

# Swedish Names

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In the very beginning there were only what we today call first names. Very soon it was however found to be very impractical to have only the one name – since many had the same name – and another name was added to clarify who was meant. This second name was not a family name since it did not apply to everybody in the family. Surnames was something that e.g. described an occupation (“John (the) smith”) or looks (“Erik (the) red”, “Harald blue tooth”) or from which farm you came (“Pers Margit”, i.e. Margit from the Pers farm), or it could be a so-called patronymic, i.e. a father name like “Andersdotter” or “Svensson”. It was not unusual to combine one of the first three alternatives with a patronymic. Surnames, also patronymics, eventually developed into what we today call family names (last names).

## First names

During Viking times names were often after the Viking gods or after something in nature. Examples are Tor (god), Nanna (goddess), Gudrun (“holy runes”), Sten (“stone”), Ulf (“wolf”). These names were discouraged by the church which tried instead to introduce saints’ names and Biblical names, such as Johannes (John), Peter, Marta (Martha). Some saints’ names had been used already during Viking times in the Nordic countries; also Viking women were e.g. called Katarina (Catherine).

Some names were considered too “holy” and were not – as opposed to continental customs – used at all. We have e.g. no Jesus and few Josef (Joseph). Maria (Mary) came into more general use only in the 17th century and was for the next couple of centuries not very common; very often the diminutive form, Maja, was used instead.

Names from the Old Testament were generally never popular in Sweden and some today common names like Eva were by many regarded as more or less

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offensive. As an exception there are some families with a tradition of using certain Old Testament names (usually some of the more popular figures like Elias, Samuel, Daniel and Sarah). Old Testament names are more prevalent in the north than in the south, where they are very rare indeed.

Swedes have always had an amazing ability to change and adjust names and to create several new names from a single original one. That Laurentius became Lars and Benedict turned into Bengt is maybe not so strange, but from the Greek Ioannes we managed to create Johannes, Hannes, Hans, Johan, Jonas, Jöns, Jon, Joen and Jan, and from also Greek Katarina we have Katarina, Karina, Katrin, Katrina, Karin, Karna and Kajsa (all of which can also be spelled with a "C") – and these are just a *few* examples. This habit of creating variations of the names is something that must be kept in mind when reading church records; the clergy had their own ideas of what was really meant and wrote down what they themselves thought correct and not what you happened to be named at your baptism – someone who for fifty years had been Kierstin can with no further ado suddenly be called Kristina since the new vicar thought this was the “real” name. Some clergymen also thought that farmers and their children should not have too “fine” a name; Katarina was a name for an aristocratic lady while a farmhand should make do with Karin (or even Kajsa).

Using several first names was unknown before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the nobility started giving their children two first names. Only towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century did the simpler gentry – and even some farmers – start using two or more first names, but it did not become very common until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are also great variations between different parts of the country and between parishes. In some parishes nearly only girls are given two names, in others the boys and in some places it is hardly used at all. Probably the local vicar had a decisive influence here.

“Fashion” names is not a modern invention; already by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century some – often “odd” – names become very popular for a time in certain parishes. An example is Petronella which was immensely popular in some places in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and then disappeared as quickly as it arrived.

Sweden has perhaps not had as firm traditions regarding the giving of first names as some countries on the continent or England. The following was however not uncommon: the first son was called after his paternal grandfather (we get the “classic” line of Anders Svensson – Sven Andersson – Anders Svensson), the second son after his maternal grandfather, the third son after his father (this is when it comes out as Anders Andersson) and the remaining sons after other relatives and friends while the first daughter was named after her maternal grandmother, the second after her paternal grandmother, the third after her mother and the remaining daughters again after other relatives and friends. There are however numerous examples of other factors coming into play and it is not at all uncommon to see names that are neither in the immediate family nor among the sponsors (godparents).

Very common – not to say mandatory – was naming children after a sibling who had died. If you see two sons both being called Sven, it is very probable that the first Sven has died before the second Sven is born but there are examples of both children growing up; the first child may have been sickly and

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was not expected to survive into adulthood – or two grandfathers with the same first name had to be honoured. Children could also be named after their parents' dead siblings and the first child (of the "right" sex) in a second marriage was very likely to be named after the dead spouse.

## Father name

In Sweden the so-called **patronymic** became the most common surname (but see also *Farm names*). Patronymics have been widely used both in the Nordic countries, in the Slavic countries and on the Continent. In e.g. the Netherlands it used to be as common as in Sweden and it has been used also in Wales until quite recently; in Russia it is still in use. Most places where patronymics have been used they sooner or later turn into family names.

Usually it is indeed the father-name, i.e. the father's name plus "son" or "daughter" – father Anders has children Erik Andersson and Karin Andersdotter. Patronymics change for every generation, but all children of a certain father have the same patronymic; however it does happen that e.g. the sons are called Petersson while the daughters become Persdotter since it is quite simply such a mouthful to say Petersdotter. In singular cases you can also see that children of a father with two first names have chosen different names for their patronymic; the children appear not to be siblings. The name may also "change" over time; what was at first an "Olofsdotter" may after thirty odd years turn into an "Olsdotter" – this of course follows the same ideas that change first names (see above).

Patronymics always take a double "s" for the sons – Karlsson, Eriksson, Svensson, Gunnarsson etc. This is of course due to the fact that the name is in the genitive: Karl's son, Erik's son etc. When patronymics started being used as family names (see below), spelling often became more "exotic" – simple "Karlsson" could be changed to e.g. more dramatic "Carlzon" – and it was (and is) common to suppress one "s" (almost mandatory for emigrants) – Swedish rural "Andersson" becomes international urban "Anderson".

In some cases – very rare – you can see a **metronymic**; the surname is formed from the mother's name, e.g. "Brittasdotter". This *can* be due to the fact that the father really is unknown, but more probably because of a wish to create a distance to the father, deny the father, e.g. in a conflict between the parents. A handful of people from medieval times are known by their metronymic because the mother's family was more prominent than the father's, which is along the lines of denying the father – this does not exist after the end of the Middle Ages (in Sweden about 1520).

*Please not the format! "Metronymic" comes from the Greek and has nothing to do with the Latin "mater"!*

If the father is truly unknown the *mother's* patronymic is often used: illegitimate son Erik with mother Anna Persdotter becomes Erik Persson – the grandfather takes over the responsibility. It was however not uncommon to use the name everybody thought was the father even if that is not what the church record says and the court had decided against it. Before 1864 it was a criminal offence to bear an illegitimate child; a pregnant unmarried woman would be sentenced like any criminal in court where she had to tell who the

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father was – the man then had to appear before the court but could “swear himself free”, i.e. with his fingers on the Bible protest his innocence. So the church records may have “father unknown” and at court a man has “sworn free” and yet his name is used for the child’s patronymic... Usually, in a case like this, you will find that the man has had to pay a fine for “whoring” to the church – because the vicar usually knew what was going on in his parish.

## Family names

When preparing the first real name law in Sweden – the Name Law of 1963 – the legislators tried to define what characterises a family name, compared to other kinds of surnames. The committee findings (SOU 1960:5) said that a family name “expresses a sense of belonging between the user of the name and his parents, children and siblings and is meant to be used unchanged generation after generation to denote such belonging”. After much deliberation this definition did not make it into the actual law, but it seems to express what most people mean by a family name. And except for the special cases enumerated below family names in this sense were not used in Sweden until the 1860’s / 1870’s. Then an avalanche of people moved into the towns and the clergy, in order to keep track of all these people, started transforming the old patronymics into family names (without asking). Anders Svensson who moved to Göteborg in 1875, married and had children shortly afterwards discovered that his sons were also called Svensson, while his brothers’ children still in the countryside retained their patronymics. In the countryside the use of patronymics did not cease until shortly after the turn of the century 1900.

Adopting a family name did not necessarily mean dropping the patronymic; the names could be used simultaneously. Erik Nilsson Stake, a smith born in 1720, is variously called Erik Nilsson, Erik Stake and Erik Nilsson Stake. Note that the proper order is always: first name, patronymic, family name.

Before the 1901 family name ordinance you could assume almost any name you liked – you just started calling yourself the new name and told the vicar what he was to write in the church records; the only exception was noble names which had some protection although people with no scruples did use well-known names and names that at least sounded noble, perhaps with some minor variation as to the spelling. But in 1901 an ordinance was issued – which in fact was only an addendum to the ordinances regarding church records – that stated the proper procedure for acquiring a family name: all “unique” names had to be approved by the authorities, who checked that you did not use someone else’s name. If you did not want to use a “unique” name but instead e.g. you patronymic, you could do so without having to make any special application for it. You were however not forced to take a family name, but society had in general changed so much that this was now becoming the norm. How quickly the use of a family name was accepted is shown by the fact that already in 1917 and 1920 there were ordinances about children’s last names and in 1920 the new Marriage Act actually forced women to assume the husband’s family name while legislators as late as in 1898 thought that it was incorrect to say “family name” since wives and sometimes even widows used the husband’s last name!

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In 1963 we had the first proper Name Law that stated that you actually had to have a family name – there were stubborn country people, in e.g. Dalarna province, that did not think it at all necessary to cease using farm names and patronymics (which made the then primitive computer systems break down) – and women were again given the right to retain their own family name.

Times changed very quickly however and already in 1982 a new Name Law was needed. The major change is that it is much easier to change both first and family names; the authorities have abandoned the notion that people can be identified by name when the civic registration number is so much easier and safer – so now you can change your name nearly as easily as before the Name Ordinance of 1901...

## Nobility

The first group to use family names was the nobility. Sweden's oldest noble families usually count their origins back to the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Alsnö statute, the first law to regulate nobility, was issued in 1280. Just as their foreign counterparts they were warriors – knights – and as such carried a shield. Different markings were soon painted on the shields so you could tell who the warrior/knight was. The shield markings could refer to something the knight was known for – or he became known for his markings. The first coats of arms were very simple and graphically clean – generally speaking, the later the creation the fussier the coat of arms (nothing can e.g. be simpler than a coat of arms that is half dark and half light – the family of Natt och Dag (Night and Day), Swedish original nobility). In any case the knights and their coats of arms soon became identical which created surnames; from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries the surnames were used to designate entire families. However, it took a while before any single member of the family/clan/house was called by the surname – Gustaf Vasa was in his own time known as Gustaf Eriksson and if you wished to distinguish between him and some other Gustaf Eriksson (before he became king) you could say Gustaf Eriksson "of the Vasas" or "of the Vasa family" etc., more or less as we would talk of someone working for a big, well-known corporation. It was only after the coronation of Erik XIV in 1561, when he elevated a number of noble families to counts and barons after foreign fashions (hereditary titles were unknown before this date in Sweden – a very "equal" nobility) that families and "houses" were talked of in another way and in 1626 the House of Nobility ("Riddarhuset") was founded; the House insisted that all noble families that had not already assumed a family name did so (the recommendation was to create a name after the coat of arms). During the 18<sup>th</sup> century the nobility tried to protect their noble names and some laws giving at least a limited protection were passed.

Noble names are thus all names that have been registered and numbered at the House of Nobility, and with this have been "introduced". In Sweden there is also a large number of so-called un-introduced nobility. This refers to families that in their country of origin are noble but have never been introduced at the House of Nobility when they immigrated; perhaps most common among the German Baltic nobility (i.e. originally German nobility that has been domiciled in the Baltic countries for centuries). In passing it can also be mentioned that in Sweden – as Swedish nobility – there are no other titles than baron and count; otherwise there are (unintroduced) e.g. a ducal title

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from France (duke d'Otrante) and a marquis from the Vatican (marquis Lagergren) and of course the royal ducal titles that from the present generation – HRH Crown Princess Victoria and HRH Princess Madeleine – are given as "own" titles also to women. In Scandinavia the most common form of nobility is the nobility without titles; this corresponds internationally to a British "baronet" (hereditary title ("sir"/"dame") but not "peer" i.e. no seat in the House of Lords). The untitled nobility is usually referred to as "low nobility".

For a century after the mid 1600's many, many people were ennobled. This was due to the fact that certain professions, like e.g. officer, were the privilege of the nobility. So if you had an able man he could not be promoted above a certain rank unless he was noble – problem solved simply by ennobling him. In this way a nobility of professionals and officials was created; they did not have origins lost in the mist of times, nor did they have ancestral acres and a mansion – they were more of a professional upper middle class. The names assumed by these newly ennobled can be rather odd – some "decorated" their names with "gyllen" (golden), "hielm" (helmet), "creutz" (cross) etc., while others just put a plain and simple "af" (of) before their original name (which sometimes was even a patronymic!) – like e.g. "af Jakobson".

## Clergy

When Gustaf Vasa in 1527 (the parliament of Västerås) decided that Sweden should become a Protestant country he opened up for a whole new class of society – the clergymen and their families. There had of course been priests before and it was probably not unusual for a priest to promote e.g. a nephew, but this was a permanent class of people.

The priests had already during the Catholic era Latinized their names, but most often only the first name and sometimes – as usual just to distinguish between people with the same name – the patronymic.

Already from the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the new clergy were often recruited from the farmers – and thus they had no family names. At first the clergy assumed their names only as surnames; it was not a family name since it was not inherited by the children (and was not used by the wife, see *Women* below). However, it became common for the sons of the clergy to become clergymen themselves (not to mention the daughters marrying clergymen which in extreme cases has resulted in an unbroken row of clergymen's daughters for 13 generations!) – and it was of course tempting to keep your father's surname, particularly if he had done well or just to distinguish yourself from the common farmers. In any case, from at least the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the clergy's surnames can be regarded as family names.

The clergy liked to market how learned they were and so often gave their names a Latin or Greek touch. Someone who hailed from e.g. "Aros" constructed a name like Arosenius (Aros plus the Latin "-ius" (coming from, son of)) or Arosander (Aros plus the Greek "-ander" (man, man from)) and hey presto you had an "erudite" name, a name that said that you had indeed studied at university.

It can also be noted that the clergymen further showed their great knowledge of the classical languages by writing down the female members of these families with the female form of the name: Peter Tunnander's sister Katarina

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was called “Tunnandra” and Herman Mollerius’ sister Anna became “Molleria” (not to mention the fact that Herman would have insisted on the proper form of genitive for his family name: Mollerii).

It must however be remembered that very far from all –ius- and –ander- names are old clergy names. When it became a more general custom to change family names formed from patronymics – the –son-names – for more unique names many people knew how the clergy names were constructed and thought it a simple and effective way of “getting a background”.

## Town people

From the 17th century town people and some rural professional people started assuming family names. This was due partly to a wish to imitate the upper classes – being a little bit better than the common farmers – and partly because it was good for business to have a distinguishing name. Also the advantage of having the same name for several generations was quickly realized – the sons could take over the company with a family name that guaranteed that products and services were as good as in the father’s time.

The names were most often in two parts and referred to “something in nature”, such as Ekberg (oak mountain), Lindblad (linden leaf), Björkegren (birch branch) etc. This was so common that e.g. Lindgren (linden branch) today ranks among our 25 most common surnames.

Examples of occupations that assumed a family name are town officials, foresters, rangers, sheriffs, merchants, different craftsmen (tailor, shoemaker, smith, cabinetmaker etc). For craftsmen certain names were common for certain crafts and you usually did not assume a new family name until you had become at least a journeyman – though if you were born with such a name, you used it.

While rural parish shoemakers and tailors seldom assumed family names, smiths *always* did. Although a smith properly speaking was “just” a worker, smiths were always trained professionals and immensely important to the Swedish economy – and were thus accorded much respect. Smith names are usually indistinguishable from other town names (unless of Walloon origin).

## Soldiers

The allotment system – which was what provided men for the Swedish armed forces since Gustav II Adolf until 1901 when national conscription was introduced – provided every soldier with a surname. This was for practical reasons – you could not shout for “Anders Persson” and twenty men stepped forward. Since there was a purely practical reason for the name, the name was practical too. A soldier’s name was preferably short and often warlike – Spets (point), Lans (lance) etc. There were however many other forms; certain regiments e.g. liked flowers, and that is where Lilja (lily), Ros (rose) etc. comes from. Characteristics like Lång (tall), Modig (brave), Fast (firm) were also common names and some used what can be called town names, Bergendal (mountain valley), Krusman (ripple man), Nyman (new man) etc.

Even if the soldier already had a family name when he enlisted he was almost always given a new name, a soldier surname. This was of course due

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to the fact that it was easier to use the name associated with the soldier number; the name was more like a badge of office.

Patronymics were never used. In fact it is sometimes rather difficult to find a soldier's patronymic, which can make it hard to properly identify him.

Two things must be understood:

1. *The same name does not occur twice in the same company.* It was to avoid the "Anders Persson-effect" that surnames were introduced, so there were 150 different names (the number of men in a company). The same name occurs however in the next company belonging to the same regiment (each regiment had eight companies) – and the same name does *not* mean that you have two brothers serving in different companies in the same regiment (far more likely that the brothers serve – under different names – in the same company).
2. *The name was not personal property.* The name belonged to the soldier number, as did the croft. If you moved to another croft, you changed your soldier number and also your name. In *exceptional* circumstances you could in this situation be allowed to keep "your" surname. This also means that if Petter Flinta after a while is called Anders Flinta, it does not mean that Petter has changed his first name nor that his son has succeeded him – there's simply a new soldier at the croft (who of course just *might* be a son of the old soldier, but that is not very common). This also means that the popular belief that the captain made up names according to the soldier's characteristics is not very plausible – though it did happen. And sometimes a soldier simply did not like his name and was actually allowed to change it.

Children and wives of the soldiers did *not* assume the soldier's surname – it was after all more of a professional badge – and the surname was "returned" when the soldier was discharged. If he had been honourably discharged he was however usually still called by his last surname, as a sort of courtesy name, but it was not inherited by his children. The soldier names people use today as family names are from when the allotment system was discontinued, and from the decades immediately preceding this event. It coincided nicely with the new family name ordinance so the soldiers and their families kept the soldier name (which they were probably happy to do since this showed they were professionals instead of amateur conscripts). The soldier names were not regarded as "unique" and could be kept without administrative fuss.

## Women

Swedish women did usually not take their husband's name before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**If** both man and wife only had patronymics the woman could of course not change patronymics just because she married – she did not get a new father.

**If** both man and wife had family names, the woman kept hers. There are plenty of rural churches with memorial plaques where the married women are mentioned with their own names. However, in some town families with foreign connections/origins there were women who used their husband's name *socially* already by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century (legally they kept their names).

**If** the man had a family name and the woman did not, the woman could assume his name *socially* – but this did not become common until the end of

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the 18th century and then first in the towns from where it slowly spread to the country.

During the first decades of the 19th century it is noticeable that it becomes more common for women to assume the husband's name and it was socially quite accepted from at least the 1850's (though not fully accepted in the church records). In connection with patronymics being used as family names in the towns (1860's, 1870's, see above) women were more often called by the husband's name. *Widows* quite often used their husband's name.

With the Marriage Act of 1920 the transition was complete – a married woman *had* to take her husband's name. Only with the Name Law of 1963 were women again given the right to retain their own name or make a “double” name; it was however a rather circumstantial administrative process and few used the possibility. The Name Law of 1982 makes it simple for the woman to retain her own name – and many chose to do so – it is after all a rather new custom for Swedish women to assume the husband's name.

## Children

Children under 15 (i.e. before being confirmed) were not regarded as persons “in their own right”. They were “part” of their father – even if he had died – and were noted as such in all records: “Britta, daughter of Per Andersson and its wife Anna Erikdotter, born December 12<sup>th</sup>” or “Anders, son of Per Andersson's widow Anna Erikdotter, dead from dysentery at age 13”. Children are thus commonly noted without surname. Usually this is not a problem: if the father has no family name, the children will use a patronymic as adults; if the father has a family name, the children will use that as adults.

There are however two exceptions: children, specifically sons, who go down the social ladder and illegitimate children.

As has been shown above, a family name was more or less the prerogative of people who did not belong to the farmers' estate. If a son of, e.g., a clergyman for some reason became an ordinary farmer he would no longer use his family name. If a farmer used a clergyman's or even a smith's family name he would risk quite serious social consequences. However, if this man's son – or even grandson – again climbed the social ladder and attained a social position which warranted a family name, the old name was not forgotten and would be used again – perhaps after as much as 50 or 75 years. This is sometimes the origin of family names “suddenly” assumed by emigrants.

Daughters who married “beneath” them would most often continue to use their family name.

The surname of illegitimate children is usually a problem until they are adults and a surname is noted in the records. However, if the child was *not* to use its mother's patronymic or family name, the surname was often noted quite early; this is particularly true after the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century when children were formally enrolled in schools and the name was taken from the parish records.

## Emigrants

Many emigrants changed their surnames on emigration. This was usually *not* to make it easier to pronounce the name in the new country. Instead many emigrants regarded emigration much as they would a move to town – which “entitled” them to exchange their patronymic for a town name.

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Another reason for changing surname was that patronymics were not understood in America: if you filled out a form where you had to state your father's name, it would appear that you were illegitimate (a grave social handicap, also in America) since you did not share a family name. It is therefore not uncommon to see emigrants who used their *fathers'* patronymic when emigrating or changing into it shortly after immigration.

## Immigrants

Already from early medieval times Sweden had many immigrants. The largest and best known groups have been German merchants (the Hansa) and Walloon smiths, but there has always been a steady "trickle" of specialists and experts. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish merchants arrived here (Gustav III allowed Jews to settle in a few towns, before that they were not allowed to live here). Common to all these people was that in their countries of origin they already had family names and they kept these on moving here.

Examples of this sort of "old" immigrant names are Allard, Tersmeden, de Geer (Walloons, early 17<sup>th</sup> century), Hamilton (Scots military, 17<sup>th</sup> century), Chalmers (Scots merchant, 18<sup>th</sup> century), Fürstenberg (Jewish, 19<sup>th</sup> century).

## Farm names

In some parts of the country using the *farm name* has been a very common practice. The reason is that neither the first name nor the patronymic was enough to distinguish a person. A parish could easily have some ten people with identical names. This was really the same problem as the armed forces had; "everybody" was called "Anders Persson" (see above). In civilian life the problem was however often solved by adding the name of the farm. If "Anders Persson" came from the farm "Pers" he was called "Pers Anders Persson" (or occasionally "Anders Pers Persson"). The farm name included everybody at the farm, also a man who took over his wife's parents' farm – he had to drop his old farm name and use the new one; this was called "taking the chemise name".

Use of the farm name has also been common abroad; a close example is Norway where it has been used until recently.

In some parts of Sweden – mainly in Dalarna – people have been very chary of divesting themselves of their farm names. However, the legislation took no notice until 1982 when the question was brought up in connection with the new Name Law. It was then decided that farm names can be used provided:

1. it is used "by" the first name; i.e. "Pers Anders Persson" and "Anders Pers Persson" are both in order, but "Anders Persson Pers" is not. In this last case "Pers" is regarded as a family name, not a farm name.
2. there is a "real" connection to the name, and the name is still in actual use (however, the farm need not be in operation).



*What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other word would smell as sweet*

W. Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet* (Act 2, Scene 1)