

*Marriage, Family and Social Structure  
in an Early Modern German Town*

Birth, marriage, death: to the historical demographer, all three vital events are of equal importance. But to the social historian, one of these three events — marriage — is of special interest. For unlike death, and to a far greater extent than birth, marriage reflects conscious human choice. The decisions involved in the making of a marriage — whether? when? where? and, above all, to whom? — represent crucial choices in which the spouses or their parents articulate their familial purposes or reflect prevailing social values.

Indeed, the social content of marriage is normally taken to have been much greater in earlier times than it is today. It is a truism that marriage in premodern society was generally based on social and economic bonding rather than emotional bonding. But this statement still requires considerable elaboration, for marriage can fulfill very different and potentially even contradictory social and economic purposes. It can serve as a mechanism to reinforce existing social structures, or as a mechanism to promote social readjustment. It can be endogamous, thus promoting group solidarity, or exogamous, thus rendering the composition of groups more fluid. It can, in fact, serve as an instrument either to promote social mobility or to retard it. And marriage can even serve different purposes at the same time in the same society.

This paper will present some findings about marriage and its relationship to social structure in one early modern community — specifically, the south German town of Nördlingen between the late sixteenth and the early eighteenth centuries. For the example of this one community can effectively illustrate both the problems involved and the kinds of results to be looked for in studying the function of marriage in early modern urban society.

There is, in fact, very little direct evidence about the function of marriage in early modern Nördlingen. We do know something about how the community's elites perceived the purpose of marriage in general — but we