

Our family name Korhonen

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Understanding of the age of Finnish surnames (second names, family names) has changed fundamentally in the latest hundred years. In a couple of decades, the old Finnish popular name practice has been brought up especially strongly. Our own family name *Korhonen* is older than any population register. There have been many attempts to try to guess its origin and meaning.

Some Savo–Karelian family names are nearly one thousand of years old, declares professor **Veijo Saloheimo** in his 2006 printed book *Viiipurin karjalaiset kotona ja maailmalla 1541–1620* (Karelians from Vyborg at home and out in the wide world 1541–1620)¹. "In the eastern realm, where the influence of Novgorod and the Orthodox Church extended not only to Karelia but also over the border of the peace treaty of Pähkinäsaari (Nöteborg, Shlisselburg, Oreshek, Оре́шек) in 1323, up to the western shores of the lake Saimaa, there came into existence the oldest family name system used by ordinary people in our country, or perhaps in the whole world", writes an onomast **Sirkka Paikkala** in her article *Sukunimet sukututkimuksessa* (Surnames in genealogy)².

A hundred years ago, surnames may have been considered as a late phenomenon, which came into existence only some hundreds of years ago according to gentlefolks pattern. **Hannes Gebhard** wrote in his doctoral dissertation³ published in 1893 that "during pagan times, Finns had only one name, which was also used for the house. When they were given new Christian names, the former pagan individual names remained as surnames or the names of their houses."

In 1921, a historian **Jalmari Finne** acknowledged the old surnames as medieval, but rejected the notion of old family names⁴: "Savonian family names ending -nen, which are found already in the Middle Ages also in other areas of the country than in Savonia, were originally not actual family names, but have only become crystallized in the 18th century. If in some cases persons with such kind of surnames can be traced back to the 16th century along paternal line in a same house, the name was not a family name, but a house name. Personal names ending with -nen were undoubtedly originally only nicknames."

A historian **Kauko Pirinen**, the writer of the second volume of the history of Savo⁵, advocates already in 1980s a newer position, when he says that it is legitimate to "talk about Savonian family names as far back as the 16th century". However, he does not consider the family name system to be of Savonian origin, but says that "the majority of the Savonian family names seems to be of ancient Karelian descent". In his lists from 1541 to 1617 there are about a thousand Finnish surnames. The number of the names implies that the system must be essentially older, as such abundance does not occur in an instant.

In spite of what was said at the beginning, the idea of the common people without family names still persists, as, for example, an editor of *Helsingin Sanomat* wrote in 2004⁶ that "Western Finns had no family names at all". However, individual surnames with suffix -nen, appeared in western Finland as early as the Middle Ages in the 14th and 15th centuries.⁷ There, according to Swedish administrative practice, they were left out of the Crown authorities' documents, only to return in the late 19th century.

In Eastern Finland, however, medieval family names remained strong throughout the Swedish rule and yet in 19th century when Finland was an autonomous part of the Russian Empire. The hereditary nature of Finnish family name system has perhaps been an original feature of the

Eastern Finnish naming system from the beginning.² It was not an imported commodity, like the later surname and nickname systems, but was based on the legal system of the Eastern Finnish tribal society.⁸

The survival of our own family name **Korhonen** from the 16th century onwards, from generation to generation, is an indication of its strength and stability. The family did not get its name after a house, but houses in many villages and parishes were named Korhola after the master, called Korhonen, of the house. The name of the house could have been changed later to a new owner, but in some cases the name Korhola has survived even though the house is no longer in a Korhonen's possession.

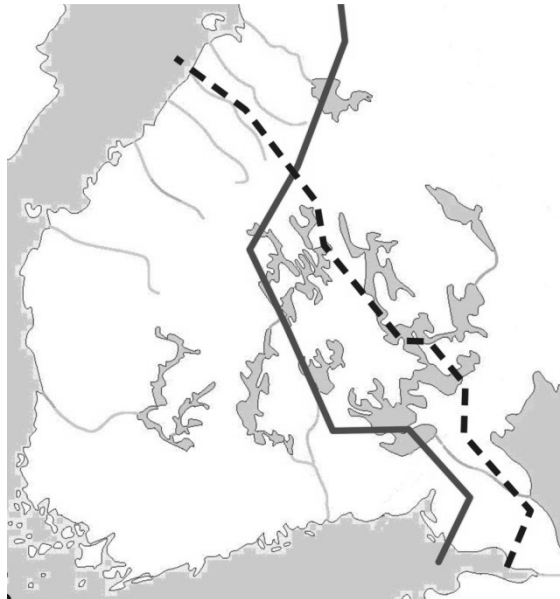


Figure 1. The border between the western and eastern surname practice in Finland (red line) and the border between the areas of Sweden and Novgorod according to the peace treaty in Pähkinäsaari 1323 (dotted blue line).

Form and concept

The suffix -(i)nen has sometimes been considered diminutive, but so it is not in the old Finnish family names. In them, it indicates belonging to a family, for example the son of a rune singer **Arhippa Perttunen** was called *Arhippaini Miikkali* (Arhippa's Michael).⁶ On the other hand, the suffix -inen may also indicate a characteristic or belonging, e. g. 'punainen' (red), 'vihainen' (angry), 'lappalainen' (one from Lappland), 'venäläinen' (Russian), which would also be a characteristic interpretation for a family name.

A woman preserved the family name of her father's also after marriage. The female form of the family name had the suffix -tar/-tär⁹, the same one that has been used earlier and is still used sometimes even today in gender-specific titles such as 'tanssijatar' (female dancer) or 'näyttelijätär' (actress).¹⁰

The oldest known record of a family name is found in **Andreas Kexler's** funeral sermon¹¹ of 1680: "Adeleilla annetan lijka ja sukunimi, josta hänen cunnians tutan ja muista eroitetaan." (A nickname and surname is given to gentlefolks. It is how their honour will be known and they will be differentiated from other people.) Thus, the family name practice is much older than the word

'sukunimi' (family name) itself. An older word which had same meaning in Savo, was 'költti'. In **Ganander's** dictionary of 1787, 'költti' means same as the Swedish word 'tilnamn' (nickname).

'Sukunimi' (family name) is mentioned in the same paragraph as a word used in Ostrobothnia.⁷ 'Költti' also appears in the additions which professor **Henrik Gabriel Porthan** made handwriting to **Daniel Juslenius'** dictionary *Suomalaisen Sana-Lugun Coetus*, published in 1745.¹² The explanation is in Swedish 'släktnamn' (släktnamn in contemporary Swedish, family name). In the **Elias Lönnrot's** dictionary published in 1880, 'sukunimi' was already a common keyword.¹³

The oldest names were in the same position than other words in common speech. Initially, surnames or family names did not have been just meaningless symbols. Names due to the names of animals represent probably the oldest stratum. In Karelia, many of these names have appeared later without the suffix -(i)nen.

Many names have also been derived from the ancestor's first name: Heikkinen (Henrik), Mikkonen (Michael), Penttinen (Bengt, Benedictus), Jouhki (Jefim), Riikonen (Grigori). In Savo, such names appear to have been relatively more popular in the 16th century.¹⁴ They have also existed in Western Finland at least since the 14th century.¹⁵

Other names can describe physical or mental qualities, appearance, occupation, or lineage of the ancestor, such as Takku (tangly hair), Pitkänen (long man), Karvajalka (fur-footed), Runttikorva (hole-eared?), Nahkahattu (skin hat), Soutaja (boatman), Paranta(ja)inen (healer), Pappi (riihipappi, riihenlämmittäjä, one who is warming up a kiln), Lappalainen (Laplander), Savolainen (Savonian), Venäläinen (Russian).¹⁶

There are plenty of such kind of nicknames (surnames) still in 17th century documents¹⁷; many of them very tangible and straightforward: Bläsipää (face head?), Halkisilmä (split-eyed), Hikipää (sweat-headed), Hutimies (reckless man?), Ikätora (always-angry?), Jauhosuu (flour-mouthed), Kohopää (lifter-head), Luukulkku (bone-throat), Pitkäparta (long-beard).

In her book *Suomalaista sukunimikäytäntöä*¹¹ (Finnish Surname Practice), **Eeva Maria Närhi** groups our old surnames into seven groups: deriving from old Finnish first names (Lalli, Rahikka, Ihanuksenpoika or Ihanuksinen, Hyväneuvoinen); related to a person's characteristics or appearance (Pitkänen (long), Torahammas (fang), Suuripää (big-headed)); depicting a profession or position (Leikari (= soittaja, player), Paranta(ja)inen (healer), Suutari (shoemaker)); doing with ancestry (Lappalainen (Lappish), Hämläinen (Tavastian), Venäläinen (Russian), taken from the nature (Karhunen (bear), Susi (wolf), Varis (crow), Tarvainen [tarvas = deer], Paju (willow); tools or clothing (Pyssy (gun), Konttinen ([bark] knapsack), Turkki (fur)) and from other languages (Björn, Cajanus, Gråsten, Svärd).

Attempts to find explanations

Our own surname *Korhonen* belongs to the oldest stratum of the nomenclature. Over the last one and a half hundred years, there have been many attempts to try to guess its origin from dialect words sounding alike. Lönnrot's Dictionary¹³ from 19th century knows only one similar word 'korho', which is said to be synonymous with 'karho' and 'karhe' (a swollen haystack). "Being elevated" has been one of the most popular meanings: 'ylpeä' (proud), 'rikas' (rich), because "after all, a proud person walks with his body upright and head raised"; 'iso mies' (big man) because "it fits in with the raised, upright meaning"; "hearing impaired" because "he raises his head and his

ears, so he is somehow elevated"; 'huonokuuloinen' (having bad hearing) perhaps the most common meaning in dialect collections.¹⁸

This explanation is also supported by Pirinen⁵, who offers the Savonian-like expression 'kovakuuloinen' (hard to hear, a dialect word for deaf). There are many other descriptive surnames with the meaning "elevated" from both eastern and western Finland, such as Kohopää and Kokkapää.¹⁹ All of these, as well as 'pörröpäinen' (fluffy-haired), have grounds in the dialectal vocabulary, for in so many meanings the word 'korho' has appeared throughout Finland.

"Korho" has also been said to have its origin in a Baltic root word of ancient Prussian, meaning a chief or a villager elder²⁰. These explanations have not been supported by current onomasts, but on the contrary got a clear knockout¹⁸. However, the origin from the name of an ancient Baltic god called Korho, Curcho for fields and agriculture has been supported still in recent years.²¹ Miraculously, he is looking very fluffy in a picture from 16th century.



Figure 2: The god Chorcho of fields of the ancient Prussians according to the Simon Grunau's Prussian chronicle. In other sources, the picture is said to represent the god Perkunas of thunder and originate from the old flag of Lithuania. (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)

The word "Korho" has also been featured in Novgorod's birch bark letters dating from the 12th century²². This is because the word Кѣрга, transliterated as Korga in Latin letters, could have the referent of "Korho", since, in written Russian language, Finnish "h" is often matched by "g", for example Гельсингфорс in the name "Helsingfors", the Swedish form of Helsinki, or vice versa "h" appears in the loanwords instead of "g" as in 'pohatta' (rich man), from the Russian word богатъ (bogat).

However, the author of the article associates the name with the name "Kurko" and further "Kurki" (crane) mentioned in Mikkonen's and Paikkala's book *Sukunimet*²³ (Family names). On the other hand, it has been pointed out that in this case the most natural spelling would have been be Кѣрко and not Кѣрга. According to the author, the word "Korga" has no Slavic equivalents, so one has to look for a starting point from Finnish or Baltic languages.

An interesting connection in this respect is that the *Vatjan viidennes* (the Votian Fifth, Voteland, Watland (not to be mixed with an English surname or areas in other parts of the world), Водская пятинa, Vodskaja pjatina), to which Karelia belonged in the Middle Ages, was under the rule of Lithuanian princes of Pihkova (Pskov) in the 14th century.²⁴ Our name appears in 1500 in the Land Book of the Votian Fifth in Sakkola in the area of the later Metsäpirtti in the kyrillic form "Коргола", transliterated "Korhola"²⁵.

Baltic speculations, whether human or divine, have no steady scientific basis, and are irrelevant to genealogical work, but show how far explanations have been sought in the absence of obvious interpretation. The basis for dialectal samples collected from different parts of Finland does not seem to be more steady, since dialectal samples have been compiled much later than the name has come into existence, and there are so many different dialectal meanings that the choice among them is only a matter of guessing. Instead, we will return to the name Korga later.

However, if we keep to documentable sources and do not go further out to sea, the meaning of the name should be sought in a direction where Korhonen is known to have appeared as a personal or place name at an early age. Then we go to Karelia. The Karelian Online Dictionary of the Center for Domestic Languages²⁶ knows the verb "korhota" and gives it two different meanings: "kohota, nousta" (to rise, to come up) and "vaurastua, rikastua" (to prosper, to become rich).

If these are considered as original meanings, the Finnish dialectal words 'leuhka' (boastful), 'pystypäinen' (one holding his head up), 'huonokuuloinen' (with bad hearing) will appear to have later differentiated meanings. However, the language samples are from the Säämäjärvi area near Petroskoi (Petrozavodsk) and not from the Karelian Isthmus, where Korho and Korhola could be found at least in Jääski, Metsäpirtti and Kurkijoki. The latter has been considered to be the origin of the Savonian Korhonen on the basis of dna analyses²⁷.

It is also possible that the last word on the emergence of our name has not yet been said and, therefore, explaining our surname from its meaning is just an unfounded and misguided guess. Indeed, a recent online discussion has suggested that the name would originate from by the Greek name Georgios.²⁸ It is a particularly well-known name, for the most famous Georgios is probably Saint Great Martyr Georgios the Triumphant, who lived in the late third century and is known in the West as Saint George.

There are plenty of examples: Huotari(nen) < Feodor (Russian) < Theodor (Greek), Pasanen < Paša aka Pavel < Paulus, Simanainen < Sim(a) < Symeon. Correspondingly, the name "Korhonen" would have its origin from Georgios.

The name Georgios was also in common use and not only as the saint's name. The name could have brought to Karelia by a Greek monk, Sergei, founder of the Valamo Monastery, who came into Karelia in the 12th century. The relaying form would be the everyday form Gorga or Gorgo. It is no longer a long journey to the Karelian outfit Korha or Korho.

The later Korhonen need not have any direct contact with the salt trade client mentioned in the birch bark letter found in Staraja Russa, south of Lake Ilmajärvi (Ilmen, ИЛЬМЕНЬ). However, the letter is appropriately from the early 12th century. If Georgios lies behind the name Korha, Korho, then the name is borrowed directly from Greece, not Russia, since the Russians initially used the everyday form Гюрги (Gjurgi) which changed into form Юрьи (Yuri) later in the 15th century. To Finnish language, the name was loaned in the form "Jyrki" already from the older version.

The Karelian name Korga, Korha may also have traveled along the busy trade road going via Taipale on the west bank of Lake Laatokka (Ladoga). Later, though, Taipale receded into a meaningless little village. In the immediate vicinity of the later Metsäpirtti in Suvannonpää, there was already a strong Korho concentration in the 15th century. It is known by the place names Korhola, Korholanjaama, Martinkorhola, Mäki-Korhola, Korhola lake and Korhola river.

The solidity of the names is evidenced by the fact that Korholanjaama and Martinkorhola were still in use in Finnish maps of the 1930s. – The name explanation from Georgios is, of course, guesswork, as well as explanations derived from dialect words collected much later, but not on a weaker basis.

Where and when

Then we go back to the more secure documentary information than dialectal speculations. The dissertation *Savonlinnan läänin oloista vuoteen 1571* from the year 1888 (On the conditions of Savonlinna County until 1571) lists over 600 Finnish surnames. Of these, over a hundred or so are old Savonian great families²⁹, one of them Korhonen. At that time, the name Korhonen appeared in four of the six rural municipalities in Savo: Vesulahti (Mikkeli, St. Michel), Pellosniemi (administrative municipality south of Mikkeli), Rantasalmi and Tavisalmi (Kuopio). Likewise, in the oldest juridical records from Savo, the Korhonen are mentioned in every municipality in 1560s as parties or jury members in every court³⁰.

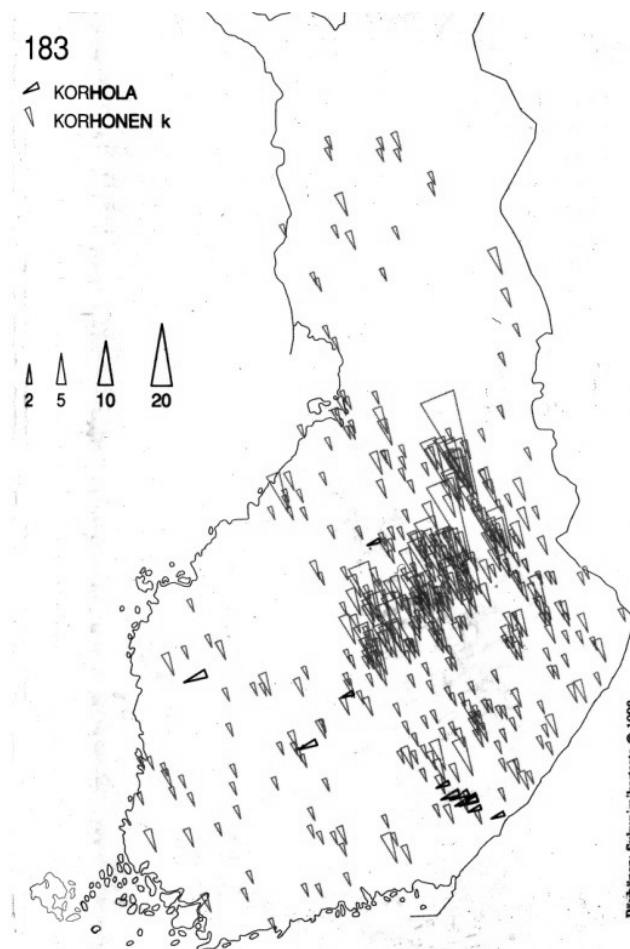


Figure 3: The distribution of the name Korhonen according to the radio licence register in late 1960s in Finland. (On the right owner's permission from the book Pöyhönen, J. *Suomalainen sukunimikartasto*³⁸.)

Pirinen regards the Korhons as a family coming from Mikkeli⁵. The name Korhonen was among the top ten names in the first three municipalities mentioned above. A slightly younger dissertation *Rautalammin vanhan ballintopitäjän historia*³¹ (History of the Old Administrative Municipality Rautalampi) mentions only one Korhonen at Rautalampi, and because he lives at Kerkonjoensuu, it cannot be anyone other than our progenitor Tuomas Pekanpoika.

People called Korhonen appeared also elsewhere – in the Oulu region and in Satakunta – already in the late 16th century. In the second volume of the history of Savo, Kauko Pirinen has listed the Korhons within an accuracy level of quarter of the municipality (pitäjä in Finnish) in Savo and elsewhere within the accuracy level of a province⁵. The puzzle, if all the Korhons are relatives to each other, will remain unsolved, unless DNA research does not bring any new pieces of information, because there were no systematic census record before the mid-16th century.

Similarly, since the early 17th century, the Korhons have been abundantly inhabited in Sotkamo³² and Little Savo³³. In the Käkisalme County Court Registry³⁴, over a dozen of the Korhons are mentioned in Kurkijoki, Pälkjärvi, Tiurala, Uukuniemi, Liperi, Salmi and Ilomantsi, as well as in Ruokolahti, Jääski and Äyräpää³⁵. There are several references to the Korhons in Finnish forests in Sweden and Norway, too³⁶.

Nowadays Korhonen is the most common surname in Finland³⁷, although Eastern Finland is still visible in the placement of surnames. The Virtanens were passed in 2009. How many of these over twenty thousand of the Korhons are the Korhons of Rautalampi, i. e. the descendants of Tuomas Pekanpoika Korhonen, has not been determined. However, it is worth remembering that not all of Tuomas Korhonen's descendants carry the name Korhonen.

Many daughters of the Korhons have changed their name to their husband's. Some others have changed their surname to the house in which they lived, in accordance with the Western Finnish practice. Pirjo Mikkonen mentions in his doctoral dissertation³⁹ examples from Virrat in the late 19th century where a Korhonen became Kivimäki or Koivuniemi. Correspondingly, in Sievi, Korhonen became Knuutila⁴⁰. Our old name has been dropped recently, too. For example, in Vesanto, two of the seven children of the Korhons of Tulila house changed their surname in the turn of the 21st century, one to Tulila and the other to Tuliharju. Furthermore, the wives married by some Korhonen have naturally same right to be members of Korhonen family society although they are not blood relatives.

Ways of writing our family name

The name was written most often in the form of "Korhoin" in documents in the 18th century and still in the early 19th century. However, it was not a real name, but just an abbreviation. The suffix -inen belonged to the name all the time. It appeared back in church books at Rautalampi in the early 19th century. At about the same time, "i" disappeared from the suffix. – In the first legal document relating to our family, the Jöns Västgöte's decision of 1553 (fig. 4), the name is complete: Korhoinän. The Finnish-like genitive "Korhoises" in the text written otherwise in Swedish indicates the language skills of the scribe⁴¹.

Figure 4: In January 11th 1553, the judge of the rural district court of Ylä-Satakunta Jöns Västgöte confirmed Thomas Korbonen's right to settle down in Tavastians' fishing and hunting area called Kerkoeräsija on the western bank of the lake Niinivesi.

In the first preserved communion book 1704–1713 of Rautalampi parish, the names are often spelled out without abbreviating, that is Korhoinen, although the omission of the ending -en also appeared without any ascription. The practice of using "i" in the suffix -inen was still in use at Rautalampi in the 1830s, but the symptoms of the transition were already visible. So, for example, the housekeeper of Naulakaari, Kerkonjoensuu, was "Lars Korhoinen", but his wife, whose father was also Korhonen, was "Caisa Korhoin". The following communion book in 1840s already used non-i forms, unabridged as they are today.

The strength of the Eastern Finnish family name is demonstrated by the fact that a woman kept her family name even after her marriage. It was only at about the same time in the 19th century than the ending -tar/-tär began to be abandoned, when "i" dropped out of the suffix -inen. The relationship between such a naming convention and the old local juridical Savonian family and inheritance system does not seem discussed much in onomastic literature. Namely, the inheritance right of women did not extend to the land⁴², but the eldest son, the son-in-law or even the adoptive son inherited the house.

If the wife died before her husband, the husband was left out of the wife's inheritance, which returned to the wife's father's home, where it was originally left. Instead, the wife owned the dowry she had brought to the house and the inheritance she had received from her mother, holding clothes, a cow and so on. So the wife did not belong so much to her husband's family, but to her father's family, to which she could return after widowhood with her personal possessions. Fittingly, the wife also retained her father's family name.

The practice that a woman had to take her spouse's surname was also very short. It only lasted from the 1929 Marriage Act until the 1986 new Surnames Act. The first Surnames Act of 1920 stated that a wife was entitled to use her husband's surname, but did not yet enforce it, and the 1986 law gave her the right to keep her own name. Therefore, recording a married wife in the name of her husband's and the use of the expression "omaa sukua" (own family name or born) is an anachronistic mistake before the twentieth century, without some particular reason.

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