



# The Briese Surname: A Tale of Two Sources?

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The Briese surname is not a common one. According to the Forebears website [1], in 2014 it ranked 99,728<sup>th</sup> in the world, with an estimated 4,200 people worldwide with the surname (see Appendix). Just under half of these live in Germany, the main country of origin, followed by USA, Australia, Brazil, and Canada, where Briese families emigrated in the nineteenth century [2]. The remainder are scattered in other European and South American countries, some apparent places of origin and some places of migration.

Some years ago I wrote a paper on the meaning of the Briese surname [3], which focused on families of German origin. This pointed out that Briese is a toponymic name, i.e. one taken by people living in a particular geographic location. Moreover, as the earliest Brieses (based on old church records [4]) lived in an area of Prussia where there are over twenty towns or villages which include “Briese” in their name [3], the surname could have had multiple origins. However, this is only part of the picture, for the surname also appears in Britain and north-western continental Europe (Fig.1), and at an earlier date than it appears in Prussia. This paper uses data collected by the Briese Surname Project [5] to re-examine the origins of the Briese surname in the context of its broader distribution and the changes in this distribution over time.



Fig.1. Distribution of the Briese surname from the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries – the blue to red heatmap shows lower to higher densities (data from Briese Surname Project). Map generated by TNG Place Map Mod.

## German Brieses

According to the *Dictionary of American Family Names* [6], Briese is a German “habitational name from a place so named in Silesia, related to Slavic bres- ‘birch’” – concise, but only partially correct. The name certainly has Slavic roots (Fig.2), being the German phonetic spelling of the old Slavic word for a birch tree [7]. While there is a place called Briese in Silesia, there are more than twenty others called Briese or Briesen in neighbouring regions where German and Slavic people intermingled in the middle ages (Fig.3). Without further evidence, any of these could have been the source or sources of the name [3].

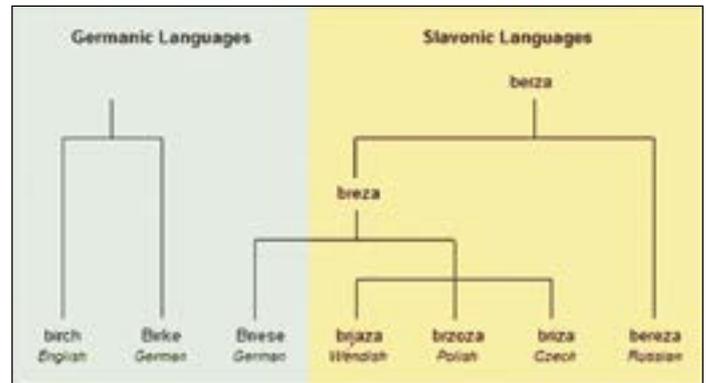


Fig.2. Phonetic origins of the surname Briese from the old Slavic word for a birch tree.



Fig.3. Distribution of towns and villages bearing the name Briese or Briesen or that were called this in the past by the German-speaking population.

Three types of evidence could help refine the source of the Briese surname; the overlap or not between people and locations bearing the name, the locations of the earliest records of people bearing the surname and the occurrence of high densities of the name that might suggest a long historical association with a particular region. The recently set-up Briese Surname Project website [5], which includes a database of over 1,600 birth, marriage, death, and residence records for Brieses up to the end of the nineteenth century, provides these data.

Firstly, the distribution of these records (Fig.4) excludes Silesia as a source of the name; the name is rare in this region and does not appear before the 1800s. Saarland is excluded for the opposite reason; there is a higher density of the Briese surname but there is no Briese(n) locality anywhere nearby. East Prussia has early records, large numbers, and a long

historic association with the Briese surname. However, it also misses one critical element: there are no locations with the Briese name in this region. This still leaves several possibilities in the regions of Briese high density in Brandenburg, Posen, and West Prussia (Fig.4) where there is also a scattering of Briese(n) towns and villages. To refine this further, those locations that appeared after the time when surnames were being adopted can be eliminated. The earliest mentioned towns or villages named Briese(n) in this area date back to the fourteenth and early fifteenth century and these occur in Brandenburg – in the region west of the Oder River and in the old Neumark district bordering Pomerania (see Fig.4). This is around the time when people in northern Germany were adopting surnames, making them likely candidates for the source of the name.

Finally, the earliest historic mentions of the name Briese come from the 1599 musters of males of military age in the cities of the Neumark (or East Brandenburg) [8]. Importantly, these musters were undertaken in all the cities of the Neumark and the Briese name occurs as a single individual in only four – Cottbus, Landsberg, Friedeberg, and Soldin (Fig.4). Evidence of where the name wasn't is just as important as where it was – the Briese name was apparently both rare and restricted in the Neumark. None of these locations coincides with a more recent high density cluster of the surname, indicating that the movement was occurring quite early on following its adoption.

From where then did these early Brieses come? The process of elimination described above leaves three possible locations: Briesen in der Mark (1403), Briesen im Spreewald (1346 – called Brjazyna in the Wendish language) – both west of the Oder, and Briesen im Pyritz (1306 – now called Brzezyn in Polish). Of these, Briesen in der Mark is also near one of the 1599 Briese surname records and is closest to a later dense cluster of the Briese surname, while Briesen im Pyritz is closest to the remaining 1599 records of Briese in the Neumark area. Unfortunately, I have not found any pre-1600 records for the rest of Brandenburg, but the high density of the surname

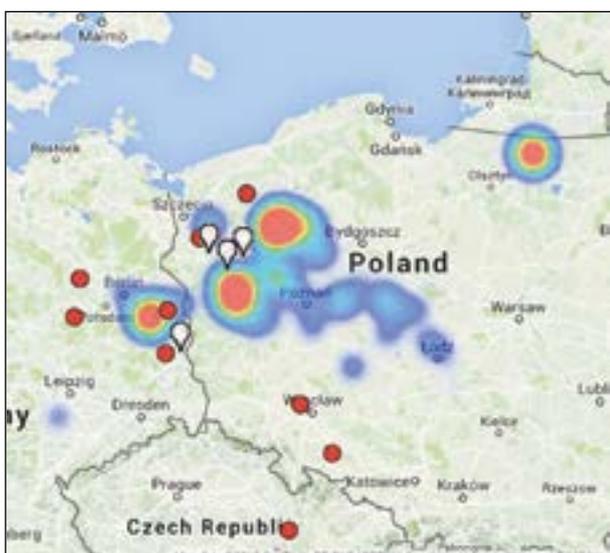


Fig.4. Towns and villages named Briese or Briesen that existed before 1500 (red dots) and earliest locations where the Briese surname was recorded in 1599 (white markers) superimposed on the distribution of the Briese surname prior to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

here during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and its absence from Pyritz would favour the region west of the Oder (see Fig 4) as the origin of the Briese surname.

This eastwards movement from the putative centre of origin would have formed the new Briese clusters in the Meseritz/Schwerin areas of Posen and in the Deutsch Krone region of West Prussia. The eastward spread of Briese families continued into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, following the Warthe and Netze Rivers into Poland and on as far as Ukraine and Romania (Fig.5). A map produced by Breyer [9] indicates that most of the eighteenth century German settlements in the Upper Warthe region of Poland were established by people from Pomerania, i.e. it is more likely the Briese surname here would derive from Deutsch Krone and neighbouring regions. Genetic evidence from Y-DNA studies of several Briese family members [10] supports this eastward spread of the surname. It is postulated that the dense, but isolated cluster of Briese families in East Prussia (Fig.5) was due to a very early one-step migration of individual(s) from the Brandenburg centre of origin. From this point there was subsequent spread northwards along the Baltic coast. Following the end of The Second World War, German populations east of the Oder River were expelled or killed, which would have resulted in a massive displacement of surviving eastern Briese families back into the modern-day borders of Germany.

Not all migration was to the east, however. Berlin, slightly to the west of the area of origin, has also attracted people with the Briese surname and there also appears to have been some northwards movement into Mecklenburg. There are some locations in western Germany with scatterings of Briese families and a dense cluster in Saarland. Genealogical evidence [4] indicates that at least some of the people bearing the Briese surname in the Rhineland and Hanover regions are descended from a person who was born in West Prussia and lived for some time in Pomerania, before moving west in the early nineteenth century.

Some of the records for Briese in Saarland date back to the early eighteenth century [5], which suggests the possibility of a surname origin distinct from that of the Brandenburg Briese families in the east. This will be discussed in more detail below.

### Flemish/Dutch/Frisian Brieses

The surname Briese appears to have always been very rare in Dutch-speaking regions. There is no official published definition of its meaning here, but a Belgian surnames website [11] does list it as a variant of Brixius, which can be traced to the Celtic patronym, Brice. Brice (latinised as Bricius) and its variants, which include Brixius, Briese and Bries, were present as far back as the thirteenth century in Flemish-speaking areas [11]. One of the early Dutch families to emigrate to North America (arriving in New York in the seventeenth century) is alternatively referred to as Briese or Bries in different records [12] [13]. The name also appears in early eighteenth century records from coastal regions of northern France (e.g. Dunkerque) that were originally settled by Flemish-speaking people. Thus, the Briese surname in this area seems to be of Flemish/Dutch origin.

A small concentration of the Briese surname has existed in East Frisia, the German region bordering The Netherlands, since at least the eighteenth century. However, the first

names used by these families are very different from those used by the Briese families of Brandenburg and further east; they follow instead the Dutch patronymic naming system (the middle name is derived from the father's surname). This clearly identifies the Briese surname here as of Flemish/Dutch, rather than German origin.

The Briese name also appears in Bas-Rhin and Alsace (the north-east of modern France) in the eighteenth century [5] and, as mentioned above, has developed into a small surname cluster in the Saarland region of Germany. While the first names are Germanic, not Dutch, which would suggest a Brandenburg origin, several first names common in eastern Briese families are rare or do not occur here, and vice versa. As there is a strong continuation of first names within family lines [5], this may suggest different origins. Because of the geographic proximity to the Flemish Briese clusters, these western German ones may have originated from them. Alternatively, they may have an independent origin based on the same patronymic source of Brice/Brixius. Genetic studies based on Y-DNA (which like surnames is patrilineal) may be the only way to refine this.

### British Brieses

If you google "Briese surname," probably the first sites that you will come across are those that want to sell you products bearing a coat-of-arms. They claim that Briese is a Scottish patronymic name derived from the Gaulish saint, Bricius, who lived in the fifth century [14]. This is a case of gilding the lily since, as mentioned earlier, Bricius is the latinized form of the Celtic name Brice and St Bricius was most likely only one of many who bore this name. People who derived their surnames from this patronym several hundred years later could have had any one of these as their ancestor. The heraldic websites also point out that Briese is one of several spelling variations of the name, together with other more common surnames such as Bryce and Brice. If true, the name is a very rare variant, as the Scotlands People website records only one instance of the Briese surname (a marriage) from 1531 to the present [15].

By contrast, there are Briese records from England that date back to the sixteenth century [5]. While still very rare (only six records from the 1891 UK census [16]), it would suggest that the surname is more likely to be of English than Scottish origin. That said, the distribution of Briese surnames in England during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries gives rise to alternate possibilities.

These records (Fig. 5) show an eastern cluster of Brieses centred on East Anglia and Kent and a western cluster centred on counties bordering Wales. It is possible that Briese could be a variant spelling of the Welsh patronymic surname Breese (from ab'Rhys – the son of Rhys). Breese is more common and more widespread than Briese, but also has clusters in Wales and the neighbouring English counties. Another possibility is that, while the name is a patronym of the Celtic name Brice, its origins are Dutch/Frisian and not British. As mentioned, the name Briese/Bries occurred in Dutch-speaking regions of Holland, Belgium and France from quite early on [17] and the concentration of the Briese surname, in East Anglia, lies just across the North Sea from this region. In his 1894 book on the origin of British family names, Barber [18] observed that East Anglia had a high frequency of Dutch, Flemish, and Frisian names because of movements from the continent to Britain.



Fig. 5. Hypothesised migration routes of people bearing the Briese surname (numbers indicate the centuries when people reached different regions). These are inferred movement patterns based on birth, death and marriage records and should not be considered as actual routes.

### Possible Briese Migration Patterns

Surname data collected to date suggest that there are two distinct origins to the Briese surname: a toponymic name that originated in Brandenburg and a patronymic name that originated in the Flemish region. From the database of the Briese Surname Project [5], the Brandenburg Briese lineages form by far the larger group, comprising 94 percent of the birth, death, marriage, and residence records. Can the changes in distribution patterns of the surname over time tell us more? It is always tempting to hypothesise on the migration routes of our ancestors and, using the birth, death and marriage dates in the Briese Surname Project database [5], it is possible to make an initial attempt at to do this.

Clearly, one cannot be certain that there were not multiple sources of the name within a broader area of origin, but for the purposes of this exercise a parsimonious approach is being taken and a single origin for each region is assumed: Brandenburg and Flanders. The hypothesised spread of the surname from these centres is shown in Fig. 5. The patronymic name Briese, seems to have originated earlier and is considered to have spread from Flanders north through the current Netherlands into Frisia, and west across the North Sea to England.

Evidence indicates that the toponymic name Briese has primarily spread eastwards from its Brandenburg origins; in a single jump



Fig. 6. Emigration patterns of people bearing the Briese surname from the areas of origin to North America, South America and Australia during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Records in the newly settled regions include only the emigrants and the first generation of descendants.

to East Prussia and more gradually into the old Prussian Provinces of Posen, West Prussia and Pomerania. These regions were the primary source of further expansion eastwards into Poland, Volhynia (now part of Ukraine) and Romania. Some northwards spread into Schwerin-Mecklenburg and westwards spread into Rhineland and Hanover, respectively, is also indicated.

The earliest records of Briese emigration outside of Europe were from The Netherlands to New York (North America) in the seventeenth century. Further spread of the Briese name into the New World – North America, South America, and Australia – occurred during the wave of emigration from northern Europe in the nineteenth century (Fig.6). Over 200 Brieses emigrated at this time and the great majority came from the region that is now north-western Poland [2], though there were some Briese emigrants of Dutch, Frisian and French origin, i.e. the Flemish grouping. Emigration continued up to the mid-twentieth century, but on a greatly reduced scale, leading to the presence of the Briese surname in Argentina, Chile and Venezuela. Currently, more than half of the people bearing the Briese surname live outside of their regions of origin [1].

What is not shown is the contraction of the eastern distribution of the surname into the modern borders of Germany, following the expulsions of German people from these areas after World War II. Only a very small number of people bearing the name Briese remain in Poland and Romania today. This contraction and resettlement, with subsequent local movements, has also blurred the geographic distinction of the two different sources of the Briese name – genealogical and genetic studies would be needed to distinguish them.

### Further Studies

To date, research on the Briese surname shows that, both from an onomastic and from a geographic perspective, it has two separate sources. In north-western Europe it is a patronym, being a variant of the Celtic name Brice, and in eastern Germany it is a toponym, formed from locations of the same name. This does not preclude multiple origins within these two distinct groupings, with unrelated individuals initially adopting the same patronymic name in the west or the same toponymic name in the east. For example, Y-DNA studies have identified three genetic families within the eastern toponymic Briese surname family [10].

Paper records of births, deaths, marriages and residence (or more correctly, the digitised versions of these from different internet sources [19]) have enabled some degree of refinement of relationships within this surname web, but are limited as far as any further disentanglement is concerned, as many lineages have now been traced back as far as such records go [5]. There is some scope to find additional Briese lineages in the old Prussian provinces, as many of the church books from these areas have not yet been digitised. Microfilms of some of these records do exist [20] and need to be identified and searched.

Genetic studies based on Y-DNA, which mimics the patrilineal inheritance of a surname, have become the best option for understanding the history and distribution of the Briese surname. The project mentioned above, which is currently focussed on the Brandenburg Briese lineages could be extended to verify its separation from the Flemish lineages and examine the genetic structure within the latter. Such

studies would shed light on the hypothesised patterns of surname spread. Unfortunately, this is not a simple task, as DNA-testing requires active participation of family members and it is relatively expensive to have a meaningful number of markers tested [22]. Like other rare surname projects with a small potential sample pool, finding sufficient testers will be a challenge. ■

### Appendix: Frequency and Incidence of the Briese Surname

The data in the table below were compiled from several on-line surname sources, including Forebears, Public Profiler, and Verwandt. These sites primarily use on-line telephone books, and occasionally electoral rolls to calculate surname frequencies and hence should be considered estimates only. The relative frequencies given in this table are averaged from the different sources and in some cases, corrected by cross-checking other available records (e.g. Forebears gives the number of Brieses in England as two, whereas a check of the UK electoral roll for London alone lists six).

To avoid a false indication of accuracy, the numbers of people bearing the Briese surname are given as a broad range rather than a single figure.

**Table 1.** Frequencies of the Briese surname in different countries (asterisks indicate countries of origin)

Country	Relative frequency (No. / million)	Absolute number (est. range)
Germany *	28.1	2000-2300
Australia	21.1	400-500
United States	3.8	1000-1200
Canada	3.6	100-120
Sweden	2.2	20-30
Austria	1.7	20-30
Brazil	1.4	200-300
Chile	1.0	20-30
Belgium *	0.8	<10
Poland *	0.6	20-30
Switzerland	0.6	<10
New Zealand	0.5	<10
England *	0.4	10-20
Denmark	0.4	<10
Netherlands *	0.3	<10
France *	0.3	<10
Costa Rica	0.2	<10
Romania	0.2	<10
Spain	0.2	<10
Italy	0.1	<10
Argentina	0.1	<10
Russia	0.1	<10
Czech Republic	0.1	<10

(This article has been abridged. The complete article, with full references, can be found on the Guild website at <[http://one-name.org/members/journal/articles/vol12-7\\_briese.pdf](http://one-name.org/members/journal/articles/vol12-7_briese.pdf)>).

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