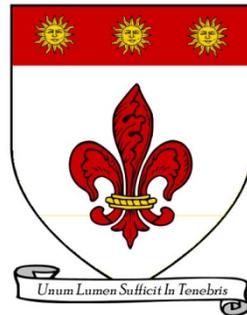


# Overview of Medieval and Renaissance Italian Names

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The first major step for a living history participant to assume a persona is to choose a name. An understanding of the reasons people called themselves or became known by a certain name is useful when attempting to understand the cultural norms of a historic time and place. This paper will provide an overview of the origins and development in Italian naming practices from 800 AD to 1600 AD.

## GIVEN NAMES

In the Middle Ages people regarded the meaning of names and believed "nomina sunt consequentia rerum" (names are the consequences of things, Dante, *Vita Nuova* VIII). Naming practices follow this logic. Names in Italy from 800 AD to 1600 AD were given based on the prestige of Catholic saints, literary protagonists and classical Greek or Roman icons (Fucilla 9). Evidence of this can be traced back to the days of Charlemagne.

In the 9th Century Charlemagne united Western Europe as the Holy Roman Empire. Once he established religious control via the Roman Catholic Church the influence of invaders' (Arabs, Turks, Franks, etc.) names in Italy ebbed. Names became more standardized and religious, Greek, Germanic, and Latin names can be clearly identified. Popular Italian religious names from Latin such as *Giorgio*, *Alessandro*, *Domenico*, and *Filippo* are popular down to this day. Names from Greek, such as *Pietro*, *Maddalena*, and *Giovanni*, and from Germanic origin such as *Rodolfo* and *Guido* are now inextricably linked to Italian culture the world over. Classical names from Latin such as *Laura*, *Augusto*, and *Silvia* have also come down to us through the Italians (Cole 24).

Italians in the Middle Ages (800-1450) desired to grace their children with the virtuous, charitable, or pious characteristics of the entity with whom the name originated. If a child was born on June 24, he may be named for St. John (*Giovanni*) as that is St. John's Day on the Catholic calendar. Saints names are also given with reference to the patron saint of the town, city, or region in which the child is born. Joseph, Peter, Paul, Mary, and Elizabeth are very popular names from the Middle Ages (*Giuseppe*, *Pietro*, *Paolo*, *Maria*, and *Lisabetta*). The

Virgin Mary is so revered that the name is even owned by a large number of Renaissance men such as *Galeazzo Maria Sforza* and *Francesco Maria della Rovere*. Even when parents choose a secular given name, middle names in the often retained a religious origin (i.e. Giata Magdalena Alberti).

Humanists of the Renaissance (1450-1600) desired to transform themselves into the archetypes of Latin and Greek heroes by adopting classical names. *Ariosto* asserts this fact in the Seventh Satire: "The name of the apostle or saint given to you via baptism you change to Cosmico and Pomponio. Others change Pietro into Pierio and Giovanni into Giano and Giovian":

"Il nome che di Apostolo ti denno

O d'alcun santo i padri, quanto

Christiano d'acqua e non d'altro ti fenno,

In Cosmico, in Pomponio vai mutando.

Altri Pietro in Pierio, altri Giovanni

In giano o Giovian va riconciando (Fucilla 9).

Characters from literary fiction furnished many names in Italian history. *Armida* from Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*; *Orlando*, *Marfisa*, and *Rinaldo* from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*; *Beatrice* from Dante's *Vita Nuova*, and *Laura* from Petrarch's *Canzoniere* (Fucilla 11).

Families named their sons after the paternal and maternal grandfathers and great-grandfathers. To eliminate the confusion of having three or four men in the same generation named the same name, variations on a theme were used. In the 16th Century *Giulio Cesare Croce* from Bologna has a character remark how families carried on the root names of sires and grandsires (for generations) in his poem *Bertoldo, Bertoldino, e Cacasenno* (Canto I, xxiv):

"Di Bertagnana io son; Bertoldo ho nome

E Bertolazzo il mio padre si chiama,

O si chiamo, che le terrene some

Depose, uomo tra noi di molta fama.

Bertin, Bertuzzo, e Bertolino furo

Gli avi..." (Fucilla 4).

The English translation is, "From Bertagnana I am; my name is Bertoldo, and my father is called Bertolazzo, or was called, as he has laid down his earthly burden, a man of fame among us. Bertin, Bertuzzo, and Bertolino were my grandires."

## SURNAMES

In part, the need to distinguish family lines and noble blood brought about the necessity of a name in addition to the given name. *Filippo figlio di* (son of) *Giovanni* was a simple way to identify a person in written record. As more generations passed additional names were needed to distinguish between all the sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons of Giovanni.

Just as in English 'Phillip son of John' became 'Phillip Johnson', in Italian 'Filippo figlio di Giovanni' became 'Filippo di Giovanni'. Names recorded in the 14th Century such as *Giovanni di Pietro di Paolo d'Alberto* (Giovanni, son of Pietro, grandson of Paolo, great grandson of Alberti) expressed multi-generational paternity (Fucilla 14). One of the founders of the modern Doni-Dati family of Florence was *Filippo di Dono di Lapo di Dato*, a prior in the city 1365-1369.

Taxes, judicial records, and christenings called for a better system of identifying nobles and commoners alike. As time passed instead of using your given name and paternal or maternal namesake for identification one would use a surname. Eventually, these surnames and surname derivations became permanent and passed from one generation to the next (Pigna 187, 671).

Four major categories of surnames can be found throughout Italy from medieval times to 1600 AD; surnames from personal names, from locations, from vocations, and from nicknames (Cole 25).

## PERSONAL SURNAMES

The earliest Italian surnames came from paternal or maternal personal names (Cole 25). If the family head was named Andrea for the apostle Andrew, brother of Simon Peter, his children might be called by their given names + *Andrei* (Latinized) or their given name + *di Andrea* (Italian). This initial surname root could remain the same or vary from one generation to the next with the addition of suffixes.

In Italian, the suffixes *-otto*, *-otti*, *-oni*, and *-one* are augmentative (denote largeness). So if Andrea was a big man the surname could become *Andreotti* or *Andreone*. The suffixes *-ini* or *-etti* are diminutive (notate smallness), and would change the name to *Andretti*. The suffix *-accio* has a negative connotation and could be attached to the name of a man with a bad temper. The ending *-uccio* is the opposite, denoting a kind or gentle person, and could change the name to *Andreuccio* (Cole 26).

Naming practices varied from city to city and from North to South. The prepositions *di*, *de*, *dei*, or *del* usually precedes a surname that originated from a personal name. *D'Andrea* and *De*

*Andrea* were common in southern Italy, while *Andreotti* and *Andreaccio* are more common in central Italy. Northern Italy is home to the *Adreasi* and the *Andrat* families. There are also variations due to dialects. For instance, Giovanni has variations such as *Giovannelli*, *Gianni*, *Giannassi*, *Giammaria*, *Vannoli*, *Zanelli*, and *Zanardo*. Some of these surnames spurred variations that form other local root surnames like *Vanni* and *Zanni* (Cole 26).

## LOCATIVE SURNAMES

The next large category of surnames is descriptive of the geographic location of the family origin. These names denote immigrants from other cities, regions, or countries. A common surname like *Tedesco* (German) originally identified the person as a German immigrant. *Greco* denotes a person of Greek origin, and a man from Lombardy may be called *Longobardo*. In Italy there was little migration from village to village so when someone did move in from another place, even from just a few miles away and with an established surname, they were typically regarded as a foreigner from "insert village of origin". In central and northern Italy there were times of pestilence and war which caused emigration from small towns like Parodi to larger cities like Genova. Even today in Genova the most common surname is *Parodi* (Migliorini 37).

A common suffix used to denote a place is *-ese*. The painter *Paolo Veronese* was from Verona and the writer *Alessandro Piemontese* was from Piedmont. Another way to denote place in a name is to use the given name and the preposition "da", meaning from. My primary persona is Giata and she is from Florence, so her locative surname could be *Giata da Firenze*. This is appropriate for late Medieval or very early Renaissance surnames.

## VOCATIONAL SURNAMES

This category of surnames comes from work or profession. Trades like baking, smithing, and farming were passed from generation to generation. These trades often became the basis of the family surname. Some surname roots of this category are: *Pane* (Baker), *Fabbro* (Smith), *Ferrari* (Smith), *Massaro* (Farmer), *Cardinale* (Cardinal), *Guerra* (Soldier) and *Mastro/Maestro* (Teacher). Vocational surnames, especially artisan surnames, became more stable by the late 14th Century and began to be retained from one generation to the next (Neel 148).

## NICKNAME SURNAMES

Many of the most common Italian surnames originate from a personal nickname. Popular given names of the early Middle Ages were often distinguished by a personal characteristic of the bearer. If there were four men in the commune named *Giovanni* (John), the burly one could be *Giovanni Grosso* (Big), the one with the red beard could be *Giovanni Rossi* (Red), and the clever one could be called *Giovanni Asutuo*. Nicknames based on physical characteristics, behavior, intellect, or notable events are listed below (Cole 27):

*Bevilacqua* (Drinks Water)  
*Biondo* (Blonde)  
*Fumagalli* (Chicken Thief)  
*Magnavacca* (Eats a Cow)  
*Moro* (Dark)  
*Piccolo* (Small)  
*Ricci* (Curly)  
*Rossi* (Red)  
*Sordo* (Deaf)  
*Zoppo* (Handicapped)

## CONCLUSIONS

Italian names of the Middle Ages had Roman Catholic, Greek, and classical Latin origins. A given name alone or with a patronymic or matronymic byname was used throughout the Medieval period. As populations increased the need for a common familial name served as a catalyst for surname development in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. The four major categories of surnames continued to evolve from Middle Ages through the Renaissance with variations based on patrimony, events, locations, and physical characteristics (see examples below).

Giovanni (John)  
Giovanni figlio di Giorgio (John son of George)  
Giovanni di Giorgio di Giacomo (John son of George, grandson of Jack)  
Giovanni di (son of) Giorgio (John Georgeson)  
Giovanni Rossi di Gorgio (Red John Georgeson)  
Giovanni de Rossi (John the Red)  
Giovanni Rossi da Genova (Red John from Genova)  
Giovanni Rossini (John Small)  
Giovanni Rossellini (John Tiny)

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