

Y-DNA: The Role of Surnames

By Susan C. Meates

The surname is an important component of analyzing Y DNA results, and sets the outer boundary for the time frame of a match.

Surnames were adopted in different countries at different times. For a long time, people were just known by their first name. As society became more complex, a system was needed to distinguish one person reliably and unambiguously from the next person.

A surname is typically a hereditary name borne by members of a single family and handed down from father to son. Thus, surnames contrast with given names, which identify individuals within the same family. It is characteristic of surnames that all members of a particular family normally have the same surname.

A surname therefore follows with the Y DNA result, which makes the testing of Y DNA a very powerful tool.

Surnames were adopted in different countries at different times.

In England, the period of adoption of surnames was 1250-1450. Most people didn't have a surname before 1250, and almost everyone had a surname by 1450. The adoption of surnames began in the major population centers and the south, and spread to the north and rural areas.

The process of adopting a surname was spread over time, and these surnames continued to evolve until the 1900's when spelling was standardized.

Surname variants occurred during the evolution of the surname. There was no guide to the spellings of names, and those who recorded events, such as the clergy and registrars, attempted to reproduce phonetically the sounds they heard. The great majority of the population were illiterate and had no notion that any one spelling of their name was more 'correct' than any other.

Prior to the time surnames were adopted, men with the same Y DNA result were spread out over a geographic area due to migrations. In addition, invasions and wars often dispersed a Y DNA result significantly.

Many men had the same Y DNA result when surnames were adopted. It is currently impossible to predict how many men had the same Y chromosome DNA result at this time. Some Y DNA results were dying out, and others were abundant.

Therefore, men with the same Y chromosome DNA result adopted different surnames. If there was a large population of the Y DNA result, such as with the haplogroup R1b, many different surnames would have been adopted for this Y DNA result.

As the database of Y DNA results at Family Tree DNA grows, almost everyone will eventually have Y DNA matches with other surnames. The primary reason for these matches is that multiple men with the same Y DNA result adopted different surnames during the time period when surnames were adopted. These men could have been in the same village, or in the same county, or perhaps migration had taken them to different countries.

In addition, two men with different surnames may have a matching Y DNA result due to convergence. Convergence is where you start with two different Y DNA results, in the past, and the results mutate over time, to where they match or are a close match today. The higher the population of a Y DNA result, the more opportunity there is for convergence to occur. Since Haplogroup R1b is the largest population group in Europe, matches with other surnames are very common. These matches are due to the large population of this Haplogroup that existed when surnames were adopted. Many different surnames were adopted, and convergence has occurred over time.

If we go back far enough in time, we are all related. The surname is used to establish a boundary for determining whether two people are related. If you match someone with a different surname, you are most likely related prior to the adoption of surnames.

In some cases, you could be related after the adoption of surnames, due to one of the following events occurring:

1. Informal adoption, such as a widow remarries, and the children take the new surname
2. Infidelity
3. Illegitimate male child who takes the mother's surname
4. Adoption of a new surname, such as by preference or for inheritance
5. A pregnant woman marries a man with a different surname than the child she is carrying

Even though these events have occurred in the past, they were not the norm.

Pursuing a match with another surname is tempting. To avoid wasting time, there should be some evidence that one of the events above occurred. In making this decision, the place to start is to evaluate the evidence. Were the ancestors in the same location, at the same time? Was there a marriage by a widow who had children? Is there a use of alias in any records? Is there any evidence to support a match with another surname?

In most cases, there isn't any evidence to support pursuing the match.

In addition, consider the population of the surname that has tested. If you have tested less than 90% of the trees for the surname, pursuing a match with another surname, with no evidence, is probably a waste of time. The size of the genetic trees from each origin varies. Some might have ramified significantly, and others have a limited number of males. If you have tested only a small percentage of the surname, the man will most likely get a match with his surname as more people test with the surname.

Surname Projects

Y-DNA is organized into Surname Projects, specifically because the surname is the key element in evaluating results.

The surname establishes the time period for determining if two people are related.

As you research your family tree, eventually you have to stop, because the written records end, or are sporadic. This could be the result of the destruction of records, such as due to a court house fire. Or, this could be the result of reaching the time period prior to consistent written records. For example, the time period before the adoption of Parish registers. Often your family tree will stop before you reach the start of Parish registers, because there is insufficient documentation to make a connection or a migration occurred, and you don't know where they came from.

When your family tree ends, there is still a long period of time between then and the adoption of surnames. For example, if your tree ends in the late 1700's due to insufficient documentation, there is still 400 to 500 years between then and the adoption of surnames, depending on your ancestral country.

DNA testing can fill this 500 year gap.

Matches between documented trees will tell you which trees are related, and provide location clues for looking for a documented connection.

Imagine a situation years from now, where every family tree with your surname has tested. The data would then be available to determine whether your surname had a single or multiple points of origin. Combining this information with surname mapping, frequency distribution studies, and research in early records would most likely enable you to identify a geographic area as the ancestral homeland.

Our surname is a very important part of us, and DNA testing tells us about this surname. For example, did

one man take on the surname, and all the descendants today are related, except for a few trees which are descendants of an informal adoption or descendants of an illegitimate birth?

With DNA testing, you might also discover previously unknown variants. This could be very helpful for research, especially when records can't be found, and later it is discovered that the records are actually there, but recorded with a previously unknown variant.

There are many discoveries to be made with DNA testing. Most likely, DNA testing will prove that some long held beliefs about the origins of various surnames are incorrect.

Whether you participate and take a Y-DNA test, or sponsor a participant if you are female, or manage a DNA Project, you are making a significant contribution to the knowledge about your surname.