

THE STATUS DESIGNATION IN CHURCH RECORDS

A MIRROR OF LOCAL SOCIETY

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STAND - A PERSON'S STATUS

Church records primarily inform us of baptisms, marriages, and burials. However, upon closer examination we can gain insights into the social fabric of a town or village. One detail that can reveal interesting information is the *STAND*, or status.

At first glance, the status describes a person's occupation or marital status. Yet in German society, its meaning was more complex and layered.

The status designation in church records can inform us about:

- Occupation
- Marital status
- A person's moral status
- Family relationships of woman or minors
- Social networks and social boundaries
- Military ranks
- The local economy
- Socioeconomic developments in a community

What the status in church records can tell us varies significantly by:

- Size and type of community
Free farming villages, landed estates, towns, cities
- Historical region
Vast differences depending how the community was shaped and influenced by political history
- With societal changes
18th century Enlightenment; 19th century Secularization; 19th century Industrialization

EXAMPLES DISCUSSED IN THIS PRESENTATION

A. Dreitzsch, Thuringia: 1840 Lutheran baptisms

Status: *Nachbar und Einwohner* – neighbor and resident

- This status is found only in some regions; its meaning can vary by location.
- It typically refers to the core population of a village: the families that had been established for some time.
- The designation “neighbor and resident” does not indicate lack of an occupation.
- These families shared ownership in common community land, such as grazing land.
- In the example from Dreitzsch, those not identified as *Nachbar und Einwohner* had recently moved to the community.

B. Five contrasting parishes in and around Coburg

i. Weitramsdorf, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha: 1829 Lutheran Marriages

The predominant status in this community is the *Bauernstand* – the farmers’ status. Weitramsdorf was a village of free farmers who owned their farmland. This stands in contrast to tenant farmers and farm laborers in other communities who leased land or worked on land owned by wealthy landlords.

ii. Scheuerfeld, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha: 1838 Lutheran Marriages

In contrast to nearby Weitramsdorf, Scheuerfeld was a landed estate. Status designations include tenant farmer, shepherd, night watchman, day laborer – all of which imply the presence of a landowner who employed them. Most residents worked on land they did not own.

iii. Coburg, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha: 1826 marriages at Lutheran city parish

Status designations tell us of a vibrant community of burghers - citizens who had been granted the rights of town citizenship. This larger city had an economy with a wide range of trades. Some men, like the court saddle maker, worked directly for the royal court. Marriages often reflected professional continuity, with men typically marrying women whose father’s worked in similar trades.

iv. Coburg, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha: 1862 marriages at royal court parish

The palace had its own chapel, where members of high society held their weddings. This included not only the nobility but also men who worked at the palace and those who married daughters of palace employees.

v. Coburg, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha: 1809 marriages at Coburg Fortress

During the Napoleonic wars, there was a military chapel at the fortress. The grooms’ status was defined by their military rank. Brides came from middle-class families, many likely also with a history of military service.

C. Lauf an der Pegnitz, Bavaria: Three Lutheran marriages in 1730/32

In the 18th century, it became fashionable in some communities to use flattering attributes when describing even ordinary persons – perhaps a mirror of the excesses in flattery commonly seen in aristocratic circles. These attributes give us insights into the person's social and moral standing in the community.

- i. The administrator at the nearby university was decorated with three flattering attributes: *wohlehrbar, vorachtbar, und wohlvornehmer Herr* – most honorable, respectable, and distinguished Sir, while his bride was considered a virtuous maiden.
- ii. The local gardener's son was deemed *ehrsam und bescheiden* – honorable and humble. Being a man of lower social status, he received only two attributes. His lower social status required honor and humility, but not distinction.
- iii. The couple that had sinned by getting pregnant before marriage was denied any flattery. Instead, they were punished with imprisonment and a solemn (and possibly forced) marriage at the small altar.

D. Kleinmachnow, Brandenburg: 1739/43 Lutheran baptisms

Kleinmachnow was a feudal estate where some residents were subservient to the landlord. The status designations for baptismal sponsors reveal details about the social network of the infants' parents. The order in which sponsors were listed reflects the hierarchy in the community. Men were typically listed before women, noblepersons before commoners, and young, unmarried adults ranked according to their father's status.

- i. The baptism record for the family of a cottager, lists sponsors in the following order: 1. The local miller, 2. Inhabitant (male), 3. Son of a supervisor, 4. Son of a cottager, 5. Daughter of a supervisor, 6. Wife of a coachman.
- ii. The baptism record for the child born to an unwed mother, lists the sponsors as follows: 1. A farmer's daughter, 2. A farmhand, 3. Another farmhand.
- iii. The baptism record for the pastor's own child shows the following sponsors: 1. The noble wife of the Lord of the Manor, 2. The wife of the pastor in the next village, 3. A pastor of a village in another state.

E. Schildesche, Westphalia: 1806/1823/1887 Lutheran marriages

Schildesche was home to both a land-owning abbey and a farming community. Marriages records show the shift from a farming village where some individuals were still serfs in 1806, to a free society in 1823, just beginning to feel the effects of the Industrial Revolution. By 1887, many had emigrated, and new industries were emerging in the region. Although the church records do not explicitly document this history, it can be inferred from the status designations of the spouses in these marriage records.

STATUS OF WOMEN

Historically, a woman's status in church records could be defined by her marital status, moral standing, and as a dependent of her father or husband.

- It is rare to find occupations listed for women in church records, with the exception being *Magd* or *Dienstmagd*, which denotes a domestic servant.
- With the introduction of civil registration records in 1874, we begin to see occupations for women. As migration to cities increased towards the end of the 19th century, more women entered the labor force, and this is sometimes reflected in civil records.
- Unlike church records, civil registration records do not include a status designation in the traditional sense. When an occupation is listed, it refers solely to employment status.

RESOURCES FOR UNDERSTANDING STATUS DESIGNATIONS

1. English language resource: Familysearch Research Wiki
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page
Europe → Germany → Germany Genealogical Word Lists → German → Latin
2. German language resource: Genwiki
<https://wiki.genealogy.net/Kategorie:Berufsbezeichnung>
Hauptseite (landing page) → Lexika → Berufsbezeichnung
3. Historical German dictionary: Krünitz
https://www.kruenitz1.uni-trier.de/site/a_to_z.htm
Krünitz Online (landing page) → A – Z → Online-Version der Encyclopädie
4. Use German Wikipedia for more thorough historical context – then use web translator
<https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Hauptseite>
5. Use ChatGPT for translations
<https://chatgpt.com>

LITERATURE RECOMMENDATIONS

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2. Hagen, William W. - Ordinary Prussians: Brandenburg Junkers and villagers, 1500-1840. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Sources used for this presentation

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