the second an in-depth taxonomy. It is hard to think of a better way to introduce a corpus of onomastic data to the educated novice, blending the big picture with onomastic *minutiae*. The non-medievalist will be at home here. Valeria Di Clemente's contribution, an exploration of the forenames of the 1296 *Ragman Roll*, is in search of evidence for the adoption of Germanic names into Scotland. What follows is an onomasticon of examples within the text, accompanied by extensive but accessible etymological analysis. Compiling this data reveals much of interest: evidence of orthographic and dialectical variation; the distribution of diminutive and hypocoristic forms; and the balance of monothematic and dithematic names.

John Reuben Davies collates those Hebrew forenames derived from the Old Testament found in Scottish texts datable 1093–1286 and roundly dismisses the notion that these names denote Scottish Jews. There follows a corpus of examples and an exploration of the origins of these names. It is worth pausing over Davies' observation that, in contrast to the Scottish data, Old Testament names are rare in England (188). This is of course *relatively* true, as the mass of Scottish data starkly illustrates, but the corpus of Hebrew names in pre-Conquest England is larger than Davies gives it credit for. Recourse to the *PASE* database identifies the following examples, a few of which appear briefly in Davies' footnotes:

- Daniel 1, bishop of the West Saxons¹
- Daniel 2, *miles*
- Daniel 3, bishop of Cornwall
- Daniel 4, moneyer of King Edgar
- David 1, unknown monk
- David 3, priest of Worcester
- Elias 1, priest of Lindisfarne
- Elias 3, abbot
- Jacob 1, *subregulus*
- Johan 1, cleric of Worcester
- Johanna 1, slave
- John 3,² bishop of Wells
- John 7, abbot of St Augustine's
- John 18, bishop of Hexham, later York
- John 19, priest
- John 21, 'the Old Saxon'
- John 22, abbot of Athelney
- John 26, scribe of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 311
- John 34, abbot of Fécamp, *TRE* landholder
- John 37 'the Dane', *TRE* landholder
- Joseph 4, *TRE* landholder
- Salomon 2, *TRE* landholder
- Samson 1, bishop of the Hwicce
- Samson 3, moneyer of King Alfred
- Simun 1, ninth-century moneyer

Two chapters place particular emphasis on the relationship between Scottish and Irish evidence. Matthew Hammond's contribution takes as its subject those surnames in *Mac* in the Gaelic world and explores the varied evolution of patronymic name-forms into surnames proper. The result is a convincing chronology: the employment of a range of avonyms from circa 1000; their use as "style" names (100) as a title or mark of status; and the emergence of the *Mac* surname in the latter half of the twelfth century. Nicholas Evans' chapter (18–40) examines the forenames and surnames found in the *Gaelic Chronicles* between 661 and 760, and 901 and 1000. An examination of the forms these names take raises important questions of chronological evolution and the similarities between Scottish and Irish evidence. Using onomastic evidence to peer into the murky question of the "Viking" impact, Evans notes a substantial influence of Scandinavian names among the corpus.

David Sellar's short note places methodological concerns forefront by exploring that great bane of the medieval historian: orthographic variation. He hypothesises that the range of name-forms attributed to the daughter of the thirteenth-century Earl Henry of Atholl all represent the Gaelic name *Forbflaith*. Three other examples of this name are identified in near-contemporary Scotland; a short addendum by Hammond identifies a further four examples cited within the PoMS database (146–147).

Two contributions place particular emphasis on the motivation for name choices. Thomas Clancy and Hammond explore the role of literary texts in influencing the name-stock of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Scotland. Literary inspiration is difficult to prove, as the authors readily acknowledge, but at least one concrete example emerges from their dataset: Corc, son of Alún II, appears to have gained his name in emulation of a poem written for his immediate ancestors (180–181). A corpus of likely examples is presented, drawn from literary texts in a range of languages. Rachel Butter's focus is on the literal translatability—the “transparency” (224)—of names in *Gilla-* and *Máel-* ‘servant of X’. When this form of name is compounded with the name of a saint, producing a so-called hagiophoric, does this imply a specific personal connection to that saint? An examination of two seventeenth-century name lists from Argyll produces interesting (if not medieval!) conclusions: a loss of meaning is hypothesised as these forenames pass into the realm of surnames (225–244).

Tom Turpie's chapter adopts an approach more easily identifiably by the historian and seeks to explore the value of onomastic data in addressing the question of “devotional nationalism” (214) in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Scotland. It tests a deceptively simple historically informed hypothesis: does the adoption of hagiophoric names of local (Scottish) saints imply a particular popular engagement among the masses, as other texts imply? (214). If caution is Turpie's watchword, the examination of five specific hagiophoric names suggests a popular cultic focus, with various degrees of official manifestation.

The study of medieval personal names remains in rude health throughout the British Isles. The future looks rosy and, pleasingly, not entirely Anglo-centric. A collection of essays such as this—minutely precise in its analysis and yet broad in its outlook and chronology—is a further statement of that health. It will find a ready audience, I hope, on two fronts: the historian seeking fresh methodologies and new evidence, and the student of onomastics seeking concrete data. It is worth closing this review by noting one strand common to all contributions: caution. Onomastic data often necessitate a tentative approach, but it speaks, I think, to a timidity that many of us historians feel when drawing conclusions from names. *Personal Names and Naming Practices in Medieval Scotland* is one of a number of recent publications that starkly illustrate that adopting an onomastic outlook brings substantial benefits to the medieval historian. We would do well to remember that fact.

Notes

¹ Each individual is accompanied by their corresponding PASE number. For the sake of clarity, full citations have been omitted. This does not claim to be a complete corpus.

² I have excluded here those missionaries and papal legates present in England, for which see John 4; John 5; John 6; John 12; John 16.

References

Chetwood, J. 2016. “Tom, Dick and Leofric: The Transformation of English Personal Naming, c. 800–c. 1300”. PhD thesis, University of Sheffield.

Chetwood, J. 2018. “Re-Evaluating English Personal Naming on the Eve of the Conquest”. *Early Medieval Europe* 26, no. 4: 518–547.

Chetwood, J. 2022. “Naming and Renaming: Names and the Life Course in Early Medieval Europe”. *Early Medieval Life Courses: Cultural-Historical Perspectives*. Edited by Thijs Porck and Harriet Soper. Leiden: Brill.

People of Medieval Scotland 1093–1371 (PoMS). 2025. Accessed 20 June 2025. <https://poms.ac.uk/>

The Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England (PASE). 2025. Accessed 18 June 2025. <https://pase.ac.uk/>

T. K. Alphey

University of Oxford, UK