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Family background of Peter Forsskål, Linnaean Disciple born in Finland

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Brief biographical introduction

Peter Forsskål¹ was one of those pupils of Carl Linnaeus who lost their lives on expeditions in distant lands. He was the naturalist member of the famous Arabian Expedition (1761-1767), sent by Denmark to study the nature and culture of Yemen, “Arabia Felix” of olden times.



Peter Forsskål, portrait by Paul Dahlman 1760.
National Board of Antiquities, Finland. Photo Bo Gyllander.



After spending his childhood in Finland, at that time the eastern provinces of Sweden, Peter Forsskål moved to Sweden proper with his family when his father changed his position as a vicar from Helsinki to Tegelsmora in the vicinity of Uppsala. Later on he studied philosophy, oriental languages and natural history in Uppsala and Göttingen. His thesis criticizing the prevailing wolffian philosophy aroused attention in Göttingen and another paper on civil rights, e.g. freedom of press, when back in Sweden, caused severe criticism. There were many phases around this matter which resulted in negative publicity for him in Sweden. Being obstinate and sure of his case, he never gave up and was in open conflict with the authorities. On the other hand his relationship with Carl Linnaeus, his professor, was close. At the time of the dispute Linnaeus was university rector and was put into an awkward position when he was obliged to handle the confiscation of the already published paper. Thus Forsskål's future in Sweden was uncertain and the invitation to partake in the Arabian expedition was certainly more than welcome.

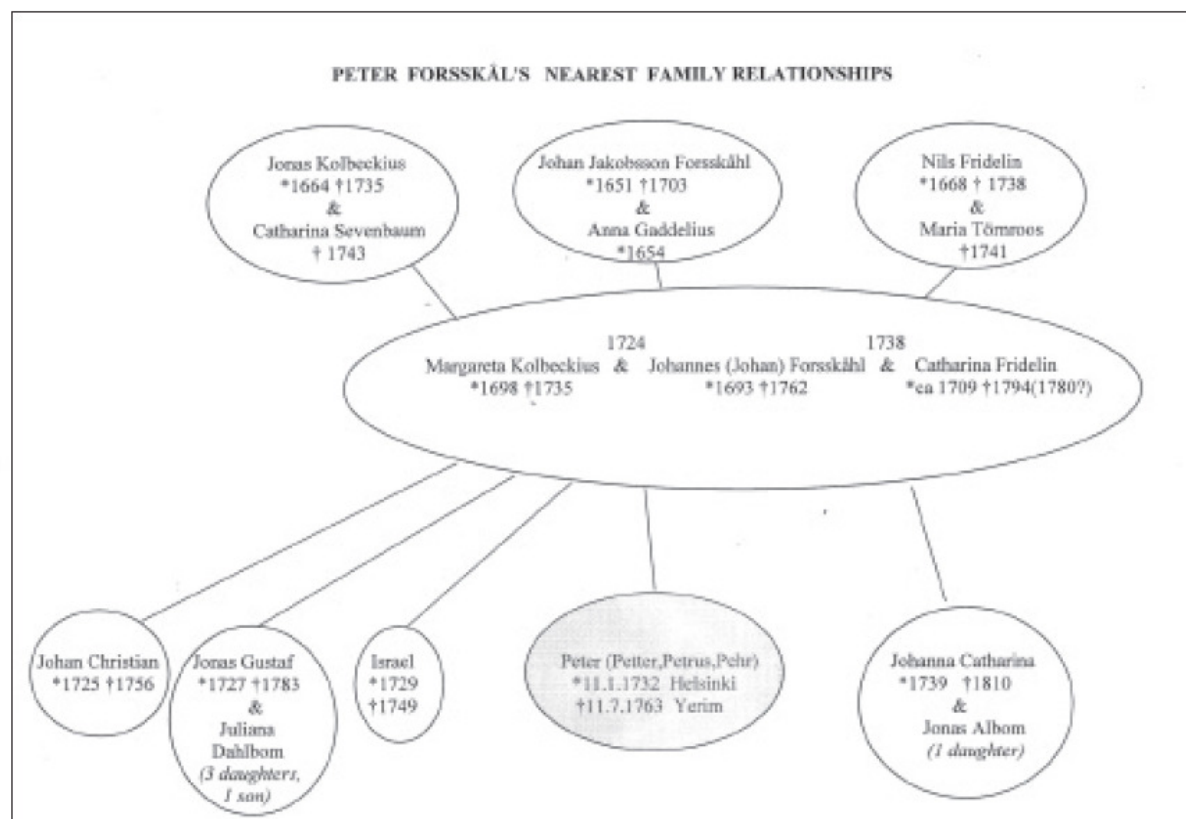
Of the longdistance expeditions with scientific goals, so much in vogue in the 18th century, this one is said to have been the very first thoroughly planned sent from Europe. Nevertheless it was ill-fated from the start: six men of very different mentality set off from Copenhagen after weeks of delays due to storms. In a little less than two years the company reached northern Yemen, via Constantinople and Egypt. To begin with, all was well and interesting fieldtrips were rewarding. But in half a year's time misfortunes began, including a predisposition to malaria in all expedition members in the unhealthy climate of the Red Sea coastal valleys. Forsskål passed away on July 11th 1763 in the small highland town of Jerim at the age of 31. He had been feverish for about a fortnight and had been carried on camelback barely conscious through a difficult mountain pass. In the course of three years all of the party except one had died.

The sole survivor, mathematician and cartographer Carsten Niebuhr returned to Denmark by way of India and Persia as late as 1767. Niebuhr saw to it that most of Forsskål's specimens and fieldnotes arrived back to Europe. It is also thanks to Niebuhr's dedication that the Forsskål papers were published. After settling down he published, in addition to his own diary *Descriptiones animalium*, *Flora Ægyptiaco-arabica*, both in 1775 and the following year the volume of illustrations *Icones rerum naturalium*. The Forsskål material, as well as other documents concerning the Arabian voyage, well kept and arranged in Copenhagen, are valuable and much used by researchers even today. Forsskål has certainly earned a permanent place in the history of natural history as well as in biological taxonomy.

His father's family

The Forsskål-family has been traced in southern and southwestern Finland as far back as the beginning of the 16th century. The parish of Sauvo can be considered the cradle of Peter Forsskål's family-branch. There were many clergymen in the family, of whom Sigfrid Forsskål, and later his son Simon, served there as vicars around the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries. Peter Forsskål's greatgrandparents were Jakob Forsskål and Anna Blåfield. Of their five children Johan Jakobsson Forsskål, crown official, head of Piikkiö hundred, was his grandfather.

Peter's grandmother from his father's side, Anna Gaddelius came from Sweden. She was the daughter of Per Gaddelius, vicar at Kjula, and Katarina Magnelius, daughter of the vicar of Ekeby. Johan Forsskål and Anna Gaddelius had five children, two of whom died at an early age. The second of the three boys, who lived until adulthood, was Johannes² (Johan) Forsskål, Peter's father. Grandmother Anna had six brothers and sisters, many of whom, in addition to herself, had close connections to Finland, both through marriages and through working duties.



His mother's family

Margareta Kolbeckius, Peter's mother was born in the parish of Kolbeck (Kolbäck) in Västmanland, Sweden as the second child of assistant priest Jonas Kolbeckius and his wife Catharina Sevenbaum. Their first-born died as a baby, so Margareta became the eldest of five children, two of whom also died at an early age. Peter's grandfather, Jonas became the vicar of Svedvi. Margareta had a short life, she died in 1735 in Helsinki after eleven years of marriage. Peter was three at the time of his mother's death.

Margareta's sister Hebbela Apollonia was married to Östra Löfsta's (Österlövsta) vicar Zacharias Westbeck, a very interesting personality: his sermons were informal and daring. He was stubborn but warm-hearted and friendly, interested in nature and especially agriculture as well as horticulture, on which he wrote publications. He was also a member of the newly founded Swedish Academy of Sciences.

Johannes Forsskåhl's second wife's family

Johannes Forsskåhl was single for many years after Margareta had died. He married again in 1738 Catharina Fridelin from Korppoo, southern Finland where her parents were the vicar Nils Fridelin and Maria Törnroos. Fridelin was especially interested in the Greek language – he even published poems in Greek. He died the same year as their daughter Catharina was married.

Brothers and sister

Peter had three older brothers, all born in Stockholm, and a younger half-sister. **Johan Christian** (1725-1756) became a clergyman but died soon after having just begun his career as a batallion preacher in Helsinki. He died unmarried at the age of 31 just as his brother Peter would seven years later. **Jonas Gustaf** (1727-1783) studied medicine at Uppsala University, where he earned a degree of medical doctor. He took a career in Örebro, Sweden as a doctor for nobility in Nerike (Närke). For about ten years he was also intendent at Medevi bath in eastern Götaland. Being kindhearted and open he was very popular amongst his patients. He married Juliana Dahlbom at the age of fifty but died only seven years later. They had three girls and two sons.

Next to nothing is known about the life of **Israel** (1729-1749). He was born in Stockholm where he also died at the age of twenty. He seems to have been sickly; sources say that he died of a stroke and was buried in St. Nicolaus church in Stockholm. At that time Peter was seventeen.

Johanna Catharina (1739-1810) was born in Helsinki as half-sister to the then seven-year-old Peter. She was to marry landsecretary Jonas Albom in Sweden. Twins were born to their daughter Johanna Sophia and her husband Samuel Jacob Gyllenadler. One, a daughter, died after birth, the other, a son, Claes lived to be 45. His descendants are many and the family still thrives in Sweden.

These descendants of Johanna in Sweden are the nearest known relatives of Peter Forsskål today. Members of the Forsskåhl-family in Finland and in Sweden are separated by many generations – common ancestors are to be found as far back as the 17th century.

Father Johannes Forsskåhl

Johannes Forsskåhl was a distinguished clergyman of special quality. Born in

Sauvo with his fathers roots deep in the soil of southern Finland, he began theological studies at the nearby Academy of Turku. The Great Northern War affected Finland drastically and he moved away from Finland to complete his studies at Uppsala. After ordination he was first appointed assistant priest and before long (in 1724) vicar of the Finnish congregation in Stockholm, a post which suited him well. In May 1724 he and Margareta Kolbeckius were married in Stockholm.

The Finnish congregation has much to thank him for. Amongst other achievements he succeeded in acquiring for the congregation a church of it's own, a building still in the same use today.

After a few years, in 1730, Johannes Forsskåhl moved back to Finland, to be the vicar of Helsinki. The town of Helsinki was at that time small and insignificant with less than 2000 inhabitants. The vicar of Helsinki also took care of the surrounding parish of Helsingin pitäjä (Helsinge). This post most surely was more respected and therefore better economically than the one heading the poor congregation of Finns in Stockholm. This was understandably important for Forsskåhl and his growing family. Moreover, he was also returning to Finland which, after all, was his home. Peter was born within two years and the boy came to spend his early childhood in Helsinki and it's surroundings. As time passed responsibility for the twin-congregations with primitive conditions became too heavy, whilst also Forsskåhl's health was deteriorating. The family returned to Sweden-proper when father Forsskåhl received a vicar's post in Tegelsmora, in the vicinity of Uppsala. After 8 years there Forsskåhl returned to the Finnish congregation in Stockholm until he was called to be vicar at Maria congregation, also in Stockholm, which post he kept until his death.

Johannes Forsskåhl was a humane, righteous and broadminded personality, a peacemaker and excellent preacher. He was energetic and had much authority.

His large library shows that he was deeply involved with theological matters but interested in many other sciences as well. He was greatly appreciated amongst his colleagues and other contemporaries although he never defended a doctor's degree and there are no publications from him. As an indicator of this he received a honorary doctor's degree in Uppsala in 1752. He was also more than once a member of Parliament.

Johannes Forsskåhl was a key person for Peter. The two were obviously close to each other. Father Forsskåhl only extremely reluctantly gave consent for his son to undertake the long and dangerous journey to Arabia. He knew very well the hazards and that lives could be in danger. He had already lost his wife and two of his sons and had good reason to worry about the fate of his youngest son. Peter kept his head although parting from his father must have been difficult. Linnaeus, amongst others did his utmost to help fulfill the plan. Before leaving Stockholm Peter allowed his portrait to be painted as a farewell-gift to his father. Today his relatives in Sweden still cherish this oil-painting by Paul Dahlman.

Father Forsskåhl passed away in June 1762. At that time Peter was in Cairo. We do not know when knowledge of this reached him or if it ever did. Letters to faraway places were months on their way in the 18th century. It is possible that the message was waiting in Jedda when the party had landed there in October. Forsskål's diary



Kumpula Botanic Garden of Helsinki University in early spring 2001. Kumpula manor was the second home of Forsskål's childhood family. The old buildings have long since disappeared but the undulating terrain must have been similar in Forsskål's time. The main building, just visible on the right behind the trees, stands on the same site as the original one. Photograph by Marjatta Rautiala.

skips the stay in Jeddah altogether. Later on, in December, he writes to the Danish envoy in Constantinople expressing his wish to turn homewards as soon as possible. He had grown weary of the long distances and postal delays.

Peter Forsskål chose neither a theological nor a medical career, as did his brothers Johan and Jonas. Those were very popular careers amongst university students in the seventeenth century. Instead, Peter chose a path of his own. He distinguished himself in all of his manyfold philosophical, philological and natural history interests.

In spite of only spending his early childhood in Finland Peter Forsskål is highly esteemed amongst Finnish biologists and considered one of us. Father Forsskål owned Kumpula manor outside the town of Helsinki. By an interesting twist of fate, it is today Kumpula Botanic Garden of Helsinki University. Peter and his brothers must have roamed around the surrounding countryside and played on the banks of the nearby brook – today the economic and geographical sections of the university garden. A memorial plaque in his honour has been fastened on a building wall by the local authorities.

His contribution to science would, no doubt, have been even much greater had he been able to live an entire life. His destiny was sealed in Copenhagen when he stepped on board the Danish naval ship *Grønland* and began the long journey to southern Arabia which ultimately led to his tragic and untimely end on the rugged highlands of faraway Yemen.

Acknowledgements

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Notes:

1. Sources use both the family name as well as the first name in many forms. The family name appears as Forsskål, Forskål, Forsskåhl or Forskåhl. In this paper Forsskål (which he himself mostly used) is for Peter but Forsskåhl for his father and other relatives. In addition, other common forms of the first name Peter are Petter, Pehr and Petrus. He himself seems to have preferred Petrus. He could use even Pierre when writing in French. Peter seems to fit best in the English language.
2. Johannes instead of Johan for father Forsskåhl is used in this paper. Both are common in sources. This is done to distinguish him from his many Johan-named relatives, here specifically from his eldest son as well as his own father.

Selected references:

On Peter Forsskål's genealogy and childhood see:

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