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Family and Community. Godparenthood in a Bohemian Village Community in the 17th and 18th Centuries

Rodzina i społeczność. Rodzicielstwo chrzestne na wsi czeskiej w XVII i XVIII w.

ABSTRACT

The paper uses a micro-level analysis of godparenthood as a tool for studying the social structure and personal networks in the rural milieu in Bohemia. The ritual kinship created between a child and its godparents during the baptism carried an essential symbolic value. It represented the social bonds, networks and hierarchies in the village, and reflected the traditions and individual aspirations of community members. The research concentrates on the Červená Řečice domain (South Bohemia) from the beginning of the 17th century, when the first parish register of baptism appeared, to the turn of the 18th century. The Bohemian rural society underwent significant transformation in this period: from the strengthening of subjection and the recatholization after the Thirty-Year War to the birth of civil liberties. The paper examines godparenthood as an indicator reflecting both the enforcement of ecclesiastical authority and the prominence of habitual godparents – individuals commonly chosen for baptismal ceremonies.

Key words: godparenthood, village community, local elites, Bohemia, 17th–18th century

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STRESZCZENIE

W artykule wykorzystano analizę mikropoziomową rodzicielstwa chrzestnego jako narzędzie do badania struktury społecznej i sieci osobistych w środowisku wiejskim w Czechach. Rytualne pokrewieństwo powstałe między dzieckiem a jego rodzicami chrzestnymi podczas chrztu miało istotną wartość symboliczną. Reprezentowało ono więzi społeczne, sieci i hierarchie na wsi oraz odzwierciedlało tradycje i indywidualne aspiracje członków społeczności. Badania koncentrują się na domenie Červená Řečice (Południowe Czechy) od początku XVII w., kiedy to pojawił się pierwszy parafialny rejestr chrzów, do przełomu XVIII w. W tym okresie czeskie społeczeństwo wiejskie przeszło wiele zmian: od wzmocnienia podporządkowania i rekatolizacji po wojnie trzydziestoletniej do narodzin swobód obywatelskich. Artykuł koncentruje się na modelu rodzicielstwa chrzestnego jako wskaźniku egzekwowania oficjalnych zasad kościelnych oraz osobowości stałych rodziców chrzestnych, tj. ogólnie popularnych mężczyzn i kobiet najczęściej zapraszanych do udziału w rytuałach chrztu.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzicielstwo chrzestne, społeczność wiejska, lokalne elity, Czechy, XVII–XVIII w.

INTRODUCTION

The early modern village can be characterized as a small, steady but not invariable community¹. Nevertheless, the study of its internal structure and dynamics represents a methodological challenge. The topical examination of godparenthood, which began to develop nearly twenty years ago, offers a functional tool to analyse mutual ties between members of the village community. Since the establishment of the *Patrinus* research group in 2006 and the publication of the initial book *Fathers and Godfathers* by Guido Alfani one year later², a substantial number of scientific papers from around the world have appeared. Proceeded from methods of historical demography and detailed microhistorical research, they analyse bonds formed between the baptized child, the child's parents, and the godfathers and godmothers they invited to witness the christening³.

¹ On early modern village society in Bohemia for example: *Untertanen, Herrschaft und Staat in Böhmen und im „Alten Reich“: sozialgeschichtliche Studien zur Frühen Neuzeit*, eds. M. Cerman, R. Luft, Oldenbourg 2005 (Veröffentlichungen des Collegium Carolinum, 99); S. Ogilvie, *Communities and the „Second Serfdom“ in Early Modern Bohemia, “Past and Present”* 2005, 187, pp. 69–119; D. Štefanová, *Erbschaftspraxis, Besitztransfer und Handlungsspielräume von Untertanen in der Gutsherrschaft. Die Herrschaft Frydlant in Nordböhmen 1558–1750*, Wien 2009; H. Zeitlhofer, *Besitzwechsel und sozialer Wandel. Lebensläufe und sozioökonomische Entwicklungen im südlichen Bohmerwald, 1640–1840*, Wien–Köln–Weimar 2014.

² G. Alfani, *Fathers and Godfathers. Spiritual Kinship in Early-Modern Italy*, Farnham 2007.

³ Q. Alfani, V. Gourdon, *Fêtes du baptême et publicité des réseaux sociaux en Europe Occidentale. Grandes tendances de la fin du Moyen Âge au XXe siècle*, “Annales de démographie

The relevance of godparenthood as the research instrument for further analyses lies in its universal character: as all children had to be baptized in the past, each received their 'spiritual kin', regardless of their parents' social status. Although baptismal practice was strictly regulated, its actual form varied locally and over time, providing evidence of the acceptance of official norms established by the ecclesiastical or secular authorities. The particular choice of godparents reveals the social connections of the newborn's family, its position and aspirations in the community. A useful tool for a quantitative comparison is based on the distinction between horizontal (the parents and godparents of the baby are of the same social level) and vertical godparenthood (the godparents are from a higher social stratum than the parents). Another important aspect is the potential presence of biological kin, which indicates the familiarization of the ritual. The personalities of generally respected and frequently chosen godparents provide a picture of the local elites, including the informal ones.

Despite the international boom of historical research on godparenthood, Czech historiography has so far paid only marginal attention to the issue of spiritual kinship⁴. Several studies focusing on the mid-17th century appeared, tracing the transformations of baptismal practice during the re-Catholicisation of Bohemia after the Thirty Years' War⁵. Other periods remained largely neglected for a long time; however,

historique" 2009, 117, pp. 153–189; *Baptiser. Pratique sacramentelle, pratique sociale (XVIe–XXe siècles)*, eds. G. Alfani, P. Castagnetti, V. Gourdon, Saint Étienne 2009; *Spiritual Kinship in Europe, 1500–1900*, eds. G. Alfani, V. Gourdon, Basingstoke 2012; *Le parrainage en Europe et en Amérique. Pratiques de longue durée XVIe–XXIe siècles*, eds. G. Alfani, V. Goudon, I. Robin, Bruxelles 2015; T. Ericsson, *Godparents, Witnesses, and Social Class in Midnineteenth Century Sweden*, "The History of the Family" 2000, 5, pp. 273–286; C. Fertig, *Rural Society and Social Networks in Nineteenth-century Westphalia: The Role of Godparenting in Social Mobility*, "Journal of Interdisciplinary History" 2009, 29, pp. 497–522; C. Munno, *L'écheveau des parentèles au village. Dynamiques démographiques, mobilisations réticulaires et parcours individuels dans une communauté de Vénétie au XIXe siècle*. Thèse de doctorat, Paris–Venezia 2010; A. Violić-Koprivec, N. Vekarić, *Baptism and marriage witnesses of the Catholics of Dubrovnik (1870–1871)*, "Dubrovnik Annals" 2017, 21, pp. 97–137.

⁴ M. Skořepová, *Kmotrovství jako badatelský problém. K sociálním dějinám raného novověku a 19. století*, "Český časopis historický" 2016, 114, pp. 58–82.

⁵ J. Grulich, „*Slavnostní okamžiky*“ – svatební a křestní obřad v období raného novověku. (Závěry tridentského koncilu a pražské synody ve světle jihočeských matričních zápisů z 2. poloviny 17. století), "Historická demografie" 2000, 24, pp. 49–82; M. Melkesová, *Adhiberi solent, qui compatres vocantur. Kmotrovství ve venkovském prostředí raného novověku na základě výzkumu chýnovské matriky*, "Historická demografie" 2003, 27, pp. 63–120; J. Kadeřábek, *Protireformace Slaného v letech 1610–1635 a její dopad na sociální vazby radních*, "Historická demografie" 2009, 33, pp. 9–44; L. Nekvapil, *Kmotrovské vazby ve farnosti Hlinsko v letech 1645–1650 z hlediska sociálně-náboženského (sonda)*, "Historická demografie" 2011, 35, pp. 33–44.

considerable research on 19th-century godparenthood has been conducted⁶. Nevertheless, a serious lack of research on godparenthood in the 18th century persists.

This paper represents an intersection between the longstanding research on godparenthood in the village milieu in Bohemia, concentrated primarily on the 19th century, and the actual study of the social structure of rural society in the early modern period. The individual choice of godparents provides an opportunity to examine social structure and social hierarchies at a micro-level. The local „elites“ and people with personal authority and respect can be identified through their godparental activities, allowing for the assessment of a certain level of informal power within the village population.

The presented research concentrates on the former domain of Červená Řečice located in the South Bohemia. The estate belonged to the archbishops of Prague since the Middle Ages, and the castle of Červená Řečice (455 m above sea level) served as their country seat. At the beginning of the 15th century, the estate was pawned, and secular landlords alternated in ownership for 200 years. In 1623, after the defeat of the Bohemian Uprising and the triumph of the emperor and his Catholic supporters, the estate returned to the hands of the Prague Archbishop, where it remained until the mid-20th century. Nevertheless, parish administration and religious care for inhabitants were entirely separated from the manorial management⁷.

The main sources for studying godparenthood are parish registers of baptisms that I have fully excerpted or the period and region under analysis. These well and completely preserved books are easily accessible for researchers online⁸. The registers were written by diligent priests, who ensured the precise recording of all requested data: name of baptised child, the name and surname of the father, the name of the mother, their residence, the date of the christening, and the names and surnames of godparents. However, identifying godparents, especially females, is not

⁶ M. Skořepová, *Godparenthood in the Context of Family Relations in the 19th Century Bohemian Rural Space*, "Annales de démographie historique" 2022, 2, pp. 219–244.

⁷ J. Dobiáš, *Dějiny královského města Pelhřimova a jeho okolí*, part 2, *Doba reformační*, Pelhřimov 1936, pp. 157–160; idem, *Dějiny královského města Pelhřimova a jeho okolí*, part 4, *Doba reformační*, Praha 1957, pp. 619–734; M. Skořepová, *Vztah pánů a poddaných na Červenorečickém panství v 16. a 17. století*, "Opera Historica" 2022, 23, pp. 29–57.

⁸ Státní oblastní archiv Třeboň, Sbírka matrik Jihočeského kraje, Farní úřad Červená Řečice [State regional archive in Třeboň, Collection of parish register, Parish Červená Řečice]: books no. 1, 2, 3, 12, 14, <https://digi.ceskearchiv.cz/Matriky-Rimskokatolicka-cirkev-C-C-Cervena-Recice> [hereinafter: SOA Třeboň, SMJK, FÚ Červená Řečice].

always straightforward, primarily due to the coincidence of names⁹. For more accurate identification of marital couples, the parish registers of marriages were used¹⁰. The information about the social structure of the villages under analysis, property and social position of the studied persons was derived from the manorial land registers, which recorded the possessions of rural farms¹¹.

The presented research covers a 150-year period and includes more than one thousand baptisms. It starts in the 1650s with the first preserved parish register of births and concludes in 1799, during the period of consolidation following the Enlightenment reforms¹². This paper aims to reconstruct the godparental bonds and identify personalities with distinct popularity among the parents choosing spiritual kin for their newborn children. The frequency of godparental pledges might help to identify men and women with strong influence in the local community. It is also indisputable, the transformation in the formal characteristics of christening rituals including the number of godparents, can be interpreted as a reflection of the broader changes in the village society.

GODPARENTHOOD IN BOHEMIA

The religious situation in early-modern Bohemia was rather specific. One hundred years after the Hussite Reformation began in Prague in 1415, the German Lutheran Reformation overlapped the original Utraquism and by around 1600, it was adopted by most inhabitants, although the sovereign and political elites confessed Catholicism. At that time, the oldest parish baptismal records were established in Lutheran parishes in the western Bohemia. Simultaneously, in 1605, the Catholic Prague Synod took place and accepted the rules of the Council of Trent. The beginning of the Thirty-Years' War and the emperor's victory over the aristocratic revolt in 1620 brought a new land statute that enacted

⁹ The spectrum of used names was quite limited. Maiden names of married women, very useful for identification of the particular family members, started to complete the data not before the end of the 18th century.

¹⁰ See note 8.

¹¹ Národní archiv, Archiv pražského arcibiskupství I. [hereinafter: NA, APA I.], inv. no. 2609; inv. no. 1754, sign B43/11a; Národní archiv, Velkostatek Červená Řečice [hereinafter: NA, VS ČŘ], inv. no. 60, sign. Pelhřimov 202.

¹² All data represent a result of a combination of diverse sources worked out in the multi-level computerized database created by the author in several diverse IT programs. For this reason, I abandon individual references.

Catholicism as mandatory religion in 1627. This situation led to the forced recatholization and expansion of the Catholic Reformation in the Czech Lands. At the beginning of the Enlightenment era around 1770, various reforms led to increased state interference in ecclesiastical matters, culminating in 1781, with the establishment of religious tolerance. Non-Catholics, however, remained a discriminated minority until 1848.

The official Roman ritual from 1614 that was introduced in the Bohemian parish administration simultaneously with conversion to the Catholic faith after 1627. It defined the form of ecclesiastical rituals, including christenings. For each baptism, either one godfather, or one godmother, or both were required, while other people were present only as witnesses¹³. In Bohemia, as is true for the region under analysis, the triple model of godparenthood determined by the sex of the baptised child, probably generally prevailed in the early modern period: in the case of boys, there were two men and one godmother present, whereas for girls, two women and one godfather served as ritual kin. This model was not exceptional even in the post-Tridentine period, appearing in many regions in Catholic Europe¹⁴. Concerning the Czech Lands, the transition from the multi-god-parental, protestant arrangement of baptisms to the triple model with a godfather, a godmother and a witness has been recognized in Slaný as early as the 1620s and in other regions in the mid-17th century¹⁵.

BAPTISMS IN THE ČERVENÁ ŘEČICE DOMAIN

The Červená Řečice castle and town represented the centre of a large and fragmented domain. In 1623, when it returned to the hands of the Archbishop, the estate comprised 22 villages, the castle with market town of Nový Rychnov, and Červená Řečice that held the status of a town, despite its size (there were only 61 houses in 1674 and 154 houses in 1833)¹⁶. The on-

¹³ 'Patrinus unus tantum sive vir, sive mulier, vel ad summum unus et una adhibeantur'. *RITVALE PRAGENSE AD VSVM ROMANVM ACCOMMODATVM*, Prague 1642 (first printed edition of Roman Ritual published for the archbishop of Prague).

¹⁴ The obligatory request for one couple of godparents had roots in the compulsory reduction of the number of godparents commanded by the Council of Trent. The aim of this measure was to limit the profane festivities and luxury of baptismal rituals. G. Alfani, *Godparenthood and the Council of Trent: Crisis and Transformation of a Social Institution (Italy, XV–XVIIth Centuries)*, "Obradoiro de Historia Moderna" 2009, 18, pp. 45–69.

¹⁵ J. Grulich, *op. cit.*; J. Kadeřábek, *op. cit.*; L. Nekvapil, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ K. Poustka, E. Svoboda, L. Dědková, *Archiv města Červené Řečice 1593–1945* (1961). *Inventář Okresního archivu Pelhřimov*, Pelhřimov 1973; J.G. Sommer, *Das Königreich Böhmen. Taborer Kreis*, Prag 1842.

going research concentrates on a minor part of the estate: the Zmišovice judicial district ('rychta') located in the centre of the Červená Řečice domain. It was headed by a reeve and consistently included five villages: Pobistrýce, Popelištná, Svépravice, Těchoraz, and Zmišovice. The presented study on godparental practices concentrates on the last two villages, Zmišovice and Těchoraz, both situated very close to the Červená Řečice parish church, approximately 3 and 5 km, respectively.

At the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, Zmišovice was the largest village in the judicial district with nine peasant farms. In Těchoraz, there were five farms and one cottage. These homesteads originated in the medieval establishment of the villages and usually had between 12 and 15 hectares of arable land at their disposal. The manorial land registers indicate that the number of peasants' homesteads remained nearly constant for a long time. New smaller homesteads, called cottages (chalupa) with only small plots of land, began to be built in the late 17th century. The social structure of both villages was different because of the manorial farmstead in Těchoraz with a fairly large staff. The workforce included both adults and married people, as well as the young and single, however, very little information about them is preserved. They appear only in the parish registers of baptisms, marriages and deaths, as they did not manage any land, and no list of the landlord's employees has survived.

Table no. 1. Number of homesteads in the villages under analysis

Year	Number of peasant homesteads	
	Těchoraz	Zmišovice
1600	6	9
1650	6	10
1700	7	10
1720	7	10
1750	7	11
1780	8	12
1800	11	18

Sources: NA, APA I., inv. no. 2609; inv. no. 1754, sign B43/11a; NA, VS Červená Řečice, inv. no. 60, sign. Pelhřimov 202; NA, TK inv. no. 2817, box 826.

All entries concerning babies born in both villages during the studied period 1650–1799 have been excerpted from the parish registers of baptisms. The dataset contains 1093 records of christenings, distributed approximately equally between both villages. Dividing the period under analysis into three 50-year intervals, the number of baptisms increased from an average of approximately five per year in 1650–1699 to about nine per year in 1750–1799.

Table no. 2. Number of christenings

Years	In both villages				Origin of newborns	
	births	stillborns	christenings	births per year	Zmišovice	Těchoraz
1650–1699	250	1	249	5	115	135
1700–1749	387	0	387	7.74	184	203
1750–1799	456	7	449	9.12	227	229
In total	1093	8	1085	7.28	526	567

Source: SOA Třeboň, SMJK, FÚ Červená Řečice; the database created by the author.

From the number of stillbirths and also from the sex distribution of baptized children it is evident that the parish registers did not contain all births. Only babies born alive and properly baptized were recorded, the majority of newborns who died before christening are missing. Not until the last decades of the 18th century did the number of boys begin to prevail, as priests were ordered to record stillborn infants as well. Illegitimate children were recorded separately, yet with the same thoroughness as legitimate babies. Their share was continuously increasing from 2.4% at the beginning of the analysed period to 5.1% at the end of the 18th century. All inhabitants living in Zmišovice and Těchoraz confessed Catholic faith since the mid-17th century, at least in public. The only exception was the family of Josef Horký, the tailor and cottager from Těchoraz: 5 of his 9 children were born after the establishment of the 'tolerated' church of Helvetic confession in Moraveč in 1783 and were baptized by its pastor Jan Szalatnay, whereas their older siblings had received the Catholic sacrament¹⁷.

Table no. 3. Baptized children according to sex and legitimacy

Years	Boys	Girls	Boys%	Illegitimate	Illegitimate%
1650–1699	124	126	49.6	6	2.4
1700–1749	191	196	49.4	13	3.6
1750–1799	242	213	53.1	23	5.1
In total	557	535	50.9	42	3.8

Note: One baby was registered without information about its sex in 1750–1799.

Source: SOA Třeboň, SMJK, FÚ Červená Řečice, database created by the author.

¹⁷ Moraveč is a village that belonged to the former archbishop's domain. The church of Helvetic Confession established there in 1783, two years after the Toleration Act declaration, is one of the oldest in Bohemia.

MODELS OF GODPARENTHOOD

The official rules of the period recognized three categories of godparents: levans, patrinus, and testes. However, the parish registers of Červená Řečice only occasionally emphasize levans (if written in Latin) or simply describe the person of the same sex as the baby who literally held the child in his or her arms during the ritual ('na rukou držel / držela'). Entries written in Czech typically identified a godfather and a godmother for each infant, while a third (or even fourth) person present at the baptismal font acted only as a witness, whose role was evidently less important.

Although the Catholic church defined a strict form of baptism ritual, the number and sex of godparents varied. No fewer than seven distinct models of godparenthood can be identified in Těchoraz and Zmišovice, although some of them were marginal.

The triple model was the most common, documented in two-thirds of baptisms: boys were accompanied by a godfather (levans), a godmother and a male witness; whereas for girls the principal role was assumed by a godmother, supported by a godfather and a female witness. This model prevailed almost exclusively in the second half of the 17th and in the first half of the 18th century. Between 1702 and 1756, thirty-eight babies received as many as four godparents at baptism, however, this practice appears to reflect an exceptional familial custom, as it was repeated only by a few marital couples across different socio-economic statuses.

The officially prescribed couple model of godparenthood, i.e. one godfather and one godmother for each child, sometimes appeared in the second half of the 17th century, but it did not become the preferred arrangement until the 1770s, evidently because of generally enforced reforms. Whereas in 1670–1769 only nine children had to be contented with a mere two godparents (1.3%), in 1770–1799, more than four-fifths of baptisms followed this model (254 christenings with one godfather and one godmother from 315 rituals in total, i. e. 80.6%). In 26 cases during the same period (8.3%), the parents chose two males as the only ritual kin for their boys. This decision may be interpreted as an effort to retain a more festive character of the ritual. The asymmetric variant with two godfathers and no godmother appeared in the same lineages as the model of four godparents, most distinctively in the Farka and Vytsika families from Těchoraz that will be mentioned further among very popular godparents.

Godparents were usually neighbours from the same or the nearest village, as children were baptized very quickly. The interval between birth and christening can be calculated only in one-quarter of cases, however, the ritual evidently took place either on the same day or the following

Table no. 4. Males and females as participants in baptisms

Godparents	Boys			Girls		
	1650–1699	1700–1749	1750–1799	1650–1699	1700–1749	1750–1799
M+F	10	1	126	8	1	133
2M+F	107	170	81	3	4	1
M+2F	3	4	0	115	180	73
3M+F	3	2	0	0	0	0
2M+2F	0	14	6	0	11	2
2M	0	0	26	0	0	0
2F	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total of christenings	123	191	239	126	196	210
Total of birth	124	191	242	126	196	213
Total of male godfathers and witnesses	236	379	352	129	211	212
Males per christening	1.91	1.98	1.47	1.92	1.98	1.91
Total of female godmothers and witnesses	126	209	213	241	387	286
Females per christening	1.92	1.99	0.89	1.91	1.97	1.36

Note: M = male, F = female

Source: SOA Třeboň, SMJK, FÚ Červená Řečice, the database created by the author.

day after the delivery; with delays of one or two days being exceptional. Consequently, there was no time to invite potential ritual kin from more distant localities (the longest identified and rare distances between the godparents' house and the children's domicile was approximately 8 km). The geographical horizon of godparenthood corresponded to similar social statuses among ritual kin. Most infants were born into farmers' families, with fathers serving either as heads of households or as their designated heirs, and farmers and their wives were predominantly invited to participate at christenings. Slightly fewer than one-fifth of children were ritually related to someone from the town of Červená Řečice, although the share of the town's inhabitants among particular groups of godparents ranged from 7 to 12%¹⁸. The inhabitants of the manorial

¹⁸ Godfathers came from the town of Červená Řečice most often (130 from 1084, i.e. 12% of baptisms where a godfather was present). In the town lived also 9.6% of godmothers (102 from 1059), 7.2% of male witnesses (31 from 430) and 6.8% of female witnesses (28 from 409).

town were burghers; however, they had been subjects of the same landlord. The town held several privileges that enhanced the position of its residents, but their social status was closer to that of villagers than to, for example, burghers from royal towns, who were free citizens.

Godparenthood displayed a horizontal character during the period under analysis, as the stratification of village society was relatively weak. Until the mid-18th century, the situation among peasants was fairly egalitarian, as most villagers were holders of a self-supporting farm¹⁹. Subsequently, the group of cottagers – which included poorer peasants and small village craftsmen – began to grow. In the first generations, cottagers were often siblings of the farm heirs who could not inherit their parents' homestead²⁰. Cottagers usually also invited farmers to serve as godparents for their children, perhaps because they still perceived themselves as part of their original lineages and had not yet represented a distinct social class. Nevertheless, the number of cottagers' infants was too low in the studied period to allow any meaningful conclusion about the potential vertical character of godparenthood in their case²¹.

Godparents were usually married, as single individuals were of lower social status. Only seven unmarried girls and four young men participated as godparents, most of whom were related to families working in the landlord's service. The most unusual case in this respect represents the christening of Victoria Maleček in 1781: her father, a steward of a manorial farmstead and son of a burgher from Červená Řečice, not only chose her a common name but also invited his single sister and an unmarried colleague to participate as godparents. Such a baptism would have been common in the village community a hundred years later. Nevertheless, it was rare for the godfather and godmother to constitute

¹⁹ The arable land belonging to particular farms is measurable thanks to Theresian cadastral and its predecessor called Berní rula. Nevertheless, declared areas of fields did not always meet a real situation and, what is important, the economic condition of homesteads depended on many factors and could change in every generation and even every few years in case of natural diseases or a family infortune such an early death of the householder. Národní archiv, Tereziánský katastr [hereinafter: NA, TK], inv. no. 2817, box 826.

²⁰ The rural farms were practically imitable in the early-modern Bohemia, only one child (preferably a son) could become a new householder, although all children in the family were entitled to receive an equal share of the parents' property.

²¹ The probe made on the example of the neighbouring region of Nový Rychnov (another domain of Prague archbishop, approximately 20 km distant away from Červená Řečice) in 1785–1855 has shown the predominantly horizontal character of godparenthood in quite stratified village milieu with very numerous classes of cottagers and tiny protoindustrial craftsmen. M. Skořepová, *Le parrainage en Bohême dans le milieu rural, du XVIIe au XIXe siècle*, "Histoire, Économie & Société" 2018, 37, 4, pp. 106–119.

a married couple. This contrasts with the situation in the 19th century, when the godfather and the godmother were usually husband and wife²². The beginning of this transition can be observed in the very last decades of the period under analysis, for example in the case of the family of František Křepinský, the brewmaster, who served as a godfather together with his wife.

It is also probable that midwives commonly participated in the baptismal ritual, as was traditional, although they are not mentioned in the records until the end of the 18th century. Since 1792, Marie Eliáš, Marie Červená and some others were regularly recorded in the parish registers as midwives, however, these women did not rank among the most popular godmothers²³.

It can be concluded that godparenthood did not disadvantage girls compared to newborn boys. Both sexes received a similar number of godparents, with gender specification occurring in the case of the triple model of godparenthood. The only exception to the comparable average number of godparents of both sexes per christening was the 26 'male' pairs of godfathers chosen for boys born in the last third of the 18th century.

HABITUAL GODPARENTS

The concept of habitual godparents developed by Guido Alfani proves useful for estimating the individual influence in the village society²⁴. Habitual godparents were individuals who commonly and frequently served during baptisms and became ritual kin for many members of the community. These people were not necessarily wealthy or officially powerful, but socially respected and popular. For this research, concerning the character of the analysed probe, a habitual godparent is defined as someone present at least during 10 baptisms in the role of a godfather or a godmother. In this identification, only the primary pair of godparents is considered; witnesses are not included. Using this criterion, a group of 28 women and a group of 29 men can be distinguished, each of whom acted as godparents in more

²² M. Skořepová, *Godparenthood*.

²³ Marie Eliáš from Zmišovice probably acted as godmother only three times, always in the same family, and Marie Červená became godmother four times. The 'double' activity of midwives, who were obliged to assist during baptisms to confirm personal data of the babies and at the same time they acted as godmothers was very frequent and criticized practice in the second half of the 19th century. H. Stoklasová, *Katolické přechodové rituály v „dlouhém“ 19. století*, Pardubice 2017, pp. 109–136.

²⁴ G. Alfani, *Fathers*, pp. 159–208.

than half of all baptisms (females in 572 cases, males in 542 cases, out of a total of 1985 christenings). Furthermore, these individuals sometimes attended rituals as witnesses, so only one-quarter of all baptized children did not have any member of this popular group as ritual kin. The likelihood that parents would invite one of them to a baptism gradually increased over time. For males, the share of baptisms with a habitual godfather rose from 44% in the second half of the 17th century to 53.1% in 1750–1799. Among godmothers, 58.7% of christenings were assisted by a habitual godmother in 1700–1749, after which this proportion declined to approximately half²⁵.

Table no. 5. Activity 28 women and 29 men classified as habitual godparents

		Females	Males
Length of activity	years	11 to 43	3 to 45
	average	24.3	24.0
	median	23	23
Acting as a godmother/godfather	number of baptisms	10 to 69	10 to 47
	average	20.3	18.7
	median	14.5	16
Acting as a witness	number of baptisms	0 to 21	0 to 17
	average	4.4	5.6
	median	2.5	5
Baptisms in total	number of baptisms	10 to 89	10 to 60
	average	24.7	24.7
	median	19	20

Source: SOA Třeboň, SMJK, FÚ Červená Řečice, the database created by the author.

Naturally, basic factors, such as growing natality and the individual longevity of potential godparents, played an important role. Nevertheless, the quantification of the godparental activity appears similar for both males and females. The career of a habitual godparent lasted approximately 23–24 years, encompassing the entirety of their productive age. On average, a respectable woman was invited to be a godmother 20 times and four times she acted as a witness. For males, the numbers showing their participation in baptisms are nearly the same, on average,

²⁵ In 1650–1699, 110 christenings (44%) were accompanied by a habitual godfather and 116 (46.4%) with a habitual godmother. The shares grew up to 190 (49%) with a habitual godfather and 227 (58.7%) with a habitual godmother in 1700–1749. In the last period of 1750–1799, a habitual godfather was invited to 242 baptisms (53.1%) and a habitual godmother to 229 christenings (50.2%). The cases in which habitual godparents played the role of witnesses are not included in these calculations.

they became godfathers approximately 18 times and five times they acted as witnesses. It is evident, that attendance at baptismal rituals had the potential to create a dense network of social bonds around a respected individual. Moreover, parents of numerous children had an opportunity to establish or strengthen personal relationships within their neighbourhood through ritual kinship, since the trend of familiarisation of godparenthood (that is the preference for one's family members as godparents) did not prevail until the second half of the 19th century²⁶.

No case of elite godparents as noblemen or priests were observed during the baptisms of village children. Inhabitants of the town of Červená Řečice, only slightly wealthier and a little more privileged, were occasionally asked for godparenthood by villagers, as was shown above, but most of them did not achieve the position of habitual godparents in relation to the inhabitants of Těchoraz and Zmišovice. Only two of 29 habitual godfathers came from Červená Řečice; both Jan Zach and Václav Kaňka, who served at the turn of the 17th century, had 10 and 13 godchildren, respectively. Dorota Kaňka, possibly the mother or grandmother of Václav, who was the only habitual godmother residing in the town, assisted 11 baptisms. Number of their godchildren living in Těchoraz and Zmišovice was considerably lower than that of the most popular godparents residing within the village society.

The employees of the landlord can be perceived as a prestigious group of godparents as well. Only men holding positions of lower management, such as stewards of the manorial farmsteads, manorial clerks, gamekeepers, heads of the sheepfold, brewers, and a teacher, appeared at the christenings of village babies. They used to be godparents of farmers' children, but often they acted as ritual kin in their own social and professional groups. Customarily, the head of the manorial farmstead acted as a godfather to the children of his subordinates. Two stewards of manorial farmsteads in Těchoraz and the wife of the younger one ranked among the habitual godparents: Matěj Kříž had 18 godchildren at the beginning of the 18th century, Rosina Rychtářů assisted 12 christenings, and her husband participated in 10 baptisms in the 1780s and 1790s.

An eminent place in the village community was reserved for millers, as wealthy, indispensable and often personally independent artisans. Villagers from Zmišovice and Těchoraz carried their grain to the nearby mill called Pod Hodějovicí, nevertheless, they seldom asked its holders to accompany their newborns to the church. The prestige of the miller's family was represented by its women: at the beginning of the 18th century,

²⁶ M. Skořepová, *Kmotrovství a biologické příbuzenství na českém venkově 19. století*, "Historická demografie" 2021, 45, pp. 139–160; eadem, *Godparenthood*.

Dorota Bárta had 43 godchildren and, her successor Alžběta Bárta, had another eleven.

Habitual or prestigious godparents also appeared during the baptisms of illegitimate babies²⁷. Especially in these cases, godparenthood was perceived as a religious service and a pious deed, and a request for it could not be refused. Among 42 babies born out of wedlock, 25 became godchildren of a habitual godfather or godmother (or both). Alžběta, the daughter of a farm maid, became ritual kin of two women and a man known as habitual godparents and relatively affluent farmers in 1684. In 1711, Jan Král, a son of another maid in Těchoraz was brought to the baptismal font by the highest manorial financial clerk, a castle steward's wife and a supervisor of manorial fieldwork. Although no evidence of practical support for illegitimate children in daily life can be confirmed from the sources, it is indisputable, that the presence of respectable individuals during their baptism had an important symbolic sense and constituted a ritual gesture of social integration.

PERSONALITIES

For the purposes of analyzing social ties formed during christening rituals, the group of the most popular godparents was selected. Table 6 shows 14 men and 14 women whose number of godchildren surpassed the median value calculated for habitual godparents. The most active godfather was Vít Veselouš from Popelištá, a successful farmer and a reeve (a representative of the village self-administration responsible to the landlord). Jiří Jančík from Zmišovice, the second one, had a comparable career. In contrast, Jakub Chuchel, another reeve, was not popular at all. Other prominent men included wealthy farmers and members of the local peasant administration from the Vytiska, Farka, and Píša families. Matěj Kříž, previously mentioned, served as the head of a manorial farmstead and was the only member of this group who did not hold a peasant farm.

The reasons for godparental popularity thus appear relatively straightforward for men, with factors such as economic capacity, wealth and influence in local village administration. However, the status of a husband did

²⁷ Prestigious godparents of illegitimate babies seem to be quite common in Bohemia, but very unusual in European context. V. Gourdon, I. Robin, *Le baptême des illégitimes, XVIe-XXIe siècle*, in: *Bâtards et bâtardises dans l'Europe médiévale et moderne*, ed. C. Avignon, Rennes 2016, pp. 225–241; M. Skořepová, *Nemanželsky narozené děti na Pelhřimovsku v 19. století a jejich obraz v matrikách křtěných a zemřelých*, "Historická demografie" 2022, 46, pp. 167–196.

not determine the position of his wife. In comparison with their spouses, females demonstrated varying intensity in their godparental activities and maintained their own strategies and networks of ritual kin. Among the 14 most popular godparents of both sexes, only five marital couples can be distinguished.

Magdalena Tomiček, the most popular godparent of all, was a farmer's wife, and the reasons for her popularity remain unknown; she might have assisted as a midwife, or her personal qualities or generosity may have been decisive. The second one, Dorota Bárta, also previously mentioned, was a miller's wife; however, her husband and son had hardly any godchildren. It should be emphasized, that the presence of godmother was equally important for boys as for girls, and children of both sexes had the same chance of receiving a habitual godparent as ritual kin. For example, Magdalena Tomiček had two more godsons than goddaughters. Vít Veselouš, the reeve, with Helena Farka, a farmer's wife and very popular godmother, acted together as godparents of 18 children, 14 girls and four boys.

Table no. 6. The most popular habitual godparents depicting possible marital bonds

Godfathers			Godmothers		
Name	Years of activity	Number of baptisms	Name	Years of activity	Number of baptisms
Veselouš Vít	1700–1728	47	Tomiček Magdalena	1673–1718	69
Jančík Jiří	1655–1700	32	Bárta Dorota	1699–1717	43
Průcha Matěj	1762–1787	31	Farka Helena	1756–1798	39
Vytiska Martin	1723–1743	30	Průcha Alžběta	1722–1765	37
Průcha Martin	1722–1756	27	Tomiček Anna	1764–1799	33
Farka Jiří	1760–1792	26	Hovorka Rosina	1743–1790	30
Jančík Matěj	1737–1779	24	Jančík Kateřina	1716–1744	24
Jančík Václav	1715–1732	24	Farka Mariana	1724–1754	24
Vytiska Vít ml.	1776–1798	21	Píša Anna	1773–1796	22
Píša Vavřinec	1677–1700	20	Straka Alžběta	1664–1688	21
Vacek Tomáš	1778–1793	20	Vytiska Mariana	1774–1798	19
Kříž Matěj	1721–1742	19	Vytiska Kateřina	1666–1700	17
Vytiska Vít st.	1745–1773	19	Vacek Marie	1783–1796	17
Skala Matěj	1732–1755	17	Dvořák Kateřina	1725–1745	15

Note 1: Number of baptisms they acted in the role of godfather or a godmother, excluding the christenings they visited only as witnesses.

Note 2: The same colours indicated marital couples.

Source: SOA Třeboň, SMJK, FÚ Červená Řečice, the database created by the author.

Nevertheless, godparenthood was often a familial duty and inheritance as illustrated by examples of prominent families. The members of the Farka family in Těchoraz belonged to the respectable members of the village community since their participation in the revolt against the landlord at the beginning of the 16th century. Although their farm was not the largest one, the family tree reveals five generations of farmers and their wives, who served as godfathers and godmothers regularly, albeit with varying degrees of participation. Between 1667 and 1799, in total 45 babies became godchildren of the male heads of the Farka family, but their wives and widows became godmothers 79 times. Mariana Farka accompanied 23 babies to the church, whereas her husband did so only five times; their son Jiří was more popular with his 26 godchildren, but his wife Helena became the godmother of 39 newborns in 1756–1798.

On the imaginary family tree of Vytiska lineage from Těchoraz, it is also possible to distinguish five relatively prominent godfathers in subsequent generations, along with three popular godmothers – their wives. Generational cultivation of godparental ties could be interpreted as a strategy aimed at maintaining relationships with many local families: males acted as godfathers in 42 families in 1650–1798, females established affiliations with another 25 families; only 5 families were ritually related with both men and women from this lineage. In this context, particularly noteworthy is the inactivity of Jakub Vytiska and Jiří Vytiska, who had no godchildren at all. During these two generations, at the turn of the 17th century, the family faced significant difficulties with the farm – Jakub Vytiska was even forced to retire by the landlord due to his inability to manage it effectively. These examples demonstrate that family prestige alone was insufficient, individual character and economic success played a crucial role, even within otherwise respectable families.

The fact that women developed their godparental activities independently of their husbands, raises the question of whether they could transfer their popularity from their families of origin to their marital lives.

When examining the Červená Řečice parish registers of marriages for data on 28 habitual godmothers, only ten wedding records were found.

Two of these women were from Popelíštná, a nearby village belonging to the same judicial district, and only four originated directly from Těchoraz or Zmišovice. The remaining four did not come from the neighbourhood, while another 18 married elsewhere so it can be assumed that they were also born in another parish. Most habitual godmothers thus could not rely on their parents' social status and had to establish their reputations anew after reaching adulthood and marital status. Only two habitual godmothers demonstrated the transfer of recognition from their parental house to marriage. Mariana Vališ born Jančík from Zmišovice had

ten godchildren between 1711 and 1734, her husband had none, whereas her grandfather, brother, sister-in-law and nephew were all very popular habitual godparents; on two occasions, she even attended the church with her brother to assist at a baptism. Another one was Alžběta Průcha born Skala who became godmother 38 times in 1722–1765. She was more popular than her husband, who participated in 27 baptisms, and her mother and brother were also actively involved in godparental duties. Matěj Skala served as a godfather during 17 baptisms and in eleven cases he stayed near the baptismal font besides his sister Alžběta.

CONCLUSIONS

It is possible to conclude that the village godparenthood in the Červená Řečice Domain kept a horizontal character as the community remained quite egalitarian at the microlevel of the two villages. No elite and thus powerful godparents such as priests, nobility, or high-ranking members of the landlord's court have been identified. Burghers from Červená Řečice, the centre of the estate and parish, frequently appeared as godparents, but they rarely attained the status of desired ritual kin for villagers. By contrast, the popularity of wealthy and successful farmers and representatives of village self-administration is obvious, as well relatively high prestige of landlord's employees, although primarily among the members of their own social group. Simultaneously, the considerable informal influence of women, independent of their husbands' position, is visible in godparental ties.

The presented research should be complemented by an analysis of the role of biological kinship in ritual relationships²⁸. This task is however more complex for the early modern period than for the 19th century due to the instability of surnames and their frequent absence in the case of women. Another important question to address concerns the influence of the local representatives and their ability to affect the form of the particular rituals and the activity of their participants. At this stage of research, it is impossible to determine whether a priest or a reeve had the authority or capacity to permit or forbid someone from becoming a godparent²⁹.

²⁸ M. Skořepová, *Godparenthood*.

²⁹ A very directive attitude of a priest towards villagers, who were even forced to abandon locally popular names given to children during baptism was described for Slovak Detva by J. Golian, *Život ľudu detvianského. Historicko-demografická a kultúrna sonda do každodenného života na Podpol'ani v dňom 19. storočí*, Rožumberok 2019, pp. 254–256.

The concept of habitual godparents allows for the identification and analysis of the most respected members of village society. It also raises the question of why they were so popular, although this often remains impossible to answer. In any case, godparenthood shows the diversity of personal bonds and confirms, that the question of social ties and hierarchies in historical village societies cannot be reduced solely to biological kinship or measurement of peasants' landholdings.

The conclusions of this study are limited, as little research has been conducted on godparenthood in Bohemia, particularly in the early modern period, making meaningful comparison difficult. The studied sample of baptized children and their godparents is too small to support broad generalizations, and results from other studies may yield entirely different outcomes. Reducing number of individuals analyzed is unavoidable for pursuing individual bonds and social networks.

This study aims to contribute to the further exploration of godparenthood in Central Europe, a topic that remains relatively underexplored but offers many intriguing questions and insights for future research.

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Markéta Skořepová – dr, studiowała historię i archiwistykę na Uniwersytecie Południowoczeskim w Czeskich Budziejowicach, następnie zdała egzamin państwo i kontynuowała studia podyplomowe. W 2015 r. zdała państwo egzamin doktorski. Od 2009 r. pracuje w Muzeum Regionu Vysočina w Pelhřimowie jako historyk, etnograf. Od 2012 r. wykłada również na Wydziale Sztuki Uniwersytetu Południowoczeskiego. Specjalizuje się w strukturach rodzinnych i społecznych na wsi czeskiej, takich jak problematyka rodzin niepełnych i rodzicielstwa chrzestnego. Ostatnio zajmowała się tematem podrzutków w społecznościach wiejskich.

