

# CHALLENGES IN FINNISH FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH

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# Language

- In medieval church records, the language is Latin.
- Swedish was used in Finland as an official language from the 13th century onwards.
  - Latin was still often used in church records and in individual words.
- From about 1880 onwards, Finnish is used.
- The Orthodox Church records are in Russian.
  - Some individual records can be found in Finnish.

# Names

## Official language

When Swedish was the only official language of the kingdom, the first names of the Finnish-speaking population were recorded in accordance with Swedish practice and sometimes in French, German or Latin according to the priest's own preference.

For example

Paavo = Pähl, Paul or Paulus

Liisa = Elisabet, Elisabeta, Elizabeth, Elisabeth, Elizabetha, Lisbet, Lisbeta, Lijsbetha, Lisa, Lijsa

These were all considered to be forms of the same name.

The names of the Orthodox population were recorded by Russian.

The Finnish forms (Pekka, Matti) were not included until the language of the church records became Finnish, which happened at the end of the 19th century at the latest.



# Last Names

## Eastern surname

As early as the 1200s-1300s, the common people had a system of family names that was passed down steadily from generation to generation. The bearers of Eastern Finnish family names form coherent families.

A woman's family name was retained when she moved home, as even after marriage she was considered to belong to her father's family. The legal obligation to use a man's family name was only introduced by the Marriage Act of 1929.

## Western household name practice

No surnames were used in western and southern Finland.

The population may have had various non-inherited last names.

Names of houses and other dwellings also appear in documents, used as an additional name.

- The continental custom of using family names among the nobility, clergy, civil servants and burghers spread to the Finnish nobility in the 17th century. Merchants, craftsmen and soldiers also used the name of their estate or profession throughout the country.
- For the nobility, the names became hereditary early on, for others the names became surnames more slowly.

- Military names belonged to the “ruotu” and a new soldier often used the same military name as the previous one.

Ruotu = A unit of land responsible for equipment and maintenance of a soldier

- Some of the foreign-language military and craftsman names remained hereditary family names.
- After the middle of the 19th century, non-Finnish surname holders began to change their names to Finnish.
- Towards the end of the 19th century, the rural and urban working population of western Finland began to use taken surnames.
- The old names are only more or less correctly recorded spellings of the names actually used.



# Patronymics

- In Finland, patronymics have not been used in a vernacular way as in many other languages. In Finland, patronymics have lived mainly in official documents, where the patterns and spelling of names were borrowed.
- A patronymic (/matronymic) could be briefly defined as an expression appearing in a document to indicate whose son or daughter a person is on a first name basis. A patronymic is in a sense an attribute of the given name, an additional qualifier.
- The classification of patronymics as bynames or their exclusion from bynames is not unambiguous. Patronymics are a category all their own and have retained their strongest original function for which they were used in documents: to indicate kinship. Patronymics cannot be considered as proper names.

# Missing and destroyed records

- Reasons:
  - Wars
  - Evacuation
  - Fire
- Part of the records have been destroyed in several parishes.
- Everything has been destroyed in some parishes.



# Digitisation

- Almost all surviving church records have been digitised up to at least 1880.
- Most of the records have been digitised up to 1899.
- Some records from 1900-1920 have been digitized.
- Digitisation work is carried out on a voluntary basis all the time.
- Most of the undigitised records cannot be examined on your own, as they are held by the central registers of the parishes.
  - Requests for family history research can be made to the central parish registers for a fee.
    - Can take a long time, because legal genealogical research is done first and then, if there is time, family history research is done.



# Personal Data Protection

- Strict
- Documents less than 100 years old cannot be freely researched, a special search permission must be requested.
- Death records have a protection period of 50 years.
- Sensitive information cannot be obtained from the authorities and sensitive information obtained with a special search permission cannot be stored until 50 years after the death of the person.

## **More information:**

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[Familysearch.org/help](https://familysearch.org/help)