Mariann Slíz

✉ sliz.marianna@btk.elte.hu

🆔 https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5959-1018

⌂ Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE)

🌐 Budapest, Hungary

Differences in the Applicability of Female and Male Names in the Historical Study of the Cults of Saints

Abstract

The paper demonstrates the usability of historical given name corpora in the research of saints' cults, with special emphasis on the methodological consequences of gender differences. The small number of historical female name data compared to the male ones is a well-known fact in historical anthroponomastics. Moreover, female names were significantly less likely to become surnames. However, it is less evidently acknowledged how much these differences can complicate (and, in some historical periods, eliminate the possibility of) the onomastic examination of the cults of saintly women in comparison to that of men. The differences between the applicability of the two groups of names by gender are shown by actual examples, comparing the onomastic results with information on the actual state of the cults of saintly men and women in question. The interpretation of the name data covers the aspects of historical changes, as well as social and geographical variances in the frequency of the actual given names and surnames. The analysis is based on Hungarian historical personal name corpora from the Middle Ages (the author's corpus from the 13th–14th centuries), the Early Modern Period (the Atlas of Historical Surnames of Hungary, 1715) and the Modern Period (the database of official family name changes, 1815–1932).

1. Introduction

It is a widely known fact in historical anthroponomastics that historical documents – especially deeds and censuses, the most typical sources of historical onomastic research – preserved far fewer female names than male ones, at least in European culture. Naturally, this provides fewer opportunities for the historical onomastic survey of female names. However, this difference has further consequences in other fields that use the evidence provided by names. One of these fields, in which names can also be used as sources, is cult history. Namely, the frequency of an actual saint's name, its changes in time and its variety in space and society may indicate the popularity of the saint's cult, assuming it is investigated with adequate methodology. It should be noted that name choice can be driven by several motives, and only some of them may be connected to the cults of saints. Additionally, the frequency of a name may be inflenced by several saints (e.g., John the Evangelist, John the Baptist, John Chrysostom and other saints called *John*). Furthermore, the actual name-giving can be motivated by several intertwined factors. However, comparing the results of onomastic research to those of other sciences (mostly of cult history) can reveal the impact of the cult of a saint on the popularity of his/her name in a given place, time and society. For instance, certain factors (such as religious or political changes) may increase or decrease the popularity or regional prevalence of a cult (e.g., strong royal or state support, propaganda, Reformation and Catholic Revival; for detailed examples, see, e.g., Slíz, 2013, 2020).

In the following, I will concentrate on one methodological aspect of such a study: the importance of comparing at least two cults to provide a basis for assessing the changes. Without comparison, we can only discern the increase and decrease in the frequency of a name, but the degree of these changes can only be ascertained in proportion to the changes of other names' frequencies. Cults connected to each other in some way are best for these comparisons. Sometimes, the most obvious choice for a comparison would be a saint from the opposing gender, e.g., the case of Saint Francis and Clare of Assisi or Saint Benedict of Nursia and his sister, Saint Scholastica. In the following, I will introduce the methodological problems of such a comparison caused by the above-mentioned difference between the numbers of data entries by gender.

The introduction is based on Hungarian databases of historical anthroponyms, and the results are compared to the histories of the cults of two Hungarian saints, whose names provide enough data for a survey like this: Saint Stephen and Saint Elisabeth of Hungary. First, I will present the connections of their cults, then methodological difficulties involved in the comparison of their names' frequencies will be demonstrated, divided according to time periods, methods and personal name types.

2. The cults of Saint Stephen and Saint Elisabeth of Hungary

The connection between the two saints that may motivate an onomastic comparison is their lineage: they were both members of the Hungarian Árpád Dynasty. Saint Stephen was the first king of Hungary (Grand Prince: 997–1000, King: 1000–1038) and was canonized in 1083. He became the ideal of the wise ruler, the founder of the state. Saint Elisabeth lived about two centuries later: she was a daughter of King Andrew II of Hungary and the wife of Louis IV, Landgrave of Thuringia. She was canonized in 1235, only four years after her death. She quickly became a role model for saintly princesses and was venerated in every social class due to her commitment to helping the sick and the poor. Since the Middle Ages, both St Stephen and St Elisabeth have been regarded as Hungarian national saints and are usually depicted together (among other Hungarian saints). Hungarian rulers greatly supported their cults since saintly relatives may have increased their international prestige, and – in the case of the Angevin kings – their descendance from the Árpád Dynasty served as an argument to confirm their legitimacy. Even subsequent rulers whose relation to the Árpáds was quite distant or non-existent promoted the cults of the Hungarian dynastic saints since their characters could always be ideologically utilized and reinterpreted in line with the needs of current politics (for further information, see, e.g., Klaniczay, 2002; Gecser, 2012; Slíz, 2020).

3. The databases applied in the survey and research questions

The following demonstration will concentrate on three periods: the Middle Ages, the Early Modern and the Modern Age. This provides an opportunity to highlight temporal changes and methodological specialities, since every period has its typical source types with characteristic opportunities and data processing problems. The database used for the first case study regarding the Middle Ages comprises approximately 20,000 given names collected by the author from 14th-century deeds and published in two volumes as a historical personal name dictionary (Slíz 2011, 2017a). It is applicable to the survey of the temporal changes in the frequency of names within the time range of the database (ca. 1220–1359) but not usable for name geography since – despite data collection from all around the country – the geographical distribution of the extant sources is accidental.

This deficiency can only be eliminated regarding the Early Modern Age, as the first national censuses were conducted at the beginning of the 18th century. Consequently, the second case study will be based on a given name database connected to the digital Atlas of Historical Surnames of Hungary (AHSH). This corpus is based on the 1713 census of Transylvania and the 1715 census of Hungary and contains name data of about 200,000 name bearers.

Due to the nature of their sources, both databases contain different language variants of the same names. The majority of names were recorded in Latin or Latinized forms, but Hungarian, German, Slavic and Romanian variants, a range of hypocoristics among them, can also be found in non-negligible quantities. As for the two names in question, *Chepan*, *Estphan*, *Istók*, *István*, *Stephk*, *Stephan*, *Stipán,* etc., will be processed together with the Latin *Stephanus*. Similarly, *Else*, *Elys*, *Ersok*, *Ersebeth,* etc., will be counted along with the Latin *Elisabeth*. Since the two names in question were widely used in every ethnicity and supported by national cults, the language of the name variants bears no significance in the study. (Of course, when a cult and/or a name is characteristic of an ethnicity or denomination, for example, in the case of Saint Demetrius, whose Hungarian cult had declined by the 18th century, except among Orthodox people, a lower level of lemmatization would also be advisable.)

Regarding the Modern Age, another personal name type, surnames, can also be involved in research. Since surnames are generally inherited, the

frequency of a surname derived from a saint's name cannot directly reflect the influence of the cult. However, surnames chosen by their bearers through official name changing processes may reflect religious motivations behind their choice. Therefore, the source of the third case study will be the online Name Changes Database (NChD). The study will demonstrate the usability of newly chosen surnames in the onomastic research of saints' cults. The online corpus contains data of the official name changes that occurred between 1815 and 1932: the original and the requested new surnames, the given names, the places of birth and dwelling places of the applicants.

In applying these databases, the research questions will be the same in the three case studies: (1) What kind of methodological difficulties should researchers deal with when comparing the frequency data of male and female names? (2) Can these difficulties be eliminated? If so, what methods can be applied?

4. Demonstration of methodological difficulties

4.1. Case study 1: regarding the Middle Ages

The frequency of the name *István* 'Stephen' in the stock of male names borne by landowners in the 13th–14th-century database is 5.96% (Slíz, 2017b, p. 19), while the frequency of *Erzsébet* 'Elisabeth' in the stock of noble women's names is 15.79% (Slíz, 2017b, p. 32). At first glance, *István* seems to be a much less popular name than *Erzsébet.* However, the picture is distorted by the difference between the total amount of data in the two groups: approximately 12,000 entries for male names, opposed to less than 500 entries for female names, which makes the comparison inadvisable. A more appropriate solution could be comparing their positions on the frequency lists of male and female names in the corpus of the nobility. Since *István* was the 4th most popular among male names and *Erzsébet* was the No. 1 female name (Slíz, 2017b, pp. 19, 32), they can both be considered names of the highest popularity in the upper class of society in the period. This result reflects the strong influence of the actual saints' cults on personal name-giving. The frequency of the two names was undoubtedly increased by other saints (by the first martyr and the mother of Saint John the Baptist), but, unfortunately, there are no

methodological tools to separate the influence of different saints behind the same names in the period.

The study above only concentrated on the nobility since the sources of the corpus contained much fewer names from the other classes: approximately 400 entries for city-dwellers and 600 for serfs among male names, and only 36 data for city-dwellers and 29 entries for serfs among female names. Consequently, a comparison of the name data for the two sexes modified by social standing would lead to immense distortion, too. However, a general remark can be made: *István* and *Erzsébet* were as popular in the lower classes as in the upper class (they held the 2nd–3rd positions in the mentioned classes) (Slíz, 2017b, pp. 19–20, 32). This result confirms that the two saints were venerated in medieval Hungary independently of social standing.

The temporal distribution of data makes a survey of frequency change possible in the case of *István*. However, as Figure 1 shows, compared to the names of the other two male saints of the dynasty, its position changed only slightly in the period: it was constantly among the most popular male names, due to the support of the cult by the last kings of the Árpád Dynasty and their successors, the House of Anjou. Unfortunately, in the case of *Erzsébet*, the total number of occurrences (72) and their uneven temporal distribution makes the creation of a similar diagram impossible. Thus, a comparison of temporal changes in the frequency of *István* and *Erzsébet* cannot be drawn.
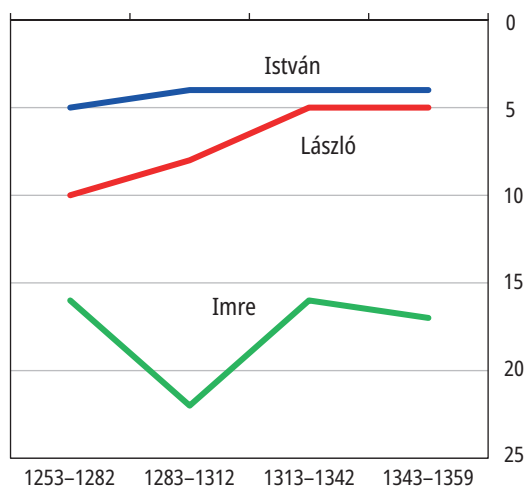

Figure 1. The position (rank) of *István*, *Imre* and *László* in the 13th–14th-century corpus, among landowners
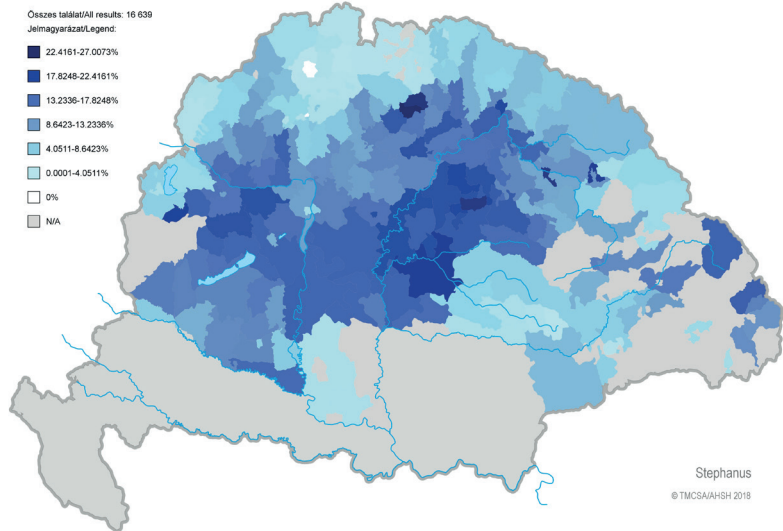
Source: based on Slíz, 2011, 2017a.

Figure 2. The geographical distribution of the given name *István* in 1713–1715
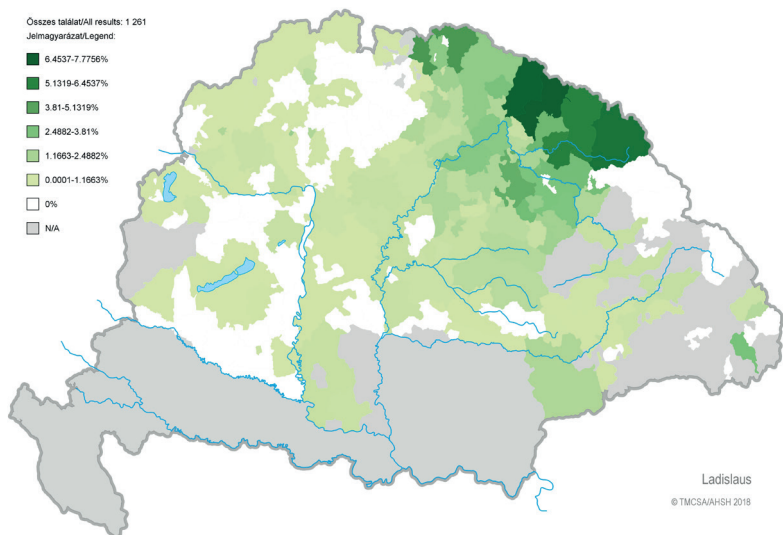
Source: AHSH.[1]

Figure 3. The geographical distribution of the given name *László* in 1713–1715

Source: AHSH.

[1] There are no data from the areas coloured uniformly grey (the westernmost, southern-most and easternmost parts of the maps).

4.2. Case study 2: regarding the Early Modern Age

The geographical distribution of the given name *István* in the second decade of the 18th century (Figure 2) offers at least three points of note. First, the name was found in great numbers around the country, as opposed to the name of the other saint king, *László* (Figure 3; the name did not appear at all in the territories left white on the map).

Second, it was more frequent in areas where surnames of Hungarian origin appeared as a block (Figure 4). Although the Hungarian origin of a surname does not necessarily indicate the name bearer's Hungarian ethnicity, the high number of data and such clusters indicate that most of their bearers could have been Hungarians. This strongly suggests that the name's high popularity was mostly driven by the Hungarian saint and only supported by the Protomartyr. Third, the high frequency of the name countrywide confirms the results of historical research on the cult. Namely, Catholic propaganda tried to monopolize the cult of the saint king and used it as an ideological weapon against Protestants: many of the Catholic theorists claimed that the disintegration of the Hungarian kingdom due to the partial Turkish occupation was God's punishment because many Hungarians had turned from the Catholic Church, founded in Hungary by Saint Stephen. Nevertheless, the figure of Stephen I (not the saint but the founder of the state) had become a national symbol by the time the state was refounded and territories of the former Kingdom of Hungary occupied by the Ottomans were reconquered (cf. e.g., Bene, 2006; Tóth, 2016).

Unfortunately, a similar analysis cannot be completed in the case of *Erzsébet,* since the name – although still the most popular among female names (Hajdú, 2003, p. 386) – appears in the whole database only 27 times. The geographical distribution of these entries is somewhat sporadic, too, which is evidently not enough to draw a reliable geographical name map. Nevertheless, the low number is understandable, knowing that women's names were registered in censuses only in those rare cases when they were the heads of their families, primarily as widows. Moreover, several women in the corpus were only mentioned by their late husbands' names (the surname + the given name of the husband + *-né* 'wife of' suffix).
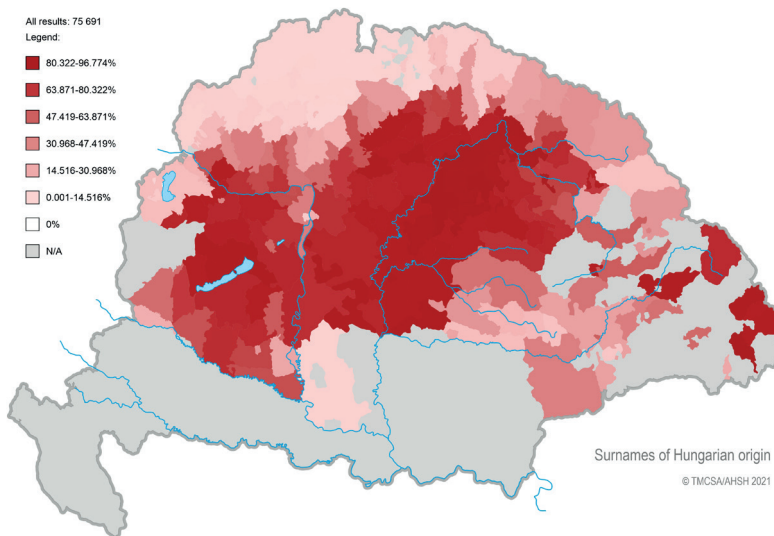
Figure 4. The geographical distribution of surnames of Hungarian origin in 1713–1715

Source: AHSH.

4.3. Case study 3: regarding the Modern Age

Searching in the Name Changes Database (NChD), 83 newly requested surnames can be connected to the name *István* (Table 1). The motivations behind the choices can only be presumed based on the available data. The given names of the applicants (*István* or *László,* the other saint king's name) could have served as motivation in 7 cases, but the majority of cases are connected to the original surname: applicants had similar-sounding names, or those with similar beginnings, or names with an etymological relation to the name *István*. The place of birth (a settlement called *Szentkirály* 'Saint King') could only have influenced the choice in one case. At least one possible motivation can be discerned in 52 cases (i.e. 63% of all cases). The influence of the cult may be a supporting factor in these cases, but its effect usually cannot be proven. The other 37% of the cases are free of any associations to the given names, the settlements of origin or dwelling places, but only some traces indicate the possible effect of the cult, connected to the surnames mentioned above, *Szentkirály*(*i*). The *Szentkirály*

settlement names dated from the Middle Ages always refer to Saint Stephen as a patron saint of the settlement's church. The choice of this name resulted in telling personal names in 3 cases: *Szentkirály István* ('Stephen Saint King'), *Szentkirályi István/László* ('Stephen/Ladislaus of a settlement called Saint King'). These cases clearly reflect the influence of the cult. The name *Szentkirályi László* also shows that the knowledge of the settlement name's exclusive connection to Saint Stephen could not have been general by the Modern Age: people associated it with the other holy Hungarian king as well.

Table 1. Surnames connected to *István* among official surname change requests (1815–1932)

Requested family name	No. of cases	Original family name	Given name	Place of birth
István	13	among them 2 occurrences of *Stefán* and 1 occurrence each of *Istvánescu, Stepan, Listván, Stefánovics, Stefanek, Stefanovitz*		
Istvánfi, Istvánfy, Istvánffy (< *István* + *-fi* 'son of' suffix with various spellings)	25	among them 2 occurrences of *Stefanyak* and 1 occurrence each of *Istvancsics, Istvánfi, Stepfáni, Stefán, Istók, Stephanovics, Stephanyák, Istvánkovics, Stefanko, Stefan, Stefanek, Stefánics, Stefanik, Stipanovics, Sztipanovics, Stephanovszky*	1 *István*	
Istvánka (< *István* + *-ka* diminutive suffix)	2	1 occurrence each of *Stepanek, István*		
Istók (< a hyporocistic of *István*)	2			
Istvándi, Istvándy (< *Istvánd* settlement name + *-i* 'from, of' suffix or *Istvándi* settlement name)	2	1 *Istvándi*	2 occurrences of *István*	
Istványi (< a dialectal variant of *István* + *-i* suffix)	2	1 *Stefán*		
Szentistvány, Szentistványi (< 'Saint Stephen' + *-i* suffix with various spellings)	2		1 *István*	
Szentkirály, Szentkirályi (< 'Saint King' settlement name + *-i* suffix with various spellings)	35	15 occurrences beginning with S-/Sz- + 1 occurrence each of *Kirmáyer, Königstein, Kral*	2 occurrences of *István*, 1 *László*	1 Szentkirály

Source: own work based on NChD.

Trying to compare these results with the data on the female name *Erzsébet,* the same problem as noted above is encountered. The number of surnames originating from female names is lower by orders of magnitude than of those originating from male names, and their frequencies are also rather low. This is understandable since it was the father who was the source of the succession of property and social standing in the Middle and Early Modern Ages, i.e. the ages when the Hungarian surname system was born. Consequently, expressing a connection to one's father in the antecedents of surnames was more evident and essential for name bearers. Knowing these facts, it is no surprise that not a single case connected to the name *Erzsébet* can be found in the Name Changes Database. Although there were 390 women among the applicants whose given name was *Erzsébet*, and there are several settlements in Hungary named after Saint Elisabeth, there are no traces of the given name *Erzsébet* or of the toponym *Szenterzsébet* as a motivating factor of name choice.

Nevertheless, the total lack of data regarding *Erzsébet* does not mean that the newly requested surnames originating from female names are not included in the database. For instance, 62 surnames connected to *Margit* 'Margaret', the name of another saintly Hungarian princess, appear in the corpus. However, the motivation in more than half of these cases appears tied to the original name and the new surname sounding similar, while the impact of the place of birth (named after Saint Margaret of Antioch and not Saint Margaret of Hungary) can be seen in 7 cases. This means that no cases can be proven to have been influenced by the saint's cult. However, a much newer, rejected request from the end of the 20th century confirms that the possibility cannot be excluded: the applicant hoped to bear the name *Árpádházi Margit* ('Margaret of the House of Árpád') (Farkas, 2012, p. 47).

5. Conclusions

The three case studies demonstrated that comparative onomastic research into the cults of male and female saints cannot be effective, or rather cannot be implemented due to methodological difficulties. Sometimes the small number of female name data "only" leads to a distortion of the results. However, the

application of adequate methods may help overcome this problem. This was the case in the first case study: comparing the frequency of *István* to that of other male names and the frequency of *Erzsébet* to that of other female names and only comparing these respective results to each other can lead to a reliable picture. In this case, this method proved that *István* was only slightly less popular among male names than *Erzsébet* among female ones, despite the relatively big difference between their frequency in the database. In contrast, the small number or lack of female name data makes the comparison impossible in several cases. Since this limitation cannot be solved by applying alternative methods, researchers should resign themselves to the inevitable: the study of the impact of female saints' cults on the frequency of their names in the population provides much fewer opportunities and results compared to onomastic research into the cults of male saints.

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