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Jens Nielsen, son of Niels, son of Jens

Testing the conservatism of patronymic naming traditions in pre-industrial Denmark

Naming your new-born children may have been easier in older times – at least in the peasant communities of Denmark up until the early twentieth century. Because for the bulk of peasant families from all regions of Denmark, it was customary to name the first-born son after his father’s father and the second-born son after his mother’s father; likewise, the two first-born girls were usually named after their grandmothers. Furthermore, until the mid-nineteenth century the name of the father was added to the first name as a patronymic surname. For instance, a man called *Niels Jensen* would be the son of someone called *Jens*. Niels Jensen’s oldest son was very likely to be named *Jens Nielsen*, after his father’s father (Jens) and his own father (Nielsen = ‘son of Niels’) respectively. A younger brother of Jens could, for instance, be named *Peder Nielsen*, especially if *Peder* was also the name of his mother’s father.



Figure 1: General model of traditional naming practice among male peasantry in pre-industrial Denmark. The picture to the left of a peasant sharpening his scythe is a Dutch chalcography by CASPAR LUYKEN, c. 1700.

Due to this customary tradition, the variety of personal names within the peasant community of pre-industrial Denmark became naturally limited. For instance, the ten most popular male names alone constituted no less than 39 % of all males recorded in a national census of Denmark in 1801 (EGGERT 2009: 104). In comparison, the Top 10-names in 2016 only accounted for 16 % of new-born boys in Denmark (*Nyt fra Danmarks Statistik* 2017 no. 298). The conservative naming practice also meant that certain names were likely to continue within particular families for generations. This is especially evident with names, which were otherwise less commonly used. Partly derived from



such family traditions combined with local inspiration from other factors, some names show significant regional variations in their nationwide distribution (KRISTENSEN 1914: 6, THOMSEN 1926, MELDGAARD 1982, EGGERT 2009). Whereas a name like *Peder*, for instance, appears to have been immensely and equally popular all over Denmark for centuries, the names *Jens* and *Hans* (which are, by the way, both short forms of *Johannes*) almost seem to have been mutually complimentary with a particular usage in the northern and southern regions respectively (see Figure 2) (KRISTENSEN 1914: 6, THOMSEN 1926: 141–142, EGGERT 2009: 105–106). Even more spectacular is the regional concentration of *Rasmus* to the south-central parts of Denmark, giving name in Danish onomastics to the so-called ‘Rasmus Banana’ (EGGERT 2009: 109–110).

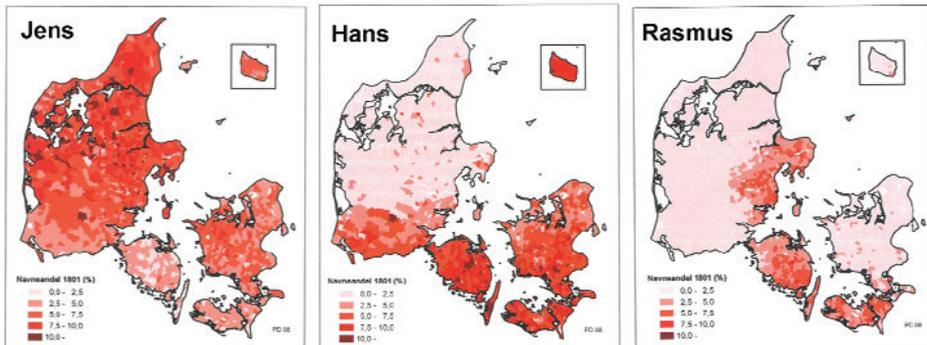


Figure 2: The distribution of Jens, Hans and Rasmus as primary first name in the Danish census of 1801, shown as percentage of the entire male population per village (‘*ejerlav*’); data from Sønderjylland is not included on the map for technical reasons. EGGERT 2009: 105–106 and 110 (Fig. 7, 8 and 10). Maps by PEDER DAM.

It has been suggested that due to the conservativeness of Danish naming practices among the peasant population (which historically has accounted for about 90 % of the population in pre-industrial Denmark), local variations in the popularity of particular names may go as far back as the Late Middle Ages (THOMSEN 1926, MELDGAARD 1965: 109, MELDGAARD 1982: 198–200, EGGERT 2009: 109 and 117, KÆLLERØD 2016: 107–108). One medieval factor often suggested as possible reason for such variations is saints, especially those who were mainly venerated in particular regions (THOMSEN 1926: 138–140, HALD 1961: 337, HALD 1974: 46 and 56, MELDGAARD 1982: 191–193, EGGERT 2009: 110).¹ However, an attempt to compare male names in two Danish

¹ The classic example of this is St. Theodgar (Da. *Tøger*), a missionary saint from the eleventh century, who was buried in Vestervig in north-western Jylland and after that almost exclusively

regions in 1787 with local parish church dedications, to identify possible naming after local patron saints used in Catholic times (which in Denmark would mean before the Protestant Reformation in 1536), found no evidence of such a positive correlation (KÆLLERØD 2015, 2016). While several studies by now have found reason to support a thesis that regional naming variations go as far back as to the late seventeenth century, only one has tested naming continuity systematically for the same locality for a longer time period, and that did not go further back than 1636 (MELDGAARD 1965). Thus, no systematic attempt has yet been made in Danish onomastics to test whether local naming traditions (and, from that, regional naming variations) can indeed be seen to go all the way back to the Middle Ages – and, herein, to the times of Catholic saint veneration in Denmark.

1. Regional vs. national naming patterns in the late 18th century

In order to evaluate the conservatism of patronymic naming traditions in pre-industrial Denmark, I have performed a comparative cross-section analysis of the twenty most popular male names in a particular district of Denmark at three different points in time. The chosen district is Merløse hundred, an administrative unit on the island of Sjælland, which can be expected to be quite representative for the entire country, with no beforehand-known peculiarities in terms of personal names. The district contains nineteen rural parishes, along with the town of Holbæk, but only material from the rural parishes is included in this survey (although leaving out the rural nobility).

celebrated in his home region. Still in the sixteenth century, the name *Tøger* was predominantly used by peasant families in the same region (THOMSEN 1926: 140, HALD 1961: 337). In the same way, a high frequency in modern times of the name *Knud* in southern Jylland, Fyn and Sjælland has been connected to the cult of two royal Danish saints, St. Canute the Holy and St. Canute Lavard (THOMSEN 1926: 139, HALD 1961: 337, MELDGAARD 1982: 191–193).



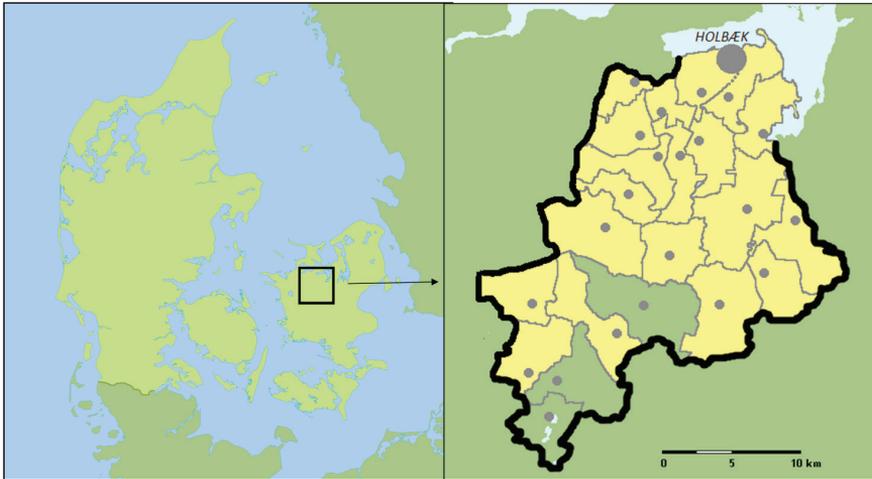


Figure 3: Map of present-day Denmark with the location of Merløse hundred pointed out (left) and the medieval borders and parishes of the district (right).

Three of the southernmost parishes were transferred from Merløse to a neighbouring hundred in the early seventeenth century and are therefore not included in the survey. Neither is the town of Holbæk, leaving a total of nineteen rural parishes to be analysed. Maps by the author.

The youngest cross-section is made with the first national census in Denmark recorded in 1787. At this time, the names *Niels* and *Jens* were the two most (and equally) popular names in the district, both covering 12.1 % of the male population. While a nationwide Top 20 has not been calculated for the 1787 census, one is available for the census of 1801, and it seems fair to assume that figures would not have changed much in the intermediate period. When compared to this it is seen that the seven top positions in both rankings are taken by the same group of names (see Table 1). There are, however, some noteworthy internal variations in the positioning. Whereas *Peder*, for instance, was only trailing fourth in popularity among male names in Merløse hundred, the name was a clear number one in the national ranking. In fact, the Top 4-names were switched exactly upside down between the district and the entire country. Moving further down the chart, *Rasmus* was the eighth most popular name in Denmark in total, but only number eleven in Merløse, corresponding well with the fact that the district is not considered a part of the ‘Rasmus Banana’. Besides the noted preference for *Niels* and *Jens* in the district, other names with a particular popularity in Merløse hundred compared to the nation as a whole are *Ole*, *Jørgen*, *Christoffer* and *Morten*. Thus, even if there are no dramatic deviations in the naming practice recorded for Merløse hundred anno 1787 compared to the nationwide patterns, some regional variations can be accounted for.

	Merløse hundred (census 1787)		Denmark (census 1801)			
		number	%	number	%	
1	Niels (Nilaus, Nis)	521	12.1	Peder (Peter, Per)	65,292	7.1
2	Jens	520	12.1	Hans	62,759	6.8
3	Hans	463	10.7	Jens	52,026	5.6
4	Peder (Peter, Per)	462	10.7	Niels (Nilaus, Nis)	49,690	5.4
5	Christen	300	7.0	Christen	32,425	3.5
6	Laurids (Laur, Lars)	267	6.2	Anders (Andreas)	31,360	3.4
7	Anders (Andreas)	237	5.5	Laurids (Laur, Lars)	22,973	2.5
8	Oluf (Ole)	220	5.1	Rasmus	18,762	2.1
9	Jørgen	154	3.6	Søren	18,633	2.0
10	Søren	154	3.6	Christian	17,414	1.9
11	Rasmus	122	2.8	Jacob (Jep, Jeppe)	16,227	1.8
12	Christian	97	2.3	Johannes (Johan)	16,171	1.7
13	Jacob (Jep, Jeppe)	91	2.1	Jørgen	14,963	1.6
14	Johannes (Johan)	83	1.9	Mads (Mathias)	13,538	1.5
15	Mads (Mathias)	67	1.6	Oluf (Ole)	12,553	1.4
16	Frederik (Friedrich)	46	1.1	Henrik (Hendrik)	9,580	1.0
17	Christoffer	43	1.0	Claus	9,338	1.0
18	Morten (Martin)	43	1.0	Frederik (Friedrich)	8,946	1.0
19	Henrik (Hendrik)	40	0.9	Jürgen	7,087	0.8
20	Povl (Poul, Paul)	31	0.7	Povl (Poul, Paul)	7,000	0.8

Table 1: Top 20-rankings of the most frequently used male names in Merløse hundred (left column) and in Denmark as a whole (right column) at the national censuses of 1787 and 1801 respectively. The percentages show the share of each name compared to the total number of male individuals in each census. Data for Merløse hundred 1787 has kindly been provided by LARS-JAKOB HARDING KÆLLERØD, data for Denmark 1801 by BIRGIT EGGERT; the Top 10-ranking for Denmark has previously been published in EGGERT 2009: 104 (Table 2).

Cross-section analysis of naming patterns in Merløse hundred (c. 1100–1787). The cross-section of 1787 for Merløse hundred will in the following be compared to another two cross-sections from earlier periods in the very same district. One is from the Danish land register of 1688, where the peasants and cottagers (along with parish priests and millers) from every parish were listed with their names; for the parishes of Merløse hundred, a total of 923 male names is recorded. There are unfortunately no correspondingly complete name lists from the Middle Ages. In stead, I have listed all the names of peasants in the same district that I have come across in various diplomas, rolls (‘jordebøger’) and royal registers from the period 1100–1550; the bulk of this material is from after 1350. Currently, the medieval name register for Merløse hundred only counts 229 names and should be extended for future studies, but it can already now be used to suggest a possible continuity or change. A more critical problem for the cross-section analysis than the medieval ‘sample size’ is the fact that a large part the recorded names (especially from the fourteenth



century) are preserved in Latin forms only, which means that, for instance, Danish variant forms as *Jens*, *Hans*, *Johan*, *Jon* and *Jes* in these sources are all listed as *Johannes*, just as *Jacob*, *Jeppe* and *Jep* all will be called *Jacobus*. For this reason, I have grouped the three latter as just one name in all three cross-sections, but as I consider the distinction between *Jens* and *Hans* quite relevant for the period, I have only paired *Jens* and *Johannes* as one name in the medieval period, leaving *Hans*, *Jon* and *Jes* out as variant forms on their own in the Middle Ages already. The Top 20-rankings of all three cross-sections are listed in Table 2.

	Medieval period (1100-1550)		Land register 1688		Census 1787	
1	Peder (Petrus)	41	Peder	118	Niels	521
2	Niels (Nicolaus)	35	Jens	104	Jens	520
3	Jens (Johannes)	30	Niels	104	Hans	463
4	Jacob (Jacobus)	24	Laurids	83	Peder	462
5	Oluf (Olavus)	11	Hans	77	Christen	300
6	Jes (from Johannes)	10	Christen	69	Laurids, Lars	267
7	Laurids (Laurentius)	9	Oluf	48	Anders, Andreas	237
8	Mads (Mathias)	9	Anders	44	Oluf, Ole	220
9	Anders (Andreas)	8	Søren	44	Jørgen	154
10	Hemming	6	Rasmus	33	Søren	154
11	Mogens (Magnus)	6	Jørgen	28	Rasmus	122
12	Bent (Benedictus)	4	Mads	26	Christian	97
13	Jon (from Johannes)	3	Jacob, Jeppe, Jep	23	Jacob, Jeppe, Jep	91
14	Knud (Canutus)	3	Morten	16	Johannes, Johan	83
15	Mikkel (Michael)	3	Christoffer	12	Mads, Mathias	67
16	Asser (Ascerus)	2	Mikkel	12	Frederik	46
17	Bo (Boetius)	2	Povl	12	Christoffer	43
18	Clemens	2	Mogens	9	Morten, Martin	43
19	Morten (Martinus)	2	Jesper	8	Henrik	40
20	Søren (Severinus)	2	Thomas	6	Povl	31

Table 2: Top 20-rankings of the most frequently used male names in Merløse hundred at three cross-sections in time: 1100–1550 (left column), 1688 (middle column) and 1787 (right column). Data for the two oldest cross-sections has been collected by the author. For the census of 1787, see Table 1.

A comparison of the three cross-section rankings reveals several interesting things. The name *Hans*, so widely used both in 1688 (no. 5) and 1787 (no. 3), only came into popular usage among the peasant population in Merløse hundred after the Middle Ages. This originally Low German and Dutch short form of *Johannes* were not uncommon among the rural nobility of the district or the urban bourgeoisie in Holbæk in late medieval times, but apparently only later had its impact in the peasant community. Here, the most common Danish short form of *Johannes*, *Jens*, remained continuously popular throughout the studied periods (no. 3 in the Middle Ages, no. 2–3 in 1688 and no. 2 in 1787), whereas the two additional short forms of the same name from the Middle Ages, *Jes* (no. 6) and *Jon* (no. 13–15), subsequently lost their popularity. The basic form

Johannes (along with *Johan*) had re-established itself to some extent in 1787 (no. 14).

Several other male names do, like *Hans*, only occur in the Top 20-rankings after the Middle Ages. These include **Christen** (no. 6 in 1688, no. 5 in 1787), **Rasmus** (no. 10 in 1688, no. 11 in 1787), **Jørgen** (no. 11 in 1688, no. 9–10 in 1787) and **Christoffer** (no. 15 in 1688, no. 17–18 in 1787). In two cases, the names only reached the chart in the eighteenth century: **Christian** (no. 12) and **Frederik** (no. 16). Since *Christian* and *Frederik* have been the alternating names for the kings of Denmark since 1513, their late coming as popular names among the peasant population may reflect a general hesitance until then to take what were considered ‘royal names’. This may also be a part of the explanation that *Hans* only emerges in the Top 20-ranking after the Middle Ages, as this was indeed a royal Danish name until the mid-sixteenth century; although only held by one actual king (Hans, 1481–1513), it was initially lined up to be *Hans* – and not *Frederik* – that should have alternated with *Christian* as names for the Danish rulers of the Oldenburg dynasty.² Also *Christoffer* had been a royal name in Denmark in the Middle Ages, but the last king of this name (Christoffer III ‘the Bavarian’) had died in 1448, and apparently it had lost its ‘sense of royalty’ by the seventeenth century, at least enough to have been taken up by the Danish peasant community. No other names held by Danish kings since 1202 (e.g. *Valdemar*, *Erik* and *Abel*) are found in any of the rankings. ‘Royal monopoly’ cannot be claimed for any of the names *Christen*, *Rasmus* or *Jørgen*. Whereas *Christen* is hardly known as name in medieval Denmark at all and *Rasmus* was then strictly limited to Fyn, *Jørgen* was quite common in late medieval Danish nobility and bourgeoisie. Being the Danish form of *Georgius*, *Sankt Jørgen* was also widely known as patron saint for a large number of hospitals all around late medieval Denmark.

When new names entered the Top 20-rankings after the Middle Ages, it automatically follows that other names with medieval popularity must have left. In Merløse hundred, this is particularly evident for **Hemming** (no. 10–11), **Bent** (no. 12), **Knud** (no. 13–15), **Asser** and **Bo** (no. 16–20) – and, as already mentioned, for *Jes* (no. 5) and *Jon* (no. 13–15) – who all dropped out of the Top 20 after the sixteenth century. Others fell from higher to lower ranking, such as **Jacob** (no. 4 in the Middle Ages, no. 13 in 1688, no. 13 in 1787), **Mads** (no. 7–8 in the Middle Ages, no. 12 in 1688, no. 15 in 1787) and **Mogens** (no. 10–11 in the Middle Ages, no. 18 in 1688). It is difficult to point out any particular reason

² King Christian II was to have been followed by his son Hans (†1532), who would have been Hans II, when a coup in 1523 replaced Christian with his uncle Frederik, the Duke of Schleswig. Even after the death of King Frederik I in 1533, the Catholic party of Denmark wanted to crown his youngest son, also named Hans (†1580), but the Protestants chose Hans’ elder brother Christian (III), after which *Hans* fated out as a possible royal name.



for these names' fall in popularity after the Middle Ages, but it can be noted that most of them were either old Danish, pre-Christian names (e.g. *Hemming*, *Asser* and *Bo*) or well-known saint names (e.g. St. Benedict, St. Canute, St. James, St. Mathew and St. Magnus) with many known church and altar dedications in Denmark. Whereas the church dedications often remained in use in the Danish cities after the Protestant Reformation in 1536, the actual cult of the saints was gradually abandoned, and this may partly explain why some of these names lost their favour among the peasants. Still, other names closely associated with medieval Catholic sainthood – such as *Peder* (St. Peter), *Niels* (St. Nicholas), *Laurids* (St. Lawrence), *Anders* (St. Andrew) and *Oluf* (St. Olav) – remained very much popular; in the cases of *Hans* (St. John) and *Jørgen* (St. George), as already mentioned, its usage even significantly increased.

A final interesting observation from the cross-section analysis is that the regional deviation from the nationwide preference for *Peder*, which held first ranking in Denmark as a whole in 1801, but only came fourth in Merløse hundred in 1787, does not recur in the two preceding rankings of the district, where the name did indeed hold first place. Thus, 'the decline of *Peder*' in Merløse hundred only appears to have set in after 1688.

2. Regional vs. national naming patterns in the Middle Ages

In fact, in medieval times, the name *Peder* even appears to have enjoyed higher popularity in Merløse hundred than in Denmark on average! Whereas no nationwide record has ever been made on personal names occurring in the census of 1787 or the land register of 1688, an attempt has been made to list a ranking of male names occurring in extant written sources from medieval Denmark (MELDGAARD 1982). A peculiarity about the nationwide survey is, though, that it is not based on an actual name count, which would demand an enormous effort of time, as this data (along with the sources) is still not available digitally. Still, a huge research project was implemented in the 1930s to record the majority of personal names in (predominantly then published) written sources covering the entire medieval Denmark (including Schleswig and Skåne) from around 1000 to 1500. The project recorded more than 300,000 instances of names on both men and women,³ which to some extent were catalogued in the published dictionary *Danmarks Gamle Personnavne* (4 vols. 1936-64). However, for the most popular names, which are of special interest here, only a representative sample was included in the printed catalogue. No actual count has still been made on the collected name data, but a creative 'fast track' to establish the relative ranking of the most popular names was carried out by EVA MELDGAARD in 1982, by simply measuring the stacks of records



³ These records are currently being digitized, a process still not fully implemented.

for each name. The outcome of this survey, measured in centimetres (sic!), is presented as the right column in Table 3.

A direct comparison with the medieval name data from Merløse hundred is, unfortunately, highly problematic. This is not so much due to the method of measurement in the nationwide survey or even that all the variant forms of *Johannes* (i.e. *Jens*, *Hans*, *Jon*, *Jes*, *Johan*, *Johannes*, *Henneke*, etc.) are classified as one. A bigger problem is that while the data from Merløse hundred solely includes names on the rural peasantry (and, as much as it has been possible, only counts the same person once in case of him being mentioned in repeated sources), the nationwide data basically includes every single reference to a named person in the extant written sources. And since these sources tend to focus on kings, nobility, bourgeoisie and clergy, but only rarely refer to named peasantry, the latter group can be expected to be significantly underrepresented in the material.

	Merløse hundred 1100-1536 (no.)		Denmark c.1000-1500 (cm)	
1	Peder (Petrus)	41	Johannes (incl. Jens, Hans, Jes, Jon, etc.)	262
2	Niels (Nicolaus)	35	Niels (Nicolaus)	161
3	Jens (Johannes)	30	Peder (Petrus)	150
4	Jacob (Jacobus)	24	Jacob (Jacobus)	78
5	Oluf (Olavus)	11	Oluf (Olavus)	57
6	Jes (from Johannes)	10	Anders (Andreas)	57
7	Laurids (Laurentius)	9	Laurids (Laurentius)	51
8	Mads (Mathias)	9	Henrik (Henricus)	50
9	Anders (Andreas)	8	Erik (Ericus)	40
10	Hemming	6	Mogens (Magnus)	37
11	Mogens (Magnus)	6	Knud (Canutus)	28
12	Bent (Benedictus)	4	Mads (Mathias)	27
13	Jon (from Johannes)	3	Christian (Christiernus)	24
14	Knud (Canutus)	3	Svend (Sueno)	23
15	Mikkel (Michael)	3	Mikkel (Michael)	22
16	Asser (Ascerus)	2	Bent (Benedictus)	22
17	Bo (Boetius)	2	Toke, Tyge	20
18	Clemens	2	Morten (Martinus)	19
19	Morten (Martinus)	2	Thomas	19
20	Søren (Severinus)	2	Troels (Thrugils)	19

Table 3: Top 20-rankings of the most frequently used male names in Merløse hundred (left column) and in Denmark as a whole (right column) in extant written sources from the Middle Ages. Whereas the Merløse data solely contains peasant names, the national data includes all names. The national ranking is based on MELDGAARD 1982: 198 (encl. III). (For an explanation of the measurement of the national data (in cm), please see the text.)



Thus, the high ranking of the names *Henrik* (no. 8), *Erik* (no. 9), *Christian* (no. 13) and *Svend* (no. 14) for medieval Denmark as a whole, while none of these are found in the regional Top 20 of Merløse hundred, most likely only reflects the differences in social classes included.⁴ If leaving these names out of the comparison, and taking into consideration the *Johannes*-problem, the two rankings show a lot of similarities, as well as a few differences. While *Peder* was slightly more popular than *Niels* among peasantry in medieval Merløse hundred, *Niels* was significantly more used in medieval Denmark as a whole than *Peder*. Whereas names like *Jacob*, *Laurids*, *Anders*, *Oluf*, *Mogens*, *Bent*, *Knud*, *Mikkil* and *Morten* almost find similar positions in the two rankings, some regional deviation can be noted for *Mads* (equally popular to *Laurids*, *Anders* and *Oluf* in Merløse, but significantly lower than these in Denmark as a whole) and particularly *Hemming* (no. 10 in Merløse, not listed in the nationwide Top 20 at all).

In terms of a possible ‘saintly factor’ in the local naming practice, the main saints with a large popular veneration in the region were St. Lawrence and St. Severin, who were patron saints for the parish churches in Undløse (Merløse hundred) and Holmstrup (in a neighbouring hundred) respectively. More importantly, both saints were also connected to holy wells adjacent to the churches, which are known to have attracted a significant pilgrimage in the Late Middle Ages, and even enjoyed a post-Reformation veneration in local folklore way into the nineteenth century (Jakobsen in prep.). However, neither St. Lawrence nor St. Severin can be seen to have generated more peasants by the names of *Laurids* or *Søren* in this region than elsewhere in the country in the Middle Ages (*Laurids*: no. 7 in Merløse, no. 7 in Denmark. *Søren*: no. 20 in Merløse, just outside Top 20 in Denmark). If anything, it rather was the continued spring cult of St. Lawrence and St. Severin into post-Reformation time that can be argued to have caused an increased popularity for these names in Merløse hundred more than in most other regions after the Middle Ages, since both names rose significantly in local popularity between 1550 and 1688 (*Laurids* from no. 7–8 to no. 4; *Søren* from no. 20 to no. 8–9), but it then also needs to be noted that they both held rank positions in Merløse hundred in 1787 similar to those in the national ranking of 1801, so their rise in popularity at least eventually was nationwide (see Table 1).



⁴ While *Erik*, *Christian* and *Svend* are all royal Danish names, *Henrik* was extremely common among nobility, bourgeoisie and clergy of German origin.

3. Summary and conclusion

The cross-section analysis of consistency in naming traditions among male peasants in Merløse hundred from the Middle Ages to the late eighteenth century show signs of both continuity and change. Names like *Peder*, *Niels*, *Jens*, *Laurids*, *Anders* and *Oluf* have remained highly popular throughout the entire period, being positioned in the Top 10-rankings at all three cross-sections; *Peder*, *Niels* and *Jens* even continuously in Top 4. Other popular names from the Middle Ages, such as *Jacob*, *Jes*, *Mads* and *Hemming*, dropped out from the most frequently used between 1550 and 1688, when they had been replaced by names like *Hans*, *Christen*, *Søren*, *Rasmus* and *Jørgen*. More continuity can be seen between the cross-sections of 1688 and 1787, although the intermediate period does show signs of minor shifts in popularity for *Peder* (decline) and *Hans* (rise).

It is possible that some names associated with Catholic saints (such as *Jacob*, *Mads*, *Mogens*, *Bent* and *Clemens*) fell in popularity when the cult of saints in Denmark was discontinued at the Protestant Reformation in 1536, but other ‘saint names’ obviously stayed in usage (e.g. *Peder*, *Niels*, *Laurids*, *Anders* and *Oluf*) or even experienced a popularity growth (e.g. *Hans*, *Jørgen* and *Søren*) after the Reformation. A clearer tendency can be observed for ‘royal names’, as male names, which were still in use by the royal family, were generally avoided by the peasant community in the Middle Ages and in 1688. Thus, although popular as name among the rural nobility and the urban bourgeoisie in medieval times already, *Hans* only became a peasant name in Merløse hundred in the run of the seventeenth century, long after the death of King Hans (†1513) and his two princely would-be successors of the same name. Likewise, *Christoffer* only entered the Top 20-ranking of peasant names after the Middle Ages, when most people had forgot about the last Danish king by this name (†1448). While the peasant community still avoided presently used royal names in 1688, this ‘royal monopoly’ was apparently broken in the run of the eighteenth century, as *Christian* and *Frederik* were in use for kings as well as pawns at the census of 1787.

Finally, the study’s aim to test if variations between regional and national naming patterns observed in the pre-industrial censuses of 1787 and 1801 can be expected to reflect similar deviations and local traditions all the way back into the Middle Ages has come to a negative conclusion. While *Peder*, for instance, where less common in Merløse hundred than in Denmark on average in the late eighteenth century, it was the most frequently used name in Merløse in the Middle Ages, when it only came third nationwide. To judge from a comparison of the regional and the national rankings around 1800, *Oluf* could appear to have been a ‘regional darling’ (no. 8 in Merløse, no. 15 in Denmark), but here



it turns out that while the name has stayed at a regional rank no. 7–9 throughout the period, the difference at the end of the period is due to a significant drop in popularity on the national level, as *Oluf* used to be the fifth most popular name in medieval Denmark as a whole as well as in Merløse hundred. And, finally, while *Mads* could be argued to have been slightly more popular in Merløse than in medieval Denmark on average, this deviation would have been impossible to deduct from a comparison of the pre-industrial censuses, where the name was ranked almost identically in the district (no. 15) and the country (no. 14). Thus, regional variations identified for Merløse hundred in the censuses around 1800 appear to have almost no correspondence with variations that can be observed in the Middle Ages, or vice versa. Furthermore, the present study only concords with KÆLLERØD's warning against putting too much emphasis on local veneration of saints as an important factor in medieval (or post-medieval) naming in the peasant community, as neither St. Lawrence or St. Severin can be accounted for any particular impact on this account in Merløse hundred.

However, the registration of names from the medieval period needs to be improved in order to validate the abovementioned conclusions. This holds both in terms of the regional data, which shall be increased in numbers, and in terms of the national data, which would benefit from both a more accurate measurement (in numbers rather than centimetres!) and a distinction between variant forms of *Johannes* (*Jens*, *Hans*, *Jon*, *Jes*, etc.); if possible, it would of course also be wonderful if the on-going digitization of the national records could make it possible to classify the names in different periods, regions and social classes. On a regional level, near future studies are planned for Merløse hundred to register also the names of the rural nobility, the clergy and the urban bourgeoisie in the Middle Ages, just as the census of 1787 will be analysed for differences between the names on actual peasants (*gårdmænd*) and cottagers (*husmænd*) in the district. So, as always, more studies are needed.

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Abstract

Until the twentieth century, naming traditions in Denmark have been rather conservative. Traditionally, the firstborn son would be given the name of his father's father, while the name of his father would be included as a patronymic surname. The second-born son would often be named after his mother's father. In this way a certain selection of names was likely to continue within a family for generations. This paper tests to what degree regional variations within male first names in 18th- and 19th-century Denmark may go as far back as the Middle Ages due to this conservative naming practice. Male names in one Danish



district (Merløse hundred) as recorded in a census of 1787 are compared with peasant names found in a land register of 1688, and with peasant names of the same district found in extant documents from the period 1100–1550.

Keywords: personal names, patronymic naming, Denmark, pre-industrial period