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Single, safe, and sorry? An analysis of the motivations of women to join the early modern beguine movement in the Low Countries

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Abstract

The beguine movement is in many ways one of the most remarkable movements in the history of the Low Countries; the impetus for the movement as a whole still remains to be explained. Factors such as the sex-ratio, diminished access to convents, and the religious revival of the late Middle Ages have been put forward, but remain insufficient to explain the specificity of the movement and its popularity in the long run. In many ways, the beguine movement stands out as different from other female organisations or religious movements. The question then arises why this was possible and whether the local conditions of the Low Countries had something to do with it. In this paper, I argue that the specific attitude towards women in the Low Countries that is reflected in their wages, as well as their level of human capital, and labour market participation created a fertile basis for the beguinages to develop: the beguinages may have offered women in the Low Countries – who enjoyed an exceptional “liberated” position regarding social and financial independence, the origins of this position lying in the emergence of the European Marriage Pattern (EMP) – safety and security in case they chose to remain single.

Keywords: *beguines, single women, Low Countries, agency*

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1. Introduction

The life of beguines has, since its onset in the late twelfth century, been marked by ambiguity, making it substantially different from the convent-life or that of other (semi-)religious movements (such as the Modern Devotion) in which women could also play an important role: beguines pronounced vows, but only temporary ones; they had to live a simple life, but some of them had considerable property as they retained their right to possess – and even amass – worldly goods; beguines kept their legal personality; they were separated from the world, but did not live in seclusion as in (most) convents; and they lived a life that was both active and contemplative.¹ Geographically, the emergence of this peculiar movement should be situated in the area around Liège in present-day Belgium, but it soon spread out over the rest of the Southern Netherlands, and also further to the north and as far east as Bohemia, where it later “mingled” with the Modern Devotion, and south, to the northern part of France. The first written documentation of the beguine experience dates back to the second decade of the thirteenth century, when James of Vitry, an ecclesiastical administrator and analyst of the state of contemporary religion, recorded the life of Mary of Oignies, a holy woman of the diocese of Liège and a model for a new variety of lay piety.² The core-area, where every city of even a moderate size had its own beguinage or even several – such as in Ghent and Malines – would remain Liège, Flanders, and Brabant (including present-day Northern Brabant in the Netherlands). Elsewhere in Europe, communities that described themselves as beguines – but may not have all the ambiguous features I have just described – have been found to a lesser extent.³ Notwithstanding the replication of the phenomenon elsewhere, the core-area, from its foundational period to the survival of the last beguine quite recently, would be situated in the Flemish part of the Southern Netherlands and the southern provinces of the Northern Netherlands that bordered Flanders.

¹ Translated from the introduction of Pascal Majérus, *Ces femmes qu'on dit béguines-- : Guide des béguinages de Belgique : Bibliographie et sources d'archives* (Bruxelles: Archives générales du Royaume, 1997), 7.

² On the basis of his account, the exceptionality of her way of life for that period in history becomes clear. James of Vitry had the intention of composing a hagiographical text for use against a variety of heresies that were common in Southern Europe (among others the Cathars). Carol Neel, "The Origins of the Beguines", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 2 (1989), 245. Even more ironic is the assumption that the name "Beguine" would be derived from a man called Lambert le Bègue.

³ See for example for England Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies : Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 35.

The “institutionalised” form – following a period of informal gatherings of individual women – whereby the beguines started to organise as a real community, with their own regulation, collective property, and identity, dates from the middle of the thirteenth century and varied substantially in size: from the smaller convents to the large, extensive courts that comprised virtually all necessary functionalities of a small city, usually situated just outside the city walls, and sometimes within. The most active period in the Southern Netherlands in terms of the foundation of new “settlements” was between 1230 and 1320, with the establishment of up to nearly 70 percent of the pre-revolt beguinages, most of them in the form of a convent. In comparison with a “normal” convent/nunnery, the number of contemplating women in many cases was much larger; whereas exceptionally large beguinages such as those in Ghent or Malines would have hundreds, and at times even thousands of inhabitants (the beguinage of Malines comprised 1,500 to 1,900 beguines in the late fifteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries), even the more “modestly” sized beguinages often outnumbered local nunneries, which would often have no more than 60 nuns within their confines.⁴ The number of beguines did however vary greatly: from just a few in the smaller convents, to populations even accounting for nearly eight percent of the entire population of the town.⁵ Although such high numbers were less common in the Northern Netherlands, the second religious women’s movement there too led to large numbers of women choosing to live the beguine life.⁶ Alternatives there were the communities of the “*zusters van het gemene leven*” (literally translated: Sisters of the Common Life), which were part of the Modern Devotion movement, or the *Tertiarissen*-convents. These were similar, but not the same: whereas the former did not break their contacts with the lay world, they did renounce private property; the latter – which belonged to the third order of Saint-Francis – eventually changed from not pronouncing any vows to a more strict way of life, closer to the rule of Saint-Augustine.⁷ Beguines clearly stayed more in touch with the “outer world”, often providing public services such as schooling and health care, and had more freedom in the way to accumulate and spend their property and income gathered from

⁴ Simons (*Cities of Ladies*, 60) refers to R. R. Post, “De roeping tot het kloosterleven in de 16e eeuw,” *Mededelingen Der Koninklijke Akademie Van Wetenschappen, Afdeling Letterkunde*, n.s. 13, no. 3 (1950), 31-76. For a graph of the development of beguinages founded before 1566, see Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 50.

⁵ Simons gives the example of Herentals, where in 1480 the beguines counted for 7.7% of the entire population (*Ibid.*, 60).

⁶ Madelon van Luijk, “Devote vrouwen tijdens de tweede religieuze vrouwenbeweging in de laatmiddeleeuwse Noordelijke Nederlanden”, *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 27, no. 1 (2001), 33-37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 39-43.

participating in “worldly” occupations such as textile production. It would be hard to put these distinctions in figures, but clearly, the beguines lived another sort of life than their more contemplative sisters.

The above figures clearly indicate that the beguine movement was an important part of society before the sixteenth century. The latter century was in many ways, and not only for the beguinages, a problematic period. In the northern – mainly Protestant – part of the Netherlands, most beguinages disappeared, with the exception of those in Amsterdam and Breda, the latter being close to the Flemish “heart” of the movement. The sixteenth century was also the age of the return to patriarchy, as I have described elsewhere, during which women were – at least temporarily – restricted in their rights, behavior, and opportunities.⁸ The seventeenth century however witnessed a revival in the number of beguinages and beguines, following the Counter Reformation. Some of the beguinages, like the one in Tongeren, reached their largest size during this period. At the end of the eighteenth century, many beguinages would however disappear under the pressure of Austrian rule;⁹ by that time, most had already lost the attraction they had once enjoyed, with substantially lesser numbers of beguines.

In the light of the current debate about institutions and their role in economic and social development,¹⁰ the growth described above of the beguinages shows they were blessed with an extreme form of resilience: although quite a number of them disappeared around the time of the Reformation (in particular in the northern part of the Netherlands), many individual beguinages survived for several consecutive centuries, and as a movement they have survived until the very beginning of the twenty-first century.¹¹ The movement thus survived for over 750 years; many of its former

⁸ See Tine De Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Vrouwen en de geboorte van het kapitalisme in West-Europa* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2006), 93-99; see also the discussion in *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* in the following articles: Manon van der Heijden, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, and Ariadne Schmidt, "De terugkeer van het patriarchaat? Vrije vrouwen in de Republiek", *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 6, no. 3 (2009), 26-52; Tine De Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden, "Een reactie van De Moor en van Zanden op het TSEG-artikel van Manon van der Heijden, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk en Ariadne Schmidt: "Terugkeer van het patriarchaat? Vrije vrouwen in de Republiek", *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 9, no. 2 (2012), 61-72.

⁹ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 136

¹⁰ The debate on institutions was set-off by the work of Nobel Prize winner Douglas North (Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and has thereafter gained increasing popularity in the field of in particular economic history.

¹¹ The last beguine in the Netherlands was Miss Cornelia Frijters, who was a member of the beguinage in Breda; she died at the age of 81 on 13 April 1990 (Wikipedia, http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornelia_Frijters, accessed 31 January 2013). In Belgium, the last surviving beguine is Miss Marcella Pattyn, who was professed in 1942 in the beguinage of Kortrijk. Currently she is

houses still stand. The architectural remains, however, cannot be used to study the resilience of an institution. One of the more appropriate ways to explain the long-standing popularity of the movement is by reconstructing the motivation of the women who chose to join a beguinage instead of a convent, or in preference to marrying, living as a lay woman with a family, or as a single elsewhere in town. Understanding this longevity and the continuing choice of women to join this movement demands, moreover, that we focus on a period well after the start of the movement, which the literature has thus far focused on. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries not only form an interesting period due to the revival of the beguinages that occurred then, but also for the possibilities they offer for gathering substantial amounts of biographical data about individual beguines. Literature about the motives of beguines from the early years of the movement are mainly based on the *vitae* of literate and often well-off beguines, whereas we now know that the beguine community was socially more varied.¹²

Explaining a movement that survived for such a long time calls our focus right away towards structural factors that must have been “embedded” in society, rather than temporary factors that may have influenced women for a relatively short period of time, though the latter may well have contributed to a greater popularity for certain time periods. The importance of focussing on structural factors in society is also supported by the regional exceptionality of the movement. Its prevalence in the continental North Sea area and its surroundings suggests that this region must have been characterised by a very specific combination of factors, conducive to particular choices during an individual’s life. The fact that the female variant of this particular movement – and not the male *begharden*-movement – became so popular, hints that we should be looking at factors that conditioned female decision making, within the household sphere (e.g. parental authority) and in society at large (e.g. their position on the labour market and capacity to earn their own income). Although the beguines in essence were a semi-religious movement, the religious causes of the movement might have been overstated, and too little attention has been paid to the influence of social structures on the

living, aged 92, in a rest home in Kortrijk. Miss Pattyn is also the last beguine alive worldwide. (<http://www.demorgen.be/dm/nl/989/Binnenland/article/detail/1487889/2012/08/18/Laatste-levend-begijntje-viert-92ste-verjaardag-in-Kortrijk.dhtml>, accessed 31 January 2013).

¹² Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 91-104.

motivations of beguines, as Walter Simons already stressed in several publications.¹³ Although I give particular attention to the non-religious factors in this article, I do not intend to ignore or even deny the importance of religious vocation in the emergence and continuation of the movement. Given the already-described ambiguity of the beguines' lives and their dependence on the lay world to facilitate their own lives, through earning their own income, it cannot be denied that a substantial part of a beguine's day was not – and could not – be devoted to religious activities. As such, a woman choosing for the beguinage solely out of religious motives might have been rather disappointed and would have, if they were in the position to do so, have either not chosen for this semi-religious life or have left the beguinage in search for a place where their vocational aspirations could have been better fulfilled. As we will show on the basis of the data, a number of beguines did indeed choose to leave the beguinage for a convent, but the popularity of the movement does demonstrate that this could have only been a minority.

In this article, I will start by exploring the “traditional” explanations for the beguine movement, such as the unbalanced sex-ratio and the reduced access to convents, in particular in the thirteenth century, which may have had a continuing effect on the growth of the movement also after its foundational period. Next to this, I will introduce a number of other factors that, over the past few years, have received substantial attention from scholars in social and economic history, which may explain the structural differences between the area where the beguinages were formed and the rest of Europe – where singular examples can sometimes be found, but never in the same concentration as in the area I discuss in this article. On the basis of these factors, I will formulate a hypothesis, which will be tested in the next part on the basis of a large dataset of biographical data of over 13,000 beguines who lived in ten different beguinages throughout present-day Flanders and the Netherlands. This dataset, complemented with other data about the entry age of nuns and the marriage age of women, allows us to balance the decision of women to enter the beguinage against other options in life. In the last part, I will explain the major conclusions that can be drawn on the basis of the data-analysis.

2. Research questions

¹³ Ibid., 126.

The beguine movement is often interpreted as a solution for women who faced difficulties in finding a husband, or who could not gain access to a convent, whereby both explanations have often been connected by their proponents.¹⁴ In the early days of the movement, vowed religious life in monastic houses for women was reserved primarily for aristocratic women whose families could afford the necessary dowry.¹⁵ Established convents were full, and the limitation of vacancies was further compounded by the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) forbidding the establishment of new religious orders.¹⁶ Moreover, a substantial number of men had departed for the Crusades, and many others had entered the priesthood or male orders. By this line of reasoning, it was supposed that medieval cities had a “surplus of women” for which the beguinages offered an attractive alternative to marriage or entering a cloister.¹⁷ Similarly, the foundation of many beguinages in the thirteenth century has been explained in the light of the emigration to the towns; the “freedom” that the cities offered meant that some preferred to live in autonomous groups where they could live a freely-chosen religious life in combination with a work life that could ensure their livelihood. In contrast to regular nuns, beguines did not take a vow of poverty.¹⁸ They did promise to lead a humble and modest life, but this left considerable room for manoeuvre. And in fact, beguinages often became rather rich institutions in the centuries after their foundation.¹⁹

In general, the explanations that have been given for the beguine-movement can be divided into two major theories: one hinges on the unbalanced sex-ratio (*Frauenfrage*-debate) in medieval towns, and the other points to access to convents and

¹⁴ In France, Germany, and the Low Countries, there were more marriageable women than men “due to local wards, feuds, crusades,...the large number of secular and regular clergy”. See Fiona Bowie, *Beguine Spirituality: An Anthology* (London: SPCK, 1989), 14.

¹⁵ See for example the social composition of the nuns at the cloisters of Cîteaux and Prémontré. Neel mentions the important role of these orders, founded in 1098 and 1124, respectively, in the century of spiritual activity before the registered beginning of the beguine movement. By the thirteenth century, both orders received only cloistered choir nuns into heavily endowed foundations. These nuns came exclusively from the urban patriciate and higher social groups. Neel, *The Origins of the Beguines*, 248.

¹⁶ This view is supported, among others, by Joseph Greven, *Die Anfänge der Beginen; Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Volksfrömmigkeit und des Ordenwesens im Hochmittelalter* (Münster i.W.: Aschendorff, 1912).

¹⁷ See description of the debate on the origins of the beguine movement by Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, xi-xiii.

¹⁸ This kind of simple life in common, should also be seen as a response to the tremendous appeal of the *vita apostolica* during the fourteenth century, when many other groups – such as the flagellants, the Albigensians – that strived towards a *vita apostolica* emerged. See Ernest William McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture, with Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 141.

¹⁹ Geneviève de Cant, *A World of Independent Women: From the 12th Century to the Present Day: The Flemish Beguinages* (Riverside, CT: Herve van Caloen Foundation, 2003), 60.

the links with religious developments at the time. Simons sees the *Frauenfrage*-debate as a reaction to the latter, more religiously-inspired theory. Authors such as Greven and Philippen have stressed the importance of opportunities in the main religious orders for the emergence of beguinages. Several limitations in the growth of nunneries would have led to groupings of women developing, first in the vicinity of nunneries or hospitals, and later in the formation of the actual beguinages.²⁰ The sex-ratio explanation, on the other hand, was based on Bücher's *Frauenfrage*²¹, and stressed the social role of religious movements above the religious background of the beguines, whereby the beguinages functioned as a refuge for women of the lower classes.

Various critiques of both explanations have been formulated. Access to nunneries was less restricted than previously thought, and there was a geographical divide between the regions with nunneries and those with beguinages, with both of them attracting different classes of women as well. Furthermore, access to convents might have played a role in the first period of the development of the beguine movement, right after the Lateran Council in the thirteenth century, as the movement attracted – especially in the beginning – mainly women from the elite, and the number of places in the convents was indeed limited even for them. Thereafter the beguine movement however was quickly taken over by women outside the nobility; access to the convents was no longer considered an option for them anyway.²²

Regarding the *Frauenfrage*-theory, several authors have argued that the sex-ratio-imbalance may not have been significantly large enough to bring about a whole new movement.²³ The *Frauenfrage*-argument also partly rests upon the supposition that there was a shortage of women in the early medieval period.²⁴ But several authors have shown that either (1) the male surplus was not that large in the early medieval period or (2) the female surplus was not that large in the late medieval period. Ester Koch sums up a number of criticisms which show that, as far as the sex-ratio can be reconstructed with

²⁰ Greven, *Die Anfänge der Beginnen*; L. J. M. Philippen, *Het ontstaan der begijnhoven : Een synthetische studie* (Antwerpen: De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1943); Simons, Walter. "Een zeker bestaan: de zuidnederlandse begijnen en de *Frauenfrage*." *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 17 (1991): 125-146, 128.

²¹ Bücher, Karl. *Die Frauenfrage im Mittelalter* (2nd ed.) (Tübingen: Verlag der H. Laupp'schen Buchhandlung, 1910).

²² On the issue of class: see arguments in Ludovicus Milis, *Angelic Monks and Earthly Men : Monasticism and its Meaning to Medieval Society* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY, USA: Boydell Press, 1992).

²³ Milis, *Angelic Monks and Earthly Men*; Ester Koch, "De positie van vrouwen op de huwelijksmarkt", *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 13 (1987), 150-172.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

a sufficient number of sources for the early and late Middle Ages, there is no clear evidence that supports the above hypotheses.²⁵

On top of this, one can also argue that the sex-ratio-divide was not a problem limited to the Low Countries. The causes (of the military type in particular) of the skewed sex-ratio were present across Europe. If the sex-ratio was the main cause of the emergence of the beguine-movement, we would expect to see beguines everywhere in Europe, but apart from some isolated cases the beguine movement, especially in its walled/court-form, was most popular in the Low Countries, with some extension to the northern part of France and the German regions bordering the Low Countries. The beguines were indeed not the only European women living an informal religious life outside of the convent; the *Humiliati*, for example, became a popular lay movement for both men and women in Italy from the twelfth century onwards. But as with other forms of (semi-)religious movements – see earlier in this paper – what distinguishes the beguines from these other movements is that the women did not have to live in poverty: they could actually accumulate wealth, and keep and obtain property, rights that were not available, or at least not straightforwardly so, for women in general in Southern Europe. As will be shown later, their capacity to accumulate wealth both explains their uniqueness and their capability to survive as a community, a capability that eluded most other informal female (semi-)religious movements.

Overall, notwithstanding their potential explanatory value for the earlier, pre-sixteenth century developments, the arguments for both sex-ratio and access to convents cannot explain the long-term development of the beguinages in the Low Countries: after a period of lesser interest, in the seventeenth century we see a clear revival of the beguine-movement, whilst there are no arguments claiming that either one of the above factors played a role in this demise and revival. Looking at this later period allows us to find out which other factors might have played a role in the evolution of the beguine movement. We do not have the sources for the preceding period, but we will offer some interpretations on the basis of the later evolution of the movement.

This paper will focus on two major, interlinked factors that may have played a crucial role in creating fertile soil for the emergence and continuation of the beguine movement in the Low Countries. First of all, changes in the marriage pattern and – linked to this – the changing position of single women within society at large, as well as

²⁵ Ibid., 162-164.

the increasing participation of women in the labour market. Secondly, I argue that the beguine movement should be seen as yet another institution for collective action, having more in common with other institutions such as guilds than with conventional nunneries. The comparison with convents that have been made in the past might well have blurred the true nature of the institution. Both the changes in the marriage pattern – in particular the formation of the European Marriage Pattern²⁶ – and the development of institutions for collective action follow a similar path in Western Europe, particularly in the Low Countries.²⁷ This paper will focus primarily on the individual motives of beguines and less on the presence of this new institutional model that thrived on self-governance and (mainly) bottom-up organization, but in the last part before the conclusions I will briefly dwell upon this aspect of the beguine-movement.

3. Hypotheses and sources

In this article, I want to test for three hypotheses that are directly related to the two theories on the emergence of beguinages that can be found in the literature (see above). The main question is, to what was life as a beguine an alternative? Did they choose the beguine life as an alternative to marriage, to the convent, or even to a third option – to living single elsewhere in town, without the protection offered by the beguinage's walls and other visual features of being a beguine (such as their clothing)? I will examine all these options by looking at their place of birth (in comparison to the location of the beguinage) and by looking at their age at profession (in comparison to the average age at profession in a convent and the average age at first marriage).

First of all, it needs to be analysed where the beguines actually came from. If we want to test the true value of the sex-ratio-argument, we need to take into account that the imbalanced sex-ratio (more women than men) was a typically urban phenomenon. In the countryside, several factors led to a higher mortality among women, leading to a more or less equal sex-ratio, whereas in the cities, an unbalanced sex-ratio was more likely. Although we cannot give any firm empirical basis for this, it could be assumed

²⁶ For a thorough discussion of the timing of the emergence of the European Marriage Pattern, see De Moor and van Zanden, "Girl Power", 1-33.

²⁷ See for a development of this argument Tine De Moor, "The Silent Revolution: A New Perspective on the Emergence of Commons, Guilds, and Other Forms of Corporate Collective Action in Western Europe," *International Review of Social History* 53, no. Supplement S16 (2008), 179. doi:10.1017/S0020859008003660.

that women who originally came from the countryside would be able to return to the countryside to get married, as it would have been far easier to find a husband there. In the literature, it has long been assumed that beguines stemmed from the urban bourgeoisie. Simons has already stressed on the basis of preliminary analyses of more scattered data that the beguines to a large extent came from the areas around the town where the beguinage was situated, not from the town itself.²⁸ This suggests that the sex-ratio might not have been a really important factor in the women's motives to move into a beguinage: if women were really desperate to get a husband it would have been more logical to return to their village and find a local husband. For women who were born in an urban environment this would have been more difficult. It thus would make sense that if the marriage-factor played a major role, we would find primarily women with an urban background in the beguinages. With our large data collection we can now analyse the place of origin for a large number of beguines and we can also refine our argument further by looking at the age at profession of beguines, and compare this to the average age of marriage in the area. One can assume that if women who entered the beguinage were above the average age at profession, when the vow of obedience was declared by the novice-beguine, they might have considered the beguinage as a "last resort", and that their profession was the result of their unsuccessful search for a groom. An age of profession below the average marriage age would point towards a choice made before the "point of desperation", and could indicate an individual choice to remain single, without waiting for the ideal partner.

A similar reasoning could also be made in relation to the nuns-manquéés argument. Notwithstanding the other arguments that have already been made which indicate that access to nunneries – both in terms of entry requirements and of places available – was not restricted after all, we also need to take into account the argument of choice: if the beguinage was only a second-best option to the convent, this should be evident from the age of the beguines, however not at profession, but somewhat earlier. Convents required future nuns to be trained for a certain period; the beguines, too, spent on average 1.5 to 2 years with the beguinage before taking their actual vows. This entry age, which can be extrapolated for all beguines for whom we know the age at profession, can be compared to the age at entry into a convent. From this we can also – to some

²⁸ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 139.

extent – analyse the relationship between peerage and entry into the convent, by considering the question whether the beguines were of noble descent or not.

On the basis of the analyses I offer in this paper an alternative explanation, that entering the beguinage was an individual choice to remain single (as had become normal in the area of the Low Countries), instead of getting married. Considering that the more religious option would be taken much earlier than the choice to get married, one would have to see this difference reflected in the average age of profession, in comparison to both average age of profession in convents and average age at first marriage.

For this paper we composed a dataset with biographical information on more than 13,000 beguines (13,362 beguines to be precise) from several beguinages in the Low Countries, mainly in the period 1550-1900, and on a number of basic data such as their date of arrival at the beguinage, the date/year they took their profession, and their place and date of birth. It proved impossible to retrieve all these data about every beguine in the dataset. For the different analyses in this paper we fall back on different samples of the data, whereby a different set of cases is included in the various samples. We expand on the content of each sample wherever appropriate. The dataset was based on data that were linked after being retrieved from a number of primary and secondary sources. Most of the information is taken from profession-books, burial-books, and parish registers with data on beguines from a total of ten towns (Amsterdam, Breda, Dendermonde, Diest, Ghent, Hasselt, Hoogstraten, Sint-Truiden, Tongeren, and Turnhout), situated in Flanders and the Netherlands. In some cases – such as Ghent – several beguinages could be found on the city's premises, and thus it is possible that the beguines in the dataset were located in different beguinages within the same town, but this should not affect our conclusions. Though the database as it now stands can still be much improved, it is without any doubt the largest dataset of its kind. However, although the size of the database might be surprising, we should keep in mind that the number of beguines present in the Low Countries throughout history was even much larger, and that we are thus looking at a sample, though a substantial one, of the whole movement.

4. The geographical origins of beguines

As mentioned above, the geographical origin of the beguines is an interesting issue for two reasons. First of all, it can help us to understand whether there was such a thing as a skewed sex-ratio in the cities, and secondly it can give us a better idea of the importance of the urban bourgeoisie as a class of origin, and thus answer the question whether women became beguines due to a lack of access to other religious alternatives. As Simons noted, the urban location of the beguinages did not prevent women from the countryside from choosing for a life within their walls. He gives examples of estimates based on cross sections made for particular years, with varying degrees of dependency on immigrating women: from 62 percent of the beguines in the Sint-Truiden beguinage in 1780, to as many as 95 percent in the beguinage of Hoogstraten in 1619 were out-of-town immigrants. These figures are far from exaggerated, as our data show. The table below demonstrates that on average, a large majority of beguines was born in another location than where the beguinage was situated. Both in the beginning and at the end of the period described the percentage of immigrating beguines was particularly high: around 95 percent of the total population. The number of women that had no out-of-town marriage market to rely upon was thus very small. Moreover, our data demonstrate that the argument that the majority of beguines had an urban bourgeois or even noble background can also be discarded. This also runs counter to the argument that noble women were “parked” by their families in a beguinage to avoid the splitting up of the family inheritance. One element, a rather substantial number (18 percent) of beguines with family members in the beguinage at the moment of profession, might give the impression that there was a “family strategy” involved. But there might be a number of explanations for this that give less credit to the capacity of the women’s families to have planned their lives for them. The work by Kim Overlaet, for example, shows that beguines, bequeathed on the one hand to their family-members, but also to a large extent to non-related persons.²⁹ This suggests that if the women were pushed by their families into becoming beguines, this turned out to be a rather unsuccessful financial strategy. If we look at this high number of women that joined a family member from the new beguine’s perspective, one could also claim that these – mostly young – women considered their kin-beguine as a successful example of female “liberation” and/or

²⁹ Kim Overlaet, "Beguines in Early Modern West-European Cities: Isolated Islands or Open Networks? A Reconsideration of the Social and Familial Embeddedness of Beguines for the Case of Sixteenth-Century Mechelen, a Medium-Sized Town in the Low Countries" (Working Paper, 2012).

independence and that they simply sought to follow their example instead of being the subject of family intrigues and strategies.

Table 1: Evolution of the number of beguines coming from outside the beguine location

Period	Born outside beguine location	Born within same town as beguinage	# for which we know birth location	# with profession/arrival (+1) year	% of data for which we have a birth location
1500-1599	94.12%	5.88%	17	128	13.28%
1600-1649	69.78%	30.22%	278	943	29.48%
1650-1699	78.77%	21.23%	1,385	3,145	44.04%
1700-1749	80.27%	19.73%	1,333	2,263	58.90%
1750-1799	87.27%	12.73%	1,414	1,588	89.04%
1800-1849	89.66%	10.34%	1,141	1,187	96.12%
1850-1899	96.85%	3.15%	890	917	97.06%
1900-1977	96.75%	3.25%	277	285	97.19%
End total	85.49%	14.51%	6735	10,641	63.29%

Let us have also a closer look at those beguines who were born outside of the beguinage location and thus would, at some point in their lives, have to move from one place to another. For nearly 5,000 beguines (4,940) we were able to identify both the location of birth and the location of the beguinage. There was a small sample of beguines whose village of birth could be linked to different places; we have excluded them for further analysis. As mentioned, the share of beguines that migrated to towns among the total population is very large: in some periods more than 95 percent of them came from outside of the town where the beguinage was located. Most of the beguines moved a distance of less than 20 kilometers away from their birth location, which would mean they still had the opportunity to be visited regularly by kin or visit their family themselves, if permitted by the mistress of the beguinage. Only very few beguines lived further than 50 kilometers away from their hometown. This analysis suggests that

beguines usually did not have to lose their original kin network, nor were they cut off from their original social network, which could have also provided a husband if the need was there. Returning back home was at least not impeded by distance.

The rural origins of many of the beguines might also be an explanation in itself why the beguinage attracted women: beguinages were like small villages within cities – some even had farms and most had large pastures where the cows of the beguines grazed.³⁰ This particular village-like setting might have given a sense of familiarity and protection to women arriving from the countryside, although in itself it might have been only a secondary argument for joining a beguinage.³¹

Table 2: Distance between the beguinage where the beguine lived and her birth location, in percentages of the total population per century.

Year of profession of beguine	Distance between beguinage and birth location					#
	0	0-20	20-50	>50	Total	
1500-1599	7%	40%	53%	0%	100%	15
1600-1699	21%	39%	36%	3%	100%	1,405
1700-1799	16%	54%	25%	5%	100%	2,549
1800-1899	7%	56%	33%	5%	100%	1,688
Total	14%	51%	30%	4%	100%	5,657

Concerning our second question, our database allows us to examine in a unique way the relationship between profession as a beguine and the possibility of marriage. The age we focus on here is the age when the decision to stay at the beguinage is made. This is not linked to the actual entry date, but the date at which the beguine took the vows – as far as a beguine takes any – which were made at the time of the profession. In general this is about one to two years after the actual entrance in the beguinage.

The size of our database – due to the fact that we brought together data from several beguinages – allows us to give well-founded conclusions for nearly every year in

³⁰ For instance, the beguinage of Leuven, founded presumably c. 1232, originally consisted of several half-timbered houses situated outside the city walls of Leuven, surrounded by meadows and streams. Later on, most of the half-timbered houses were replaced by brick houses. When the city of Leuven expanded, the beguinage was incorporated in the city, but due to its walled character, the beguinage retained its secluded character; even today, the appearance of the beguinage of Leuven is described as if it were ‘a city within the city’.

³¹ In this sense, the setting of the beguinages also reminds of the much later but similar format of the so-called *tuinwijken*, or garden cities, which were fairly small, often walled communities set-up early twentieth century to tackle social decay in many Western European towns.

the period on the age at profession. We focus in this paper on the ages of beguines at arrival or profession and their (geographic) origins. For 5,286 beguines we know which year – and in many cases also the exact date – the beguines were born or when they were baptized (considering baptism usually followed rapidly after the birth, we pulled these data together);³² In order to come to the analysis of the average age of the beguines at which they “chose” to live in the beguinage, we relied in most cases on the year they took their profession (which we have for 9,659 beguines), and, if this was not available, we relied upon the date of arrival, but added one extra year to it, as the average difference between profession and arrival was 1.5 years (for 982 cases).³³ If we combine all these data (birth/baptism data with data on arrival/profession), we can rely upon a sample of 4,499 beguines for which the age at profession can be calculated and 540 for which we do not have the age at profession, but we do have the age at arrival at the beguinage, giving us in total 5,039 beguines that can be used for the analysis of the average age at profession.³⁴ Our largest sample of beguines for whom we can calculate the average age at profession comes from Ghent, which is not surprising: Ghent was one of the towns with the largest number of beguines ever.

³² We needed the year of birth to calculate the age at entrance/profession. For this we checked several thousands of beguines’ birth years. In some case we could only find the date of baptism. As is commonly known baptism followed very closely upon birth, so the year would most likely be the same. The calculation of ages at specific moments in time are based on a combination of birth dates (in the great majority of cases) and baptism dates.

³³ If we look over time, the period between arrival and profession did not change much, except for the period in the first half of the 17th century and in the first half of the 18th century, when remarkably more beguines had to wait a little longer to be accepted officially.

	< 0	1-1.99	2-2.99	Grand Total
YEAR				
1616-1650	3.23%	70.97%	25.81%	100.00%
1651-1700	3.66%	90.50%	5.83%	100.00%
1701-1750	2.12%	85.74%	12.14%	100.00%
1751-1800	5.82%	91.44%	2.74%	100.00%
1801-1850	3.19%	88.02%	8.79%	100.00%
1851-1900	1.41%	96.25%	2.34%	100.00%
1901-1965	2.05%	97.26%	0.68%	100.00%
Grand Total	3.37%	89.79%	6.84%	100.00%

³⁴ When we calculate how long the period from arriving at the beguine to the actual profession lasted (this can be done for 2,848 cases), it becomes clear that this trajectory took in 97% of the cases less than 3 years (2,773 beguines). If we exclude 5 extreme outliers who waited over 20 years between arrival and profession, the average period between arrival and profession is 1.5 years. This information we use to estimate the year of profession of those 540 beguines for which we only have the date/year of arrival.

Table 3: Number of beguines for which we have information on arrival/profession and for which we have age at profession

Period	# with profession/arrival (+1) year	# with age at profession
1420-1500	185	
1500-1599	128	15
1600-1649	943	150
1650-1699	3,145	491
1700-1749	2,263	932
1750-1799	1,588	1,195
1800-1849	1,187	1,102
1850-1899	917	879
1900-1977	285	275
Endtotal	10,641	5,039

Table 4: Number of beguines of which we know average age at profession per beguinage (summarized per town)

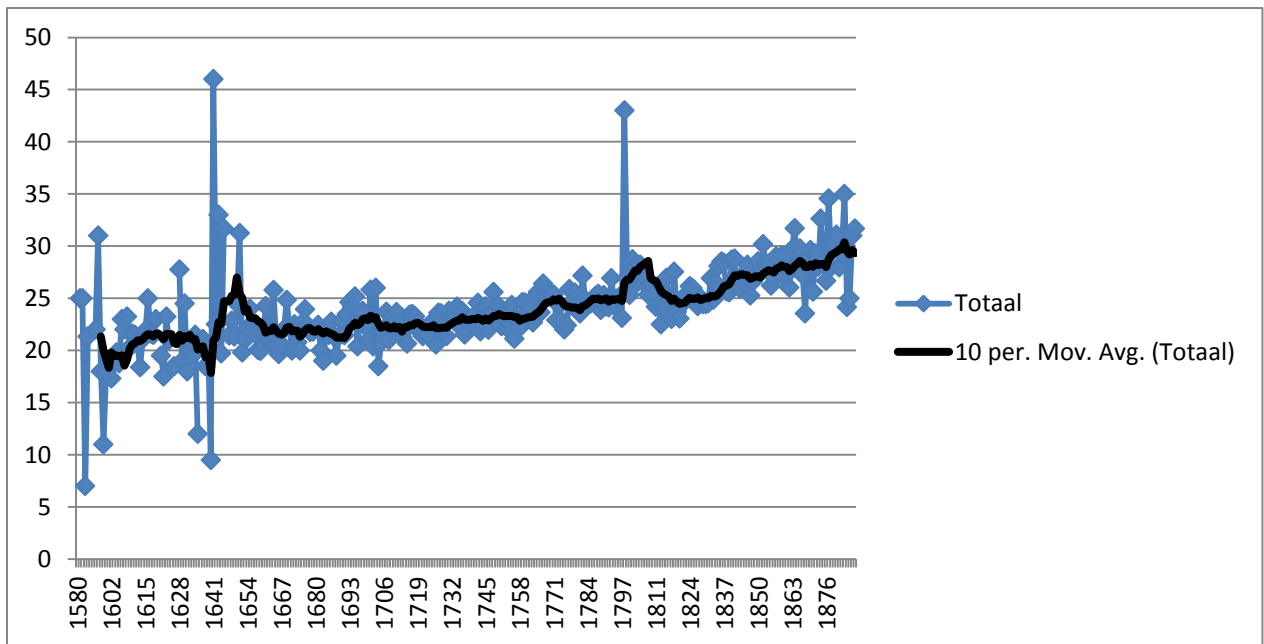
Period	Ghent	Dendermonde	Diest	Hasselt	Sint-Truiden	Tongeren	Breda	Turnhout	Hoogstraten	Amsterdam	End total
1500-1599				1					14		15
1600-1649		2		6	21	20	2	12	85	2	150
1650-1699	8	7	197		36	75	88	32	48		491
1700-1749	168	55	389	26	22	123	48	34	67		932
1750-1799	551	143	239	33		53	50	36	90		1,195
1800-1849	806	102	59	4			75	12	44		1,102
1850-1899	657	79	14				58	33	38		879
1900-1977	221	11					26	5	12		275
Endtotal	2,411	399	898	70	79	271	347	164	398	2	5,039

The information we have on the age of profession is concentrated in the period 1640-1781; before and after, we have less than 10 records per year, although this can also be the case for some isolated years within the period with denser information, which can lead to the odd outliers in the graph below. We have excluded this information from the graph in order to give a more reliable impression of the real evolution.

The graph below shows that the average age of beguines at entrance and profession moves upwards during the period 1580-1900, from around 20 years of age to a little less than 30 years of age. Clearly this means that the position in the life cycle wherein the beguines entered the beguinages changed over time. It is clear that – upon arrival – the beguines were well beyond the age of the average novice that entered a convent (see for the evolution over time figure 2). In the period we studied, entrance in a convent was no longer as restricted as in the late medieval period, and could thus have been a feasible option for women choosing a religious life. The average age upon arrival and at profession shows that for most women (we are dealing with an average) the beguinage was an alternative to remaining single, not to the convent (too old), nor did they wait to reach the average marriage age. A small number – and in some cases we know them by name – entered the convent after a period in the beguinage. Another small number did leave the beguinage to get married. It is hard to give real figures for these however, as the availability of such data is very dependent on the local customs to note this or not. For a small sample of beguines (only 140), spread out over the whole period of study we also have information which indicates that at some point they actually left the beguinage. For half (75) of these women we do not know the exact reason they left. Of the rest, about one-third left to enter a monastery, others were considered “unfit” for the life as a beguine and were asked to leave, and still others took the initiative to leave by themselves. Some of the beguines in our database are reported to have (eventually) married, but our data suggest that in most cases the choice for the beguinage was instead a means of escaping marriage to a specific marriage partner or marriage altogether. This is also described by Simons, but for the pre-sixteenth-century period, and for women of noble descent in particular.³⁵ Apparently, the need to escape the parents’ choice of partner was still present in the later period as well, but one also wonders how much parental authority there would have been when so many beguines were living a substantial distance from their place of origin.

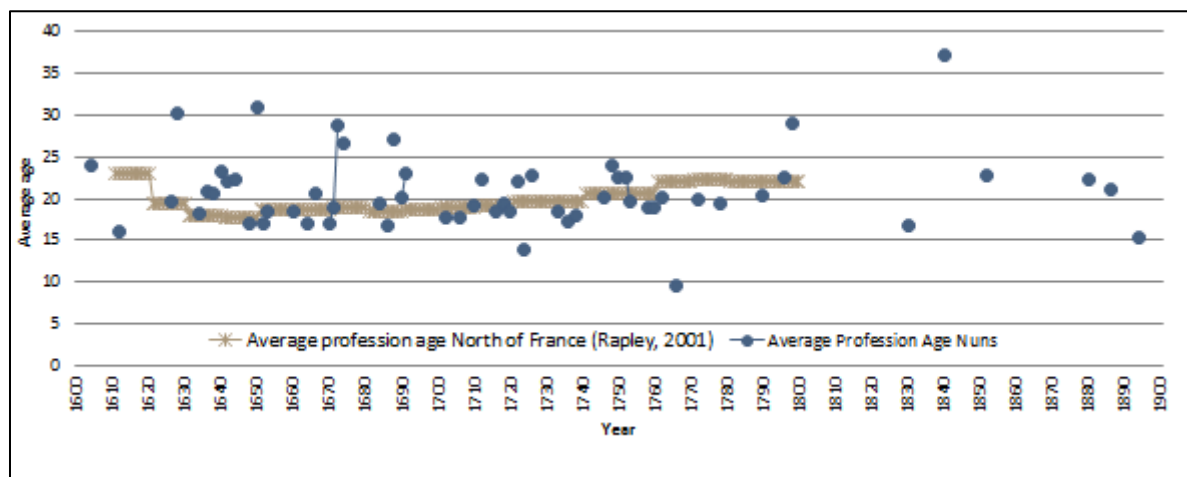
Figure 1: Evolution of the average age at profession of beguines, 1680-1781

³⁵ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 69.



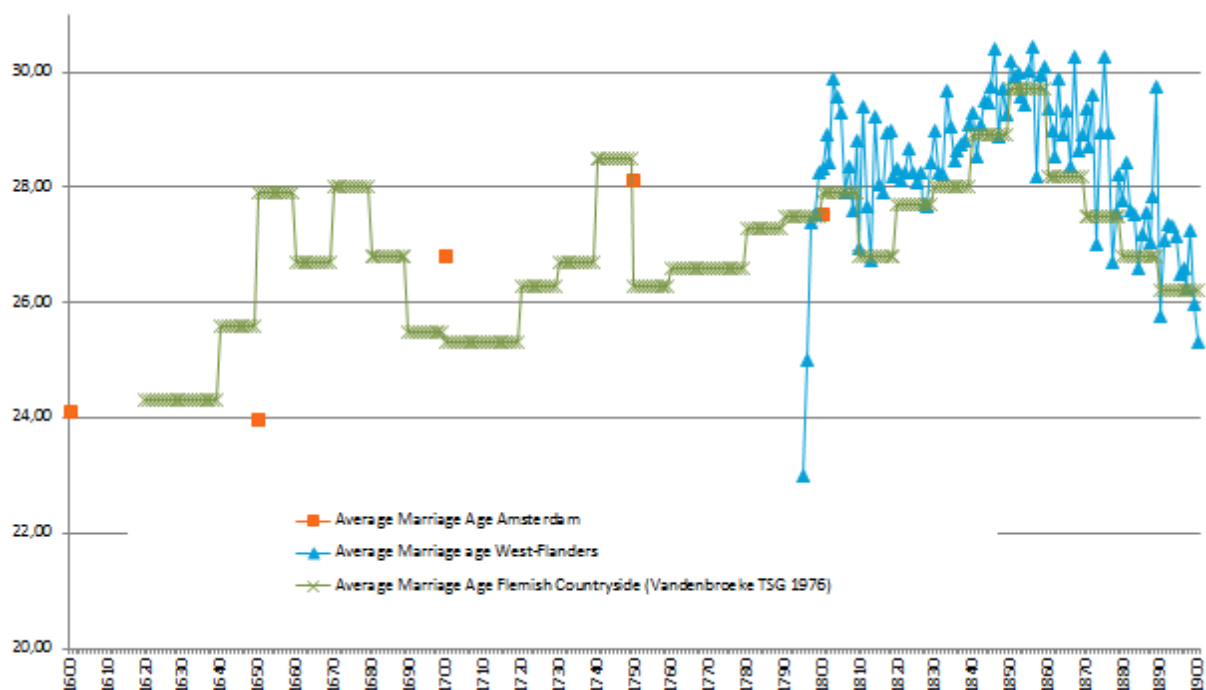
Source: beguines database

Figure 2: Average entry ages nuns into convents



Source: Data for Northern France from Simons, *Cities of Ladies*; collection of nuns' entry ages for convents in Brabant, Limburg & Liège on basis of Ursmer Berlière's, *Monasticon Belge* (Liège: Centre national de recherches d'histoire religieuse, 1960)(180 values for the whole period).

Figure 3: average marriage age (at first marriage) in several locations in the Low Countries between 1600 and 1900.



Sources: Marriage registers West-Flanders 19th century; average marriage ages countryside (per decade) as in Chr. Vandenbroeke, “Karakteristieken van het huwelijks- en voortplantingspatroon. Vlaanderen en Brabant, 17de-19de eeuw”, *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 2, (1976): 107-145; samples for 1600, 1650, 1700, 1750, and 1800 of the *Ondertrouwakten Amsterdam*.

Our data do not offer the material to tackle the period before the seventeenth century, nor can I fully address the reasons for the nineteenth-century demise of the movement leading to its final extinction at the end of the twentieth century – although the number of beguines remaining by then could hardly justify still calling it a “movement”. This could also have to do with several changes in north-western society, whereby the religious explanation again might be less important than one might suppose. The decline of the number of beguines from the middle of the nineteenth century appears contradictory to the resurgence of monastic life in that same century.³⁶ One could boldly argue that potential beguines started having more intensive religious

³⁶ Between 1861 and 1868, the number of Catholic orders founded within the Netherlands rose from 200 to 500 (Michael J. Wintle, *Pillars of Piety: Religion in the Netherlands in the Nineteenth Century, 1813-1901* (Hull, England: Hull University Press, 1987), 48, citing J. Hendriks, *De emancipatie van de Gereformeerden. Sociologische bijdrage tot de verklaring van enige kenmerken van het huidige Gereformeerde volksdeel* (Alphen aan den Rijn: Samsom, 1971, 83). The work of Wintle suggests that the relatively strong increase of the number of religious institutions emerging in the Netherlands especially in the second half of the nineteenth century seems to be the result of both past (the suppression and abolition of religious institutions during the French Revolution and its aftermath) and contemporary (i.e. the struggle between Catholic, Protestant, and liberal ‘pillars’ in the 1840s and 1850s) struggles between several confessional and non-confessionals ‘pillars’ in society, forcing ‘monastic sentiments’ to be organised within strict, very ‘recognisable’ formats.

feelings, driving a multitude of them to the convent, but our data for the nineteenth century on marriage ages suggest something else. Whereas we see a drop in marriage ages from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, the profession ages of beguines remain more or less (we have data only until the 1970s) on a par and actually become higher than the marriage ages. It might well be that in a society where staying single was increasingly accepted and possible, women, by the second half of the nineteenth century, no longer sought the security and community spirit of the beguinage to help them in their plans to remain single. Following the line of reasoning we have used before in this article, it might also be that the beguinage eventually became a last resort for old spinsters with little luck of finding a man. This would be in line with the rather unpleasant terms that were offered to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century inhabitants of beguinages as well.

On the basis of the above data analysis, the beguinage seems to have been a first choice which allowed women to stay single, and not a second choice to marriage or life in a convent. The fact that women were allowed to live as singles is typical for Northwestern Europe, where the European Marriage Pattern (EMP) already dominated from the late Middle Ages onwards.³⁷ In Hajnal's seminal paper from 1965, three 'distinctive features' of the EMP are stressed: the average age of marriage, the share of the population that never married, and the effects on fertility and resulting population growth.³⁸ Particularly important for us are the typical characteristics that formed the area of Europe west of the Triest-Saint-Petersburg line (according to Hajnal, later refined by Laslett),³⁹ where both men and women married late, a high percentage of both men and women lived single, and in which new couples formed a new household (neolocality). What is most peculiar about this combination of features is the position of women: whereas late marriage was normal for men in many societies, late marriage for women was most exceptional; the same goes for singles. This "cocktail" of major changes in society, which were all present at the same time in the northwestern part of Europe, developed into the specific Western European Marriage Pattern which still

³⁷ For a thorough discussion of the timing of the emergence of the European Marriage Pattern, see De Moor and van Zanden, *Girl Power*, 1-33.

³⁸ John Hajnal, "European Marriage in Perspective", in *Population in History*, eds. D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (London: E. Arnold, 1965), 101-143, 101.

³⁹ Peter Laslett, "Family, Kinship and Collectivity as Systems of Support in Pre-Industrial Europe: A Consideration of the 'nuclear-Hardship' Hypothesis", *Continuity and Change* 3, no. Special Issue 02 (1988), 153. doi:10.1017/S02684160000093X.; Hajnal, *European Marriage in Perspective*, 101-143.

dominates our household formation system today (with late marriages, high numbers of singles among both men and women, neolocality and consensus-marriage), and still makes it distinct from other parts of Europe (in particular from some parts of the South). In subsequent studies it has been shown that female singles – and this is what interests us most here – were indeed much more present in Northwestern European towns than elsewhere.⁴⁰

In my view, the dominant features of the European Marriage Pattern played a major role in not only triggering the beguine movement, but also in enabling the continuation of it. Whereas temporary “problems”, such as an unbalanced sex-ratio or a lack of access to convents, may have played a role in stimulating women to choose for the beguinage, they cannot account for the long-term continuation of the movement, nor can they explain the geographical concentration within the boundaries of the Low Countries. The demographic regime is only part of the story, however. The particular regulation of inheritance in the Low Countries also influenced the establishment of beguinages: as women in the Low Countries were allowed to inherit, they could establish wills and manage their own fortunes. The beguines were thus able to bring their property with them into the beguinage. Even if some of that property would become communal property of the beguinage, they would still benefit from having the right to own and acquire (through work) property of their own. The possibility of owning property is evident from the fact that some beguinages had convents for the poorer beguines and separate houses for the wealthier beguines.⁴¹ A description of the beguinage of Ter Hooie in Ghent from 1328 makes clear that there were richer and poorer nuns, but that the latter did manage in providing for themselves, in particular with textile work: 'Some women [at the beguinage of Ter Hooie] are rich and have rents, but most own little more than their clothes, the personal belongings they store in coffer, and their beds. Yet they are a burden to no one, working with their hands, supporting themselves, napping wool

⁴⁰ Maryanne Kowalewski, "Singlewomen in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: The Demographic Perspective", in *Singlewomen in the European Past 1250-1800*, eds. Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 38-81 and 325-345, 40. See also her overview of average marriage ages and percentages of single women (Ibid., 326-328).

⁴¹ Although much literature on beguines gives the impression that beguines – at least in the early years – originated from the upper strata of society, Simons argues that right from the start of the movement, the beguines had diverse social backgrounds. See Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 91-104.

and finishing cloth'.⁴² Simons further mentions that, besides their involvement in the textile industry and their charity work (in hospitals, leper houses, or the nursing of individuals in private homes), some beguines even 'did farm work in nearby fields, herded animals, raised poultry, or grew vegetables for the urban market. Still others worked in an unspecified capacity in the city, perhaps as maids, to earn a living'.⁴³ The EMP was the driving force behind the high female labour market participation in the area, and, linked to this, substantial immigration of women in the early modern towns which was rather exceptional in comparison to e.g. Southern Europe, and which is also in line with the high number of out-of-town women that became beguines as I have shown before. The self-sufficiency of the beguines – through production or wage labour – should within the context of the EMP thus not be seen as an exceptional phenomenon, but rather as in line with the role of women in society and economy at large in Northwestern Europe. Women were able to earn their own living, and found support, safety and security among each other if needed, and the beguinage formed an excellent opportunity to achieve this. Between the bringing in of their own property and their textile production or work in wage labour, they could live autonomously.⁴⁴ The beguine movement is a powerful (albeit only one) example of how (late) medieval and early modern society created openings, both in economic and in ideological terms, for women to live a kind of life that was quite unthinkable in more patriarchal societies.⁴⁵

5. Beguinages as institutions for collective action

Women who had some religious vocation but wanted to remain single (and had no interest in going to a convent or marrying) could – thanks to a much higher presence of single women in general in these areas – join a beguinage. This explanation of their marital state does however still not explain the way in which they organised in

⁴² Citation from Simons (*Cities of Ladies*, 95) who translated an excerpt of a charter of the Begijnhof Ter Hooie, at the City archives of Gent. The many beguines that did need charity, in particular from 1275 onwards, were supported by the other wealthier beguines (Ibid., 104).

⁴³ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁴ The following comment of the Bishop of Lincoln indicates the self-sufficient life of the beguines: "There is an even greater form of poverty and this is to work for a living, just as the Beguines do. These people have the utmost perfect and saintly form of religious life, because they live their own work, their needs never weighing on the rest of the world". Citation from Robert Grossetest, Bishop of Lincoln, thirteenth century, cited by de Cant, *A World of Independent Women*, 7. In some literature the beguinages are even considered as the female versions of guilds. See e.g. Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, xi.

⁴⁵ During the fourteenth century, the church did try to limit the expansion of the beguines.

beguinages. Apart from the very specific form of architecture (which is still preserved in many towns in Flanders as World Heritage sites), the internal organisation also differed from a regular convent or from other groups of women that lived together and in some cases also developed into beguinages.⁴⁶ Rather than showing similarities with religious institutions, beguinages have many of the structural characteristics of secular institutions, such as guilds. In the literature, they have even been termed “female guilds”, but this reference also had to do with their engagement in the fabrication of textiles. Similarities can be found in their bottom-up formation and high degree of self-governance: there was no central coordination of their development, no single point of origin, nor a single founder.⁴⁷ Although several noble families are known to have supported groups of women with the intention of setting up a beguinage financially or in kind (by the donation of land to build upon),⁴⁸ the women themselves were responsible for the creation of the community, and decided – without influence of the religious authorities – the way in which their community would be organised. In many cases this entailed some hierarchy, but with a rotation of responsibilities among all senior members.⁴⁹ Another similarity rests in their exclusiveness, and the need to become a member of the community, which could be obtained via the profession. One of the other key characteristics of institutions such as guilds and beguinages is their reliance upon

⁴⁶ In the city of Bergen op Zoom, for example, a community of religious women was living at the Vrijthof. In 1429, these women seem to have chosen to live a more monastic kind of life: some of them chose to live together as beguines, whereas others chose the monastic life of a *grauwzuster* (lit.: “grey nun”) (W. A. van Ham, *Macht en gezag in het Markiezaat. een politiek-institutionele studie van Stad en Land van Bergen Op Zoom (1477-1583)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2000), 393-395). The small beguinage of Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe-ter-Ooie in Ghent also originally was a congregation of devote women living together; after some years, they organised themselves according to the example of the larger beguinage of Saint-Elizabeth. Formal recognition as a beguinage was granted to them by the Countess of Flanders in 1262 (Majérus, *Ces Femmes Qu'on Dit béguines*, 883-892; Hadewich Cailliau, *“Soo geluckigh als een beggijn” : het begijnhof Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-Ter-Hooie, 1584-1792* (Gent: Maatschappij voor Geschied. en Oudh. te Gent, 1995), 13-17).

⁴⁷ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 47.

⁴⁸ For instance, both beguinages that existed in the city of Sittard were founded by donations in kind. The first one was first mentioned in archival sources in 1276 and was founded by the noble Lady of Montjoie. Archival sources also mention the existence of a second beguinage, founded by the municipal government of Sittard in 1441 on behalf of the late Lord Huprecht and his wife Kathrijne who bequeathed their house and a rent-charge as an inheritance to five poor *beguines* (P. B. N. van Luyn, “Begijnstraat en Begijnhof”, in *Historisch Jaarboek voor het Land Van Zwentibold* [null], ed. Stichting Historisch Jaarboek voor het Land van Zwentibold (Sittard: Stichting Historisch Jaarboek voor het Land van Zwentibold, 1995), 14-36; for archival sources see Euregionaal Historisch Centrum Sittard-Geleen, Bestuursarchief Gemeente Sittard, 1243-1794, toegang 163, inv. nr. 1238, and Regionaal Historisch Centrum Limburg (Maastricht), Archief van het Kapittel van Sint Pieter te Sittard, toegang 14B004, inv.nr. 7, regest 16). An example in Flanders was the beguinage of Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe-ter-Ooie [Our-Lady-of-ter-Ooie], which was granted the right to build a chapel, to create a graveyard, and to have its own chaplain by the Countess of Flandres (Majérus, *Ces femmes qu'on dit béguines*, 883-892; Cailliau, *“Soo geluckigh als een beggijn”*, 13-17).

⁴⁹ Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 143.

economies of scale – visible for example in the collective provisions such as a farm on the premises – and, most importantly, risk sharing. As in guilds, beguines sought to avoid economic risks by sticking together, but this also offered them the advantage of safety. Single women ran many physical risks in the early modern town; the walls around most beguinages and gates closed at night, offering them much-needed security. The fact that the beguines chose to organise themselves in such a way should in fact be no surprise: they could find many examples of institutionalised collective action around them.⁵⁰

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to give an alternative explanation for the development of the beguine movement in the Low Countries. I have explained which factors in the literature at large – with the exception of Simons – have been given, although it should be noted that those explanations mainly pertained to the pre-1500 situation. Skewed sex-ratios and the lack of other religious alternatives have been the dominant elements in this literature. I have examined the importance of these factors for the period from the late sixteenth century onwards and have come to the conclusion that the impetus for women to become beguines lay neither in avoiding the convent nor resisting marriage, but rather in the possibility of choosing the life of a single woman within a safe environment.

The beguinage movement demonstrates that in the early modern Low Countries remaining single was a real choice, and not the result of a number of failures, or a situation in which one ended up if other preferences in life could not be fulfilled. Nevertheless, this does not mean that women would not want some sort of protection, both physically, within the walls of their community, and religiously, in their choice to lead a religious life, though in the case of the beguines they could achieve this without the usual constraints of living in a convent.

This decision to live the life of a beguine reflects an exceptionally high level of agency among single women in Northwestern Europe. Women had – in comparison to other parts of Europe – a substantially larger say over their own future thanks to the conditions for household formation stipulated by the European Marriage Pattern, their

⁵⁰ See De Moor, *The Silent Revolution*, 179; Katherine A. Lynch, *Individuals, Families, and Communities in Europe, 1200-1800: The Urban Foundations of Western Society* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

right to inherit and to own and accumulate property, and their presence on the labour market. This enabled them to provide, through their own income, relative independence from a male breadwinner, but it nevertheless also left them in a safety vacuum that was not easy to resolve. The beguinage formed, also for those women that could not otherwise easily make ends meet yet could often find employment within the beguinage, a haven of safety.

Besides the tolerance for single women that I have demonstrated in early modern society, the collectivity as the chosen form of achieving such safety demands some explanation. The way in which they organised was fairly similar to other collective institutions in medieval and early modern Northwestern Europe, both religious and non-religious. Of course, we should not underestimate the religious motives of these women in entering the beguinage, but due to the fact that beguinages have been studied in the past as particular constructs within the city, as peculiarities, or as reservoirs for nuns *manquéés*, the wider context has often been forgotten. That wider context was itself situated in an area which indeed differed in many ways from the rest of Europe, and as such can serve as an explanation for the emergence, and in particular the continuation, of this interesting movement. The choice to live collectively (in fact in fairly large collectivities) and not as semi-religious small groupings could have been inspired by other forms of institutions, which thrived on collective norms and advantages of scale through self-governance and bottom-up formation and organisation. Of course there was also the influence of the convent as a community-model, but this does not hold for the organisational setting of the beguinage, which consisted mainly of small houses for those who could afford them and larger, more convent-like communities for the less fortunate.

In general one could conclude that, although the beguine movement still strikes us as something peculiar and different apart from society – not only by today's standards, but also in the past –, such a phenomenon may have been, given the context in which it emerged, not so bizarre at all. It simply accommodated single women's needs, not shielding them from a society that was hostile to them, but rather offering them a unique opportunity to direct their future in a society that tolerated single women as a way of life.

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