

# Using the concept of onomastic literacy as an analytical tool: A methodological examination of the names of European royal families

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**Abstract:** Onomastic literacy (the skills needed to interpret the cultural and social phenomena and meanings related to name-giving) are part of a person's cultural capital. I use this concept, which I have developed, to study personal names in family networks and in royal families in particular. This research combines the approaches and methodologies of collective biography, microhistory and the history of mentalities. The concept of onomastic literacy helps us to contextualize the lives of the research objects more closely as part of the cultures and local communities of their times, thereby revealing the deep-rooted motives behind name choices and the slow change in mentalities affecting naming.

**Keywords:** cultural capital, identities, mentalities, multiliteracies, name-giving, networks, onomastic literacy, personal names, royal families, symbols

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Sofia Kotilainen (University of Jyväskylä). Using the concept of onomastic literacy as an analytical tool: A methodological examination of the names of European royal families.

## 1. Introduction

In this article I examine the question of why onomastic literacy skills (the skills needed to interpret the cultural and social phenomena and meanings related to name-giving) are such a crucial factor in choosing names and why they should therefore be conceptualized and defined more specifically. I consider how the concept of onomastic literacy could be utilized more systematically than before in studying name choices. Using some qualitative examples, I examine in particular how communal norms and symbols connected with naming have influenced name choices in royal families. I have divided my methodological analysis into two parts: the conceptions of name-givers regarding the social and cultural meanings of names and the way in which researchers have studied the motives behind name choices. The concept of onomastic literacy can be exploited as a methodological approach and an interpretational framework in both these areas.

Name-giving is strongly based on social interaction (Ainiala et al. 2016:17; Ryman 2002:35–37). It always reflects the mentalities, values and identities which each society creates and maintains (Aldrin 2017:63–64; Gustafsson 2002:224; Kotilainen 2011:52–53), until with the passage of time they are replaced by other commonly accepted ideas. There exists a constant clash between tradition and new influences in public debate on the matter. To be able to negotiate naming networks, a person needs some kind of understanding of the ideas, rules and social norms that naming involves in a particular culture and time (family traditions, new fashions, religion, political ideas etc., and how these affect the mentalities of naming). A name – forename, surname or nickname – is seldom chosen by pure chance or in a complete cultural vacuum; rather, a large group of conscious and unconscious social norms apply (Tait 2006:313–314; Misztal 1998[1996]:14–15), although admittedly these were stronger in the past than they are today. Name-giving has become individualized and diversified with the industrialization, urbanization and modernization of rural societies in Europe (see Ainiala et al. 2016:156–157, 170–185). One of the major background influences behind this was the increase in reading and writing literacy in the nineteenth century (Lyons 2010; Mäkinen

1997; Mäkinen 2015). At the same time, there was a gradual change in the direction of greater social equality.

I have limited my examination to choices of personal names, because personal and social principles of choice intertwine here more closely than in the choice of other names, such as place names. However, there is nothing to prevent the definition of onomastic literacy from applying to the naming of places, companies, brands or even animals. Local communities and their ideas and values affect the identification and representation of geographical places or brands in the same way. However, to some extent naming people always involves more intimate and affective aspects of human life (cf., however, Aini-ala & Olsson 2021), since name-givers try both to represent their own feelings of love and gratitude for being parents and to express the social status, honour, reputation or social esteem of others (for example, their relatives or members of higher classes).

## **2. Previous research on royal names**

In earlier research, naming has been examined to a large extent from the perspective of personal and communal identities (Aldrin 2017; Nakari 2011) and/or the innovations and fashions of naming (see, e.g., Gustafsson 2002; Lieberman 2000). Thus, many studies of present-day practices in particular investigate individuals' conceptions of the meanings of names and the reasons for choosing them by asking the children's parents, for example. However, there has not been very much such explicit methodological examination of the unwritten rules governing choice of names that are connected with the expectations and norms of the community involved and with what public opinion at a particular time considers to be a socially appropriate or generally acceptable choice of name and why. These would be the implicit mentalities prevailing in society, which could be discovered still more comprehensively using onomastic literacy as an analytical tool.

The personal names of European royal families have been little studied (for studies concerning the Middle Ages, see Lestremau & Epstein 2017, and for the Swedish royal family, Leibring 2013), or

only to the extent that the main object of the research has been the genealogy and life stories of members of the royal family, with personal names discussed as a minor matter in their biographies and not addressed as a central issue in the research (Dennison 2021; Kolloen 2013; Korkeamäki 2004; Seward 2018). However, it is necessary to study choices of names in royal families in greater detail, because over the centuries they have provided an important public model for name choices for children at different levels of society (e.g. Kotilainen 2009). Moreover, the names of members of ruling families serve as symbols to publicly represent the nation (see also Balmer 2011:518, 523) and its values at the time in question. Therefore, at one and the same time they involve both extremely private choices, the naming of the family's own children as well as also how the monarchy at any particular time represents society and its values.

### **3. Sources and methods**

This article introduces and explains the concept of onomastic literacy, which I have developed, and uses it to study the choice and use of personal names from a long-term, historical perspective. As the objects of my study, I have selected a number of qualitative cases of naming from two European courts, the British and Swedish royal families, with regard to the names inherited from family members. Their genealogies are, therefore, one important aspect of this study. I investigate them in greater detail using previous biographical research and media news reports as my sources. (I have not been able to use all the most relevant earlier research literature on the theme owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.) I make comparisons between the naming practices of these two royal families, whose genealogies (names and titles) the reader is assumed be generally familiar with from current media reports, since they are universally known public figures. For a more detailed account of the family relationships pertaining in these royal houses, see also the biographies of the British royal family (Dennison 2021; Marr 2012; *The royal family, United Kingdom* 2021a), and

the biographies of the Swedish royal family (Skott 1996:11–12; The Swedish royal court 2021).

Name-giving practices among well-known royal families are characterized by the fact that, although the names are publicized fairly soon after the birth of a child, the family's own subjects and the international public do not necessarily get to know the reasons behind the choice of names, because even today royal households do not generally disclose any details of the private motives behind the names. However, these name choices also include a lot of easily recognizable symbolism connected with the monarchy as an institution and the traditions and history of the royal house concerned. I therefore do not attempt to study the more personal reasons behind the choices. Rather, I investigate the images and meanings that can be ascertained from the names chosen and interpreted on the basis of information available to the general public, who in any case use this information to interpret the name choices even though the symbolism connected with them is not specified in any great detail. This research analyses the public symbolism of the names of the royal families and the attitudes and values they reflect.

Royalty thus represent a very special and restricted group, albeit a very interesting one since name choices among them are also followed internationally and their family relationships are known to the general public from media reports. Publicity, which is an inseparable part of their special position, in many ways places their name choices under closer scrutiny than those of ordinary citizens. Their celebrity can also result in their name choices serving as models for other name-givers. On the other hand, tradition ensures that name-giving practices change rather slowly at royal courts (Dennison 2021:215).

My observations in this article concern only one application of onomastic literacy to the analysis of naming. I will further test the approach by studying royal family communities in order to discover the reasons for diverse name-giving practices. Owing to the special character of royal families, some, but not all, observations about the motives behind naming in these families can be generalized to the wider population. There may be specific legislation regarding sur-

names and titles, and members of royalty tend to be very traditional in order to maintain their status and position. On the other hand, microhistory has studied exceptional local cases which at the same time may have represented something characteristic of general social conceptions and values. However, Magnússon (2020:27–28) emphasizes that, atypically, Icelandic microhistory has often studied not the exceptional but the most ordinary, lower-class people and their mentalities and aspects of life, which otherwise would not be possible to grasp with any other methods – these observations also apply to many other Nordic microhistories. The attitude of the general public to naming in royal families (interest, imitation, avoidance) indicates broader naming practices throughout society. Thus, the approach is relevant and can be applied more widely, because the observations made can explain why there are significant differences in attitudes and mentalities connected with naming in different groups within the same society.

My method combines microhistory (Ginzburg 1992[1989]), the study of collective biographies (Possing 2015:646–647) and the history of mentalities (Confino 1997:1389–1390; Hutton 2002). Microhistory helps us to interpret the silent, almost invisible clues in the sources, which often go unnoticed, and makes it possible to reconstruct the naming practices of everyday life and views concerning them, even when there are no extant written sources describing the reasons for choices of names. Name-giving has traditionally been influenced by factors like family relationships and the hierarchies of power attached to them (see, e.g., Nakari 2011; van Poppel et al. 1999). Every individual gradually becomes socialized, from childhood on, into the values and norms of their community. Such everyday, commonplace phenomena pass almost without notice, and they have not been recorded in any of the sources. Their identification thus requires a search for communal mentalities (Dunér & Ahlberger 2019; Felecan 2019) in these sources, using a microhistorical approach to find individual clues that do not always directly refer to naming. Nevertheless, the choice of a name for a newborn baby, for example, does express communal values. The choice is also linked to a great

extent to identities, the groups and networks to which name-givers believe they belong, and the way they regard themselves as being a part of their own communities (Bennett 2018:461; Evans 2021:103; Halbwachs 1980:85–86).

Communal norms in a particular age govern the name-givers' interpretation of the appropriateness of name choices. This can be affected by political or religious ideals, the veneration of particular persons and/or fashion (see, e.g., Garðarsdóttir 1999; van Poppel et al. 1999; Lieberman 2000; Tait 2006:317–320). Generally, naming has often involved a balancing act between familial traditions and fashions in names. The fact that the principles behind name choices in earlier centuries have rarely been visibly recorded makes the employment of biographical research methods (Keats-Rohan 2007; Kotilainen 2011) particularly important in ascertaining from the sources the significance of the local community in the choice of names for children. The motives for naming were not documented in the sources, because people belonging to the lower orders were for a long time illiterate or did not feel it necessary to record such matters, while members of the upper classes kept their choices within the closed circle of private life. By means of biographical methods and network analysis, it is possible to reveal the personal networks which name-givers regarded as significant and in which various rules of etiquette, economic dependencies, neighbourly and familial relationships, social status and family background (Fagerlund 1999:225–228; Keskinen 2019; Misztal 1998[1996]:64) governed who children were named after.

#### **4. The concept of onomastic literacy**

Naming and literacy are connected, since reading has provided a means of acquiring information about new fashions in names and names that are foreign to the local community. It was precisely the development of reading and writing skills that brought freedom of choice and information about alternatives to name-giving. Modernization gradually liberated people from family traditions (see, e.g., Kotilainen 2008:327–328, 331), although these were never totally

relinquished but have survived over the centuries as an important factor behind naming in different classes and social groups.

Onomastic literacy does not mean the skill of actually reading personal names, although literacy skills in general have made possible a greater awareness of the options for naming a newborn baby. For example, from the nineteenth century on, literature, newspapers and other newer media have increased the range of options available for choosing a first name for a child. However, onomastic literacy can be taken more broadly as a way of understanding the symbolic meanings of different personal names and their connections with a community's own history, identities and values.

Since the 1990s in particular, researchers have used the concept of 'literacy' to refer to different kinds of practices and competences (Hirsch 1987:3, 8; New London Group 1996). Almost any knowledge, competence or skill can be regarded as a literacy. Being literate has been understood as being able to communicate or create meaning by means of signs, codes or other symbols (Lankshear & Knobel 2011:21). Moreover, in recent decades, multiliteracy, i.e. the ability to interpret and produce a variety of messages on different platforms (for example visual, digital, multimodal literacy), has been studied to an ever-increasing extent as a civic and cultural competence that enables a person to function as part of the surrounding society and its multicultural interaction (Cope & Kalantzis 2009; New London Group 1996:64). Why, then, should name-givers have their own competence or 'literacy'? Because naming practices and the identification of individuals include a huge amount of living cultural traditions and meanings, and it would be a waste to ignore these possibilities for recognizing the mentalities of past generations. Nowadays, moreover, these practices also express many unspoken attitudes and values (see, e.g., Halbwachs 1980:63–64) that we should be aware of. Thus the study of onomastic literacy deepens our knowledge of our cultural interaction.

There are several skills and competences involved in reading and interpreting the common opinions, old beliefs and oral memory, family traditions and similar unwritten norms of communities and societies that can affect name choices (see, e.g., Halbwachs 1980:64–65,



120–123; Street 1984:2). Onomastic literacy could briefly be defined as the skills needed to interpret the cultural and social phenomena and meanings which are related to name-giving and form part of a person's intangible cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986[1983]; Coleman 1988). It also embodies the knowledge and understanding of certain principles and practices of naming, traditions, as well as the motivation to find fashionable, modern names for newborn children, for example, and the desire to be among the first to choose these names. This is prompted by a wish to be different in a positive way from others as a name-giver and to look for something special or individual, departing from the common norms, but in a socially safe way.

Onomastic literacy consists in a knowledge of the nomenclature and practices or fashions of naming: cultural memory (oral memories, generational life experiences, inherited names), long-term mentalities, values and beliefs. There are several contemporary and overlapping time layers (past, present and future) which define the way naming is understood and continually changes, generation by generation, in a society.

The concept of onomastic literacy could be defined more systematically by specifying the various main elements that it contains; these include at least the following:

1. First, there are social *norms*, which restrict and control naming in a society or local community:
  - a) written norms, state legislation and church doctrine and precepts;
  - b) unwritten social or religious norms controlling naming (common practice);
  - c) combinations of these in the society studied: what kind of names can be given (to children or adults) and used (e.g. for someone's spouse(s) or descendants) according to these norms.

2. Second, there are social *identities* connected with names and naming, common to different groups of people, families, communities and networks, which create common notions and ideas concerning self-image, belonging, social status, language and gender, for example.
3. Third, personal names form significant *symbols* of social cohesion or stigmatization. For this reason, it is important to analyse the aims and functions of names and naming. Naming contains symbolic meanings by creating and maintaining trust and good repute (intangible capital) in the closest networks connected by naming: family networks, godparent relations etc. This is especially typical of inherited names in a family.

I use this concept of onomastic literacy to study personal names in family networks and in royal families in particular. Onomastic literacy can, however, also be studied among people belonging to completely different social groups and eras. The same approach can be applied to a wide range of local and familial communities, although each must be studied on its own terms with regard to the era and sphere of activity of the individuals concerned, in other words, taking into account the whole historical and cultural context. The previous research that I have conducted on the name-giving practices of family communities in the rural interior of Finland from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries (see, e.g., Kotilainen 2008; Kotilainen 2011; Kotilainen 2016) has shown that people in local communities very often had some kind of common ‘literacy’ of mentalities which guided the choice and use of names in families, and that exceptions in the use of names broke these unwritten norms.

Onomastic literacy can also be seen as a factor behind national or global fashions in naming, or preferences within certain social groups. Certainly, there have been some universal norms of naming in European families such as naming offspring after their ancestors but this, too, has differed to some degree in different areas (regarding Finland and Scandinavia, see Vilkuna 1989 [1959]:118–121). Personal names

may have very different connotations within a society, depending on who defines the mentalities and how different opinions and values compete with each other. These always need to be investigated empirically and individually for each case, which is why it is also important to be familiar with the broader social and historical context of naming. However, in addition, naming incorporates shared, centuries-old norms, identities and symbolic meanings in European culture.

Naming involves numerous unspoken norms that are expected to be followed in a particular society. For example, a surname is traditionally often inherited from the father according to patrilineal usage (see, e.g., Hoffmann & Tóth 2015:148, 159–160; Nakari 2011; Ryman 2002), and consequently the surname of an illegitimate child (often inherited from the mother's side) has in earlier centuries meant a weaker position in terms of being considered a legitimate heir. The family or social class from which a spouse comes has also been a relevant factor, since particularly in the upper classes the tendency was to marry someone belonging to the same class. Until the twentieth century, monarchs or heirs to the throne were expected to marry offspring of the nobility (Korkeamäki 2004:9). Thus, the naming tradition among them stemmed from the customs of the upper classes. It was possible to legitimate the communal status of the family and ensure its symbolic continuance by means of name choices, as indeed is the case in any social class.

The naming of a child is a traditional rite of passage (van Genep 1960; Vilkuna 1989 [1959]), but in addition to its religious content it also has a strong social dimension. Naming is dependent on social networks between different groups (Milroy & Gordon 2003:118–119). It creates the social identity of a person or a family. Personal names constitute not only an identification system (Ainiala et al. 2016:19–20), but also a linguistic semantic system of culturally and socially shared symbols (Geertz 1973:17, 45–46), into which each member of a family or a community has been socialized. For example, down the centuries gender has been a significant factor in the identification of individuals. The social position of a woman in particular has been defined by means of naming practices that have specified her relationship to the

(male) head of the family (Garðarsdóttir 1999:301; Kotilainen 2016; Nakari 2011).

Communities aim to legitimate the identities of their members through the symbolic function of naming. Naming a person also allows their identity to extend over their lifetime or even longer (Butler 1993:152–153). In this respect, a name is more enduring than a human life because it can in a way become immortal through social memory (see, e.g., Bennett 2018; Fentress & Wickham 1992): as long as a person's life and actions are remembered, they will exist in the common memory as a historical person, and perhaps their memory will also live on in the names of their descendants.

European families have favoured giving newborn babies forenames taken from the family's own nomenclature, such as those of parents, grandparents or other forebears (see, e.g., Ainiala et al. 2016:127; Garðarsdóttir 1999). Names taken from the family's nomenclature could be handed down to new generations in order to celebrate close relations. Thus a knowledge of one's family history was an essential part of onomastic literacy. These names inherited within the family constituted common symbols that contained memorial information about the lives and personal attributes of the persons concerned (see, e.g., Ferring 2017). In the case of namesakes, the choice of names was also influenced by such factors as the parents' relations with friends and neighbours and the names of persons chosen to be godparents of the children (Alfani 2009; Fagerlund 1999; Kotilainen 2012; Tait 2006:320–321).

Onomastic literacy means the ability to recognize the social connections attached to names in each historical age (on literacy as a social practice, see Barton 1994; Street 1984), and thereby to create social and cultural capital, which can be exploited as a communal resource. This literacy skill, like all such skills, is also connected to social, cultural, historical and political factors and to the power relations pertaining in the society involved (Barton 1994:187; Larson & Marsh 2005:23). Onomastic literacy intrinsically involves the question of how names are read and interpreted. It is also a form of cultural literacy, created out of everything that has been learned through

socialization into the ways of thinking of the community since childhood (Hirsch 1987:20–21). This is evidenced by socially approved or rejected names; the latter arise from a conscious desire to avoid certain names which at a particular time are regarded as ideologically unsuitable, or the names of family members who have fallen out of favour or lost their social position.

It is important to note that onomastic literacy also changes over time. The shift from an oral culture to a written one (Certeau 1988[1984]:133–135; Goody 1987; Vansina 1985) has represented an important milestone in the way information about naming is obtained. In this respect, naming and literacy are linked. Along with the development of literacy skills among the common people from the nineteenth century on, the internet and social media have had a great influence on onomastic literacy and people's awareness of different kinds of cultures and nomenclatures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even so, the mere ability to read a written text does not in itself wholly cover onomastic literacy. Particularly in earlier times, the oral tradition and ideas inherited from ancestors influenced the way in which naming was seen and conceptualized (Vilkuna 1989[1959]:118–119). In modern times, too, onomastic literacy requires the name-giver to possess a certain social competence in functioning within networks and their unwritten codes of behaviour, so that a choice of names does not, for example, offend anyone, but rather strengthens ties with certain members of the name-giver's community.

## **5. The social meanings attached to the names of royal families**

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, when a new descendant has been born into a royal family, the reporters and experts who follow court life have immediately commented on the names chosen for him or her, and various interpretations regarding the choice of names have appeared in the media. Ordinary people have also been interested in the names chosen; the general public always seek to work out the meanings

behind royal names and to interpret them in the light of existing knowledge. Various semantic layers are attached to the names used in royal families: a) the private one, known only to the family itself; b) that which the family wishes to convey to its subjects about the situation and future of the monarchy; and also c) the speculation that occurs in public debate, and today in social media.

Royal households strictly regulate the boundary between their privacy and public life. Up to a certain limit, the popular press and royal families need each other, and publicity reinforces the special position of the monarchy in society. However, too much publicity in the yellow or tabloid press is harmful. In order to maintain their authority, royal families are in a way secretive, but at the same time their public PR and brand value is enormous (see, e.g., Balmer 2011:518), and consequently they can also skilfully exploit their public image as a symbol of their position of influence and as representatives of their country. The limited but worldwide visibility of royalty in the media is all the more effective when they work on behalf of their country or other causes (such as charities and environmental issues) which they consider important and to which they wish to draw special attention.

The Swedish royal family has frequently discussed, in interviews and books (e.g. Bah & Tarras-Wahlberg 2004; Familjen Bernadotte 2010), the border between public life and privacy, which in their case is a shifting one because of the enormous public and media interest in them as royalty. Particularly during the childhood of Princess Victoria and her siblings, they succeeded in ensuring the children's privacy and in providing them with a more undisturbed childhood and youth by coming to agreements with representatives of the media. Public appearances were strictly limited to particular occasions, and it was hoped that the press would in any case desist from excessive publicity (Bah & Tarras-Wahlberg 2004). Other royal families have also striven to diminish media attention by appearing in public at regular intervals, but also ensuring that their families enjoy their own peace (Kolloen 2013:278–279; Seward 2018:149, 158).

When, for example, Prince Harry's daughter Lilibet (*Lili*) Diana was named in summer 2021, the choice of name immediately caused

a mixed reaction in social media. Some thought the name was a tribute to the Queen, a charming gesture that referred to the child's great-grandmother and her intimate family nickname dating from her childhood (Dennison 2021:38) and used only by those closest to her, such as Prince Philip (Seward 2018:13). At the same time, others saw it as a thoughtless jibe at a time when her husband had just passed away and the Sussex family had recently withdrawn from royal duties (see, e.g., Brown 2021; Dymond 2021). All three semantic layers are present in this name choice, but the private thoughts of the family members seem to be a crucially important motive for naming, even though they will remain secret.

However, engagements, weddings and the birth of children in royal families are always certain front-page news, as they form part of the continuity of the tradition of the royal house and thus symbolically legitimate its position as part of society. Over the centuries, the birth and name of an heir to the throne have correspondingly been announced to subjects and honoured with poems, medals, gun salutes etc. (see, e.g., Kolloen 2013:110; Seward 2018:107) because the birth of a new generation is always important for the monarchy as it symbolically reinforces its existence (Nygård 2005:54–55). Bets are placed on the names of heirs to the throne before they are even born, and there is speculation in the media about them and the choice of godparents before the christening (Goldsmith 2013; Mackay 2018; Nisbeth 2012).

The names chosen for the son of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, originally an American actress, have symbolically reflected their withdrawal from the court and its traditions soon after the couple's marriage. The second name of Archie Harrison Mountbatten-Windsor (b. 2019) is a reference to the familiar name of his father, Harry. His names depart from the family tradition and identity, in that they are not part of the royal nomenclature in the same way as, for example, the forenames of the Sussexes' daughter or the second and third forenames (*Elizabeth Diana*) of the daughter of Prince William, the Duke of Cambridge, which refer to her great-grandmother and grandmother, respectively.

The forenames of the sons of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, George Alexander Louis (b. 2013) and Louis Arthur Charles (b. 2018), are also faithful to the family tradition. *George* is obviously a sovereign name in the Windsor family, and *Charles* is a salute to their grandfather. The name *Alexander* can also doubtless be interpreted as referring to Queen Elizabeth, whose second name is the feminine form, *Alexandra* (Dennison 2021:12), while *Louis* is probably inherited from Prince Philip's maternal uncle, Admiral of the Fleet Lord Louis Mountbatten, who was an important father figure for the prince in his youth (Marr 2012:65; Seward 2018:67, 132). Lord Mountbatten's father, Prince Philip's maternal grandfather, was also called *Louis*. Moreover, the names *Louis* and *Arthur* are among the forenames of Prince William, and correspondingly the Christian names given to Charles, the Prince of Wales, include *Arthur* and *George* (as did those given to King George VI; Seward 2018:108). Thus, the same names have been repeatedly inherited from one generation to the next in the Windsor family and have created strong symbolic bonds between the generations. Already in their names, Prince William and Prince George, carry a royal identity that signifies that they will very probably one day be monarchs themselves. The name *Archie* is also related to the history of the realm and originates in medieval Scotland, but more likely derived from *Arche*, the Greek word for "beginning", "origin" or "source of action" (Wace 2020).

The forenames inherited from their families by the Windsor princes born in the 2010s continue to be significant. The same observation can be made with regard to the Swedish royal family. Family traditions are strictly observed in the names of both of Crown Princess Victoria and Prince Daniel's children. For example, the second and third forenames of Princess Estelle (b. 2012), *Silvia* and *Ewa*, are taken from her grandmothers, and the fourth name, *Mary*, from her godmother, Princess Mary of Denmark. The name *Estelle*, the probable sovereign name of the future queen, appears to differ from the royal tradition, and for that reason received a certain amount of criticism from experts immediately after it was published (see, e.g., Pedersen 2012), but it, too, has a background in the Bernadotte family. The



American wife of the diplomat Count Folke Bernadotte was called *Estelle* (Skott 1996:312), and she may be one model for the name, at least the media wanted to believe so (cf. Leibring 2013:553). The first name of Prince Oscar Carl Olof (b. 2016, Estelle's younger brother) also refers to the history of the Bernadotte family, while he inherited his other forenames from his grandfathers, King Carl XVI Gustaf and Olle Westling, and his father Prince Daniel, who was baptized as Olof Daniel (see Swedish Royal Court 2021).

These examples show that the royal parents who were born in the 1970s and 1980s also believe in the symbolism of inherited forenames. Family values and the continuity of the monarchy would thus seem to be important for the younger generations of the royal families as well. The most important objective in ruling families is ensuring the royal succession (e.g. Dennison 2021:50–51; Kolloen 2013:98–103), and the naming of heirs to the throne after their forebears and earlier rulers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reinforces the continuity of the dynasty. This has been an unwritten rule or norm in the name-giving of royal families. The names of an heir presumptive (e.g. *George*) are often chosen so that they, too, will continue to observe the family nomenclature. An heir to the throne can also take a sovereign name of their own choosing (e.g. Dennison 2021:103), especially if they were not born as the heir apparent.

Throughout the centuries, the family name has not usually been freely chosen, but inherited from earlier generations (Ainiala et al. 2016:153). Monarchs have also had their own norms for the use of the names of family dynasties. Members of royal families have not usually used surnames and have been known only by the name of the royal house. Sometimes it has been necessary to change the name of the house, which has traditionally been inherited patrilineally within aristocratic families. The British royal family changed the name of their house from the House of *Saxe-Coburg and Gotha*, of German origin, to *Windsor* in 1917 (Marr 2012:30; Seward 2018:130; The royal family, United Kingdom. 2021b).

Female monarchs have brought a change to this patrilineal inheritance of the name of the dynasty. For their husbands, the adoption of

the family name has marked a radical change to their personal identity. The royal family name of *Windsor* was confirmed by the Queen after her accession in 1952. At first, the Mountbattens claimed that the royal family should take Philip's name, but the government and the Prime Minister Winston Churchill refused to accept this (Dennison 2021:245; Marr 2012:65, 165; Seward 2018:98). After Prince Andrew's birth in 1960, the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh decided that they would like their own direct descendants to be distinguished from the rest of the royal family (without changing the name of the royal house), as *Windsor* is the surname used by all the male and unmarried female descendants of George V. The Queen's descendants, other than those with the style of Royal Highness and the title of Prince or Princess, or female descendants who marry, would carry the name of *Mountbatten-Windsor*. This new addition reflected Prince Philip's surname. He had adopted the name *Philip Mountbatten* in 1947 (Seward 2018:148; The royal family, United Kingdom 2021b).

It has been suggested in the biographical literature that Philip in particular pushed for the family to take his name (Dennison 2021:245). He is reported to have observed that he was the only man in the country who could not give his surname to his children, and to have compared himself to an amoeba (Marr 2012:65, 266, 301; Seward 2018:98, 131). It is believed by the biographers that Prince Philip was bothered by this, and that in the end the Queen chose to accede to his wishes and change her children's name. This time the government agreed: children outside the direct line of succession would be called *Mountbatten-Windsor* (Dennison 2021:302; Seward 2018:148). For Prince Philip, who had served in the Royal Navy during the Second World War, life as the consort of the Queen meant a completely different world from the one he had become accustomed to during his naval career (Seward 2018:97).

For their generation it was natural that a husband was the head of the family (Seward 2018:10), and that was also reflected in the common (paternal) surname of the family (Ainiala et al. 2016:153; Marr 2012:165). This was the norm for religious reasons as well, and anything else would probably have been considered abnormal. It is char-

acteristic of the generation of Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden and her spouse (Daniel Westling Bernadotte), on the other hand, that the children of the family can less controversially have a maternal surname. For Prince Daniel, adoption of the royal naming conventions has probably been a lot easier than for Philip's generation.

Moreover, in naming the children of the Crown Princess and her husband, inherited names from Daniel's side have been given equal status, while apparently only the names of the closest female relatives of the Duchess of Cambridge have been given to her children: her daughter's name *Charlotte* is inherited from her sister Philippa (second forename) and *Elizabeth* is her mother's second forename, which, of course, is also her own second forename, inherited from her great-grandmother (Bullen 2011). Thus, the names of Princess Charlotte (b. 2015), the only daughter of the Cambridge family, beautifully combine the traditions of both families. After all, the Queen likewise inherited her forename from her mother. And the forename *Charlotte* also refers to William's father, as a feminine form of *Charles*.

Until well into the 21st century, the crown of Great Britain regularly passed to male descendants in the royal family, irrespective of the order in which the children were born (Dennison 2021:448; Duindam 2021:158), and only when there were no sons in the family might a daughter, like Elizabeth II, ascend the throne. In Sweden, the parliament decided to change the rules of succession from 1980 on so that the eldest of the royal family's children, whether a girl or a boy, would inherit the crown. Thus Princess Victoria superseded her younger brother, Carl Philip, who was the Crown Prince when he was born, in the order of succession (Bah & Tarras-Wahlberg 2004:28–30). She is an exceptional case as a woman in her generation. In the following generation, on the other hand, there are numerous future queens, since several other countries have also changed their laws of succession in recent decades. For this reason alone, surname practices will become more flexible in royal families than they have previously been, and the surname of the future ruler will more naturally be inherited from his or her mother (the queen).

What causes most speculation among the public and in the media concerning the choice of names in royal households is how well they fit in with tradition on the one hand and present-day fashions on the other. Queen Elizabeth is reported to have influenced the choice of name for one of her grandchildren, Princess Beatrice. She is known not to have considered *Annabel* a suitable name for her descendant and instead to have proposed the name of Queen Victoria's youngest daughter (Seward 2018:182). It seems that the Queen has at least occasionally been consulted by members of the royal family over the choice of names for their offspring. Name-giving in royal families is a constant balancing act between the past and the present because, despite the need to preserve continuity, royal households must also be capable of renewal and keeping up with the times.

The foundation of a new royal house or the rise to power of a new family has brought the need to create new name traditions and new (sur)names for monarchs. For example, the Bernadotte family has its own set of forenames, but the sovereign name of an ancestor of the family, Charles XIV John (*Karl Johan*, originally *Jean Baptiste Jules Bernadotte*), linked him rather into the centuries-old tradition of Swedish kings' names (Skott 1996:31–32). At the same time, points of change in the naming tradition, like the rise of a new family or a female ruler to the throne, have created opportunities to update or reform naming practices, even though the contact with the old has been maintained.

Some royal families have chosen clearly distinctive new fashions instead of tradition. The choice of Princess Estelle of Sweden's name is one such decision. In her novel first name, royal tradition has given way: she has her own unique (sovereign) name, which has its roots in the close family. Before she was born, there was media speculation about the name choice and people in Sweden bet on her name (Leibring 2013:552; Nurminen 2012). The most popular choices for a baby girl were *Désirée* (the first name of the King's sister and also Crown Princess Victoria's fourth name), *Christina* and *Margareta* (also names of the King's sisters and former queens). *Ingrid* and *Sofia* were also proposed. For a boy, the public suggested traditional names of

Swedish kings like *Oscar*, *Gustaf* and *Erik* (Leibring 2013:552; Nurminen 2012). All previous Swedish heirs of the crown had inherited their names from the family tree.

Although *Estelle* is not a traditional Swedish name, it is at least nicely linked to the French origins of the Bernadotte family. It is thus not a new but an established name with a long history, even though it was quite rare in Sweden before the birth of Princess Victoria's daughter. Soon after the christening of Princess Estelle, the popularity of the name decreased somewhat in Sweden (Leibring 2013:556–557), whereas in Finland, for example, its popularity has grown during the 2010s (The Finnish Digital and Population Data Service Agency, *Name Service*, Estelle).

As the example of the name *Estelle* shows, royal name choices are seldom simple; rather, they combine tradition with a desire for reform. The inherited first names of royal houses form very dense and multiple webs of names and identities. Their function is above all to symbolically strengthen the power of the family dynasty. The naming and baptizing of the heir to the throne has huge symbolic value as a rite: these ceremonies represent the long-term power relations of the royal family (Nygård 2005:17–20), at a time when subjects have seen a new generation born to one day take on responsibility for reigning over the kingdom.

## 6. Methodological discussion

From the viewpoint of the researcher, royal names are special because they are exceptionally well known and documented. However, the ordinary citizen can interpret the the motives of the name choices of royal families only on the basis of information that has been made public. The starting situation is rather similar to that of the historian, who has no available sources concerning the reasons behind people's name choices in the past, as those reasons were rarely recorded. This, however, does not prevent one from making interpretations, although it must be borne in mind that such interpretations are to a certain extent based only on probabilities. Nevertheless, by means of sys-

tematic research and with the help of genealogical data it is possible to elucidate quite reliably the possible motives behind name choices, albeit subject to certain limitations.

The use of collective biographical methods and genealogy to study the motives behind choices of names has proved fruitful. Because in the past parents often resorted to using traditional family names for their children, and to some extent still do so today, it is important to know the family backgrounds of the persons studied in detail. Thus, one must first compile a genealogical study in order to elucidate the possible origins of the names, which may be used repeatedly (see also Kotilainen 2011:48), as the naming traditions of royal families demonstrate. Very often, the names have been inherited from individuals belonging to different generations. The same names from the nomenclature of aunts, uncles and cousins are repeated in different generations. Some of these names may also have been those of the godparents of newborn children.

There is no one simple method whereby a researcher can reconstruct the attitudes and opinions of the name-givers from the fragmented and incomplete sources, but it is possible to use several different kinds of sources and methods to complement each other. Onomastics is a multidisciplinary branch of humanities research, and it is important to elucidate the ways of thinking of the time involved and to choose methods that best permit one to ascertain the mentalities of the population at the time in question (see also Kotilainen 2011:48). In this article I have chosen only a few examples from the lives of the royal families in order to emphasize the fragmentary character of the sources. Their familial relations are well known from earlier research, so it is not necessary to elucidate them as thoroughly as it would be in a study of the rural peasants and workers of the nineteenth century, for instance.

After a careful analysis of the genealogy, a researcher can, in accordance with the principles of microhistory and the history of mentalities, delineate the key events that have affected the lives of each person involved. It is necessary to consider and ascertain what kind of communal norms and what spirit of the times have influenced

them at different stages in their lives, what groups they have felt they belonged to and what communal and cultural symbols have been important for them (see, e.g., Kotilainen 2008). All of these factors combine to create observations about the mentalities that have influenced the name choices they have made in their lives and the naming practices they have observed.

What is perhaps even more interesting than the use of namesakes is the question of which names were *not* handed down within a family, and why this was. Were certain members of the family so unpopular, or had they been disgraced? Not necessarily; perhaps their names just did not please the name-givers etymologically or were not fashionable and so were not chosen. The names of rulers have characteristically been very popular. For example, Queen Victoria ended up with numerous namesakes over several generations, just within her own family circle (Korkeamäki 2004) but she was, after all, the mother of a large family.

We should not be satisfied with a single, obvious alternative when examining the motives behind the choice of a name; rather, we should weigh up different alternatives revealed by the sources, and leave open the possibility that they may leave some alternatives unmentioned. In other words, there may be other motives (originating in the private semantic layer) that cannot be elucidated through research and therefore remain a mystery. In this sense, the information we have about the principles of naming is always imperfect. Moreover, some names may not have been chosen simply as a result of the parents' personal preferences and their omission may be merely fortuitous, without there necessarily being any likely explanation for it.

However, the researcher's most important methodological tool is a kind of historical or cultural curiosity or imagination: the ability to envisage the possible (unwritten) principles on which naming might be based at a particular time and in a particular community. A systematic study of the sources, cultural context, and a knowledge of previous research are not enough; we also need the ability to put ourselves in the position of the name-givers. Not necessarily for or against them, but as if looking over their shoulders, because we cannot get

inside their heads. This weighing up of the possibilities is important, because naming has always been fairly egalitarian: the landless and disadvantaged population, ‘ordinary people’, have in principle been able to choose exactly the same forenames for their children as royalty. Name choices reveal the mentalities of the name-givers when they are examined in relation to their other activities. They are not necessarily limited to choices that are typical of the family or the community; on the contrary, name-givers have sometimes acted in ways that have been unexpected and unorthodox with regard to their social and familial communities. That is why research should not be limited to just the most likely alternatives, but rather seek to ascertain more broadly the experiential world in which name-givers have dreamt of a future for their children and accordingly made choices that would direct their whole lives.

## **7. Conclusions: Onomastic literacy skills as cultural capital**

The concept of onomastic literacy helps us to contextualize the lives of the research objects more closely as part of the cultures and local communities of their times, thereby revealing the deep-rooted motives behind name choices and the slow change in mentalities affecting naming generation by generation. By utilizing the methods of the history of mentalities, microhistory and cultural studies, researchers can discover possible explanations for choices of names, especially in the past, when the motives behind naming were not necessarily recorded in the sources.

In this article, I have examined some methodological principles and approaches to a study of the naming practices and onomastic literacy of European royal houses. The same principles are also valid for almost all kinds of naming. The benefits of this methodology lie in a more systematic search for possible motives in the sources. The mystery factor always still remains; we cannot say for sure why parents may have favoured a particular name. Because there are no direct



written sources explaining these choices, the motives for them need to be reconstructed from several possible alternatives.

It can be concluded that, for royal families, onomastic literacy has meant something different than it has for their subjects. Royalty has had its own legal norms for name-giving. Members of royal families did not necessarily use surnames. The heir to the throne needed the permission of the reigning monarch and the government to marry his or her spouse (Dennison 2021:97; Kolloen 2013:48–55), and the births of their children were officially announced to the public. The relationship between the personal names and the identities of the royal family is clear, but in their names public and private identities are still intertwined. Everyone knows who the crown prince or princess is. He or she has learnt from an early age to honour traditions, and family relations have usually been strong. The names of royal families are still very traditional and inherited from several earlier generations of the family. These inherited names identify the younger members of the family very clearly as members of the dynasty and also communicate this connection to the media and the public.

Compared with ordinary people, the choice of names for a royal baby is never a private matter. The opinion of ordinary people needs to be considered because of the public role of the monarchy. This is why Elizabeth II, for example, has closely monitored the name choices of her descendants. Monarchies are – as corporate heritage brands – dependent on bilateral trust between the crown and the public (Balmer 2011). To maintain its status as the nation's leading family, a monarchy needs to balance tradition and modern ideas. The gender of the successor to the throne has already changed (as the examples of Elizabeth II and Crown Princess Victoria show) and will probably change even more in the dynamics of naming in European royal families in the next few decades. Around the 2060s and thereafter, there will most likely be more reigning queens in European royal houses than kings. These houses need to create new traditions of sovereign names for their matriarchal dynasties to replace the long namesake chains of male rulers.

Royal names are inherited from one generation to another, and this long continuity of important names results in slow change of the nomenclature and favours traditional names. Thus personal names, not only surnames and the names of royal houses but also inherited forenames, could be described as a kind of a cultural DNA (see also Kotilainen 2011:46), which immediately expresses the family and royal house into which a person has been born. This has also been connected to trust in and the good repute of the royal family and its networks. For the subjects of the royal families and for the media, these ‘safe choices’ of inherited forenames also communicate their uniqueness and legitimate their status. On the other hand, royal families cannot isolate themselves from society. That is why in the Nordic countries, for example, the name choices of the royal families also reflect the greater freedom of choice that parents now have in name-giving.

Onomastic literacy is part of the cultural and informational capital of each individual and family. Communal norms have governed interpretations of name choices, but in order to be able to choose a ‘suitable’ name, an individual has to be sufficiently familiar with the traditions of the family and the locality. It is a question not only of fashion but also of identities, values and ideals. For example, in royal families it has been important to maintain the prestige of the dynasty in the eyes of the people through name choices and the symbolic meanings connected with them. For the researcher, the concept of onomastic literacy, by broadening the horizon of the motives for giving particular names, offers a useful tool in seeking possible alternative answers to the question of the significance of a name for the (local) community and the name-givers.

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