

## **Parish Registers as a Genealogical Source for Demographic Study in a Rural Community of Guimarães (Portugal): Illegitimacy in the 17th and 18th Centuries.**

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Based on Parish Register Books, this study undertakes a micro-demographic analysis of the parish of Santa Maria de Vila Nova das Infantas, located in the municipality of Guimarães, Portugal. The research aims to reconstruct and examine demographic behaviors at the local level during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, focusing on key variables such as nuptiality, fertility, mortality, and marital mobility. These variables are explored through a series of demographic indicators derived from parish records, including age at first marriage, birth intervals, mortality rates across different age groups, and patterns of remarriage. The detailed examination of these indicators provides a window into the lived experiences of a rural population in northern Portugal, revealing both the conformity to broader regional patterns and the particularities that distinguish this community.

Given the documentary gaps and inconsistencies frequently encountered in parish records, the study adopted a rigorous methodology involving the cross-referencing of multiple sources. Baptismal, marriage, and burial registers were systematically compared and supplemented with additional documentation, such as wills, notarial records, and ecclesiastical licenses, in order to reduce the degree of uncertainty inherent in the reconstruction of family units. This methodological approach is crucial in establishing a more reliable genealogical and demographic framework, particularly when reconstructing complex family structures that often include illegitimate children or non-nuclear households.

The research relies on the SRP (Parish Reconstitution System), a specialized application designed to organize and link demographic data. The system allows for the creation of a family file, where all relevant events—births, marriages, and

deaths—are recorded and connected to the corresponding individuals. From these family files, individual files can then be generated, providing comprehensive life-course trajectories for each person within the parish population. This dual structure—family and individual files—enables detailed analyses of household composition, intergenerational relationships, and demographic behaviors, facilitating both quantitative and qualitative assessments of the community.

The analysis reveals that while the overall demographic behaviors of Santa Maria de Vila Nova das Infantas largely align with established patterns for the Minho region during the Ancien Régime, certain specific characteristics emerge that distinguish this parish. One particularly striking finding is the exceptionally high rate of illegitimate births. Unlike most contemporary European populations, where illegitimacy generally remained low, this parish exhibited decades in which nearly one quarter of all births occurred outside of marriage. This pattern has important implications for the estimation of legitimate fertility, as previous assessments based solely on married women may have systematically underestimated the community's reproductive output.

Several explanatory factors appear to underlie these elevated levels of illegitimacy. Firstly, the increasing age at first marriage among women in the parish may have extended the period of premarital exposure to conception, particularly in a context where social and economic pressures delayed formal unions. Secondly, the mobility of the male labor force, including seasonal migration to urban centers or neighboring regions, may have disrupted regular conjugal patterns, leaving women to give birth outside the canonical marital framework. Thirdly, unmarried women may have utilized motherhood as a survival strategy, both socially and economically, ensuring access to resources and support networks in a rural environment where female autonomy was otherwise constrained. Finally, premarital conceptions could also result from consanguineous unions awaiting ecclesiastical authorization, a phenomenon that, while formally irregular, reflected local customs and the practical realities of rural life.

In sum, this study underscores the importance of micro-demographic analysis in revealing the nuanced interplay between social, economic, and cultural factors in shaping population dynamics. By combining meticulous record linkage with

contextual interpretation, it provides a richer understanding of family formation, fertility, and illegitimacy in a rural Portuguese parish during the early modern period. Moreover, the findings challenge simplistic generalizations about the demographic behavior of the Minho region, highlighting the need to consider local variations and the specific historical circumstances that produced distinctive reproductive patterns. Through this approach, the research contributes not only to genealogical reconstruction but also to broader discussions on the demography of pre-industrial Europe, illustrating how parish-level studies can illuminate both common trends and exceptional cases within historical populations.