

# Marriage in the Late Middle Ages

## - Rituals and Customs

### Summary

Medieval marriage. The only holiness that believers grant themselves among themselves. A necessary evil for bearing children. A religious union. A Church tolerated relation between pure virginity and honourable widowhood. The path to the achievement of the political aims and fulfilment of parental, family or personal ambitions. A relation that serves to rectification of sexual passions and helps limit the commission of even worse, physical and spiritual sins. An opportunity for a social assent and path to the multiplication of family property. A relation without love concluded behind the backs of those engaged. The term marriage can hide in these and many other schemas, which in the Middle Ages penetrated to the secular and ecclesiastical coordinates of the medieval world.

If in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marriage in the Middle Ages remained a sovereign theme of canonical-legal historical research, which focused mainly on uncovering the opinions of theologians and the creators of canon law, regarding marriage as a consensual union, then the last decades of medievalist research represent a distinct culturalistic reversal in the perception of the holy union between a man and a woman. A collection of studies by Czech, Slovak and Polish researchers, whose interest focuses on the matrimonial issue in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, tries to mediate that emphasis on the socio-cultural aspects of medieval marriage, because at the then of the Middle Ages with a certain delay as against Western Europe the efforts to subject the conclusion of marriage to ecclesiastical oversight and at a minimum to limit its still clear secular character, in the aristocratic, burgher and rural milieus, begins to be promoted more significantly in the Bohemian, Polish and Hungarian milieus. The first section of the study is devoted to these disciplinary efforts. Krzysztof Ożóg (*Małżeństwo w polskim ustawodawstwie synodalnym wieków średnich* /Marriage in the Polish Synodal Regulation of the Middle Ages/) analysed the legal regulations, issued in the sessions of the Polish episcopal and archiepiscopal synods between the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries. In these legal texts, great attention was paid to both the clarification of the sacral character of the wedding and the formal questions connected with marriage, chiefly the issue of bans, against which the Polish nobility took a negative

stance (successfully in the Cracow diocese). Like in Western Europe, just like in the milieu of the Prague diocese, the Polish synodal regulations endeavour to apply a ban on the conclusion of secret marriages. According to the statutes of the Cracow diocese from 1459, parish registers of concluded marriages were to be maintained in every parish with a unified formulaic entry, but no parish registers have been preserved from the given period, which is valid also for Bohemia and Moravia. The issue of secret marriages is also dealt with in the study by Martin Nodl (*In facie ecclesiae*), in which the author considers the extent of the conclusions of secret marriages in the Prague diocese of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Based on the preserved sources, he reaches the finding that despite the systematic, disciplinary efforts of the ecclesiastical representatives, expressed both in synodal regulations and visitations of the archdeacon, marriages were concluded without any participation of the church was a very widespread phenomenon in the rural and urban milieus. That refusal of the participation of the church in the transfer of marriage vows was not an expression of the conscious disapproval of ecclesiastical oversight, but much more a manifestation of the persistence of the secular character of the conclusion of marriages in the world of the laity. That emphasis on the secular character of the conclusion of marriages can be proved in the same period also in the noble and sovereign milieus, where marriage vows were not given without the presence of a priest, but otherwise here the consensual character of marriage made concessions to power and political pressures and further here, like in the world of the burghers and villagers, a large role was played here in the awareness of the people by the sexual connection of the engages during the wedding night. Also municipal law, which distinctly limited the freedom to conclude marriages in proprietary affairs, was similarly resistant to the disciplinary efforts of the church. Izabela Skierská (*Rozwiązanie małżeństwa w polsce późnego średniowiecza w świetle praktyki sądów kościelnych* /Dissolution of Marriage in Poland in the Light of the Late Medieval Practice of the Ecclesiastical Courts/) focused her attention on the as-yet completely unstudied form of the dissolution of marriage in the Polish milieu of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In that, she started with the rich material of the court provenience of the Gniezno and Lvov archdioceses. What is noteworthy is that for all forms of dissolution or annulment of marriage the same term is used here – *divorcium*. The initiative to dissolve the marriage was in the absolute majority purely private, often motivated by the effort to force one of the couple to conclude the marriage *in facie ecclesiae*. Skierská hence indirectly proved that chiefly in the rural milieu many more marriages were concluded without the participation of the church as a secret marriage, according to purely secular habits. It therefore seems clear that in the Polish lay milieu of the Late Middle Ages the unified ecclesiastical form of the conclusion of marriage was not applied, despite, as shown by Monika Saczyńska (*Rytuály kościelne związane z małżeństwem w Polsce późnego średniowiecza na podstawie pontyfikałów krakowskich z xv wieku* /Religious Rituals Associated with Marriage in Poland of the Late Middle Ages on the Basis of the Pontificals of Cracow with 15<sup>th</sup> Century/) at least two pontifical being present in the Cracow diocese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (of Bishop Tomáš Strzępiński and Bishop Fridrich Jagielloński), in which several rituals connected with the conclusion of marriage are described on the normative level: benediction of the newlyweds and benediction of the gifts. From the fact that there are no mentions of masses in the pontificals, Saczyńska induced that also the pontificals allow for the conclusion of marriages outside of the ecclesiastical areas, although with the participation of a priest, hence as we know from

other sources for the world of the Polish aristocracy. A specific ritual in the pontificals was the benediction of the wife after the wedding night and the benediction of the expectant mother.

The second section is devoted to marriage as an act of power, which was one of the means of considered dynastic policy. The extensive study by Petr Elbel (*Die Heirat zwischen Elisabeth von Luxemburg und Herzog Albrecht V. von Österreich. Rechtliche, finanzielle und machtpolitische Zusammenhänge*) deals with the significance of the late medieval dynastic marriage between Duke of Austria and later King of the Romans, Hungary and Bohemia Albert V and the daughter of Emperor Sigismund of Luxemburg Elisabeth. A complete collection of the deeds from the contract of a future marriage from 1411 through the actual marriage, heir and alliance contracts from 1421 all the way to the subsequently granted papal dispensation from 1431, which are analysed and newly issued in the study, have been preserved on this marriage. Besides the analysis of the individual documents, the author places the wedding project in the wider context of the Habsburg-Luxemburg relations and newly looks at the role of Albert V in the anti-Hussite policy of Sigismund of Luxemburg. Directly in connection with the given marriage, he attempts to answer the question of to what degree late medieval dynastic marriages were bound to the collection of customary marital property right, and comes to the conclusion that the given marriage represents a significant deviation from the period legal customs. The role of marriages in the dynastic politics of the Polish Jagiellonian kings was investigated using many examples by Urszula Borkowska (*Małżeństwa jagiellońskie /Jagiellonian Marriages/*). Of the royal marriages investigated by her, it arises that in the milieu of the Cracow royal court the Polish nobility and politically active Polish prelates, who distinctly influenced the selection of the bride of the royal sons and of the widowed kings, played a significant role in the conclusion of marriages. A case study of the estate influence on the marriage of King of Poland Sigismund Augustus was presented by Agnieszka Januszek-Sieradzka (*De rege et uxore. Kwestie małżeństw Zygmunta Augusta na sejmach /De rege et uxore: Questions of the Marriage of Sigismund Augustus at the Sejms/*), who showed that the aristocratic political representation in many regards acted against Sigismund's ideas and against his marriage policy and intervened in his purely private life, which certainly was not possible in the case of other European courts. Marriage policy is also dealt with in the treatise by Antonín Kalous (*Tři týdny slávy, tři roky šťastného manželství: Beatrix a Matyáš /Three Weeks of Celebration, Three Years of Happy Marriage: Beatrix and Matthias/*). In it, the author investigates the long unsuccessful efforts of King of Hungary Matthias Corvinus to acquire a new spouse after the death of his first wife Catherine. He finally managed it only ten years later in Naples in the person of Beatrix, the daughter of King of Naples Ferdinand. The wedding between Matthias and Beatrix comprised a whole number of rituals and celebrations, which in essence took place from the moment the Neapolitan king consented to the marriage and Matthias found out about the consent in besieged Wrocław at the end of 1474 until their meeting as fiancés and the coronation of the new queen at Székesfehérvár, or the confirmation of the wedding in Buda. The wedding itself was described by several eyewitnesses and later chroniclers. It clearly arises from their reports that the wedding with the royal daughter was a magnificent event and outwardly was to represent the power and wealth of the Hungarian sovereign. Daniela Dvořáková (*Manželstvo uhorskej šľachty /Marriage of the Hungarian Nobility/*) focused on the political and proprietary aspects of noble marriages in the

Hungarian milieu. The rich documentary material clearly shows that in the milieu of the Hungarian nobility marriage was one of the frequent forms of social climbing, as well as one of the forms of aristocratic representation. It arises from her findings that the Hungarian nobility, like the Polish nobility, perceived the conclusion of marriage as a distinctly secular affair and repeatedly tried to limit ecclesiastical oversight, both in terms of rituals and the possibility to terminate an infertile marriage. Nevertheless, like in the Polish kingdom also marriages unequal in estate were concluded in Hungary, motivated both by property and sometimes also with an almost romantic, amorous background. In any case, thanks to this study, we today know much more on the marriages of the Hungarian nobility than on the marriages of the Bohemian and Moravian nobility in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Purely proprietary affairs using the example of the Old Town of Prague were followed through the evidence of the burgher testaments by Kateřina Jiřová (*Manželství v pražském měšťanském prostředí. Staroměstské svatební smlouvy z druhé poloviny 15. Století* /Marriage in the Prague Burgher Milieu: Old-Town Marriage Contracts from the Second Half of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century/), knowing that the testaments have significant limitations in terms of the matrimonial issue.

The third section is devoted to the late medieval view of marital and extramarital sexuality, mainly from the perspective of struggling with the physical and spiritual character of marriage. The Polish sources were very vividly used in this respect by Adam Krawiec (*Pożądanie i rytuał. seksualność małżeńska w późnym średniowieczu* /Desire and Ritual: Marital Sexuality in the Late Middle Ages/), which focused chiefly on the tension between theological norms and everyday sexual practices. On the other hand, Kateřina Čadková (*Ach ta láska nebeská. Příspěvek k fenoménu duchovního manželství v prostoru středověké mystiky* /Oh, Heavenly Love: A Contribution on the Phenomenon of Spiritual Marriage in the Space of Medieval Mysticism/) turned her attention from marriage as a physical relation to marriage as a spiritual bond. Using several examples, she showed that a certain form of marriage and intimacy found its place even in the highest spheres of spiritual life, mainly in connection with God. Mystics of female and male gender adapted to a marriage which a person (spirit) concludes with the Creator in moments of intimate spiritual connection. In its basic features, the description of spiritual marriage was very similar in this to the institution of secular marriage and for its description it used the vocabulary and parables that matrimonial terminology offers. The treatise by Pavel Blažek (*Zhavadilé způsoby. Islámská manželství očima středověkých západních cestovatelů* /Beastly Customs: Islamic Marriage in the Eyes of Medieval Western Travellers/) surpasses the borders of Latin Europe and deals with descriptions of Islamic marriage in the reports of late medieval Western travellers to Egypt and the Holy Land. Dissimilar – in some fundamental aspects directly contradictory – matrimonial norms and practices in medieval Islam comprised one of the most visible differences between the Islamic and Christian worlds. It is, therefore, no wonder that medieval Western travellers would have devoted significant attention to them and that these practices and norms for them comprised a distinctive component of their image of Islam. It is true particularly for the Islamic practice of polygamy and legal concubinage with female slaves, but also divorce and the practice of so-called cleansing of marriage connected with that. Some travellers, moreover, mentioned Islamic rules related to marriage between relatives and the Shiite practice of marriage “for a certain time”. Other than these different legal and religious norms of Islamic marriage, some Western travellers described also the course of a Muslim marriage and

devoted attention to what from their perspective were the “peculiarities” of the marital life of Muslims. Besides that, Blažek considers how period Christian marital norms and practices were projected onto the descriptions of Islamic marriage. He also then seeks and answer to the question of to what degree the descriptions of Islamic marriage, particularly Islamic polygamy, concubinage and divorce practices, correspond to the norms and practices of the Islamic world then or to what degree they are only Western anti-Islamic stereotypes.

All three sections of this book work both on the level of ecclesiastical norms of conjugal rights and marital rituals and on the level of practice, which often deviated from the norms and rituals. The theological concepts on the conclusion of marriage, just like the sexual lifestyle in marriage in many respects struck the deep-rooted customs of the lay world, which only gradually and often grudgingly adjusted to those disciplinary efforts after the 4<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council. The treatises included in this book also showed that marriage was not a homogeneous phenomenon in terms of the individual social worlds in the Late Middle Ages and that they quite distinctly differed from one another in terms of the accepted norms and in terms of the practised rituals and the celebrations and ceremonies connected with them of the worlds of the sovereign courts, aristocratic residences, burghers’ homes and rural homesteads. In any case, the investigation of marriage in the Late Middle Ages is one of the possibilities of how to penetrate even deeper into the mental world of late medieval people, who saw the possibility of a new social existence in marriage.