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## Changing Uses in the Genealogical Research in Finland



The first written and prevailed authentic documents concerning Finnish history are very young in comparison with other countries. They are from the beginning of the fourteenth century. In dearth of sources we know just a few scattered fragments of the genealogies of the early medieval Finns. Some of the more imaginative historians have, of course, tried to lead the origins of our ancient nobility either to the pagan chieftains of the Finnish tribes or to the Swedish crusades in Saint Erik's and Saint Henry's retinue in the twelfth century. I would say: without any scientific reliability. There doesn't exist any genuine family genealogies from that time. Naturally, most people knew about their ancestors and relatives through generations, but this knowledge remained unwritten. It was stored as family tales in old persons' minds. From the documents, prevailed either in original or copies, the younger generations could sketch up their genealogical pedigrees from the old noble families.

The use of genealogy was in old times mainly connected with legal matters. The so called forbidden degrees were impediments to marriage. The law of inheritance had its special provisions making

genealogical knowledge and even research necessary. In the beginning, the right to inheritance was nearly unlimited, and when a family estate was sold or for other reasons going outside the family circle, there existed the right of redemption for the nearest kinsmen. In difficult disputes about the inheritance, old men or women were the best witnesses before the court. Their memory could reach very far, but very often they just told old tales.

When the continental notions of the rules of the hereditary nobility penetrated the simply structured society here in the far north, they were contrasted to an earlier freedom from other duties for those who fulfilled equestrian service. The advantages of nobility were so valuable — for instance the exemption from land taxation — that there was a vast horde of men and widows trying to enjoy the rights without doing the duties. When the male line bloomed out the maternal ignoble descendants were claiming the rights to nobility, while they inherit the noble estate. The continental manner of granting patents of nobility to distinguished persons and giving them letters with coats of arms, was breaking the nature of nobility as a case of service and counterservice. And then, in 1569, the privileges for the nobility of John the Third closed the boundaries around the nobility. It became an in-registered corporation of noble and en-

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nobled or naturalized families. This notion of nobility required reliable genealogical pedigrees. Those kinds of survey were already made during the Reformation Era, and used for legal purposes.

There was after the usurpation of power by Gustavus Wasa a practical need for reliable genealogies. As a part of the reformation the new king was reducing the old possessions of the Church to the crown. The noblemen wanted to share the prey. They claimed proprietary rights to such estates which had been bequeathed to the Church for expressed purposes, for instance here in Finland to grant livelihood to a family member, who had entered the Order of St Bridget's nunnery at Naantali (Nådendal). The sister in question had passed away decades ago, but the monastery wall still keeping the estate gives as *proventa* for her. The claimants of such estates documented their rights with genealogical tables and pedigrees, and, on the other side, the royal secretaries like famous Rasmus Ludvigsson in the chancellery collected genealogical evidence for the defence of the interests of the crown. They worked very seriously on the medieval documents to get reliable knowledge of the family relations among the nobility. Most of those genealogies are of course dealing with Swedish families in Sweden, but for instance among this material there is also a Finnish Family Book, *Finska Släktboken*, in the genealogical collection of the Swedish National Archives. The genealogy as a research work was mostly a practical activity in the beginning. Its aims and purposes were to serve the judges and the courts as useful and necessary material to find the most righteous solutions.

But genealogical research has never been only and purely a practical one. To know details and backgrounds, to accomplish the knowledge to higher fulfillment has always and in every field been a

pleasure and to nourish the human endless curiosity has also been a pleasure, too. When the House of Nobles in the beginning of the 17th Century was founded in Stockholm and the genealogical pedigrees were collected and built up, private amateurs were often used as sources. The famous Finnish warlord, Colonel Axel Kurck was in his time known as the best authority of Finnish noble families, and his intimate knowledge was for great help when the Directors of the House of Nobles worked out the genealogies for the Finnish families. During the following centuries, the genealogical research in Finland has worked further on those noble genealogies, and the knowledge in that field is nearby without any greater gaps. From the 1820's there exists our own House of Nobles in this Grand Duchy Finland, and one of its tasks has been to carry on genealogical research, with great success. The great names on this field are Oscar Wasastjerna, Tor Carpelan and Jullu Ramsay.

From noblemen over to the priests and ministers: In 1660, the newly nominated bishop at Turku, the Swedish-born Johannes Elai Terserus was on his first routine inspection journey through the northern parts of his bishopric. Moving slowly from one clerical residence to another he had time enough to notice that a major part of the priests were connected with each other through strong and multiply ties of kinship. He found out that a peasant living in the time of Gustavus Wasa, called Erik Ångerman Sursill, in the village Västerteg in the parish of Umeå in Northern Sweden, was the common progenitor of a vast offspring on the Finnish side of the Gulf of Bothnia, among them nearby the whole ministry of Ostrobothnia. Terserus tried to write down all the information he got. He was not only interested in genealogical matters. He had

in mind the idea of historical and topographical description of the province of Ostrobothnia with geographical and historical details, with lists of the priests hence the reformation and short biographies over them, lists over all peculiar events and over the antiquities in each parish, not mentioning the population and boundaries of each parish, its seas and rivers, roads and most significant memorabilities. This work was continued by others, but it remained however unfinished and without a final revision.

There was also a genealogical part in the manuscript, nowadays commonly known as *Genealogia Sursilliana*, but earlier as The Family Register of the Severs Sursill-Sisters. During the following nearby two hundred years it was a subject to continuous augmentation and accomplishment. It is obvious that very soon there circulated different copies of the genealogical part of the manuscript among the Ostrobothnian priests. Vicar Martinus Peitzius at Raabe (Brahestad) had the manuscript in his possession and after his death in 1727 his son, curate at Kempele, Gabriel Peitzius (who died already in 1752) continued his father's work through a large correspondence with his colleagues. The width of the manuscript was tripled through the work of the younger Peitzius. The following priest to add new generations and revise the manuscript was vicar of Pyhäjoki, Petter Niklas Mathesius, who died in 1772. Already in 1766 there were plans to publish the manuscript but this printing plan was not accomplished. Henrik Gabriel Porthan, professor of eloquence at the University of Turku and known as the "Father of Finnish History", tried in the beginning of 1780's to get the manuscript prepared and ready for print but Johan Westzyntnius, vicar of Pyhäjoki, successor and son-in-law of Mathesius was not capable to bring the work to a

proper end. Then in the end of 1820's young chaplain in Kalajoki, Elias Robert Alcenius (he died as vicar in Lappfjärd in 1875) became acquainted with the Peitzius manuscript with the Sursill descendarily from 1747. The young man was suddenly bitten by the genealogical bug and he used nearby twenty years to accomplish and prepare the manuscript. The *Genealogia Sursilliana* was published in 1850. It had about three hundred subscribers and for the publisher it was not an economical disaster. Elias Robert Alcenius became "The Father of the Finnish Genealogy". Our great national philosopher J.V. Snellman wrote a critical and biting review in his newspaper. There was thunder and lightning – ironic as usual – when he told his fellow countrymen that there is no use for genealogy at all. Its simple and pure vanity.

Hundred years before Gabriel Peitzius, for his part, had already written that the genealogical registers and tables are necessary instruments for historians, as necessary as the chronology or the topographical knowledge of the locations. History gets a great part of its light from the genealogies, and all other disciplines, useful and necessary for the common human society, are illuminated by the genealogy, too. The great historian Porthan stressed the same things when describing the whole field of the history and the task of his contemporary fellow Finnish historians in the end of the 18th century: we have to collect and to bring together all noteworthy notices for use to the store house at the moment when future historians are able to write a national Finnish history.

Snellman's criticism against *Genealogia Sursilliana* had no effect whatsoever. He could not prevent the disease from spreading. In 1870's genealogy was fully presentable as a science, when – the initiative was taken by the historian and archaeolo-

gist Johan Reinhold Aspelin – the Finnish Antiquarian Society began to collect family registers from the so called learned public. The noble families were registered at the House of Nobles, but other members of the upper strata were so to say unregistered. In good Porthanian tradition the Society collected about five hundred pedigrees or genealogical surveys. From the 1890's onward the Society then published an alphabetical collection of more than two hundred fifty family histories from Aejmelaeus to Östuring. The editor was Axel Bergholm, a country town schoolmaster who skillfully completed the collected genealogies. After Bergholm's *Sukukirja, Suomen aatelittomia sukuja* (Collected genealogies for Finnish commoner families) Atle Wilskman prepared a similar, and an even more scientific collection *Släktbok*, printed in Swedish. Such collections have ever been published in more recent times.

The genealogical publications with their often amply biographical notices showed soon their usefulness as source material for history, especially for social history. The main stream of Finnish historical research tradition was until very recent times quite predominantly directed towards social mobility, the structure of the four estates society, and of immigration and emigration. The historians have either used the same sources as genealogists do or they have found enough material for their conclusions in genealogical works. In spite of Snellman's damnation over genealogy the discipline has gained and preserved a position as one of the more important auxiliaries for history. We are even giving lectures in genealogy at our universities. The purpose of genealogy has primarily been to supply historians with facts and thus to facilitate the understanding of the past of our nation.

Of course, for many genealogy already in the beginning of this century was a hobby, a hobby, but a very respectable one. In 1917, when the Genealogical Society of Finland was founded, its rank and file was composed both by history professors and other scientists but also by a wide range of amateurs. The Society and especially its passionate factotum for four decades Osmo Durchman (who died in the fifties) gained good results when trying to improve the possibilities for everyman to practice his hobby. All the parish registers (that is lists of births, marriages and burials) from the earliest prevailed ones (from 1648) to about 1850 were copied by hand. This unique collection of about 800 copy volumes is in our National Archives. The Society has published sources of biographical character and has made it possible to its members to publish genealogical surveys and notices of interest. Outside our Genealogical Society for instance the large General Register of Land Settlement in Finland has been prepared with state support, a handy combination of all taxation sources from the Swedish rule and thus an important source for all genealogists.

This was the situation in Finnish Genealogy until recent times, let's say until 1940's and 50's. There were in fact two quite different factors changing the picture. At first, the enormous technical progress for example, the microfilms or the fiches and other modern technical equipments which make it possible for the enthusiast to do his research work at home and to get what he wants without time-consuming correspondence with the priests. All the parchmental population indexes with personal data for each inhabitant not only the already by hand copied registers of births, marriages and deaths are nowadays microfilmed. The genealogy as a hobby was at one blow becoming easier

and faster, and also more successful for the laymen to do.

But the technical progress was coped with a democratization of genealogy in Finland. Earlier when there was social mobility downwards, the descent genealogists like Axel Bergholm or even Elias Robert Alcenius wrote simply that this branch has sunken into the common people, or that one descendants live as peasants in this or that parish but without any further genealogical information. In the postwar period the common people began to have interest in their ancestors. Perhaps there was a kind of seeking the roots, lost for a while during the rapid urbanization and industrialization of the society. It might also be a result of the enlarged leisure time and perhaps of the fact that retired people have nowadays more possibilities to practice something pleasant than the previous generations. But the fact prevails that the rooms for microfilms in our archives are overcrowd with genealogists as busy as possible from the opening hour to the closing time. Most of the people have just a vivid interest to find their own roots and relatives but there are many enthusiasts who have greater ambitions and very large research programs. For them the pastime has become nearby a second profession or passion.

I have a very vivid memory of the astonishment among elderly half-professional genealogists when we in the end of the forties published a genealogical survey over a very interesting peasant family with several branches risen to learned strata. "Who could be interested in common people", they asked me and my fellow researcher Heikki Soininvaara. And the astonishment was still greater when in 1949 in the same descent collection of genealogies I published the genealogy of the family Stenvall, the family of our great national novelist and play-

writer Aleksis Kivi (1834–1872). We were told that the family was through two centuries clearly a landless working class family, and the collections were aimed to the upper and middle class families.

Times have changed and people too. In Finland today the majority of genealogical research done and its results published dealt with common families. The social mobility upwards has been enormous in the last decades and most people have lost the contacts with their past and their birth-places. They have to seek their lost and forgotten ancestors and their real roots to find an important part of their own identity.

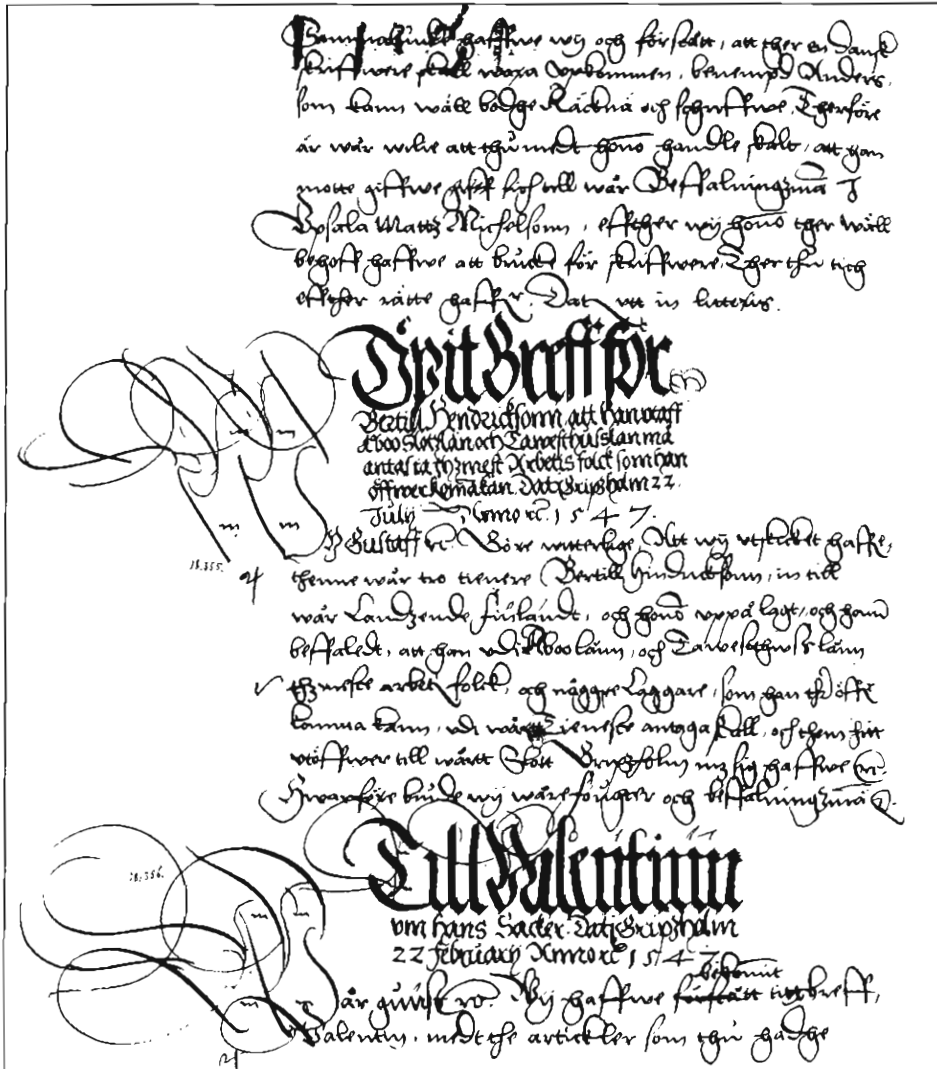
The genealogist today is no more seeking a golden pedigree. Most kings, princes and similars in the past have nowadays thousands or billions of descendants and an adult human being living today has about 30 000 or even more ancestors who lived in the time of Christopher Columbus. Genealogy from this point of view is a very egalitarian discipline. Realizing this, we can say that modern genealogy is more interested in where and how the past generations lived and worked than just to know the biological dates. She or he has enlarged his field and shown more and more interest in the social history around the ancestors.

The number of active researchers has increased enormously and modern technology with for instance data processing has made finding the ancestors almost a little easier than before. There are even more genealogists ready to help e.g. foreigners to find their Finnish ancestors.

The genealogical research has its constant methods, necessary and useful in every single case. There hasn't been any change on that side since *Genealogia Sursilliana* or since Axel Kurck. But through centuries each generation has found its own use for genealogy. First it

was more or less an auxiliary tool for legal use, then an auxiliary tool for historians, and now it is an auxiliary tool for people who have lost their tradition and identity. Nowadays it is also an auxiliary tool for genetics and for medicine in its fight

against hereditary diseases. But in all shifts genealogy is still genealogy, and it will always keep its charm because its foundations are in the basic facts of human life: birth, reproduction and death.



Gripsholm, 22 February 1547. A letter in which Gustavus Vasa, King of Sweden, asks Bertil Henriksson to recruit labourers from Finland on the King's account. Swedish National Archives/Photo collections of the Institute of Migration.