

The Continuity of Icelandic Names and Naming Patterns

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ONLY IN ICELAND has the centuries old Scandinavian pattern of naming continued down to the present. One's given name is one's primary name. One is listed in the telephone book, in library card catalogs (except in the National Library), and in directories and files as *Jón* or *Guðrún*. One's second name is a patronymic formed by adding *son* or *dóttir* to the possessive of one's father's name, and women do not change their names after marriage. Everywhere else in Scandinavia family names became legally necessary in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.

In 1913 legislation was passed in Iceland requiring the petitioning of the government to adopt a family name and it was required that the name be of a suitable type.¹ This legislation further required the drawing-up of official lists of acceptable Icelandic family names and given names. The reason for this legislation was to stem the tide in the adoption of family names and in the use of given names of foreign origin. Such practices had begun in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and rapidly increased during the nineteenth among Danophilic Icelanders. In 1855 there were 108 different family names in Iceland; by 1910 the number had increased to 297.² In 1925 additional name legislation was passed prohibiting the adoption of family names altogether, though allowing those who already had them to keep them; it also made the adoption of an Icelandic patronymic a prerequisite for obtaining Icelandic citizenship. A check of the 1972 Icelandic telephone directory indicates about 15 percent of Icelanders continue to have family names.³

The continuity of names throughout Icelandic history has been striking as a perusal of Tables 1 and 2 demonstrates. These tables

¹ Einar Hjörleifsson, et. al., *Íslensk mannanöfn: lög, nefndarálit og nafnaskrár* (Reykjavík: Gutenberg, 1915).

² Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson, *Íslensk mannanöfn samkvæmt manntalinu 1 des. 1910* (Reykjavík: Hagskýrslur Íslands 5, 1915), p. 14.

³ This is also the conventional estimate of the proportion of Icelanders with family names. This percentage may be declining; I have heard of some Icelanders who are dropping family names and reverting to the conventional Icelandic naming pattern.

give the rank order frequency of male and female names for six periods in the 1,100 years of Icelandic history; all names are spelled with modern orthography. They are based on name counts of about 6,800 persons from *Saga Times* (AD 870–1030), about 4,000 persons from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Age of the Sturlungs), complete counts of names enumerated in the censuses of 1703, 1855, and 1910, together with a frequency count of all children born in Iceland in the years 1921 through 1950 which I take as an approximation of the rank order frequency of names for the years around 1970. (The sources from which these frequencies were calculated are given in Table 1.) Study of these name frequencies indicates that a large majority of Icelanders have the same names as their ancestors of seven and eight centuries ago. More remarkable, however, is the observation that most of the names of the men and women who settled Iceland in the years 870–930 are to be found in contemporary Iceland. Of the 27 most common male names from *Saga Times* (almost 5,000 of the 6,800 known persons are male) *all* are at least fairly common in Iceland today.⁴ The same is true with one exception (*Álöf*) of the 27 leading female names (about 2,000 of the known persons from *Saga Times* are female). There were no *Álöfs* born in 1921–50; nor are there any listed in the 1972 Icelandic telephone directory. However, the very similar name *Ólöf* remains a leading name in contemporary Iceland as it was in *Saga Times*. No such continuity as this characterizes the Anglo-Saxon names in use a millennium ago; most sound ancient and distant to our ears.⁵

In spite of the continuity in names over the 11 centuries of Icelandic history, a number of trends may be noted:

(1) There has been a marked decline in *þór* names. In pre-Christian times about 25 percent of all names commemorated this most vigorous and vital of the Viking gods. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, after Christianity had been established for several generations, *þór* names had declined to about 14 percent of all names. In the census enumerations of 1703, 1855, and 1910, eight or nine percent of all names were *þór* names; there was no decline over these two centuries. Around 1970, however, only about four percent of all names were *þór* names. In the overwhelming

⁴ In fact most of these leading names from *Saga Times* can be said to be leading names in contemporary Iceland. See the frequencies in Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson, *Íslensk mannanöfn, 1921–1950* (Reykjavik: Bókaútgáfa menningarsjóðs, 1961).

⁵ Note the names in the index to some history of early England such as Dorothy Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1952), pp. 249–256.

Table 1. Rank Order of Frequency of Male Names from Saga Times to the Present

(Names for 1703 through 1970 include all names accounting for at least one percent of names.)

Rank	Saga Times	12-13 Cent.	1703	1855	1910	Ca. 1970
1	þorsteinn	þórður	Jón	Jón	Jón	Jón
2	þórður	Jón	Guðmundur	Guðmundur	Guðmundur	Guðmundur
3	þorkell	þorsteinn	Bjarni	Sigurður	Sigurður	Sigurður
4	þórir	Einar	Sigurður	Magnús	Ólafur	Gunnar
5	Björn	Guðmundur	Ólafur	Ólafur	Magnús	Ólafur
6	Grímur	Eyjólfur	Magnús	Einar	Kristján	Magnús
7	þorbjörn	Snorri	Einar	Bjarni	Einar	Kristján
8	Helgi	Björn	þorsteinn	Árni	Bjarni	Einar
9	þorgeir	Ólafur	þórður	Gísli	Jóhann	Jóhann
10	þórarinn	Brandur	Árni	Björn	Björn	Kristinn
11	þorgrímur	þorkell	Gísli	Kristján	Gísli	Helgi
12	Sigurður	Halldór	Björn	þorsteinn	Árni	Björn
13	þorvaldur	Sigurður	Halldór	Stefán	Stefán	Halldór
14	Ketill	Magnús	Eiríkur	Jóhannes	þorsteinn	Stefán
15	Einar	Hallur	Páll	Jóhann	Helgi	Bjarni
16	þorgils	Árni	Sveinn	Jónas	Guðjón	þór
17	Bárður	þórarinn	Oddur	þórður	Halldór	Ragnar
18	Eyjólfur	þorgeir	Pétur	Sveinn	Kristinn	Árni
19	þormóður	Páll	Eyjólfur	Halldór	Páll	Pétur
20	Eyvindur	þorgils	Helgi	Páll	Jóhannes	Gísli
21	þorleifur	Oddur	Tómas	Pétur	Pétur	Páll
22	þórólfur	Grímur	þorleifur	Eiríkur	þórður	Guðjón
23	Oddur	Ketill	þorkell	Helgi	Sveinn	þorsteinn
24	Ormur	Helgi	Snorri	Eyjólfur	Gunnar	Sveinn
25	Hrafn	Bárður	Sigmundur	Benedikt	Jónas	Karl
26	Ólafur	þorbjörn			Ágúst	Örn
27	þorfinnur	þórir			Sigurjón	Jóhannes
28		þorvaldur				Haukur
29						Óskar
30						Ágúst
						Ingi
						Birgir
						Sigurjón

Sources:

Rank order of frequency of names in Saga Times was calculated from Guðni Jónsson, *Íslendinga sögur: nafnaskrá* (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1968) and is based on about 6,800 names. Twelfth and thirteenth centuries data from about 4,000 names in index to Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnboason, and Kristján Eldjárn, *Sturlunga Saga* (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), Vol. II, pp. 363-473. Data for 1703 are from the census of that year: Ólafur Lárusson, *Nöfn íslendinga árið 1703* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1960). Data for 1855 are from the census of that year: Sigurð Hansen, "Um mannaheiti á Íslandi, árið 1855," *Skýrslur um landshagi á Íslandi* (Copenhagen: Hinu íslenska bókmenntafélagi, 1858), Vol. I, pp. 503-572. Data for 1910 are also from the census of that year: þorsteinn þorsteinsson, *Íslensk mannanöfn*

samkvæmt manntalinu 1 des. 1910 (Reykjavík: Hagskýrslur Íslands 5, 1915). The rank order of names for circa 1970 is based on a frequency count of the names of all children born in Iceland 1921–1950: Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson, *Íslensk mannanöfn: nafngiafir Þriggja áratuga 1921–1950* (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa menningarsjóðs, 1961), p. 13.

Table 2. Rank Order of Frequency of Female Names from Saga Times to the Present

(Names for 1703 through 1970 include all names accounting for at least one percent of names.)

Rank	Saga Times	12-13 Cent.	1703	1855	1910	Ca. 1970
1	Þorgerður	Guðrún	Guðrún	Guðrún	Guðrún	Guðrún
2	Þórdís	Helga	Sigríður	Sigríður	Sigríður	Sigríður
3	Þuríður	Þórdís	Ingibjörg	Margrét	Kristín	Kristín
4	Helga	Valgerður	Margrét	Kristín	Margrét	Margrét
5	Guðrún	Þuríður	Helga	Ingibjörg	Ingibjörg	Ingibjörg
6	Þóra	Halldóra	Þuríður	Helga	Anna	Anna
7	Þórunn	Sigríður	Kristín	Anna	Helga	Helga
8	Sigríður	Steinunn	Valgerður	Guðbjörg	Jóhanna	Jóhanna
9	Þorbjörg	Hallbera	Halldóra	Guðný	Guðbjörg	Sigrún
10	Valgerður	Herdís	Ólöf	Jóhanna	Jónína	María
11	Rannveig	Þorgerður	Guðný	Guðríður	María	Jóna
12	Vigdís	Ingibjörg	Guðríður	Halldóra	Guðný	Guðbjörg
13	Þorkatla	Þóra	Steinunn	Steinunn	Halldóra	Erla
14	Ingibjörg	Kolfinna	Þóra	Þuríður	Guðríður	Hulda
15	Gróa	Oddný	Þórunn	Þórunn	Steinunn	Guðný
16	Jórunn	Álöf	Þorbjörg	Ólöf	Elín	Elín
17	Halldóra	Guðný	Ragnhildur	Valgerður	Þórunn	Ragnheiður
18	Hildur	Hallfríður	Ingvaldur	Elín	Guðlaug	Steinunn
19	Hallbera	Vigdís	Þórdís	Þorbjörg	Ólöf	Ólöf
20	Álöf	Þorbjörg	Sesselja	Guðlaug	Sigurbjörg	Björg
21	Þórhildur	Halla	Katrín	Sólveig	Valgerður	Jónína
22	Ragnhildur	Margrét	Guðlaug	María	Þuríður	Ásta
23	Ástríður	Álfheiður	Sólveig	Hólmfríður	Hólmfríður	Halldóra
24	Auður	Birna	Gróa	Björg	Ragnheiður	Þóra
25	Guðríður	Jórunn	Þorgerður	Ragnheiður	Þorbjörg	Sigurbjörg
26	Gunnhildur		Vigdís	Ragnhildur	Kristjana	Lilja
27	Ólöf		Oddný	Sesselja	Elisabet	Þórunn
28			Vilborg		Þóra	Guðlaug
29			Anna		Björg	Unnur
30					Sólveig	Sólveig
						Elisabet
						Valgerður
						Ema

Sources: See Table 1.

majority of cases *þór* is the first part of a compound name, but in a minority of cases it is the end part as in *Bergþór* or *Bergþóra*, *Steinþór* or *Steinþóra*. Sometimes, the *þ* becomes *d* as in *Halldór* and *Halldóra*. In one case there is a consonant change: the leading female name *þuríður* (from the male *þorriður*) must be reckoned a *þór* name.⁶

(2) From the beginning there has been a continual increase in biblical and Christian names. A very small number of the 3,500 original settlers listed in *Landnámabók* (*The Book of Settlements*) had biblical names like *Jón*, *Pétur*, *Páll*, and *Margrét*.⁷ Still, however, the great majority of Icelanders down to the present have borne Old Norse names.

(3) Until the eighteenth century virtually no Icelanders had more than one name while among those born in the years 1941–1950 52 percent had two or more given names.⁸ In the 1703 census only two individuals in the whole country, a brother and sister, were enumerated as having two given names.⁹

(4) From the beginning Icelanders have continually made up new names by compounding names, but the process greatly accelerated in the nineteenth century when many new combinations came into existence like *Friðjón* and *Bergjón*.

(5) From the nineteenth century there has been an increasing tendency to use foreign names, a few of which have become very common (e.g., *Kristinn* and *Hulda*), a distressing trend to some Icelanders. Most of the leading foreign names have come to Iceland via Denmark.

Throughout Icelandic history relatively few names have been used by the majority of the population. In the 1703 census 387 male and 338 female names were counted.¹⁰ However, 23.5 percent of the males were named *Jón*, probably the most common male name at all times from the thirteenth century. The ten most frequent male names in this early census were held by over half the males. Among females, the most common name in 1703, as it has been since at least the twelfth century, was *Guðrún*; this was the given

⁶ Noted by Assar Janzén, "De fornvästnordiska personnamnen," in *Personnavne: Nordisk Kultur VII* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1947), pp. 22–186, p. 95.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29. See also Jakob Benediktsson, "Landnámabók: Some remarks on its value as a historical source," *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research*, Vol. XVII (Part 4, 1969), pp. 275–292; and the *Nafnaskrá* to *Landnámabók* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968), Vol. II, pp. 441–525.

⁸ *Íslensk mannanöfn, 1921–1950*, p. 11.

⁹ Ólafur Lárusson, *Nöfn íslendinga árið 1703* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1960), p. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

name of 19.7 percent of all females. As with males the ten most common names accounted for a majority of all females enumerated.

Among Icelanders born in the years 1921–1950 the number of recorded names more than tripled to 1,234 for males and 1,463 for females.¹¹ Yet, however, between a third and a half of both males and females had the ten most frequent names. Sixty-four percent of the male names were held by fewer than 50 individuals and 31 percent were held by only one person. Among female names 73 percent were counted fewer than 50 times and 30 percent only once. The use of *Jón* declined to 6.5 percent of all males, *Guðrún* to 7.8 percent of all females.

The leading male names have close to the same rank order of frequency at present as in 1703 and perhaps for several centuries before that. The most notable exception is *Gunnar* which moved from thirty-fifth place in 1703, to thirty-third place in 1855, to twenty-fourth place in 1910, and to fourth place in the present era. Significantly this is the name of the greatest of all heroes in the Sagas of the Icelanders, Gunnar of Hlidarend in *Njáls saga*. The name *Bjarni*, on the other hand, declined from third place in 1703 to seventh place in 1855 to eighth place in 1910, and to fifteenth place among males born in 1921–1950. Of the 33 most common male names listed in Table 1 for the most recent period at least 24 go back to the Age of Settlement (870–930).¹² *Kristján* and *Kristinn* are Danish imports and were rarely used in Iceland prior to the eighteenth century. *Jóhann* and *Jóhannes*, variations of the biblical name *Jón*, came into Iceland in the seventeenth century or earlier; there were only 11 *Jóhanns* and one *Jóhannes* enumerated in 1703. *Stefán* dates from the thirteenth century. *Guðjón* is a name which was unknown in 1703, but became common in the nineteenth century; it is a typical Icelandic compound and is simply Icelandic for God's *Jón*. *Óskar* and *Ágúst* date from the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. *Sigurjón*, in thirty-third place, is another nineteenth century compound, but, unlike *Guðjón*, has no meaning.

There is clearly less continuity with female than with male names. Of the 33 most common female names for the present period listed in Table 2 not fewer than 18 go back to the Age of Settlement. *Kristín*, the third most common name among females born in the 1921–1950 period, is a Christian name which was

¹¹ *Íslensk mannanöfn, 1921–1950*, p. 12.

¹² Much of the specific information on Icelandic names in this and the subsequent paragraph is from Hermann Pálsson, *Íslensk mannanöfn* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1960); see also Assar Janzén, *op. cit.*

introduced into Iceland in the thirteenth century, since which time it has always been one of the most common names in Iceland. *Anna* was introduced into Iceland in the fifteenth century and is the sixth most common female name among those born in the years 1921–1950; it was twenty-ninth in frequency among those enumerated in 1703, but jumped to eighth place in 1855, and to sixth place in 1910 where it has remained. *Jóhanna*, a feminine form of *Jóhann*, is of Danish origin and goes back to the seventeenth century. *Sigrún* was not used in Iceland before the fifteenth century although the name is found in *The Saga of the Volsungs* written in the thirteenth century. *María*, another Christian name, did not come into use until the eighteenth century; there were no *Mariás* enumerated in 1703.¹³ *Jóna*, the feminine of *Jón*, became popular in the late nineteenth century; only one *Jóna* was enumerated in 1703. *Erla* is of very recent vintage in Iceland; none was enumerated as recently as 1910. *Hulda* is a late nineteenth-century import from Denmark. *Elín* is of non-Norse origin (from Greek Helena) and was not used in Iceland before the fifteenth century. *Jónína*, a feminine diminutive of *Jón*, is probably a nineteenth-century invention. *Ásta* is a shortening of the ancient Norwegian name *Ástriði*, and was not used in Iceland before the thirteenth century. Six *Sigurbjörgs* were counted in 1703, a compound name of old Norse roots probably invented in the seventeenth century. *Lilja* was not used in Iceland prior to the eighteenth century. *Elísabet* dates from the seventeenth century.¹⁴ The name *Erna* is from the mythological literature of ancient Iceland (*Rigspula*); only three were enumerated in 1910.

Some of the wives and slaves who accompanied the original Norse settlers were Irish. They are responsible for a small number of Irish words in the Icelandic language, including a few proper names. The most common have been the male names *Kjartan* (*Certán*), *Kormákur* (*Cormac*), and *Njáll* (*Níall*), together with the female name *Melkorka* (*Mael Curcaig*). All of these are the names of well-known Saga characters, yet not since the earliest generations have more than a fraction of one percent of Icelanders borne Irish names. By far the most common has been *Kjarten*, also the name of an enormously illustrious and handsome figure in *Laxdaela Saga*, but of the males born in 1921–1950 only 261

¹³ There were, however, four women in 1703 with the male-sounding name *Mario*. See *Nöfn íslendinga árið 1703*, p. 38.

¹⁴ However, a northern version of this name was *Ellisif* and was used in Iceland from the thirteenth through the eighteenth century. See Hermann Pálsson, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

had this as a single, first, or auxiliary name; only 15 were enumerated in 1703.

Several patterns in the naming of children have persisted since Saga Times and earlier.¹⁵ Sometimes sons have been named after their fathers, but this has never been a common pattern either among the Old Norse *nor* among contemporary Icelanders. Of about 1,100 *Jóns* listed in the Reykjavík section of the 1972 Icelandic telephone directory, only 21 have the patronymic *Jónnson*. Rarely, at any time, have daughters been named after their mothers. Three naming patterns have been common from the beginning: alliteration, variation, and commemoration. A stunning example of the alliterative pattern is the successive list of kings of the Uppsala dynasty who have been named Agni, Alrek, Ygnvi, Iorund, Aun, Egil, Óttar, Adils, Eystein, Yngvar, Onund, Ingiald, and Olaf.¹⁶ That this was a pervasive Old Germanic pattern is suggested by the names of Alfred the Great's children: Ethelflaed, Edward, Edmund, Ethelgifu, Aelfthryth, and Ethelweard.¹⁷ Some contemporary Icelandic couples continue to have children with alliterative name combinations such as *Gunnar*, *Gunnilla*, and *Guðbjörg*. Probably always more common, however, has been the variation principle, and this pattern is probably older than the alliteration pattern having arisen before the Germanic languages were separated from the main stock; it appears in Greek.¹⁸ Here names with similar beginnings or endings are used to show family relationships. In Iceland and Ancient Scandinavia variations of the first element rather than the end element have been much more common.¹⁹ In *Landnámabók* there is an account of a settler from Sogn in Norway named Végeir (which means Temple-Geir or Holy-Geir); he had six sons named *Vébjörn*, *Vésteinn*, *Vépormur*, *Vémundur*, *Végestur*, and *Véþorn*, plus a daughter named *Védis*. The helpful brothers in *Hrafnkel's Saga* were named *þorgeir* and *þorbjörn*, and they have a third brother named *þormóður*. Such a combination would not be unusual

¹⁵ For Old Norse patterns of naming, see Assar Janzén, *op. cit.*; also, see articles on "Namngjeving" and "Personnavn" in *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for nordisk middelalder* (Reykjavík: Bókaverzlun Ísafolder, various years).

¹⁶ Noted in Peter Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1970), p. 115.

¹⁷ Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Alfred the Great* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956); see family tree opposite p. 1.

¹⁸ E. G. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950, Second Edition), pp. xxiii-xxiv.

¹⁹ For a discussion of these elements in Icelandic names, see Roland Otterbjörk, "Moderna isländska förmann," *Scripta Islandica* (Sweden), Årsbok 14 (1963), pp. 27-41.

in contemporary Iceland. Once again it is appropriate to note Alfred the Great whose father was named Ethelwulf and whose brothers were Ethelbald, Ethelbert, Ethelred, and Ethelswith.

Far more common, however, than either of these patterns has been commemoration, particularly the naming of a son after an ancestor, above all a paternal grandfather. *Ari þorgilsson* (1067–1148), the father of Icelandic history, had a son named *þorgils Arason*, who, in turn, had a son named *Ari þorgilsson*. It has always been common in Iceland, and perhaps more so now than ever in the past, to have name reversals such as this. A sizeable proportion of contemporary Icelandic males have the same names as their paternal grandfathers.

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JAPANESE ONOMATOLOGIST DIES

Dr. Ei Sakuma, former lecturer at the Japan Dental College and authority on Japanese family names, died on December 16, 1975, at the age of 62. Some of his works are *Onamae haiken* (*Show me your Name*), *Chinsei kimei* (*Curious Names*), *Nihonjin-no sei* (*Japanese Family Names*) and *Onamae fudoki* (*Topography on Family Names*). Although not a member of the American Name Society, he was widely known in the scholarly world both in this country and abroad.