

The Sacramental Registers of the Catholic Diocese of Passau, Germany Projects of Digitisation

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1. The district of the Catholic Diocese of Passau and its population

The diocese of Passau is situated in the south-eastern part of Bavaria, and almost all of the population there were members of the Roman-Catholic Church down into the 20th century, numbering ca. 340.000 people around 1900. The denominational uniformity of the population makes the sacramental registers (baptism, wedding, burial) of the Catholic parishes a magnificent source for large scale population studies.

2. The Historical Population Data Base of the Catholic Diocese of Passau

There are, however, several major problems - the registers are handwritten, difficult to read and extremely time-consuming to use. Therefore academic research has more or less neglected them, practically all over the world and in the Passau region as well. Therefore a method had to be devised to make these registers accessible to academic research. Towards the end of the year 1997, we began entering data into a data base. The first step was to enter the indices to the wedding registers. They cover all matrimonial acts in the diocese from the beginnings of the registers in the late 16th century up to 1900 (incl.). This covers about 750.000 people, brides and bridegrooms, widows and widowers. These data provide an overview over most of the genealogically relevant population of the diocese. We do not go beyond 1900 out of practical and legal reasons. The second step involves the entering of the data of the wedding registers.

In 2004, we began digitisation of the registers. The scan-images provide a fast access to the registers and will fasten the database input.

3. The relevance of a demographic data base for modern fields of research

A demographic data base is a bane for genealogists and demographers, we happened to enter another and very different field of research. Since 2000, we are in cooperation with one of regional mental hospitals. Alzheimer's disease is endemic in our region; Dr. Alzheimer's second patient, upon whose diagnosis he was convinced to have found a new disease, came from our region. We have established the existence of two large groups of people with a blood

relationship, where the disease appears again and again. There are a number of socio-medico-historical insights to be learned from this research. A more generally interesting point is the political history of the area of origin of the disease. This area was, from about the year 1000 up to 1803, a small and isolated part of the Principality of the Bishops of Passau. Based upon the legal system of the Middle Ages and of the Early Modern Era one has to expect that very few people crossed the borders of that Passavian district when they got married. As a result we seem to have a fairly restricted gene pool. This situation seems - at least for the historian - to be the basis for the spread of Alzheimer's disease in this area.