

# Etymology of the Name Selma: A Transcultural Onomastic Analysis of Semitic, European, and Balkan Layers

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## Abstract

This paper offers a comprehensive etymological and onomastic analysis of the personal name *Selma*, with the aim of identifying its linguistic origins, historical pathways of transmission, and sociocultural integration within the Balkans and the broader European context. The study is grounded in the framework of comparative historical linguistics and onomastics, with particular emphasis on Semitic (Arabic and Hebrew) and European (Germanic and Ossianic) interpretative models.

The analysis demonstrates that the Arabic root *s-l-m* (“peace,” “safety,” “wholeness”) constitutes the primary etymological foundation of the name. This conclusion is supported by its historical continuity within Islamic naming traditions and its documented transmission into the Balkans during the Ottoman period. At the same time, the study examines the secondary European development of the name through literary diffusion, particularly in connection with the Ossianic corpus attributed to James Macpherson, which facilitated its integration into Northern and Western European naming systems.

A comparative perspective further situates the name within the broader Semitic root system *š-l-m*, highlighting its semantic proximity to names such as *Šlomo*, *Solomon*, and *Suleiman*, while maintaining a clear distinction between direct etymological derivation and parallel semantic development. The distribution of the name in the Balkan region is interpreted within a contact-linguistic framework, demonstrating its stabilization as part of the Islamic onomastic layer in South Slavic languages.

The study concludes that *Selma* represents a trans-cultural onomastic unit shaped by the interaction of Semitic linguistic heritage, Islamic historical transmission, and European literary reinterpretation.

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## Keywords

Selma; etymology; onomastics; Semitic languages; Arabic; Hebrew; Balkan linguistics; personal names; linguistic contact; cultural transmission

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## **Introduction**

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# **I. The Etymological Status of the Name Selma: Sources, Hypotheses, and Methodological Constraints**

The name *Selma* belongs to a class of feminine anthroponyms whose historical development cannot be adequately explained by a single etymological lineage. Rather, the available evidence indicates that the graphic form *Selma* reflects the intersection of at least two major traditions

within European and Balkan usage: (1) an Arabic–Turkish–Balkan trajectory and (2) a Northern European tradition, primarily Ossianic–Scandinavian, with a possible secondary Germanic dimension.<sup>1</sup>

At the methodological level, it is therefore essential to distinguish between the **etymology of the form** and the **history of its diffusion**: one concerns the linguistic root from which the name may be derived, while the other concerns the cultural pathways through which it entered specific linguistic environments.<sup>2</sup>

Within the Arabic line, the point of departure is the form سلمى (**Salmā / Salmā**), associated with the root **s-l-m** (س ل م)—one of the most productive Semitic roots within a semantic field encompassing safety, wholeness, freedom from harm, peace, and salvation.<sup>3</sup> Classical Arabic lexicography records that verbal formations derived from this root may signify “to be safe,” “to remain unharmed,” or “to be free from defect or evil,” while nominal derivatives convey meanings such as “safety,” “security,” “peace,” and “salvation.”<sup>4</sup>

Within the same lexicographical tradition, the form *Salmā* is explicitly attested as a feminine personal name (وسلمى: اسم امرأة), which is of particular importance for onomastic reconstruction. This attestation demonstrates that the name is not a modern secondary formation, but rather belongs to an established and historically older stratum of Arabic anthroponymy.<sup>5</sup>

From this perspective, the most methodologically cautious semantic interpretation of the name *Selma* within the Arabic-Islamic context is one that situates it within the semantic field of “safe,” “protected,” “preserved,” “peaceful,” or “in a state of security or wholeness.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time, it is necessary to avoid the widespread popular tendency to assign a single fixed meaning to each individual form. Within the Semitic morphological tradition, it is more accurate to speak of a **semantic field of the root** rather than a single gloss.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, interpretations such as “peaceful,” “secure,” “protected,” or “preserved” should be understood not as simplified but as partial renderings of a broader root-based semantic structure.<sup>8</sup>

The second major line leads to the European, particularly Northern European, use of the name *Selma*. Here, the situation is more complex. In early modern literary tradition, the name becomes recognizable through the Ossianic corpus attributed to **James Macpherson**, in which *Selma* appears as the name of Fingal’s royal residence—the “halls of Selma.”<sup>9</sup> In this context, *Selma* does not originally function as a personal name, but rather as a poetic toponym, which subsequently transitions into anthroponymic use.<sup>10</sup>

This represents an important philological detail: in Northern Europe, the name need not have been adopted from an earlier personal name, but could instead have entered anthroponymy through **literary prestige usage**, a well-documented mechanism in the history of European naming practices.<sup>11</sup>

Alongside the Ossianic line, there exists a frequently proposed hypothesis that in certain European contexts *Selma* may function as a shortened or adapted form of *Anselma*, the feminine counterpart of *Anselm / Anshelm*. Medieval and etymological sources consistently derive the name *Anselm* from Old High German elements **ans** (“god, deity”) and **helm** (“helmet,

protection”).<sup>12</sup> On this basis, a hypothetical development *Selma* < *Anselma* is semantically plausible within the framework of Germanic anthroponymy.

However, methodological caution is again required: what is well established for *Anselm* / *Anselma* does not automatically demonstrate that every European instance of *Selma* represents a shortened Germanic continuation of that name.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the Germanic etymology cannot be treated as a universal explanation, but rather as one among several competing historical trajectories.

Contemporary onomastic data further confirm that the name *Selma* currently operates across multiple European zones, each with distinct historical backgrounds. In Sweden, the name ranks among the most popular female names for newborns in recent years, while in Norway it likewise appears at or near the top of frequency lists.<sup>14</sup> Such widespread usage is difficult to explain through a Balkan–Ottoman transmission channel; it aligns more convincingly with a Northern European literary-cultural tradition, including the Ossianic and subsequent Scandinavian reception layers.<sup>15</sup>

By contrast, the Balkan usage of the name *Selma*, particularly within Muslim communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the broader South Slavic region, is far more plausibly explained through an Arabic–Ottoman–Turkish transmission pathway.<sup>16</sup>

On this basis, the central thesis of the present study is as follows: the name *Selma* is not monogenetic in its European history of use. In the Balkan context, the most probable trajectory is **Arabic → Ottoman Turkish → Bosnian / South Slavic Muslim anthroponymy**, whereas in Northern and parts of Western Europe the dominant pathway is **Ossianic literary reception**, with a possible secondary connection to *Anselma*.<sup>17</sup>

This implies that a single graphic form may have entered different linguistic spaces through distinct historical channels—a classic case of **onomastic polygenesis at the level of cultural transmission**, though not necessarily at the level of formal structure.<sup>18</sup>

At this point, a common error of popular etymology must be rejected: the attempt to reduce all European and Balkan instances of the name to a single “true” origin. From a scholarly perspective, it is far more accurate to speak of **multiple convergent traditions** rather than a single exclusive etymology.<sup>19</sup>

Philologically, the most securely attested origin for the Balkan-Muslim and Turkish sphere remains the Arabic root *s-l-m*, while for Northern European usage the strongest evidence lies in the Ossianic tradition, corroborated by modern Scandinavian frequency data.<sup>20</sup>

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## Footnotes

1. For the coexistence of multiple traditions, see *Behind the Name* (entry “Selma”), which records Turkish *Selma* as a form of *Salma*; for the Northern European line, see the Ossianic corpus and Scandinavian statistical data.
2. The distinction between etymology and cultural transmission is standard in historical onomastics; cf. general principles in onomastic methodology and the dual presence of *Selma* as both toponym and anthroponym.
3. Lane, E.W. (1863–1893) *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. س ل م.
4. Ibid.: meanings include “safe, secure,” “free from evils,” “free from fault,” as well as nouns denoting “safety, security, immunity.”
5. Classical Arabic lexicography explicitly records: سلمى: اسم امرأة (“Salmā: a woman’s name”).
6. Semantic interpretation based on the lexical field of the root s-l-m in classical sources.
7. On the importance of root-based semantic fields in Semitic linguistics, cf. standard lexicographical treatments (Lane; Wehr).
8. Popular simplifications (“peace,” “safe,” “healthy,” “protected”) reflect partial readings of a broader semantic structure; cf. classical lexicography.
9. Macpherson, J. *The Poems of Ossian*; references to “the halls of Selma” and “Selma, the royal residence.”
10. On the transition from toponym to anthroponym in literary traditions, see general onomastic studies of literary name adoption.
11. Literary prestige as a source of naming is a well-documented phenomenon in European onomastic history.
12. *Dictionary of Medieval Names from European Sources* (DMNES), entry “Anselm.”
13. The derivation Selma < Anselma remains hypothetical and cannot be generalized to all European instances; cf. DMNES and comparative onomastic summaries.
14. Statistics Norway (SSB): *Selma* ranked among top female names (e.g. 13th place in 2025); Statistics Sweden (SCB): high-ranking name in recent years (~1% frequency in some cohorts).
15. The Scandinavian distribution supports a Northern European literary-cultural transmission model rather than a Balkan–Ottoman one.
16. On Bosnian Muslim anthroponymy under Ottoman influence, see historical studies of naming practices in the Bosnian Sanjak (e.g. 1604 defter data).
17. Turkish usage recorded as *Selma* < *Salma*; Northern European usage linked to Ossianic tradition and later Scandinavian adoption.
18. The phenomenon represents polygenesis at the level of cultural transmission rather than strict genealogical continuity.
19. Reduction to a single origin reflects popular etymology; scholarly analysis requires parallel evaluation of multiple traditions.
20. Arabic root s-l-m remains primary for Balkan-Muslim usage; Ossianic tradition for Northern Europe, supported by modern statistical evidence.

## II. Selma within the Arabic-Islamic and Ottoman-Turkish Onomastic Sphere

The name *Selma* in the Balkan and broader Southeast European context is most consistently explained within the framework of the Arabic-Islamic onomastic system, mediated through Ottoman-Turkish cultural and administrative dominance. Its primary form in Arabic is سلمى (**Salmā**), which is derived from the trilateral root s-l-m (س ل م)—one of the central roots in the Semitic languages.<sup>1</sup>

The semantic field of this root in classical Arabic lexicography encompasses notions of safety, wholeness, soundness, and peace, as confirmed in standard lexicographical sources.<sup>2</sup> Within this framework, the form *Salmā* functions as a feminine personal name, explicitly attested in the Arabic lexical tradition.<sup>3</sup>

From a morphological perspective, the name *Salmā* belongs to a class of feminine nominal formations that may carry a descriptive or qualificative function, designating a person characterized by a state derived from the core meaning of the root.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the name may be interpreted within a semantic range including “she who is safe,” “protected,” “preserved,” or “in a state of peace,” with the important qualification that these represent variations within a broader semantic field rather than a single fixed definition.<sup>5</sup>

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## 2.1. The Ottoman-Turkish Mediating Layer

The transmission of the name *Salmā* into the form *Selma* in the Balkans occurred primarily through the Ottoman-Turkish linguistic medium. In this process, phonetic adaptation takes place, whereby the Arabic long vowel *ā* is adjusted to the phonological system of Turkish and subsequently of the South Slavic languages, resulting in the form *Selma*.<sup>6</sup>

Such adaptations form part of a broader pattern of the transmission of Arabic names within the Ottoman context, where the phonological system of Turkish accommodates Arabic forms, often through vowel reduction or modification.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, numerous Arabic names acquire standardized Turkish forms, which are then integrated into Balkan languages.

Within the Ottoman Empire, personal names of Arabic origin held a particular status due to their association with Islam and the language of the Qur’an.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, such names were widely distributed across administrative, urban, and religious strata of society, a pattern clearly reflected in the Balkan onomastic system.<sup>9</sup>

In this respect, the name *Selma* belongs to a broader group of names derived from the root *s-l-m*, which includes forms such as *Salma*, *Salima*, as well as masculine forms such as *Salim*.<sup>10</sup> This confirms that we are dealing with a productive naming model within the Arabic-Islamic cultural sphere.

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## 2.2. The Parallel Semitic Framework: the Hebrew Root ש-ל-מ

An important philological dimension is represented by the parallel between the Arabic root *s-l-m* and the Hebrew root ש-ל-מ (š-l-m), which carries an almost identical semantic field: wholeness, peace, completeness.<sup>11</sup>

From this Hebrew root derive:

→ the noun **שָׁלוֹם** (*šālōm*) “peace”

→ the personal name **שְׁלֹמֹה** (*Šəlōmōh*) → Latin *Solomon* → Arabic *Suleiman*.<sup>12</sup>

This parallel demonstrates that the name *Selma* (*Salmā*) and the names *Šlomo* / *Solomon* / *Suleiman* belong to the same Proto-Semitic root system and share a common semantic foundation.<sup>13</sup>

However, from a methodological standpoint, it is essential to state explicitly:

- the name *Selma* is not derived from *Šlomo*
- nor vice versa
- rather, both represent independent realizations of the same root in different linguistic systems

In linguistic terminology, these forms constitute **cognates at the level of the root**, rather than instances of direct etymological derivation.<sup>14</sup>

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## 2.3. Onomastic Implication: the Semantic Field as a Naming Principle

In Semitic languages, roots such as *s-l-m* / *š-l-m* function not merely as lexical units, but as foundational carriers of cultural and religious meaning. Their presence in personal names reflects naming practices that encode desirable states or values, such as peace, safety, and wholeness.<sup>15</sup>

In this sense, the name *Selma* may be understood as part of a broader Semitic naming system in which personal names operate as semantically condensed expressions of specific cultural and religious ideals.<sup>16</sup>

Contemporary research in contact linguistics and onomastics further emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between etymological structure and cultural transmission, particularly in the context of Semitic–Slavic and Semitic–Turkic interactions.<sup>17</sup> Within this framework, the analysis of biblical names and their transformations across linguistic systems provides a significant methodological model for understanding other names of Semitic origin.<sup>18</sup>

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## 2.4. Chapter Conclusion

In the Balkan context, the name *Selma* has a clearly defined origin in the Arabic form *Salmā*, derived from the root *s-l-m*, with a semantic field encompassing peace, safety, and wholeness. Its arrival in the Balkans is the result of Ottoman-Turkish mediation, which enabled its stable integration into South Slavic onomastic systems.

The parallel with the Hebrew root *š-l-m* and the names *Šlomo / Solomon / Suleiman* confirms its belonging to the same Semitic root system, but does not imply a direct etymological relationship between the individual names.

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## Footnotes

1. Lane, E.W. (1863–1893) *An Arabic-English Lexicon*. London: Williams & Norgate, s.v. “s-l-m”.
2. Ibid.
3. Hawramani, F. *Arabic Lexicon*, s.v. “سَلْمَى” (اسم امرأة).“)
4. Wright, W. (1896) *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. “s-l-m”.
6. Lewis, G. (1999) *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
7. Ibid.
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15. Alford, R.D. (1988) *Naming and Identity: A Cross-Cultural Study of Personal Naming Practices*. New Haven: HRAF Press.
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## III. The Arrival of the Name Selma in the Balkans: Historical Channels and Sociolinguistic Context

The arrival of the name *Selma* in the Balkans cannot be examined in isolation, but must be situated within the broader process of Ottoman cultural, administrative, and religious

transformation of Southeast Europe from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. Within this historical framework, personal names of Arabic origin entered Balkan onomastic systems through the mediation of the Ottoman-Turkish language and Islamic religious practice, thereby becoming a stable component of local naming inventories, particularly within Muslim communities.<sup>1</sup>

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### **3.1. The Ottoman Administrative and Demographic Framework**

Following the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans in the fifteenth century, an administrative system was established that included *defters* (tax and census registers), in which personal names of the population were systematically recorded.<sup>2</sup> These sources constitute a primary body of evidence for historical onomastics, as they enable the reconstruction of naming patterns within specific temporal and geographical contexts.

Analyses of Ottoman *defters* from the Bosnian Sanjak and other regions demonstrate that within Muslim populations, names of Arabic and Islamic origin occur systematically, including those derived from the root *s-l-m*.<sup>3</sup> Although the specific form *Selma* is not always directly attested in the earliest strata—a common limitation given the underrepresentation of female names in *defter* material—the presence of an entire family of names derived from the same root confirms the existence of an onomastic model into which the name *Selma* naturally fits.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to emphasize that *defters* more frequently record male names, while female names are less consistently documented or appear only indirectly, which constitutes a significant methodological limitation in reconstructing female anthroponymy.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, later sources, including parish and civil registers as well as oral tradition, confirm the continuous use of female names of Arabic origin within Balkan Muslim communities.<sup>6</sup>

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### **3.2. The Religious Factor and Naming Practices**

A key factor in the diffusion of names such as *Selma* is the Islamization of segments of the Balkan population, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Sandžak region, and parts of North Macedonia and Albania.<sup>7</sup> In this context, personal names function as markers of religious and cultural identity.

Within Islamic tradition, naming practices are closely associated with:

- the Arabic language as the language of the Qur'an
- names from early Islamic history
- names carrying positive semantic value<sup>8</sup>

The name *Selma*, derived from a root denoting peace and security, fits this model as a semantically positive name, which increases its likelihood of adoption and long-term stability.<sup>9</sup>

It is precisely this combination of religious prestige and semantic transparency that enabled the stable integration of the name into the Balkan Muslim anthroponymic system.

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### 3.3. Geographical Distribution in the Balkans

The name *Selma* appears earliest and most consistently in:

- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- the Sandžak region (Serbia and Montenegro)
- North Macedonia
- parts of Albania and Kosovo<sup>10</sup>

This distribution closely follows the historical zones of Ottoman administrative control and Islamic cultural influence.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the name *Selma* becomes particularly frequent in the twentieth century, a development that may be linked to processes of urbanization, standardization of naming practices, and the consolidation of cultural identity.<sup>11</sup> During this period, the form *Selma* stabilizes as a standard feminine name, with minimal variation in spelling or pronunciation.

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### 3.4. Sociolinguistic Dimension: the Name as an Identity Marker

In the Balkan context, the name *Selma* functions not only as a personal name, but also as a sociolinguistic marker that may signal:

- religious affiliation (Islamic cultural sphere)
- cultural heritage (Ottoman–Oriental layer)
- regional identity<sup>12</sup>

This function is confirmed in numerous sociolinguistic studies, which demonstrate that personal names in multi-confessional societies often possess indexical value, indicating membership in particular social and cultural groups.<sup>13</sup>

In this sense, the name *Selma* in the Balkans belongs to a group of names that are clearly recognizable within a specific cultural and religious system, even though they are not strictly confined to it.

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### 3.5. Continuity and Transformation in the Modern Period

From the second half of the twentieth century onward, the name *Selma* enters the broader Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav context, where it partially detaches from its strictly religious connotations and becomes part of a more general urban naming inventory.<sup>14</sup>

This process may be described as a form of **onomastic secularization**, in which the name retains its historical origin while acquiring broader social usage. Nevertheless, its overall distribution continues to reflect the historical and cultural patterns established during the Ottoman period.

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### 3.6. Chapter Conclusion

The arrival of the name *Selma* in the Balkans is the result of a complex historical process in which the following factors played a central role:

- Ottoman administration and demographic transformation
- Islamic religious practice
- the cultural prestige of the Arabic language

Within the Balkan context, the name became stably integrated as part of the Muslim naming system, followed by a later phase of partial secularization and broader social diffusion.

Its distribution and function clearly confirm that the name entered the Balkans through the Ottoman-Turkish mediating layer, rather than directly from either the Arabic or the European linguistic sphere.

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### Footnotes

1. İnalcık, H. (1973) *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300–1600*. London: Phoenix Press.
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10. Regional onomastic studies of the Balkans (20th–21st century).
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13. Ibid.
14. Sociolinguistic studies of naming practices in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav contexts.

## IV. Selma in Northern and Western Europe: Ossianic Reception, Scandinavian Popularization, and Contemporary Development

The historical development of the name *Selma* in Northern and Western Europe cannot be explained through the same trajectory as in the Balkans. Whereas the Balkan development is primarily rooted in the Arabic–Ottoman onomastic layer, the Northern European usage of *Selma* largely belongs to the literary-cultural reception of the Ossianic corpus, that is, the European impact of *The Poems of Ossian* by James Macpherson in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary scholarship on the European reception of Ossian confirms that this corpus exerted a profound influence on literature, aesthetic models, and cultural imagination across Europe, particularly in the Nordic and Germanic spheres.<sup>2</sup>

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### 4.1. The Ossianic Line: From Literary Toponym to Female Personal Name

Within the Ossianic tradition, *Selma* initially appears as the name of Fingal’s hall or royal residence—that is, as a poetic and topographical designation rather than a personal name.<sup>3</sup> However, it is precisely this literary usage that enabled *Selma* to transition into European anthroponymy.

A contemporary Swedish onomastic lexicon notes that *Selma* in Sweden is associated with Ossian’s poems, where it is interpreted as a Celtic name meaning “beautiful view” or “pleasant sight,” originally referring to a place within Macpherson’s corpus.<sup>4</sup> The same source explicitly states that the name began to be used as a personal name in the German cultural sphere toward the end of the eighteenth century, from which it subsequently spread across Northern European linguistic zones.<sup>5</sup>

This model is of considerable methodological importance: in Western and Northern Europe, *Selma* need not be perceived primarily as a name of Arabic origin, but rather as a literary-

legitimized name rooted in Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetic traditions.<sup>6</sup> This explains how the same graphic form could be adopted in different European contexts through distinct cultural pathways.

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## 4.2. The Scandinavian Sphere: Sweden as a Key Zone of Popularization

Within Northern Europe, Sweden occupies a particularly significant position, where the name *Selma* developed into a clearly recognizable and enduring component of the female naming system. A contemporary Swedish lexicon of personal names records that the name is attested as early as 1799, experienced a strong period of popularity between 1885 and 1919, and has undergone a renewed phase of significant growth since 2005.<sup>7</sup>

The same source further notes that the writer Selma Lagerlöf likely contributed to the spread and consolidation of the name within Swedish cultural consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

Official Swedish statistics confirm that the name has experienced a marked resurgence in the twenty-first century. According to Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Selma* ranked as the 5th most common female name given to newborn girls in 2021 (660 cases), and 9th in 2022 (540 cases).<sup>9</sup> Longitudinal data further indicate that the name reached 4th place in 2023, 7th in 2024, and remained among the top-ranking names in 2025 (8th place), confirming its sustained contemporary vitality rather than a short-lived trend.<sup>10</sup>

These data are significant for two reasons. First, they demonstrate that *Selma* is fully integrated into the standard Swedish naming system, rather than representing a marginal or ethnically restricted form. Second, they indicate that contemporary Scandinavian usage is primarily linked to national literary and cultural traditions, rather than to recent migration-based transfer from Arabic or Turkish linguistic contexts.<sup>11</sup>

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## 4.3. Norway and Nordic Convergence

A similar development is observable in Norway. According to Statistics Norway (SSB), *Selma* has been among the most popular female names for newborn girls in recent years: in 2025 it ranked 13th, with 292 registered cases, while earlier datasets likewise place it among high-frequency female names.<sup>12</sup>

Long-term Norwegian statistical series confirm that the name maintains a stable presence in the contemporary period and belongs to a group of names showing measurable growth in recent decades.<sup>13</sup>

This confirms what has already been established philologically: in the Nordic region, *Selma* functions as an established European female name, associated with literary tradition, national cultural memory, and contemporary preferences for shorter, phonetically transparent, and historically marked names.<sup>14</sup>

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## 4.4. The Western European Framework: the German and Danish Channels

The Western European history of the name *Selma* is largely connected to German and Danish literary and onomastic mediation. The Swedish onomastic lexicon explicitly states that the name began to be used as a personal name in Germany in the late eighteenth century, which aligns with the well-documented reception of Ossianic literature within German Romantic and pre-Romantic contexts.<sup>15</sup>

More recent studies on the European reception of Ossian confirm that Macpherson's corpus became one of the most influential transnational literary phenomena in Europe between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>16</sup>

In the Danish context, it has long been observed that Ossianic influence shaped the emergence of names such as *Oscar*, *Ossian*, *Selma*, and *Malvina*. Contemporary bibliographic and survey literature continues to treat this layer as crucial for understanding the diffusion of such names in Nordic countries.<sup>17</sup>

Although contemporary statistics reveal varying degrees of frequency across countries, the mechanism of transmission remains consistent: **literary prestige produces anthroponymic stabilization**.<sup>18</sup>

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## 4.5. Multiple Origins in Contemporary Onomastics

Of particular importance is the fact that contemporary Swedish scholarly literature explicitly notes that the name *Selma* may have multiple linguistic backgrounds. The same lexicon indicates that the name may be:

1. Ossianic (i.e. Celtic-literary) in origin
2. a variant of the Arabic name *Salma*, often transmitted through Turkish mediation<sup>19</sup>

This observation is methodologically significant, as it directly supports the central thesis of this study: *Selma* in European usage is not a name of a single genealogical origin.

In Northern and Western Europe, the dominant pathway is literary-Romantic, while contemporary migration and multilingual urban environments allow for the secondary presence of the Arabic–Turkish etymological line.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, contemporary European onomastics must be understood as a space of **convergence of multiple historical layers**, rather than as a simple linear development.

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## 4.6. Chapter Conclusion

In Northern and Western Europe, the name *Selma* developed primarily through the Ossianic and literary-Romantic tradition, rather than through the same historical channels as in the Balkans.

The Scandinavian case, particularly Sweden and Norway, demonstrates that the name has evolved from a culturally marked literary form into one of the most successful contemporary female names.

At the same time, modern onomastic sources confirm that the name in present-day Europe may be supported by multiple etymological lines, including the Arabic–Turkish one.

The Northern European development of *Selma* thus represents a clear example of how literary reception, cultural prestige, and contemporary naming preferences can jointly produce long-term and renewable vitality of a personal name.

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## Footnotes

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## V. The Spread of the Name Selma in European Countries (1980–2026): Statistical Trends and Sociolinguistic Dynamics

The contemporary diffusion of the name *Selma* across European countries from the late twentieth century to the present reveals a markedly uneven, yet methodologically interpretable pattern: high frequency and sustained growth in Northern Europe, stable presence in the Balkan region, and selective, often migration-driven distribution in Western Europe.<sup>1</sup>

This distribution directly reflects the distinct historical channels through which the name entered individual linguistic and cultural systems.

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### 5.1. Northern Europe: Sustained Growth and High Frequency

The most pronounced contemporary expansion of the name *Selma* is observed in Sweden and Norway, where it has, since the early twenty-first century, become part of the group of highly frequent female names.

According to official data from Statistics Sweden (SCB), *Selma* has steadily risen in popularity rankings since the early 2000s, entering the group of the most commonly assigned names to newborn girls and, in certain years, reaching positions within the top ten.<sup>2</sup> This trend is not ephemeral: longitudinal data demonstrate the sustained presence of the name within the upper frequency range over multiple consecutive years, indicating its structural integration into the contemporary Swedish naming system.<sup>3</sup>

A comparable pattern is confirmed in Norway. Data from Statistics Norway (SSB) show that *Selma* has experienced continuous growth in recent decades, entering the group of the most frequently assigned names to newborns and achieving high rankings during the 2010s and 2020s.<sup>4</sup> Long-term statistical series further indicate that the name has shifted from a medium-frequency to a high-frequency category, placing it among the stable elements of contemporary Nordic onomastics.<sup>5</sup>

This development confirms that in Northern Europe, *Selma* functions as an autonomous European name, whose current status results from the interaction of historical literary reception and modern naming preferences (brevity, phonetic clarity, and historical recognizability).<sup>6</sup>

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## 5.2. The Balkans: Stable Regional Usage

In the Balkan region, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Sandžak area, Kosovo, and parts of North Macedonia, the name *Selma* exhibits a different type of stability: rather than undergoing sharp fluctuations, it represents a long-established and deeply rooted name within Muslim communities.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike the Nordic case, where a clear rise-and-fall dynamic can be observed, the Balkan context is characterized by continuity of usage across multiple generations. This continuity is closely linked to:

- religious identity
- the cultural legacy of the Ottoman period
- stable intra-family transmission of names<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary data from regional naming records and demographic surveys confirm that *Selma* retains high recognizability and regular usage, even when it does not consistently occupy top positions in statistical rankings—a pattern typical of names with long historical continuity.<sup>9</sup>

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## 5.3. Western Europe: Migration and Multicultural Dynamics

In Western European countries (e.g. Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France), the distribution of the name *Selma* follows a more complex pattern shaped by the interaction of:

- the legacy of European (Ossianic) tradition
- the presence of migrant communities from Southeast Europe and the Middle East<sup>10</sup>

In Germany, the name *Selma* has been attested since the nineteenth century; however, its contemporary increase in usage may be partially associated with migration processes in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the name aligns with a broader trend of the revival of “traditional” or “classical” names in German and Austrian naming practices.<sup>12</sup>

In France and Switzerland, *Selma* appears within a multicultural context, where it may be perceived either as a European or as an Arabic name, depending on the social and linguistic environment.<sup>13</sup>

## 5.4. General European Patterns (1980–2026)

A comparative analysis of available statistical and onomastic data allows for the identification of three principal models of diffusion of the name *Selma* in Europe:

1. **Nordic model (Sweden, Norway):**
  - strong growth since approximately 2000
  - entry into the top ten names
  - sustained contemporary popularity
2. **Balkan model (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sandžak, etc.):**
  - long-term continuity
  - religious and cultural embeddedness
  - moderate but stable frequency
3. **Western European model (Germany, France, Switzerland):**
  - combination of historical legacy and migration influence
  - medium frequency
  - multiple etymological perceptions<sup>14</sup>

This tripartite structure confirms that *Selma* functions in contemporary Europe as a **transcultural name**, whose interpretation varies according to local context.

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## 5.5. Sociolinguistic Interpretation of Contemporary Diffusion

The contemporary popularity of the name *Selma* in Europe can be explained by the interaction of several factors:

- phonetic simplicity (a short, easily pronounceable form)
- historical depth (presence across multiple cultural traditions)
- semantic neutrality and flexibility
- cultural adaptability in multilingual environments<sup>15</sup>

These features enable the name to function effectively in both homogeneous and multicultural societies, thereby explaining its capacity to persist simultaneously within traditional and modern contexts.

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## 5.6. Chapter Conclusion

The spread of the name *Selma* in Europe between 1980 and 2026 demonstrates a clearly differentiated pattern of regional dynamics. While in Northern Europe it has become part of the

dominant contemporary naming system, in the Balkans it represents a stable historical continuum, and in Western Europe it functions as a name with multiple cultural identities.

This complexity confirms the central thesis of the study: *Selma* does not belong to a single tradition, but rather represents the outcome of the convergence of multiple historical, linguistic, and cultural trajectories.

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# VI. The Name Selma in the Balkan Context: Distribution, Religious Layers, and Sociolinguistic Function

## 6.1. Introduction: The Balkans as a Contact Zone

The Balkan region represents a classic example of a linguistic contact zone, in which Slavic, Romance, Turkic, and Semitic influences intersect.<sup>1</sup>

In such an environment, personal names frequently function as indicators of cultural and religious affiliation, as well as markers of historical layers of identity.

Within this framework, the name *Selma* cannot be treated as an isolated phenomenon, but rather as part of a broader system of names that entered South Slavic languages through:

- the Ottoman administrative and cultural system
  - Islamic religious tradition
  - mediated Arabic–Turkish linguistic channels<sup>2</sup>
- 

## 6.2. Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Central Zone of Distribution

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the name *Selma* represents one of the consistently attested female names within the Muslim population, with continuous usage from the twentieth century to the present.

Sociolinguistic and demographic analyses indicate that naming practices within the Bosniak community are characterized by a combination of:

- Arabic-Islamic heritage
- local traditions
- contemporary cultural influences<sup>3</sup>

Within this framework, the name *Selma* functions as:

- a religiously compatible name (without theological constraints)
- phonetically adapted to the Slavic system
- a culturally neutral name with broad acceptability<sup>4</sup>

Unlike strictly religious names (e.g. *Fatima*, *Amina*), *Selma* possesses a broader sociocultural range and may occur beyond strictly religious naming contexts.

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## 6.3. Serbia (Sandžak) and Montenegro

In the Sandžak region (Novi Pazar, Tutin, Sjenica), the name *Selma* shows a high degree of presence within the Bosniak population, following a pattern similar to that observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>5</sup>

Its distribution in this region demonstrates several key characteristics:

- stable intergenerational transmission
- coexistence with Arabic and Turkish names within the same families
- preservation of the Islamic onomastic layer within a Slavic linguistic environment<sup>6</sup>

In Montenegro, particularly in northern and eastern areas, the name *Selma* appears within a similar cultural framework, though with somewhat lower frequency, corresponding to the demographic composition of the population.<sup>7</sup>

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## 6.4. Croatia and Slovenia: Marginal but Present Usage

In Croatia and Slovenia, the name *Selma* occurs with significantly lower frequency, yet it is not entirely absent. Its presence is typically associated with:

- the Bosniak diaspora
- urban multicultural environments
- individual parental choices influenced by global naming trends<sup>8</sup>

In these contexts, the name tends to lose its primary religious function and becomes part of a broader European naming repertoire.

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## 6.5. North Macedonia and Kosovo

In North Macedonia and Kosovo, the name *Selma* appears within Albanian and Bosniak populations, exhibiting:

- stable presence
- integration into local linguistic systems
- parallel usage alongside other Arabic-derived names<sup>9</sup>

These regions further confirm that the name functions as part of the Islamic onomastic layer of the Balkans, without being strictly confined to a single ethnic group.

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## 6.6. Religious Layers and Semantic Perception

In the Balkan context, the name *Selma* acquires a specific semantic and symbolic function.

Unlike its original Arabic meaning associated with the root *s-l-m* (“peace,” “safety”), in everyday Balkan usage the name often:

- lacks active semantic awareness among speakers
- functions primarily as a cultural identity marker
- is implicitly associated with Islamic tradition<sup>10</sup>

This semantic neutralization is typical of many borrowed onomastic units in contact linguistics.

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## 6.7. Onomastic Integration into the Slavic Linguistic System

One of the key factors behind the successful integration of the name *Selma* into Balkan languages is its phonological compatibility:

- CVC-CV structure (*Sel-ma*)
- absence of phonemes foreign to Slavic languages
- simple accentuation patterns<sup>11</sup>

This structure enables the name to be:

- easily pronounceable
  - orthographically stable
  - morphologically compatible with Slavic systems (e.g. *Selma – Selme – Selmi*)<sup>12</sup>
- 

## 6.8. Connection with the Broader Semitic Onomastic Layer

Within the broader Semitic framework, the name *Selma* may be linked to the root *š-l-m* (שלום), denoting:

- peace
- wholeness
- completeness<sup>13</sup>

This root occupies a central position in Semitic languages and appears in names such as:

- *Šlomo* (שלמה)
- *Solomon*
- *Suleiman*<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, although *Selma* is not a direct derivative of *Šlomo*, there exists a clear etymological and semantic parallel, confirming its broader Semitic foundation.<sup>15</sup>

In this context, contemporary research on Semitic–Slavic contacts and onomastic parallels is particularly relevant:

- Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *O jeziku Srba i Jevreja*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18227673>

- Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *Onomastikon biblijskih imena*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18796670>
- Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *Etymology of the Name David: A Semitic and Slavic Onomastic Interface*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19200225^16>

These studies point to the possibility of deeper linguistic and cultural connections between Semitic and Slavic onomastic systems.

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## 6.9. Chapter Conclusion

In the Balkan context, the name *Selma* represents a stable and long-standing element of the Islamic onomastic layer, fully integrated into South Slavic languages.

Its distribution demonstrates:

- a clear connection to religious and historical factors
- a high degree of phonological and morphological adaptability
- the capacity for functional integration across diverse cultural contexts

This combination makes *Selma* a representative example of transcultural onomastics in the Balkan region.

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# VII. Comparative Etymological Evaluation of the Name Selma: Critical Assessment of Theories and Final Interpretation

## 7.1. Introduction: The Need for a Methodological Hierarchy

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that the name *Selma* is associated with multiple etymological interpretations emerging from distinct linguistic traditions. In order to avoid an arbitrary synthesis, it is necessary to establish a methodological hierarchy of evidence, based on the following criteria:

- historical attestation
- morphological and phonological plausibility
- geographical distribution
- continuity of usage<sup>1</sup>

On the basis of these parameters, a precise comparative evaluation of the three principal etymological models can be undertaken.

---

## 7.2. The Arabic-Islamic Theory (Root s-l-m)

### 7.2.1. Linguistic Foundation

The Arabic hypothesis derives the name from the trilateral root *s-l-m* (س-ل-م), denoting:

- peace
- safety
- wholeness<sup>2</sup>

From this root emerge numerous lexical forms, including:

- *salāma* (safety)
- *salīm* (sound, intact)
- *islām* (submission to God)<sup>3</sup>

Within this framework, *Selma* is interpreted as a phonetically adapted form reflecting the same semantic field.

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### 7.2.2. Historical and Geographical Validation

This theory is strongly supported by:

- the widespread distribution of the name across the Islamic world
  - its continuity of usage in the Balkans since the Ottoman period
  - its stable integration within Muslim naming systems<sup>4</sup>
- 

### 7.2.3. Methodological Evaluation

In relation to the established criteria, the Arabic theory demonstrates:

- high historical attestation
- a clear morphological model
- broad geographical distribution
- uninterrupted continuity of use

**Conclusion:** This represents the most robust and methodologically convincing etymological basis for the name *Selma* within both Balkan and wider Islamic contexts.

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## 7.3. The Germanic-Ossianic Theory (Selma as a Literary Formation)

### 7.3.1. Origin in European Literary Tradition

The second theory connects the name with the works of James Macpherson, in which *Selma* appears as a toponym referring to a hall or seat of heroic figures within the so-called Ossianic corpus.<sup>5</sup>

Although the authenticity of these texts has been debated, their cultural influence on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe was substantial.

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### 7.3.2. Onomastic Transformation

During the nineteenth century, the following processes can be observed:

- the transformation of a toponym into a personal name
  - diffusion through literary and cultural channels
  - integration into German and Scandinavian naming systems<sup>6</sup>
-

### 7.3.3. Methodological Limitations

In contrast to the Arabic theory, this model presents several limitations:

- lack of earlier linguistic attestations
- secondary character (derivation from a literary source)
- absence of a clear internal Germanic etymology<sup>7</sup>

**Conclusion:** While historically valid within the European context, this theory represents a secondary developmental trajectory rather than a primary etymological origin.

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## 7.4. The Semitic Parallel (š-l-m): A Comparative Framework

### 7.4.1. The Hebrew Root שלום (š-l-m)

The Hebrew root *š-l-m* (שלום) constitutes one of the central semantic axes of the Semitic languages, denoting:

- peace
- completeness
- harmony<sup>8</sup>

From this root derive names such as:

- *Šlomo* (שלמה)
  - *Solomon*
  - *Suleiman*<sup>9</sup>
- 

### 7.4.2. Relationship to the Name Selma

Although *Selma* is not a direct derivative of these forms, there exists:

- a clear semantic correspondence
  - phonetic proximity (*s-l-m* ↔ *š-l-m*)
  - a shared Proto-Semitic background<sup>10</sup>
- 

### 7.4.3. Methodological Interpretation

This model does not function as an independent etymology, but rather as:

→ a comparative Semitic framework that reinforces the deeper linguistic foundation of the Arabic hypothesis

In this context, recent research on Semitic–Slavic contacts is particularly relevant:

- Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *O jeziku Srba i Jevreja*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18227673>
- Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *Onomastikon biblijskih imena*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18796670>
- Stanojević, Ž. (2026) *Etymology of the Name David: A Semitic and Slavic Onomastic Interface*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19200225^11>

These studies suggest the possibility of deeper structural and historical connections between Semitic and Slavic onomastic systems.

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## 7.5. Synthetic Evaluation of Theories

On the basis of the comparative analysis, the following hierarchy may be established:

| Theory                            | Linguistic Basis | Historical Attestation | Status     |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|------------------------|------------|
| Arabic ( <i>s-l-m</i> )           | strong           | strong                 | primary    |
| Germanic (Ossianic)               | weak             | moderate               | secondary  |
| Semitic parallel ( <i>š-l-m</i> ) | strong           | indirect               | supportive |

This comparative model demonstrates that:

- the Arabic theory possesses the highest degree of scientific validity
- the Germanic theory accounts for European distribution
- the Semitic parallel provides deeper historical-linguistic grounding

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## 7.6. Final Conclusion

The name *Selma* represents a complex onomastic phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single origin, yet can be clearly structured through methodological analysis.

The most plausible developmental model is as follows:

1. **Primary layer:** Arabic root *s-l-m* (peace, safety)
2. **Secondary layer:** European literary reception (Ossianic tradition)
3. **Deep layer:** shared Semitic heritage (*š-l-m*)

This tripartite structure confirms that *Selma* functions as a

**transcultural onomastic unit**, integrating:

- a Semitic linguistic foundation
- Islamic historical transmission
- European cultural reinterpretation

Such a model represents a paradigmatic example of how personal names evolve through the interaction of language, religion, and culture.

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## Footnotes

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