



Basic Scandinavian Research

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Researching the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden) needn't be scary. This is an introduction to show it's possible, even for those of us who don't speak their language! There are several issues for many non-Scandinavians in researching the records there, notably: history, geography, language, calendar, finding and using church (and other) records, and (of course) those pesky patronymics. This program introduces the basics and provides some resources to get started.

History

The interaction of the countries of Scandinavia over the years is important in understanding the records. Here are some highlights.

- There is evidence of civilizations (primarily hunters and fishermen) in what is now Scandinavia over 10,000 years ago.
- In the Viking period (c. 850 to 1050 AD) there were no written records. The few written accounts have come from the conquered people – mainly in England, Scotland and Ireland, which from 1018 to 1035 fell completely into Viking hands, as did large parts of France and Germany.
- Written accounts in Scandinavia begin to appear with the introduction of Christianity during the Middle Ages, although Denmark has some historical records dating back to 829.
- Denmark was the first Scandinavian country to embrace Catholicism. Martin Luther introduced Lutheranism to the Scandinavian countries. Sweden, Denmark and Norway adopted their own versions of Lutheran as the State Church during the first half of the 16th century.
- In 1388, Queen Margaret, daughter of the King of Denmark and wife of the King of Norway, made use of a Norwegian claim to Sweden's throne to create the Kalmar Union, which united all three countries under one monarch (Margaret, then her grandnephew Erik). This led to a 123-year period of political unity that acknowledged Denmark as the political capital of Scandinavia under the Kalmar Union.
- From 1448 to 1481 the three kingdoms were ruled by separate kings, but remained united in the Kalmar Union.
- This union was broken by the Swedish War of Liberation beginning in 1521, which led to the establishment of an autonomous Swedish/Finnish monarchy.
- Norway and Denmark remained affiliated and continued so for nearly 3 centuries. As a result of Denmark's loss of influence from the Napoleonic Wars, Norway was ceded to Sweden in 1814.
- Eventually, the Swedish - Norwegian union was severed, allowing for Norway's independence in 1905.
- Iceland, which had been a territory of Denmark from its earliest days, declared independence in 1941 to avoid German occupation (when Denmark was occupied by the Nazi forces).

- Greenland and the Faroe Islands are still part of the Danish Kingdom, however, they are each governed as a separate country.

Jurisdictions

The general church and civil organization of the countries is similar. There may be several towns or parishes in the country (or even county) with the same name, and many people moved between parishes in the same area. Here are the terms for the basic levels in each country. See the FamilySearch Research Wiki for more details on each.

| Country | Parish | County | District | Municipality |
|----------------|-------------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| Denmark | Sogn | Amt | Herred | Kommune |
| Norway | Sokn | Fylke | Prestegjeld | Kommune |
| Sweden | Församling/Socken | Län | Härad | Kommun |

There have been various reorganizations of the counties, most notably: Norway 1918; Denmark 1793 and 1970; Sweden 1660 and 1920.

Language

The Scandinavian languages are based on Norse, and are part of the North Germanic family of languages. They use the 26 characters of Roman languages (like English), with the addition of a few characters unique to each language (Norway and Denmark are similar, but Sweden is slightly different, and – just for comparison - Iceland is unique).

| | Lower Case | Upper Case |
|---------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Denmark | æ, ø, and å | Æ, Ø, and Å |
| Norway | æ, ø, and å | Æ, Ø, and Å |
| Sweden | å, ä, and ö | Å, Ä, and Ö |
| Iceland | ä, ó, þ, æ, and ö | Ä, Ó, Þ, Æ, AND Ö |

It is important to realize that these are distinct letters, NOT diacriticals on one of the 26. They are at the END of the alphabet (after Z), so be sure to look in the appropriate place in alphabetized lists. The Research Wiki at FamilySearch has wonderful helps for language, including word lists, and tutorials for the Gothic script used in early records. In addition, your best ally is a GOOD dual-language dictionary (i.e., Danish-English). Any good bookstore should have one (or more). You can also get some help on Google Translate or other translation programs.

Calendar

Most parts of the Roman world used the Julian calendar, which was instituted in 46 BC and named after then-emperor Julius Caesar. This assumed the earth went around the sun in exactly 365.25 days, so every year divisible by 4 was made a leap year of 366 days; otherwise it was a standard year of 365 days. By 1582, the calendar was 10 days early, which was a problem for the Catholic Church, because Easter was calculated based on the spring Equinox, which was now 10 days too early!

Pope Gregory XIII issued a decree in 1582 instituting a new calendar. To get things back on track, the new Gregorian Calendar dropped 10 days from the year. It also validated a change of the first day of the year from 25 March to 1 January (which had actually already

happened in most countries). Most importantly, to keep the calendar in synch for the future to account for the ACTUAL time for the earth to go around the sun (365.2422 days – about 11 minutes LESS than previously assumed), a new rule was added – every year exactly divisible by four is a leap year, EXCEPT for century years which are NOT divisible by 400 – thus 2000 was a leap year, but 2100 was NOT. This change means that the calendar SHOULD take 3300 years before it is even one day off.

The first adopters were the primarily Catholic countries (it was ordered by the Pope, after all), while more Protestant countries were a little less anxious. All of the Scandinavian countries changed the New Year's Day to January 1 in 1559. This chart shows the "official" dates for the change in Scandinavia. Denmark, its territories, and Norway, which all adopted at the same time in 1700 – with the Faroe Islands being a few months behind in the change.

| Country | Year begins 1 January | Gregorian Calendar Adopted |
|---------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Denmark | 1559 | 1700 (18 Feb became 1 Mar) |
| Iceland | Same as Denmark | Same as Denmark |
| Norway | Same as Denmark | Same as Denmark |
| Faroe Islands | 1559 | 1700 (16 Nov to 28 Nov) |
| Sweden | 1559 | **Gradual from 1700 to 1753 |

***And then there's Sweden. Sweden started to make the change from the Julian calendar toward the Gregorian calendar in 1700, but it was decided that instead of just removing 11 days as the other countries did, they would make the adjustment gradually, by excluding the leap days (29 February) from each of 11 successive leap years, 1700 to 1740. In 40 years they would "catch up" with the rest of the world. But the system was poorly administered and the leap days that were not excluded from 1704 and 1708. The Swedish calendar was then still 10 days behind. King Charles XII recognized that the gradual change to the new system was not working, and he abandoned it. However, rather than proceeding directly to the Gregorian calendar, it was decided to revert to the Julian calendar by introducing the unique date of 30 February in the year 1712 to replace the leap day dropped in 1700, adjusting the discrepancy in the calendars from 10 back to 11 days. Sweden remained 11 days off from 1712 until it finally adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1753, when Wednesday, 17 February was followed by Thursday, 1 March.*

The change in calendar also impacted the reference to feast days in church records, which was traditional in many denominations, including the state-sanctioned Lutheran Church in each of the Scandinavian countries. This is frequently used for confirmations, but also other events will sometimes refer to the feast day rather than a date. FamilySearch Research Wiki has ecclesiastical calendars by country [look under Background on the wikipage for Feast Days], or check CyndisList.com for feast day calendars/calculators (remember the calendar changes in Scandinavia were different from other countries).

So when you're looking at events, particularly in Sweden, during the 1700s keep all of this in mind. It may help to confirm your timelines are not out of synch!

Patronymics and other name issues

Patronymic refers to the creation of a surname by use of the father's name. In Scandinavia, the patronymic is formed by taking the father's first name and adding a suffix indicating the relationship to the father (son or daughter). These were introduced gradually

(beginning with nobility in the Middle Ages) to differentiate multiple people of the same given name.

Just before patronymics were phased out, some areas began using the male suffix for both sons and daughters. Illegitimate children were sometimes given a "matronymic" surname based on the mother's first name, unless the father was recorded, in which case the child could receive a patronymic based on HIS name. In Iceland it was/is common to give sons a patronymic name and daughters a matronymic name, so a household as small as four could have four different surnames!

| Country | Son | Daughter | Fixed Surname Law(s) |
|----------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| Denmark | -sen | -datter | 1826, 1856, 1904 |
| Sweden | -son | -dotter | 1901 |
| Norway | -son, -sen, -søn | -datter, -dotter | 1923 |

Note that in Norway, the extension used depended upon the ruling country: when Norway was ruled by Sweden, the Swedish extensions were used; when it was ruled by Denmark, the Danish extensions were used; after Norway gained independence from Sweden in 1914, the Norwegian (*-søn* and *-dotter*) were used usually.

Since the general use of a few popular first names limited the number of patronymic surnames, some parts of Scandinavia added the use of a second or substitute surname for differentiation – often this was a place name or occupational reference. In Sweden, a military surname was often added to distinguish between soldiers of the same name, since there could not be two men with identical names in the same unit; this name was occasionally retained after the completion of military service. Geographic names were sometimes used. In Denmark, a farm name might sometimes be used to distinguish a family. In Norway, it might be a farm or geographic name. The use of patronymics was phased out in most parts of Scandinavia in the late 1800s and surnames were fixed on the father's surname throughout the region by about 1904 (except in Iceland, where the practice persists; and Denmark in recent years has legalized use of patronymics again). Women in Scandinavia retained their maiden names after marriage, although upon emigration to America many did adopt their husband's surname.

As the population grew, the various countries mandated the use of "fixed" or inherited surnames. This was NOT universally accepted on first presentation (especially in Denmark), but took decades to be fully embraced.

Remember, when researching patronymic names, it is more essential than ever to work BACKWARDS. Look for BOTH parents in records. Look for OTHER CHILDREN of the couple for additional clues. Follow clues in EVERY record to identify the parents. Keep careful notes!

When patronymics weren't sufficient to differentiate people in a community, some additional identifier was sometimes added. These were sometimes a farm name, an occupational identifier, or a "military name" (Sweden and Finland). These may or may not have been passed on to subsequent generations.

Usual Types of Church Records

Some of the most useful records in Scandinavia are the church records, which have been available for centuries: Denmark (some as early as 1573); Norway (from 1700s); Sweden (from 1686).

| Country | Danish | Norwegian | Swedish |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Birth/Baptism | Født, Døbt | Fødte, døpte | Födde, dop |
| Confirmation | Konfirmerede | Konfirmasjon | Konfirmation |
| *Vaccination | Vaccineret (1810) | Vaksinasjon (1810) | Vaccination (1816) |
| Marriage | Copulerede, viede, Ægeteviede | Copulerede, viede, vigde | Vigda, förbindelse |
| Death/burial | Døde, Begravelse | Død, begravede | Dod, begravning |
| Immigration/Emigration | Tilganglister, Afganglister | Tilganglister (inflyttede), afganglister (uttflyttede) | Inflyttningsbor, utflyttningsbok |
| Index | Almindeligt Jevnførelses or Register | Hovedsiden | fösamlingsboken |

Vaccinations were required for smallpox in the early 1800s. The churches were the most consistent way to track everyone, so this information was added as shown. Sometimes they even had the vaccinations done for a group (usually children) at the church. These records are by date and usually show the name of the child, possibly the age, and usually the name of the father (to differentiate children of the same name).

Hint: When researching in a Scandinavian record group, you may wish to create your own extraction form. I include the citation information, the native language text/headings, and the English translation. When doing the initial extract, I copy the text as found in the original language; I either translate as I go (if it is familiar words or I have a dictionary handy) or at the end of the session. [The sooner, the better – in case the translation provides clues to other research while you're there.]

Other Records

The church records in Sweden also include annual "questioning" or household examination (*husförhörslängd*) to test knowledge of the Church and the Bible, with personal notes by the pastor. These can be used as an annual census of the parish, with details on each person.

In addition to church records, each country has various census, property, probate, military and other records that can be helpful to family research. Census records in particular are helpful (and accessible via the websites in the bibliography). The censuses date back to as early as 1787 in Denmark, 1664 in Norway, and 1652 in Sweden.

There are also probate and estate records available. These tend to be more difficult to use, since the recording of land was based on the physical location, often based on the "estate" to which it belonged, not any physical description of the land. There are also some unique records in each country: Denmark has military and conscription records; Norway has land records, bygdebøker (local history books), and farm name books; Sweden has city directories (in addition to the household examinations in the church records). Many of these resources are available through the respective National Archives, the LDS Family Search Centers, and other sources.

Tracking Scandinavians

To file ancestors (especially those who used patronymic surnames), decide how you are going to handle them. I strongly suggest you use a computer genealogy database program to keep track (not online, but on your own computer). Be consistent in entering names; use

alternate names if you wish, but try to be as consistent as possible – I use the name as shown in the **birth** record as the primary – then any variations found are alternate names so I can search for them. For paper files, just be consistent.

Final Thoughts

- Work backwards
- ALWAYS focus on a person or family – never try to search by surname
- Church records and census (or household examination record) are good starting places
- Fill in a whole family – not just one person in a generation
- Be careful of dates in the 1700s
- Keep a map handy
- Use your resources!
- Have fun



Resources

*Here are some other resources to assist in your Scandinavian research:
Check the publisher, WorldCat (or just Google the title) to find the books mentioned.
If a website opens in the native language, look around (probably at the very top) for a place to select language – sometimes a flag, sometimes the names of the available languages. If not available, keep your translation program and/or dual-language dictionary handy.*

SCANDINAVIA (general)

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7. Cyndi's List for Scandinavia & the Nordic Countries. CHECK HERE FREQUENTLY FOR NEW RESOURCES! And don't forget to look at the "Related Categories" for more specific links. <http://www.cyndislist.com/scandinavia/>
8. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Archives. Elk Grove Village, IL. <https://www.elca.org/>
9. Family History Library Catalog. The online catalog to the holdings of FamilySearch.org – onsite at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, as well as Online. <https://familysearch.org/catalog-search>
10. FamilySearch Research Wiki - Scandinavian Search List. From this page, find reference materials, finding aids, language aids, and more for each Scandinavian country; also check for handwriting aids and ecclesiastical calendars (fixed and moveable feast days). <https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Scandinavia> - history, research topics, and

background of the region. Follow the links to the country of interest (the flags across the bottom of the page).

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NORWAY

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SWEDEN

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