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# The Methods of Studying the Origins And History of Family Names in Europe

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**Abstract:** Recognizing that contemporary Europe has developed into a highly multicultural and multiethnic society is essential for understanding the region's modern social evolution. This reality plays a direct and significant role in the study of the origins and distribution of family names. Surnames function not only as personal identifiers but also as clear reflections of historical, cultural, and ethnic roots. In the following analysis, this issue is examined through examples of family names belonging to various national and cultural groups present within European society.

**Keys words:** family names, onomastics, anthroponymy, migration, diaspora, toponymy, geo-demography, surname distribution, archival data.

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**Introduction.** This article examines the linguistic and historical foundations of European family names, with particular attention to diasporic influences, toponymic and occupational origins, and the methodological issues encountered when connecting modern surname variants to their medieval sources. By employing comparative, etymological, and geo-demographic methods, the study highlights how surname research can illuminate broader questions about identity, mobility, and cultural integration in Europe.

**Methodology.** The Chinese diaspora in Europe consists of more than 200,000 people, most of whom originate from South China, particularly Hong Kong. Members of this diaspora use approximately 200 surnames, and these surnames are widely distributed across Europe. Rather than being viewed as "Chinese surnames" in the strict sense, they should be understood as "British-Chinese" names that have been irregularly adapted to English orthography. In many cases, these forms do not correspond to standard Mandarin or to any official written variant.

The surname "Lee" is one of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon. Historically, Lee is an English surname derived from the word meaning "a clearing in the forest." However, today a large proportion of people bearing this surname are of Chinese origin, where Li/Lee represents a completely different surname written with a character meaning "minister," with a history of more than three thousand years. The two surnames are unrelated in origin or meaning and share only their pronunciation. The surname Muhammad is also widespread in Europe, appearing in more than 30,000 different spellings. Individuals with this surname include not only Arabs, but also Pakistanis, Indians, Iranians, Turks, Malaysians, and members of various other ethnic groups. Although the Arabic naming system differs from the binomial (given name + family name) model commonly used in Europe, such names are often adopted as hereditary surnames within European societies. Many Pakistanis living in Europe also bear Arabic-derived surnames due to Islamic naming traditions, even though their native language is

Urdu, which belongs to the Indo-European language family.

It is also important to note that Arabic-origin names cannot be attributed exclusively to Muslims. In Europe there are Christian Arabs with the name Isa (Issa)-etymologically related to Jesus-as well as Arab Jews. Certain variants of the surname Abbas also exemplify this diversity. Thus, Arabic names vividly reflect the religious and ethnic plurality found within Europe. Modern British surnames achieved standardized spelling only in the twentieth century. As a result, the relationship between contemporary surname forms and their medieval originals is often misunderstood, and apparent similarities can easily lead to false assumptions about their historical connections. Reaney and Wilson<sup>1</sup>Reaney and Wilson, in attempting to identify modern surname variants and link them to their medieval English etymologies, often rely primarily on external phonetic similarity. Such connections, however, are considered reliable only when supported by historical evidence. In his introduction, Reaney himself notes that “many of our present-day surnames emerged relatively recently.” Despite this acknowledgement, he nevertheless proposes Old English etymologies for certain names.

From a philological perspective, the surnames listed by Reaney could, in fact, correspond to any one of several different place-names he associates them with. A modern methodological approach to surname studies therefore requires determining precisely which place-name a surname is connected to, identifying which forms represent genuine historical variants and which represent independent developments. Interestingly, Reaney and Wilson<sup>2</sup> did not provide a definite origin for the name “Ramshaw” in the third edition of their well-known dictionary (*A Dictionary of English Surnames*). However, Redmonds, King, and Hey<sup>3</sup> argue that the most likely origin of the name is the place called “Ramshaw” near Bishop Auckland in County Durham. Such surnames are toponymic, derived from place names, rather than topographic descriptions of natural features. This distinction is linguistically important, as it requires identifying the exact place associated with each surname. Although such ambiguities are common in Reaney’s work, they reflect the scholarly context of his time. Today, modern methodologies and electronic databases allow for more precise and comprehensive analyses, building on the foundation laid by Reaney.

Place names are relatively stable from both linguistic and geographical perspectives, whereas surnames do not share this stability. People migrate, surnames appear in multiple spelling variants, some are replaced or deliberately altered (e.g., Parish → Paris), and surnames are not transmitted in a strictly genetic manner; some may even disappear entirely. For this reason, the statistical study of the relationship between surnames and places should be regarded as a key direction in surname research. Although this may seem insignificant from the perspective of place-name studies, it constitutes an important source for surname research. One of the earliest contributions to this field was made by H. P. Guppy<sup>4</sup>.

Relying on data from Kelly’s Directories, he investigated the relationship between farmers’ surnames and counties. A later researcher, Steven Archer<sup>5</sup>, analyzed data from the 1881 census using computer-based methods and demonstrated that Guppy’s hypothesis concerning the relationship between surnames and geography was well founded. However, for many surnames, the precise reasons for this relationship remain unexplained.

The association of the surname Fazackerley with Lancashire is clear, as it derives from a unique place name found only in that county, indicating a local origin. By contrast, the link between Pardoe and South Staffordshire is more complex, since no place called Pardoe exists. Reaney connects the name to the Old French oath *par Dieu* (“by God”), but its strong concentration in Staffordshire remains

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<sup>1</sup>Reaney, P. H.; Wilson, R. M. *A Dictionary of English Surnames*. - 3rd ed. - London: Oxford University Press, 1991. -XX, -508 p.

<sup>2</sup>Reaney P. H., Wilson R. M. *A Dictionary of English Surnames*. London: Oxford University Press, 1991. - XX, -508 p.

<sup>3</sup>Redmonds G., King T., Hey D. *Surnames, DNA and Family History*. - Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. - 242 p.

<sup>4</sup> Guppy H. B. *Homes of Family Names in Great Britain*. - London: Harrison and Sons, 1890. - 512 p.

<sup>5</sup>Archer S. *Surname Atlas of the British Isles: Based on the 1881 Census*.United Kingdom: Archer Software, 2003. - 45 p.

unexplained. A related form, Pardey, shares the same etymology but is mainly found in Dorset, suggesting linguistic similarity without genealogical connection. This raises questions about dialectal variation, regional survival, or local population expansion. Until the late nineteenth century, widespread illiteracy in England led to multiple spelling variants of surnames, as names were often recorded by officials based on pronunciation rather than etymology. This produced forms such as Bromwich → Bromage, Greenwich → Greenidge, Leicester → Lester, and Stopford as an older form of Stockport. With increasing literacy, some families reverted to etymological spellings (e.g. Worcester), while others retained distinctive variants (Brown vs Browne). As a result, the relationship between surnames and places is not always straightforward and requires case-by-case analysis, supported by institutions such as the Guild of One-Name Studies. Historical examples further illustrate this complexity. Although Rootham is associated with Bedfordshire, evidence shows its origin in Wrotham (Kent), linked to elite migration in the seventeenth century. Laidlaw reflects the Scottish form of Ludlow, introduced through Norman influence, as do Scottish surnames such as Ramsey, Lindsay, and Hamilton, connected with the Normanisation policies of King David I in the twelfth century. While place names are relatively limited and stable, surnames arise repeatedly and independently through population movement. Common place names such as Milton occur in only a limited number of locations, whereas surnames like Smith or Johnson may be borne by thousands. This independent multiple formation (polygenesis) presents a major challenge for surname studies. Consequently, research objectives must be clearly defined: whether to focus on medieval sources or to explain modern, still-unclear surnames. Addressing the latter requires moving beyond Reaney's model and working from extensive modern datasets back into historical evidence. In addition, surnames often disappear over time. Based on statistical analysis, Sturges and Haggett<sup>6</sup> calculated that if, in 1350, each surname was borne by only one individual, more than half of those surnames could have disappeared within 600 years. This is confirmed by names recorded in the Middle English Dictionary and other sources that no longer exist today, such as Berhacch (from the place name Barhatch Farm), Boltupryht (a nickname meaning "upright"), Chaucer (an occupational name meaning shoemaker), as well as Grocer, Jubber, Lampree, Pillock, Zouch, and others. Although the study of such medieval surnames requires considerable effort and resources, its results are not always directly applicable in practice; nevertheless, it remains valuable from the perspective of public interest. Indeed, public engagement and participation are often crucial to the success of such research projects. Databases devoted to surname origins do not fully meet the needs of genealogists and family-history researchers, as surname studies are primarily concerned with linguistic origins and general patterns of distribution rather than individual family lines. Most genealogists lack reliable written sources from before the sixteenth century, creating a chronological gap of several centuries between genealogical data and onomastic research. By contrast, surname scholars must rely on medieval and early modern materials and approach surnames first as linguistic entities and only secondarily as historical phenomena. At the same time, genealogists and onomastic scholars share common interests. The case of Rootham clearly illustrates this. Well-documented one-name studies—that is, comprehensive research focused on a single surname—are particularly valuable, as they account for multiple families bearing the same name and for different possible origins. In recent years, the relationship between genetics and surnames has also emerged as a new and promising direction of research.

It is appropriate to conclude our discussion of surnames by highlighting several key findings based on the sources and commentary presented by Peter McClure<sup>7</sup>. Although these findings are strongly Anglocentric, they nevertheless reflect the historical and linguistic characteristics of different regions of Britain and their connections with Europe. Reaney<sup>8</sup> mentions the surname **"Waterer"** only through *Richard Waterer*, recorded in Sussex documents from 1443, and associates it with a person who carried

<sup>6</sup>Sturges R. V., Haggett P. *Population and Social Geography: A Model Approach*. - London: Edward Arnold, 1987. - 272 p.

<sup>7</sup>Маклюр, П. "English Surnames: Studies in the Early Modern Period" / Peter McClure // *Nomina*. - 1998. - Vol. 21. -P. 1-28.

<sup>8</sup>Рини, П. Х. *A Dictionary of British Surnames* / P. H. Reaney. - London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958. - 361 p.

water or led animals to water. Cottle<sup>9</sup> (in *The Penguin Dictionary of Surnames*) proposes the meaning “water seller.” However, sources from Woking in Surrey indicate that this name is a variant of “**Atwater**.” This suggests that it is not occupational in origin but rather **topographic**, referring to a person who lived near a water source. Gustav Fransson<sup>10</sup> conducted a study in 1935 on surnames ending with the suffix **-er** (e.g. *Felder*, *Forder*) and noted that such names were especially widespread in southern England—particularly in Sussex, Surrey, and Hampshire—during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Data from the 1881 census and the **IGI (International Genealogical Index)** show that around 90% of occurrences of the surname **Waterer** are recorded in Surrey and its surrounding areas. This distribution indicates that the occupational explanations proposed by Reaney and Cottle require reconsideration. “Maud(ye)”: Norman–Welsh origin rather than a metronymic surname. Reaney<sup>11</sup> considers “Maud(e)” and its variants (Mahood, Mawhood, Mowat, etc.) to be metronymic surnames derived from the personal name Matilda. However, George Redmonds<sup>12</sup> has demonstrated, on the basis of historical sources, that these names in Yorkshire derive from the Anglo-French toponym “de Mohaut” (from Latin de Monte Alto “high hill”). The name also spread to Scotland in the twelfth century, where it survived in the form “Mowat.” Thus, these surnames originate not from a personal name but from a place name, and Reaney’s explanation is not fully accurate in this case. The surname “Mahood” was recorded mainly around Liverpool and Glasgow in 1881, which suggests a different origin, namely the Irish “MacHood.” Accordingly, some surnames have distinct regional and linguistic origins that differ from those proposed by Reaney.

Although Reaney<sup>13</sup> correctly derives the name from the Latin *faber* (“smith”), medieval sources from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries are not particularly significant for the history of this surname. Its modern distribution reflects two distinct patterns: an occupational origin on the Continent (cf. Schmidt, Smit, Fèvre) and a toponymic origin in English contexts.

In the 1881 census, around 200 bearers of the surname *Faber* were recorded: 112 in Middlesex (Greater London), 17 in Devon, 12 in the West Riding, and smaller numbers elsewhere. The majority were London residents, many of whom were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Reaney interprets *Feaver* as a nickname derived from favour, but distributional evidence does not support this view. While Reaney is correct in identifying *faber* (“smith”) as the Latin source, the name did not survive continuously in medieval England. According to the 1881 census, most bearers of *Faber* lived in London, and the name was largely introduced by Eastern European Jewish immigrants. The earliest London record dates from a marriage entry in Stepney in 1624. The Devon *Faber* is likely either of foreign origin or a branch of the Yorkshire surname. In Yorkshire, *Faber* probably has a toponymic origin, possibly connected with a place name near Horton in Ribblesdale, and in the seventeenth century it also appears in the form *Fawber*. Such phonetic development is observable in many other surnames as well. Spanish surnames, with their historical depth and semantic layers, vividly reflect the culture and social life of society. They are generally divided into four main types, each with a distinct etymological origin<sup>14</sup>. First, patronymic surnames are derived from the father’s given name and are formed with the suffix *-ez*. This suffix originates from the Latin *-icius* and conveys the meaning “son of.” For example, *González* means “son of Gonzalo,” *Martínez* “son of Martín,” *Hernández* “son of Hernán,” *Fernández* “son of Fernando,” and *López*, derived from the personal name *Lope* (from Vulgar Latin *lupus* “wolf”), means “son of Lope.” The second major group consists of toponymic surnames, which indicate a person’s geographical origin or affiliation. Examples include *Navarro* (“a person from Navarre”),

<sup>9</sup>Коттл, А. Б. *The Penguin Dictionary of Surnames*. - London: Penguin Books, 1967. - 522 p.

<sup>10</sup>Франссон, Г. *Middle English surnames of occupation 1100–1350: with an excursus on toponymical surnames*. - Lund: Gleerup, 1935. - 145 p.

<sup>11</sup>Рини, П. Х. *A Dictionary of British Surnames* / P. H. Reaney. - London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958. - 361 p.

<sup>12</sup>Редмондс, Дж. *Surnames and Genealogy: A New Approach* / George Redmonds. — Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1997. - 263 p.

<sup>13</sup>Рини, П. Х. *A Dictionary of British Surnames* / P. H. Reaney. - London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958. - 361 p.

<sup>14</sup>Menéndez Pidal, R. *Spanish Toponymy: Origins and Evolution*. Madrid: Gredos, 1952.

Sevilla (“from the city of Seville”), Toledo (“from Toledo”), Del Río (“from the river”), and De la Vega (“from the meadow/plain”). Such surnames became widespread in the Middle Ages in connection with internal and external migration processes. The third group comprises occupational surnames, which identify a person’s main profession or social activity. For instance, Herrero means “blacksmith,” Molinero “miller” (from molino “mill”), Zapatero “shoemaker,” Pastor “shepherd,” and Carpintero “carpenter.” These surnames reflect the social importance and prestige of occupations in medieval society. The fourth type includes descriptive and nickname-based surnames, derived from a person’s physical appearance, character, or behavior. Examples include Blanco (“white, fair,” possibly symbolizing purity), Moreno (“dark-haired or dark-skinned”), Delgado (“slender, thin”), Bravo (“brave, proud”), and Calvo (“bald”). Through such surnames, personal traits were preserved as symbolic markers over time.

Spanish surnames constitute an important object of study not only for linguistics but also for sociology, ethnography, and history. They are examined using the following approaches:

1. **Etymological analysis** – identifying the lexical and morphemic roots of surnames (e.g. *López* ← *lupus*).
2. **Historical-comparative method** – comparing Spanish surnames with anthroponymic systems in other languages (e.g. English *Johnson*, Russian *Ivanovich*).
3. **Sociolinguistic analysis** – examining the social role of surnames and their connection with social stratification and migration processes (e.g. *Navarro*, *Sevilla*).
4. **Geo-demographic approach** – statistically analyzing the territorial distribution of surnames; for example, data from the **INE (Instituto Nacional de Estadística)** show that *García* is the most widespread surname in Spain.
5. **Modern corpus and database analysis** – investigating the frequency, semantic composition, and social functions of surnames within large data sets.

German surnames represent one of the oldest and most diverse anthroponymic systems in Europe. Through their historical development and semantic layers, they vividly reflect the culture and social life of society. They are generally classified into four main types, each with its own distinct etymological origin.<sup>15</sup> First, patronymic surnames are based on the father’s given name and are commonly formed with the suffixes -sen, -sohn, -s. For example, Petersen means “son of Peter,” Hansen “son of Hans,” Jakobson “son of Jacob,” and Richards “son of Richard.” Functionally, this pattern is comparable to English Johnson or Russian Ivanovich. The second major group consists of toponymic surnames, which indicate a person’s geographical origin or regional affiliation. Examples include Berliner (“from Berlin”), Hamburger (“from Hamburg”), Bayer (“from Bavaria”), and Schwarzwälder (“from the Black Forest”). Such surnames emerged in the Middle Ages as important markers of migration, territorial belonging, and social identification. The third group comprises occupational surnames, reflecting a person’s primary profession or social activity. For instance, Schmidt means “blacksmith” (from schmieden, “to forge”), Müller “miller” (Mühle, “mill”), Bäcker “baker,” Fischer “fisherman,” and Schneider “tailor.” These surnames mirror the social role and prestige of occupations in medieval society. The fourth type includes descriptive and nickname-based surnames, derived from physical appearance, character, or personal traits. Examples include Klein (“small, short”), Groß (“large, tall”), Schwarz (“black”), Weiss (“white”), and Freund (“friendly, kind”). Such surnames preserve individual characteristics as symbolic identifiers over time. German surnames constitute an important object of study not only for linguistics but also for sociology, ethnography, and history.<sup>16</sup> A range of scholarly methods is employed in their study. First, etymological analysis is used to identify the lexical and morphemic roots of surnames (e.g. Schmidt ← schmieden). The historical-comparative method allows German surnames to be compared with their analogues in other languages (e.g. English Smith, Russian

<sup>15</sup>Bahlow, H. Dictionary of German Names. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985.

<sup>16</sup>Brechenmacher, J. Etymological Dictionary of German Family Names. Limburg, 1960.

Kuznetsov). Through sociolinguistic analysis, the social role of surnames and their connections with social stratification and migration processes are examined (for example, surnames such as Müller and Schneider indicate occupational strata). The geo-demographic approach is applied to determine the territorial distribution and statistical frequency of surnames.

French surnames (anthroponyms) constitute one of the richest and most diverse anthroponymic systems in Europe and are closely connected with the history, culture, and religious traditions of France. Through them, it is possible to trace the religious beliefs, cultural transformations, and historical development of French society. A large proportion of French surnames are of **patronymic** and **religious** origin<sup>17</sup>. Because the influence of the Catholic Church was strong in the Middle Ages, many names were derived from the Bible. For example, **Jean** (Lat. *Johannes*, Heb. *Yohanan*) means “God is gracious,” **Pierre** (Lat. *Petrus*, Gk. *Petros*) “stone, rock,” **Jacques** (Heb. *Yaaqov*) “God protects,” **Marie** (Heb. *Miryam*) “beloved, pure,” and **Anne** (Heb. *Hannah*) “grace, mercy.” These names form core layers of French anthroponymy and reflect the enduring influence of religious heritage. Another important layer of French names is associated with the culture of the Germanic tribes<sup>18</sup>. Many names that entered the French language through the Franks are still in use today. For example, Louis (Lat. *Ludovicus*, Frankish *Chlodowig*) means “victory of the people,” Charles (Ger. *Karl*) “man, free man,” Robert (Ger. *Hrodebert*) “bright with fame,” and Henri (Ger. *Heimirich*) “ruler of the household.” These names are associated in French history with kingship, monarchy, and major political figures and therefore carried high prestige. In addition, a portion of French anthroponyms is based on personal characteristics or physical appearance, such as Claire (“clear, bright”), Beau (“handsome, beautiful”), Blanche (“white, pure”), and Noël (“the day of Christ’s birth”)<sup>19</sup>. In conclusion, French names, through their etymological layers, combine religious, Germanic, and Romance traditions, reflecting the historical structure, cultural customs, and religious heritage of French society. In modern scholarship, French names are studied in depth from the perspectives of etymology, sociolinguistics, and demography, with increasing attention to their cultural significance and role in historical development.

The study of surnames in Europe is closely connected with the formation of a multinational and multicultural society. Beyond serving as means of personal identification, surnames express the cultural, ethnic, and religious roots of peoples. In contemporary Europe, surnames of Indian, Chinese, Arab, and Irish origin reflect the histories of diasporas and migration processes. English surnames were largely formed between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, achieving orthographic stability only in the twentieth century. During this long period, phonetic change, spelling variation, and folk etymology complicated the interpretation of many surnames. Although the works of Reaney and Wilson provided an essential foundation, in some cases assumptions based on superficial similarity led to confusion. The research of Redmonds and McClure, by contrast, advanced scholarly approaches grounded in toponymy and statistical evidence. Consequently, the study of European surnames constitutes an interdisciplinary field that extends beyond linguistics to include history, geography, and anthropology. Modern electronic databases and genetic research are now opening new possibilities for this area of study.

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