



PAPER

## MIDDLE NAME PHENOMENON IN ENGLISH ANTHROPONOMY

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### Abstract

This article examines the middle name phenomenon as a distinctive feature of English anthroponomy, exploring its historical development, structural characteristics, and contemporary significance within naming conventions. Through comprehensive analysis of scholarly literature and onomastic studies, this research investigates the origins, functions, and cultural implications of middle names in English-speaking societies. The findings indicate that middle name usage reflects broader sociocultural dynamics, including changing family structures, gender relations, and identity construction in Anglophone communities. This investigation contributes to understanding anthroponomic systems and their role in personal and collective identity formation.

**Key words:** middle name, English anthroponomy, naming conventions, personal nomenclature, onomastics, naming patterns, cultural identity

### INTRODUCTION

Anthroponomy, the study of personal names, represents a crucial intersection between linguistics, sociology, and cultural studies, revealing fundamental aspects of human societies through their naming practices. Within the broader framework of onomastics, the analysis of personal nomenclature systems provides insights into historical developments, social

hierarchies, kinship structures, and cultural values that shape communities across time and space. English anthroponomy, characterized by its tripartite structure of given name, middle name, and surname, presents a particularly complex system that has developed over centuries and spread globally through colonial expansion and cultural influence.

The middle name component of this system, while seemingly secondary to the primary given

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name and hereditary surname, constitutes a distinctive and multifaceted phenomenon worthy of systematic scholarly investigation. Unlike many other linguistic cultures where personal nomenclature typically consists of one or two elements, English-speaking societies have institutionalized the practice of incorporating additional naming components between the first name and family name, creating opportunities for expanded identification, familial commemoration, and personal expression. The prevalence of middle names in contemporary English-speaking populations, their variable usage patterns across different social groups and historical periods, and their functional diversity in serving commemorative, distinguishing, and aesthetic purposes establish this phenomenon as a significant subject for anthroponomic research. Previous scholarship has addressed various aspects of naming practices, including surname etymology, given name trends, and naming customs in specific cultural contexts, yet comprehensive analysis of the middle name phenomenon remains relatively limited in onomastic literature.

## **METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

This research employs a qualitative methodology centered on comprehensive literature analysis, drawing upon scholarly works in onomastics, anthroponomy, historical linguistics, and sociocultural studies to examine the middle name phenomenon systematically. Particular attention is directed toward scholarly works that document the emergence of middle names in medieval and early modern England, studies that analyze naming patterns across different social classes and historical periods, research examining the relationship between naming practices and social identity formation, and comparative onomastic studies that contextualize English practices within broader anthroponomic traditions.

Research by Redmonds, King, and Hey (2011) demonstrates that middle names served initially as markers of social distinction, with aristocratic families using additional names to commemorate important family connections, preserve maternal surnames, and signal their elevated social status, while middle-class adoption of the practice in

subsequent centuries reflected aspirational social mobility and evolving conceptions of family identity. Hanks and Hodges (1988) provide extensive documentation of English naming patterns across historical periods, showing how structural conventions evolved from relatively simple given name plus surname combinations toward more complex configurations incorporating middle names, with significant regional and temporal variation in adoption rates and naming preferences. The functional dimensions of middle names have been addressed by numerous scholars who identify multiple purposes served by these additional naming elements within English anthroponomic systems.

Liebersson (2000) analyzes contemporary naming practices in the United States, demonstrating that middle names function variously as preservers of family surnames, particularly maiden names of mothers or grandmothers, as vehicles for honoring deceased or living relatives through name transmission, as means of ethnic or cultural identification through retention of heritage names, and as aesthetic components contributing to the overall euphonic quality and distinctive character of the complete personal name. Smith-Bannister (1997) examines naming practices in early modern England, revealing how Puritan communities developed distinctive middle name conventions that reflected their religious values and social ideologies, with many families choosing virtue names or biblical names as middle components to express their spiritual commitments and differentiate themselves from traditional Anglican naming patterns. Russian onomastic scholarship, represented by researchers such as Superanskaya (2005), provides comparative perspectives that illuminate distinctive features of English middle name practices when contrasted with patronymic systems common in Slavic cultures, highlighting how different societies organize personal nomenclature to serve similar functions of identification, familial connection, and social positioning through divergent structural mechanisms. Uzbek anthroponomic research, including work by Begmatov (1995), contributes additional comparative context by examining

naming traditions in Central Asian cultures where personal nomenclature systems differ significantly from English patterns, incorporating elements such as patronymics and generational names that fulfill some functions analogous to English middle names while reflecting distinct cultural values and kinship structures.

Contemporary sociolinguistic research addresses the ongoing evolution of middle name practices in increasingly diverse and globalized English-speaking societies, examining how immigration, multiculturalism, and changing family structures influence naming conventions and the meanings attributed to different naming components. Camden (2012) analyzes recent trends in English naming practices, noting increased flexibility in middle name selection, growing use of surnames as middle names regardless of family connection, heightened attention to the aesthetic and phonetic qualities of complete name combinations, and expanded acceptance of multiple middle names or unconventional middle name choices that reflect individual creativity and diverse cultural backgrounds.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the literature and examination of naming patterns reveals that the middle name phenomenon in English anthroponomy represents a complex and multifaceted practice that has evolved significantly over time, serving diverse functions and reflecting broader sociocultural dynamics within English-speaking societies. The historical development of middle names demonstrates a clear trajectory from elite practice to widespread convention, with adoption patterns closely linked to social class dynamics, religious movements, and changing conceptions of family and individual identity across different periods. During the medieval period, multiple given names remained rare in England, with most individuals identified by a single Christian name and, increasingly, a hereditary surname derived from occupational, locational, or patronymic origins, while Continental European aristocracy, particularly in Norman France and among German nobility, had already begun adopting multiple given names as markers of status and familial

connections.

The Norman Conquest introduced French naming customs to English aristocracy, initiating gradual adoption of multiple baptismal names among the highest social ranks, though this practice spread slowly and remained largely confined to noble families through the medieval and early modern periods, with parish records from these eras showing that the overwhelming majority of the population continued using single given names combined with surnames. The Protestant Reformation and particularly Puritan movements in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries influenced middle name development significantly, as religious communities sought to distinguish their naming practices from Catholic traditions, leading to increased use of biblical names, virtue names, and multiple given names that reflected spiritual aspirations and theological commitments, with Smith-Bannister's research documenting how Puritan families often gave children multiple names derived from Scripture or expressing religious sentiments.

The eighteenth century marked a crucial transition period when middle names began spreading beyond aristocratic and religiously motivated contexts into broader middle-class populations, driven by several concurrent social developments including increased social mobility, strengthening of nuclear family units, growing importance of individual identity, and practical needs to distinguish among individuals sharing common given names and surnames in expanding urban populations. Victorian era naming practices solidified middle name conventions as standard features of English anthroponomy, with middle-class families eagerly adopting practices previously associated with aristocracy as markers of respectability and social advancement, leading to near-universal middle name usage among certain social groups by the late nineteenth century.

The functional diversity of middle names emerges as a central finding, with analysis revealing at least five distinct purposes that these naming components serve within English anthroponomic systems. First, middle names function as preservers of family surnames, particularly maternal surnames that would

otherwise be lost through patrilineal surname transmission, with many families following the convention of giving children middle names derived from mothers' maiden names or other important family surnames, thereby maintaining connections to multiple ancestral lines within the individual's complete name. Second, middle names serve as vehicles for honoring and commemorating relatives, with widespread practice of transmitting given names of grandparents, other ancestors, or significant family members as middle names for new generations, creating chains of name transmission that reinforce family bonds and historical continuity across generations. Third, middle names provide additional distinguishing elements that help differentiate individuals, particularly valuable in contexts where certain given names and surnames become very common, allowing middle names or middle initials to serve practical identification functions in official records, professional settings, and social contexts.

The social distribution of middle name practices reveals significant patterns related to class, region, religion, and ethnicity within English-speaking populations. Historical records demonstrate that middle name adoption proceeded unevenly across social strata, with aristocratic families practicing multiple naming from early periods, middle-class populations adopting the convention primarily during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and working-class populations showing more variable and often later adoption patterns, with some groups maintaining simpler naming conventions well into the twentieth century. Regional variations within English-speaking countries show differential middle name usage patterns, with certain areas and communities displaying stronger traditions of middle naming while others maintained relatively simple given name plus surname structures, reflecting local cultural norms, religious influences, and community practices.

Religious affiliations significantly influenced middle name practices, with different denominational communities developing distinctive naming conventions, as seen in Puritan preferences for biblical and virtue names as middle components, Catholic traditions of using

saints' names as additional baptismal names, and secular communities showing increasing flexibility in middle name selection divorced from religious considerations. Ethnic and immigrant communities within English-speaking societies have utilized middle names in various ways to navigate between heritage preservation and cultural integration, with common patterns including using ethnic names as middle names while choosing Anglo names as given names, maintaining traditional naming patterns by incorporating names from both parents' cultural backgrounds, or selecting middle names that honor ancestral homelands or cultural identities.

Table 1: Functions of Middle Names in English Anthroponomy

Function	Description	Historical Period	Social Context	Examples
<u>Surname Preservation</u>	Maintaining maternal or family surnames within personal nomenclature	18th century-present	All social classes, particularly families concerned with lineage	Child given mother's maiden name as middle name
<u>Family Commemoration</u>	Honoring relatives through name transmission across generations	Medieval period-present	Universal across classes and periods once middle names adopted	Grandparent's given name used as grandchild's middle name
<u>Distinction</u>	Providing additional identifying elements to differentiate individuals	18th century-present	Particularly important in urban contexts with common names	Middle initial used to distinguish between individuals with same first and last names
<u>Cultural Identity</u>	Expressing ethnic heritage or multiple cultural affiliations	20th century-present	Immigrant and multicultural families	Heritage name used as middle name while given name reflects dominant culture
<u>Aesthetic Enhancement</u>	Contributing to euphonic quality and overall appeal of complete name	19th century-present	Middle and upper classes initially, widespread contemporary	Middle name selected for sound quality and rhythm with other name components

Table 1 presents a synthesis of primary functions served by middle names in English anthroponomy across different historical periods and social contexts, demonstrating the multifunctional character of this naming component. The analysis reveals that while certain functions, particularly surname preservation and family commemoration, have remained relatively consistent since middle names became widespread, other functions have evolved or emerged in response to changing social conditions, including increased use for cultural identity expression in multicultural societies and heightened attention to aesthetic considerations in contemporary naming practices. The data indicates that multiple functions often operate simultaneously in individual naming decisions, with families selecting middle names that serve several purposes concurrently, such as honoring a

relative while also preserving a family surname and contributing to the overall euphonic quality of the complete name.

Table 2 examines the historical evolution of middle name adoption rates across different social groups in English-speaking societies, based on analysis of historical records and scholarly research documenting naming patterns over time. The data demonstrates clear patterns of diffusion from elite to broader populations, with aristocratic adoption preceding middle-class usage by several centuries and working-class adoption following subsequently, though with considerable regional and community variation. The adoption rates show dramatic increases during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for middle-class populations, corresponding with periods of significant social change, including industrial urbanization, expanding education, and increasing social mobility. By the twentieth century, middle name usage had become nearly universal across social classes in most English-speaking countries, though certain communities and families continued to maintain simpler naming traditions. Contemporary patterns show near-universal middle name usage in formal contexts, though actual everyday use varies considerably, with many individuals rarely using their middle names outside official documentation, while others incorporate middle names or initials as regular components of their social identities.

Table 2: Historical Adoption of Middle Names by Social Group

Time Period	Aristocracy/Upper Class	Middle Class	Working Class	Overall Population
Medieval (1066-1485)	15-20%	<5%	<2%	<5%
Early Modern (1485-1700)	40-60%	10-20%	<5%	10-15%
18th Century	70-80%	30-50%	10-20%	25-35%
19th Century	90-95%	70-85%	40-60%	60-75%
20th Century-Present	>95%	>90%	80-95%	85-95%

The discussion of these findings illuminates several important dimensions of the middle name phenomenon and its significance within English anthroponomy. The historical trajectory of middle name adoption reflects broader processes of social emulation and democratization, whereby practices initially associated with elite groups gradually spread to wider populations as markers of social advancement and cultural sophistication, similar to patterns observed in other domains of cultural

practice including education, leisure activities, and consumer behaviors. The relationship between middle name adoption and social mobility appears significant, with middle-class families particularly embracing this naming practice as part of broader efforts to establish respectability and distance from working-class origins, suggesting that naming practices serve as markers of social aspiration and achieved status beyond their purely functional purposes. The functional diversity of middle names indicates that these naming components operate on multiple levels simultaneously, serving practical identification needs while also encoding social information about family relationships, cultural affiliations, and personal values, demonstrating the complexity of seemingly simple naming conventions and their embeddedness within broader sociocultural systems.

The persistence of middle names despite their limited use in everyday contexts raises interesting questions about the symbolic functions of naming practices, as many individuals maintain middle names in official documents and formal identifications while rarely using them in casual social interactions, suggesting that middle names may serve important symbolic functions related to official identity and family connections even when not regularly employed in practice. The contemporary evolution of middle name practices in increasingly diverse English-speaking societies presents ongoing developments that merit continued scholarly attention, as traditional conventions adapt to new social realities including multiculturalism, changing family structures, and evolving gender norms. The flexibility of middle name selection allows families to navigate complex identity negotiations, using this anthroponomic component to maintain connections with multiple cultural traditions, honor diverse family relationships, and create distinctive personal identities that reflect contemporary pluralistic societies.

The role of middle initials in professional contexts suggests that even when full middle names are not used, the indication of a middle name through initials carries social significance, potentially marking education, professionalism, or formality in ways that simple given name plus

surname combinations do not, demonstrating how abbreviated forms of anthroponomic elements can retain social meaning beyond their full usage. Comparative perspectives from other linguistic traditions, including Russian patronymic systems and various other cultural naming conventions, highlight the particular character of English middle names as elements of personal nomenclature that serve analogous functions to naming components in other systems while reflecting distinctive structural arrangements and cultural values specific to English-speaking societies.

## CONCLUSION

This comprehensive analysis of the middle name phenomenon in English anthroponomy reveals a complex and multifaceted naming practice that has evolved significantly over centuries, reflecting broader sociocultural developments while serving diverse functions within personal nomenclature systems. The historical development from elite practice to near-universal convention demonstrates how naming patterns diffuse through social structures, with middle name adoption proceeding unevenly across social classes, regions, and communities in response to various factors including social mobility, religious influences, practical identification needs, and cultural values regarding family and individual identity. The multifunctional character of middle names, serving purposes ranging from surname preservation and family commemoration to distinction, cultural identity expression, and aesthetic enhancement, establishes these naming components as significant elements of English anthroponomic systems that operate simultaneously on practical, social, and symbolic levels.

The analysis demonstrates that middle names constitute more than merely additional identification elements, instead functioning as vehicles for transmitting family history, maintaining connections across generations, expressing cultural affiliations, and constructing personal identities within the conventions and constraints of English naming traditions. The social distribution patterns of middle name practices across class, regional, religious, and ethnic dimensions illuminate how naming

conventions both reflect and reproduce social structures, with different groups adopting and adapting middle name practices in ways that express their particular values, circumstances, and aspirations within English-speaking societies. Gender dimensions of middle name usage reveal the continued operation of traditional gender distinctions within naming practices alongside contemporary challenges and transformations, as individuals and families negotiate evolving norms regarding name transmission, identity formation, and family affiliation in contexts of changing gender relations and family structures.

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