

Who was my godfather? Social status of a born child and its godparents in the 19th centuries

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The birth of child has been (and is) one of the most significant event in the life of man (and of whole society). It has therefore been associated with an entire number of specific actions, among others with baptism. This is a relatively frequently studied issue of early modern society (e.g. Alfani, 2007; Afani, Gourdon, 2012; in Czech e.g. Melkesová, 2003; Skořepová, 2018). It was a significant primarily unrelated social link, which, unlike others, can be quantified and analysed for all social strata. Godparents at first glance two dissimilar roles. They are witnesses to the religious rites of baptism but, also they are active conveyors of traditional norms of behaviour and closed people who help to family of a born child. The role of godparents was also of significance in a number of other activities outside the framework of church rites. However, the significance of baptism for the society at that time and its course (how long from birth to baptism occurred, which persons were present and so on) are often examined. Questions concerning the social composition of the godfathers and their relationship to the born children are already studied less frequently.

The aim of the study is to expand research into the issue of godfatherhood and to answer questions concerning the choice of godfathers in Bohemia in the first half of the 19th century (1800–1849). In other words, what was the choice of godparents in terms of their social status in society in comparison with the social origin of the children born? It is reason for the intention is to find out whether the godfather-godson relationship was socially homogamous or heterogamous. In addition, the legitimacy of children born is taken into account. The next question is whether there was a difference in the choice of godparents for children born in and outside marriage. The question arises whether, at a time when the social status of single mothers and their children was still not easy in Czech society (the General Civil Code of 1811 abolished the equality of illegitimate children), although it was better than in the 18th century, it was simple to find a well-situated (at least in the same social category) godfather for illegitimate children.

The previous study only marginally studied this issue (Kuprová, 2013). The social structure of children born out of wedlock and their godparents was studied separately. From this analysis,

it seems that rural society in the first half of the 19th century did not look at children born out of marriage as strictly as it might seem according to the legislation and contemporary literature. Most illegitimate children were born in the lowest social strata, i.e. between laborers and houseless lodgers (56% of all illegitimate children). Even the fathers of these children, if they claimed responsibility for their child (almost 10 %) or legalized them by marriage with mother (almost 14 %), came from group cottagers and craftsmen. Despite the fact, the most of the godfathers of these children came from the categories of farmers (46 %) and cottagers and craftsmen (34 %).

The studied locality is the Škvorec estate, located in central Bohemia near the (today capital) city of Prague. Until the end of the first half of the 19th century it was a purely agricultural area. The inhabitants were mainly farmers and small craftsmen who did small crafts needed for everyday life of village society. The estate consisted of 14 villages and 2 small towns. According to contemporary literature, there were more than 4,500 inhabitants in the 1830s. The social structure of society is unknown, because of no complete population registers including the social status of all persons have been preserved. However, a social analysis of the families who had a child between the years 1800–1849 suggests that the local society already had a composition typical of modern societies. The most numerous was the middle class (cottagers and craftsmen - almost 40 %). The demographic behaviour of the local population corresponds to the economic focus of the local society and it is typical of agricultural localities in the Czech lands. It can be assumed that the social behaviour of the local population also will be considered representative of the population of the Czech lands.

The paper study the first half of the 19th century (1800–1849). The limitation of period had two main reasons. Before the year 1800 the social / occupational status of all persons was not regularly put in the registers. In the second half of the 19th century, the spectrum of the mentioned social positions expanded quite significantly, and it is more difficult to categorize into pre-prepared social groups (see below). Both of these cases could have a significant impact on the results. Database, which was got by excerption from parish register of birth, include information about almost 10 thousands of children born in the years 1800–1849, of which more over than 1 thousand were illegitimate, and about almost 20 thousands of godfathers.

The social structure is analysed based on the social / occupational status given in the parish register of birth. The social status of births is determined based on the social / occupational status of the father of the born child in the case of children born in marriage and the social /

occupational status of the mother, respectively grandfather (father of mother) of the born child in the case of children born out of wedlock. The social status of godparents is determined based on their social / occupational status in the case of men or based on their spouse / brother / father's social / occupational status in the case of women. For the purposes of the study, six social groups were created, which were labeled as follows: - 1) clerk, 2) dominical and municipal employee, 3) farmer, 4) cottager and craftsman, 5) laborer and houseless lodger, 6) homeless.

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