



## Conferences and Events

# The Retrospective Methods Network

# RMN

## Newsletter

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### Personal Names and Cultural Reconstructions

*21–23 August 2019, Helsinki, Finland*

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The conference of *Personal Names and Cultural Reconstructions* was organized at the University of Helsinki on August 21–23. *Metsätalo* [‘forest house’], originally built for the students studying forest sciences, served as a venue for the conference which concluded a three-year research project called “Personal Name Systems in Finnic and Beyond: Reconstructing the Concepts of Name Giving in Cultural Layers”, and was funded by The Academy of Finland. The aim of the conference was to highlight anthroponymic systems within a historical context. The program consisted of 46 paper sessions, three keynote sessions and one poster session with nine posters. The atmosphere was multicultural and multidisciplinary. There were participants from 28 different countries. Most of them were linguists and onomasticians, but also scholars from the fields of archaeology, folklore studies, history and other disciplines were present.

#### **Keynote Sessions**

The first keynote speaker, Ellen Bramwell from the University of Glasgow, had a socio-onomastic look into personal names. She was comparing the personal name systems in five different communities in Scotland. She pointed out how important the cultural context is in order to understand personal naming systems.

The second keynote speaker was Mr. Frog from the University of Helsinki, whose presentation was about ancient Finnic personal name systems. As a researcher specialising in

folklore studies his perspective was multidisciplinary. He presented how ancient Finnic personal names appear in folklore and mythology. Frog concluded that many Finnic personal names have had mythological significance and this perspective should be taken into consideration when studying ancient anthroponyms.

In the last keynote session, Aleksandar Loma from the University of Belgrade and the Serbian Academy of Sciences, presented what kind of problems appear in chronological and social stratification of ancient personal names. He used two zoonyms, meaning ‘horse’ and ‘wolf’, in Indo-European context as examples. Professor Loma described how these two animals have appeared in personal names among Indo-European tribes from the Bronze Age onwards.

#### **Paper Sessions**

Paper sessions consisted of wide variety of topics and covered areas from that of ancient Egypt to contemporary times. Regions named were, for example, the Baltics, Denmark, Finland, Kazakhstan, Poland, Prussia, Scandinavia, South Africa, Turin and Zambia. The only continents that were not dealt with were Antarctica and Oceania. A scholarly change in onomastics was also visible. Many lectures had a socio-linguistic or semantic perspective whereas the amount of presentations concentrating on name etymologies were fewer than one might expect. A quick analysis of the paper titles shows that

expressions like ‘personal name(s)’, ‘anthroponym(s)’ and ‘individual name(s)’ were used the most. In addition, expressions like ‘region’, ‘area’, ‘century’ and ‘medieval’ were popular. It could be concluded that the most typical lecture was about presenting an ancient personal name system in one specific area.

It was also interesting that many of the papers were based on multidisciplinary work. Lecturers were acquainted with various disciplines. Archaeology and history were probably the most common disciplines together with linguistics. A good example of multidisciplinary work was a paper presented by Albris Sofie Laurine. She proposed that the evidence of Late Iron Age Scandinavian naming could be studied by viewing various themes and elements used in mono- and dithematic personal names from an archaeological perspective. This means that name elements mentioned in ancient Scandinavian runestones could be compared to archeological data found in the vicinity. For example, the name element *Björn* [‘bear’] could occur with artifacts depicting or including the same animal.

The connection between personal names and cultural heritage was another theme that was examined in many papers. There were three papers and one poster that discussed the role of personal names in cultural identification practices among African peoples or people descended from there. For example, Oswald Chanda stated that, in Zambia, the local personal name culture was almost completely superseded by English-derived practices during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He proposed that Zambians should be made more familiar with their ancient personal names by promoting the theme in schools.

It was also refreshing to notice that many papers were not only multidisciplinary but also based on modern methods or trends. For example, Giacomo Luigi Morando presented a study where he tries, on the basis of personal name data, to create a reconstruction of the ancient urban culture and society of Old-Elamite Susa, in South-Western Iran. He used a variety of different methods and perspectives in order to illustrate this. Indeed, Morando’s study is also a fine example of how digital tools can be applied to onomastic studies. Vanessa Hanneschläger’s paper was another good

example of using digital tools. She demonstrated how names appearing in personal name corpuses can be divided into categories by gender by using computational aid.

Among the different language groups represented at the conference, Finnic was the most present. This is expected as the conference was held in Helsinki and the project that the conference was based on concentrated mostly on old Finnic personal names. For example, Janne Saarikivi analyzed the etymologies of different Finnic deities and mythological heroes. Oliver Blomqvist’s paper fit very well with the theme of the conference. He demonstrated how traces of Finnish personal name forms can be found in medieval Swedish documents.

One could argue that Finland’s location on the border between Eastern and Western Europe was evident in the topics. There were many scholars from Latvia and Lithuania covering the naming systems used by Baltic tribes. For example, Darius Ivoska had a look into ancient Prussian personal names. Western Europe was also well presented. Volker and Rosa Kohleim gave a presentation about the reconstruction of ancient Bavarian mentalities based on medieval personal names. Elisabetta Rossi’s paper covered the personal names used by upper classes in the city of Chieri (modern-day Northern Italy). In addition to Western Europe, there were also papers concerning eastern parts of Europe and Asia, like Leo Loveday’s paper focusing on Japanese naming customs or Alexander Pustyakov’s paper presenting the 17<sup>th</sup> century personal name system in Mari-El (in modern-day Russia). Zhazira Agabekova, in turn, examined “The Arabic Side of the Kazakh Anthroponymy”.

### **Summary**

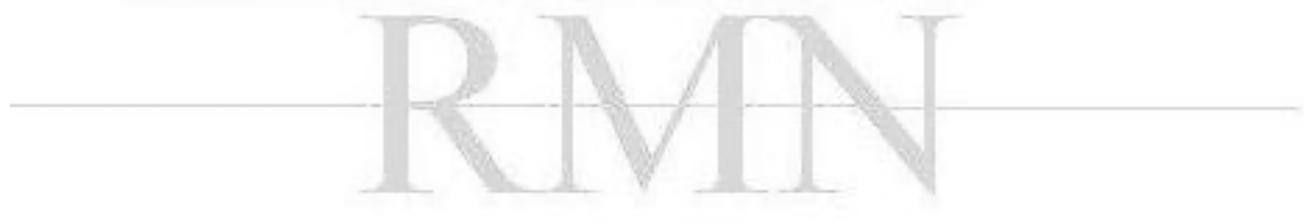
The variety of lecturers hailing from different backgrounds was visible in the variety of academic presentation styles. In general, it seemed that scholars from the sphere of Western culture were more informal and had put effort into the clarity and vividness of their presentations. On the other hand, there were also scholars who had prepared their presentations as academic papers nearly ready for publication, which they read to the public. Even though onomastics can be considered as

a small discipline in the field of linguistics, there is nevertheless so much inherent variety in the topic that it is impossible for one onomastician to understand everything. Thus, it would be desirable that, for example, visual aid would be used more often to make presentations easier to understand.

The conference not only consisted of presentations and posters but also provided the opportunity for participants to socialize and connect. The first day of the conference, Wednesday, concluded with a reception hosted by the University of Helsinki's Faculty of Arts. The second day concluded with an evening dinner at the Culinary School Perho. The vocal group *Kärhämä* introduced participants to

Finnish folk music. The lyrics were based on etymologies proposed for various Finnish words. The conference ended on Friday with a closing session held by the organizers Terhi Ainiala, Jaakko Raunamaa, Janne Saarikivi and Johanna Virkkula.

In summary, the conference was successful and interesting. Topics spanned many different eras and covered most regions of the world. Speakers were from diverse backgrounds and careers. This may have been the first conference focused exclusively on ancient personal names. We found the conference to be an exceedingly positive experience and we sincerely hope to see similar events organized in the near future.



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