

Journal of Family History

<http://jfh.sagepub.com/>

Single, Safe, and Sorry?: Explaining the Early Modern Beguine Movement in the Low Countries

Tine De Moor

Journal of Family History 2014 39: 3

DOI: 10.1177/0363199013515167

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jfh.sagepub.com/content/39/1/3>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Journal of Family History* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://jfh.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://jfh.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jan 12, 2014

[What is This?](#)

Single, Safe, and Sorry? Explaining the Early Modern Beguine Movement in the Low Countries

Tine De Moor¹

Journal of Family History
2014, Vol. 39(1) 3-21
© 2013 The Author(s)
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0363199013515167
jfh.sagepub.com


Abstract

The beguine movement is a most remarkable movement in the history of the Low Countries but still remains to be explained. The skewed sex ratio, diminished access to convents, and the religious revival of the late Middle Ages seem insufficient to explain the movement in the long run. I argue that the specific attitude toward women in the Low Countries that originated with the emergence of the European Marriage Pattern created a fertile and unique basis for the beguinages to develop: the beguinages may have offered women in the Low Countries safety and security in case they chose to remain single.

Keywords

beguines, early modern period, Low Countries, European Marriage Pattern, singles

Introduction

Although the beguine movement is still one of the most fascinating aspects of both religious and women's history, it has attracted relatively few scholars' attention. Over 750 years have passed since the start of this movement, which has left a substantial number of beguinages across the Low Countries, and many of them have been recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage. Even though the movement has recently come to an end with the death of Marcella Pattyn in 2013, the very last beguine, much remains to be explained.¹ In this article, I try to shed new light on the rise and development of the movement. I attribute a lesser role to the religious motives, emphasizing rather their social and economic motives. Contrary to most of the existing literature on beguines, the members chose their lifestyle not primarily as an alternative to a life as a nun or to marriage but rather as a deliberate decision to remain single; second, my findings are given a wider perspective, in accord with the changing marriage patterns in Western Europe. I see the beguine movement as further evidence for the prominence of the European Marriage Pattern in northwestern Europe since the late Middle Ages. This pattern includes a relatively large number of women who chose not to marry. Some of my arguments

¹ Department of History and Art History, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:

Tine De Moor, Department of History and Art History, Utrecht University, Drift 6 3512 BS Utrecht, The Netherlands.
Email: t.demoor@uu.nl

explain the beguinages' particular form as walled "cities within cities." I argue that beguinages may also be viewed as female forms of "corporate" organization, as in the guilds, providing protection to individual women active in the urban economies of the Low Countries.

Since its onset in the late twelfth century, the life of beguines has been marked by ambiguity, making it substantially different from a convent life or other religious and semireligious movements (such as the Modern Devotion) in which women could also play important roles: beguines had vows, but only temporary ones; they lived a simple life, but some 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.² Geographically, the emergence of this peculiar movement was situated in the area around Liège in present-day Belgium, but it soon spread over the rest of the Southern Netherlands, as well as to the north and as far east as Bohemia, and south, to the northern part of France. The first written documentation of the beguines 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.³ 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 the area around Liège, the northern part of present-day Belgium (Flanders), and the province of North Brabant in (present-day) the Netherlands. Elsewhere in Europe, communities that described themselves as beguines—but may not have all the ambiguous features I have just described—have also been found, but to a lesser extent.⁴

Following a period of informal gatherings of individual women, the "institutionalized" form in which the beguines started to organize as a real community with its own regulations, collective property, and identity, dates from the middle of the thirteenth century. The communities varied substantially in size: from smaller convents to large, extensive communities that comprised virtually all necessary functionalities of a small city. These were usually situated just outside the city walls, but were sometimes also within the walls. The most active period in the Southern Netherlands in the foundation of new "settlements" was between 1230 and 1320. Almost seventy percent of the beguinages were founded before the Dutch Revolt of the mid-sixteenth century, most in the form of a house where multiple beguines could live, in the form much like the "normal" convents. The number of contemplative women in many cases was much larger than in convents. 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 ones often outnumbered local nunneries, which would often have no more than sixty nuns.⁵ The number of beguines varied greatly: from a few in the smaller convents, to populations that included nearly eight percent of the entire population of the town.⁶ Although this was less common in the Northern Netherlands, the second religious women's movement there also led to large numbers of women choosing to live as beguines.⁷ Alternatives there were the communities of the "*Zusters van het Gemene Leven*" (literally: Sisters of the Common Life), or the Tertiaries, convents that were part of the Modern Devotion movement. These were similar, but not the same: whereas the former did not sever contact with the lay world, they did renounce private property; the latter eventually changed from not taking any vows to a stricter way of life, in a more cloistered form of existence, and lost their institutional independence.⁸ Beguines clearly stayed more in touch with the "outside world," often providing public services such as schooling and health care and had more freedom to accumulate and spend their property and income gathered from participating in worldly occupations such as textile production. It is difficult to put these distinctions in figures, but clearly, the beguines lived another type 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 a problematic period. In the

northern, mainly Protestant, part of the Netherlands, most beguinages disappeared around the Reformation, with the exception of those in Amsterdam and Breda, the latter city being close to the Flemish “heart” of the movement. The sixteenth century was also the age of the return to patriarchy (described elsewhere), during which women were restricted in their rights, behavior, and opportunities.⁹ The seventeenth century witnessed a revival in the number of beguinages, following the Counter-Reformation. Some of the beguinages, such as the one in Tongeren, reached their largest size during this period. At the end of the eighteenth century, many beguinages disappeared. By that time most had lost the attraction they had once enjoyed and had substantially fewer beguines.

In light of the current debate about institutions and their role in economic and social development,¹⁰ the growth of beguinages shows they represented an extreme form of resilience: although many disappeared around the time of the Reformation (particularly 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 and many of its former houses still stand. But the architectural remains 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 to reexamine the factors that may have influenced the women who chose to join a beguinage instead of a convent, or in preference to marrying, living as a laywoman with a family, or as a single person in town. To understand the longevity of this movement and the continuing choice of women to join it, we should focus on a period well after its beginnings. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries not only form an interesting period because of the revival of the beguinages but also for the possibilities they offer for gathering biographical data about individual beguines. Literature about the motives of beguines from the early years of the movement is mainly based on the *vitae* of literate and often well-off members, whereas we now know that the beguine community was socially more varied.¹²

To explain a movement that survived for such a longtime we need to focus on structural factors that must have been “embedded” in society, rather than on 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 regional exceptionality of the movement also supports the importance of focusing on structural factors. Its prevalence in the continental North Sea area and its surroundings suggests that a very specific combination of factors characterized this region, and these were probably conducive to particular choices by individuals. The fact that the female variant of this particular movement—and not the male *beghard* movement—became so popular, points us toward factors that conditioned female decision making within the household sphere (e.g., a decrease in parental authority) and in society at large (e.g., their increasingly favorable position on the labor market and ability to earn their own income). Although the beguines were a semi-religious movement, the religious aspects of the movement may have been overstated. Historians have not paid enough attention to the influence of social structures on the women who became beguines, as Walter Simons has stressed in several publications.¹³ Although I discuss the nonreligious 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 ambiguity of the beguines’ lives and their dependence on the lay world through earning their own income, it cannot be denied that a substantial part of a beguine’s day was not devoted to religious activities. A woman choosing to live in a beguinage solely for religious motives may have been disappointed. Thus, she would have either not chosen this semireligious life or have left the beguinage for a place where her vocational aspirations could have been better fulfilled. As I will show on the basis of the data, a number of beguines did indeed choose to leave the beguinage for a convent, but the continuing popularity of the movement until well into the eighteenth century does show that this was only 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, especially in the thirteenth century, which may have had a continuing effect on the growth of the movement after its foundation. I

will also detail a number of other factors that 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: even though singular examples did exist elsewhere, it was never to the same extent as in the Low Countries. In the course of this article, I formulate and test a hypothesis, based on a large data set of biographical data for over 13,000 beguines who lived in ten different beguinages throughout the Low Countries. This data set, along with other data about the entry age of nuns and the marriage age of women, helps us gain an understanding of women's decision to choose a beguinage over their other options in life. In the last part, I explain the major conclusions that can be drawn from the data-analysis.

Research Questions

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, or a combination of both.¹⁴ In the early days of the movement, women wanting to lead a religious life with vows in monastic houses had to pay a considerable large dowry. As a result, such a life was primarily reserved for aristocratic women whose families could afford such a dowry.¹⁵ Established convents were full, and this 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. This led scholars to suppose 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 was explained in light of the freedom that cities offered. Scholars argued that, rather than living alone, some women preferred to live in autonomous groups where they could live a freely chosen religious life as well as working as a teacher, spinster, or in an other occupation 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 did not prevent them from following real-world occupations. And in fact, beguinages often became wealthy in the centuries after their foundation.¹⁹

There are generally two major explanations for the beguine movement: one hinges on the unbalanced sex ratio (*Frauenfrage* debate) in medieval towns, and the other points to access to convents and the links with religious developments. Simons sees the *Frauenfrage* debate as a reaction to the latter, more religiously inspired theory. Authors such as Greven and Philippen stress the importance of limited opportunities in the main religious orders for the emergence of beguinages. Several limitations in the growth of nunneries may have provided an impetus to the development of female communities, first in the vicinity of nunneries or hospitals, and later actual beguinages.²⁰ The sex ratio explanation, on the other hand, was based on Bücher's *Frauenfrage*,²¹ which stressed the social role of religious movements above the religious background of the beguines, perceiving the beguinages as refuges for women of the lower classes.

There have been various critiques of both explanations. Access to convents was less restricted than previously thought, and there was a geographical divide between the regions with convents and those with beguinages, with each attracting different classes of women. Furthermore, access to convents probably played a role in the first period of the beguine movement, immediately after the Lateran Council in the thirteenth century, as the movement then mainly attracted women from the elite, and places in the convents was indeed limited, even for them. Thereafter, the beguine movement women outside the nobility soon dominated the movement, since access to the convents was no longer considered an option for them.²²

Regarding the *Frauenfrage* theory, several authors have argued that the sex ratio imbalance may not have been significant enough to bring about a new movement.²³ They have shown that either (1) the male surplus was not so significant in the early medieval period or (2) the female surplus was not

that large in the late medieval period. Ester Koch points out that, as far as the sex ratio can be reconstructed with a sufficient number of sources for the early and late Middle Ages, there is no clear evidence that supports the previously mentioned hypotheses.²⁴

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 waning interest, in the seventeenth century there was a clear revival of the beguine movement, despite the lack of arguments claiming that either one of the previous factors played a role in this demise and revival. Examining the later period suggests other factors that may have played a role in the evolution of the beguine movement. No sources for the preceding period are available, but I can offer some interpretations based on the later evolution of the movement.

I will focus on two major, interlinked factors that may have played a crucial role in creating a fertile soil for the emergence and continuation of the beguine movement in the Low Countries. First, changes in the marriage pattern and the changing position of single women in society at large, as well as the increasing participation of women in the labor market probably played a role. Second, 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 convents. Both the changes in the marriage pattern (especially the European Marriage Pattern²⁵) and the development of institutions for collective action follow a similar path in Western Europe, particularly in the Low Countries.²⁶ Here, I focus primarily on the individual motives of beguines and less on the presence of the new institutional model that thrived on self-governance and (mainly) bottom-up organization. In the last section, before the conclusions, this aspect of the beguine movement will be briefly touched upon.

Hypotheses and Sources

In this article, I will test three hypotheses directly related to the two theories on the emergence of beguinages. The main question is what the alternatives to a life as a beguine were. Was it simply an alternative to marriage, to the convent, or to living single elsewhere in town, without the protection of the beguinage walls? To answer this, I look at place of birth (and the location of the beguinage) and age at taking vows (compared to the average age at taking vows in a convent or first marriage).

First, we need to analyze where the beguines came from to test the sex ratio argument. We need to take into account that the unbalanced sex ratio (more women than men) was a typically urban phenomenon. In the countryside, several factors resulted in a higher mortality among women and led to a more equal ratio, whereas in the cities an unbalanced sex ratio was more likely. Women who originally came from the countryside were probably able to return to their village to get married, as it would have been far easier to find a husband there. Yet in the literature, it has long been assumed that the beguines stemmed from the urban bourgeoisie. On the basis of preliminary analyses of more scattered data, Simons stresses that most beguines came from the areas around the town where the beguinage was situated, not from the town itself.²⁷ This suggests that the sex ratio might not have been a very important factor in motives to move into a beguinage: if women were desperate for a husband, it would have been more logical to return to their village to find one. For women born in an urban environment, this would have been more difficult. It 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, I was able to analyze the places of origin for a large number of beguines, and also to refine my argument further by looking at the age they took their vows, and compare it to the average age of marriage in the area. If women who entered the beguinage were generally older than the average age they took vows, when the vow of obedience was declared by the

novice beguine, she may well have considered the beguinage as a last resort, and that it was a result of their unsuccessful search for a groom. If profession (taking vows) occurred when women were younger than the average marriage age, it would suggest the choice was made before the point of desperation, and could indicate that it was an individual choice to remain single, without waiting for the ideal partner.

Similarly, this reasoning could also be applied with respect to the nuns-manquées argument. Notwithstanding, the other arguments that have already been advanced to indicate that access to convents—both in entry requirements and places available—was not restricted after all, we also need to take into account the argument of choice;²⁸ the beguines, too, spent on average 1.5 to 2 years in the beguinage before taking their actual vows. This entry age, which can be extrapolated for all beguines for whom the age they took their vows is known, can be compared to the age at entry into a convent. From this, the relationship between peerage and entry into the convent by considering whether the beguines were of noble descent can also be analyzed.

In this article, I offer an alternative explanation, that entering the beguinage was an individual choice to remain single (which had become normal in the Low Countries), rather than to get married. Considering that the more religious option would have been taken much earlier than the choice to get married or enter the convent, this difference should be reflected in the average age of profession compared to average age of taking vows in convents and average age at first marriage.

Members of our research team composed a data set with biographical information on more than 13,000 beguines (13,362 to be precise) from several beguinages in the Low Countries, mainly from the period 1550–1900. We also included basic data such as date of arrival at the beguinage, the date/year they took their vows and their place and date of birth. It proved impossible to retrieve all these data about every beguine in the data set. For the different analyses in this article, I fall back on different samples of the data, so that a different set of cases is included in the various samples. I expand on the content of each sample wherever appropriate. The data set was based on data retrieved from a number of primary and secondary sources and then linked together. 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) in the Low Countries. In some cases—such as Ghent—there were several beguinages in the city, which means it is possible that the beguines in the data set were located in different beguinages in the same town, but this should not affect our conclusions. Though the database can be much improved, it is the largest data set of its kind.

The Geographical Origins of Beguines

The geographical origin of the beguines is interesting for two reasons. First, it can help us understand whether there was such a thing as a skewed sex ratio in the cities, and second, it can give us a better idea of the importance of the urban bourgeoisie as a class of origin for beguines, and thus answer the question whether women became beguines because they had no other religious alternatives. As Simons noted, the urban location of the beguinages did not prevent women from the countryside from choosing a life within their walls. He gives examples of estimates based on cross sections for specific years: from 62 percent of the beguines in the Sint-Truiden beguinage in 1780 to as many as 95 percent in the Hoogstraten beguinage in 1619 were out-of-town immigrants. These figures are far from exaggerated, as our data show. Table 1 demonstrates that on average, a large majority of beguines was born in a location other than the town 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 (see Table 1). 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

Table 1. Evolution of the Number of Beguines Coming from Outside the Beguinage.

Period	Born outside beguinage location (percent)	Born within same town as beguinage (percent)	# for which we know birth location	# with profession/arrival (+1) year	% of data for which we have a birth location (percent)
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	6,735	10,641	63.29

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 splitting 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 suggest that there was a “family strategy” involved. But there are several possible explanations for this that do not depend on the capacity of the women’s families to have planned their lives for them. The work by Kim Overlaet, for example, shows that while beguines did bequeath to family members, they also did so actively to nonrelated persons.²⁹ This suggests that if the women were pushed by their families into becoming beguines, it was an unsuccessful financial strategy. The number of women who joined a family member in a beguinage suggests that they probably considered their kin-beguine as a successful example of female “liberation” and/or independence and that they simply sought to follow their example instead of being the subject of family intrigues and strategies.

Of course, there were also beguines who were born outside of the town in which the beguinage was located, and thus would have had to move from that place to the beguinage. For nearly 5,000 beguines (4,940), both the location of birth and the location of the beguinage could be identified. A small sample of beguines came from villages that could be linked to different places; they have been excluded for further analysis. The portion of beguines that migrated to towns among the total beguinage population is very large: in some periods, more than 95 percent came from outside the town where the beguinage was located. Most beguines only moved less than twenty kilometers from their birthplace (see Table 2), which means they still had the opportunity to be visited regularly by kin or visit their family, if permitted by the mistress of the beguinage. Only very few beguines lived further than fifty kilometers 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. Returning home was not impeded by great distances.

The rural origins of many beguines might also explain in part why the beguinage was attractive: 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 setting probably provided 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

The Age at Marriage and at Profession

The database allows us to examine in a unique way the relationship between becoming a beguine and the possibility of marriage. The age I focus on here is the age when the decision to stay at the

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				Total	#
	0 km (percent)	0–20 km (percent)	20–50 km (percent)	>50 km (percent)		
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

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
End total	10,641	5,039

beguinage was made. This is not linked to the actual entry date, but the date at which the beguine took her vows. In general, this was about one to two years after she entered the beguinage.

Because data from several beguinages could be brought together, the size of our database allows us to give well-founded conclusions for nearly every year in the period of the age when vows were taken. For 5,286 beguines, we know which year (and in many cases the exact date) they were born or baptized (as baptism usually followed soon after birth, I pulled these data together; see Table 3).³² To determine the average age, at which beguines chose to live in the beguinage, I relied in most cases on the year they took their vows (which we have for 9,659 beguines), and, if this was not available, I relied upon the date of arrival, but added one extra year to it, as the average difference between vows and arrival was 1.5 years (in 982 cases).³³ If we combine all these data (birth/baptism data with data on arrival/vows), we have a sample of 4,499 beguines for which the age at taking vows can be calculated and 540 for which we do not have the age they took vows, but we do have the age when they arrived arrival at the beguinage. This yields a total of 5,039 beguines that can be used for the analysis of the average age when they took vows (see Table 3).³⁴ Our largest sample of this average age for beguines comes from Ghent (see Table 4), which is not surprising: Ghent was one of the towns that always had the largest number of beguines.

Most of the information we have on the age of taking vows is for the period of 1640–1781; before and after, we have fewer than ten records for any single year. To provide a more reliable picture of the real evolution, some outliers from the graph have been excluded.

The graph (see Figure 1) below shows that the average age of beguines on entrance and taking vows becomes progressively older from 1580 to 1900, from around twenty years old to a little under thirty. Clearly, this means that the age at which beguines entered beguinages changed over time. When they arrived, the beguines were well beyond the age of the average novice that entered a

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
End total	2,411	399	898	70	79	271	347	164	398	2	5,039

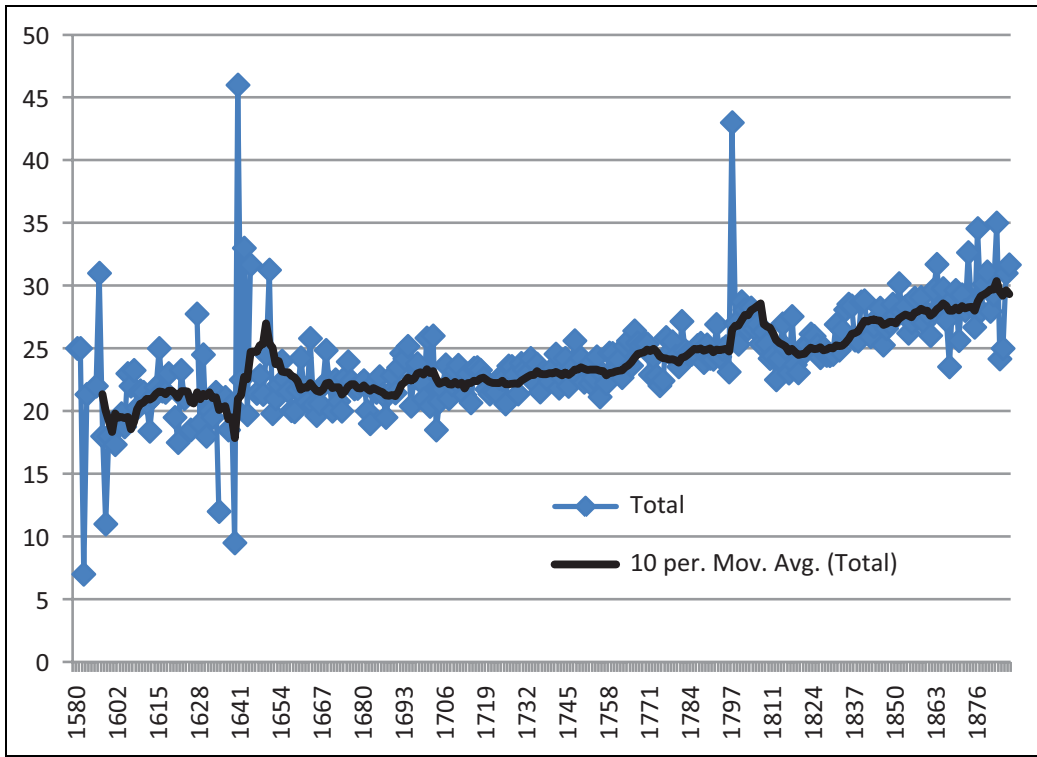


Figure 1. Evolution of the average age at profession of beguines, 1680–1781.
 Source: Beguines database.

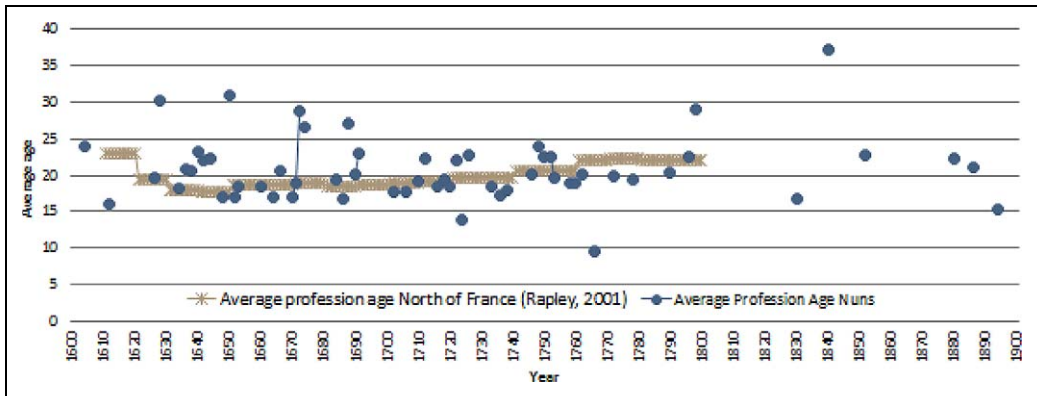


Figure 2. Average entry ages nuns into convents.
 Source: Data for Northern France from Simons, *Cities of Ladies*; collection of nuns’ entry ages for convents in the Belgian provinces of Brabant, Limburg, and Liège on basis of Ursmer Berlière, *Monasticon Belge* (Liège: Centre national de recherches d’histoire religieuse, 1960, 180 values for the whole period).

convent (see Figure 2 for the evolution over time). 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 when taking vows

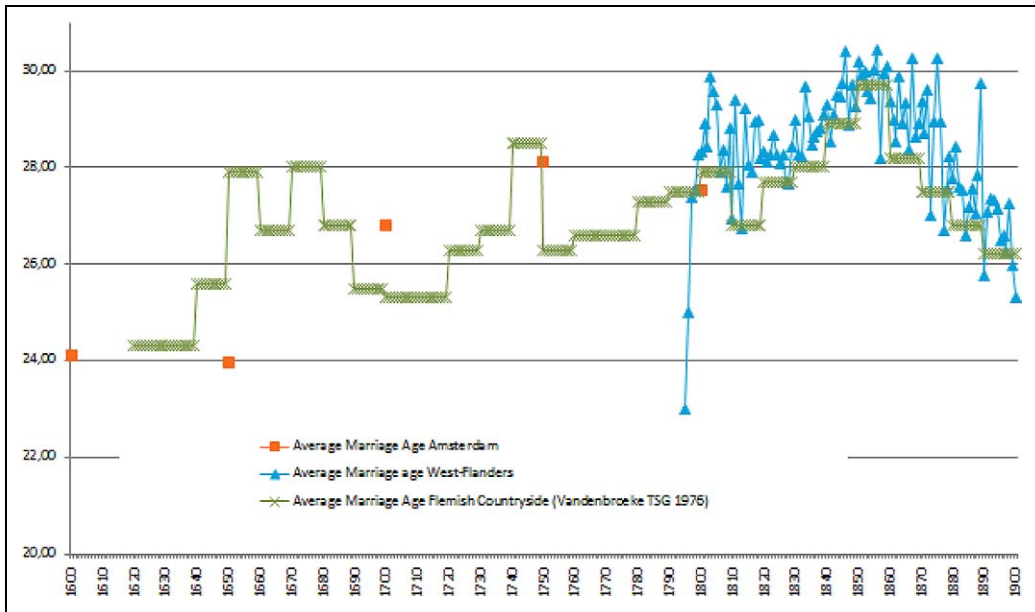


Figure 3. Average marriage age (at first marriage) in several locations in the Low Countries between 1600 and 1900.

Sources: Marriage registers West-Flanders nineteenth 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): 107-45; samples for 1600, 1650, 1700, 1750, and 1800 of the *Ondertrouwakten* Amsterdam.

shows that for most women the beguinage was an alternative to remaining single, not to the convent (too old), nor did they wait to reach the average marriage age (see Figure 3). A small number—and in some cases we know them by name—entered the convent after a period in the beguinage. A small number also left the beguinage to get married. It is difficult to give actual figures for these, as the availability of such data depends on whether local customs noted that. For a small sample of beguines (only 140), spread out over the entire period of study, we also have information which indicates that at some point they actually left the beguinage. For half (75) of these women, the exact reason for their departure could not be retrieved. For the rest, about one-third left to enter a convent, others were considered "unfit" for a life of a beguine and were asked to leave, and still others took the initiative to leave on their own. Some of the beguines in our database are reported to have (eventually) married, but our data suggest that in most cases when they chose the beguinage, it was to escape marriage to a specific partner. 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 so many beguines were living a substantial distance from their place of origin, the extent of parental constraints is questionable.

Our data do not contain sufficient information for the period before the seventeenth century, nor can we 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 calling it a "movement." This may also relate to several changes in European society in which the religious explanation is less important. The decline in the number of beguines from the middle of the nineteenth century onward seems to contradict the resurgence of monastic life in that same century.³⁶ It is possible to argue that potential beguines started having

more intensive religious feelings, leading them to choose the convent, but our data for the nineteenth century on marriage ages suggest something else. Whereas there is a drop in marriage ages from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, the ages at which beguines took vows remained more or less the same as before (data are only available until the 1970s), and actually become higher than the marriage ages. It might well be that in a society where staying single was increasingly accepted and possible, by the second half of the nineteenth century, women no longer sought the security and community spirit of the beguinage to help them in their plans to remain single. It might also be that the beguinage eventually became a last resort for old spinsters who had no luck in finding a man. This would be in line with the unpleasant terms that were offered to the nineteenth and twentieth century inhabitants of beguinages as well.

Our data analysis shows that women chose to live in a beguinage as a first choice that allowed them to stay single, rather than as a second choice to marriage or living in a convent. The fact that women were allowed to live as singles is typical for Northwestern Europe, where the European Marriage Pattern (EMP) dominated from the late Middle Ages onward.³⁷ Hajnal's seminal article of 1965 stresses three "distinctive features" of the EMP: the average age of marriage, the portion 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 were characteristic of the area of Europe west of the virtual line Trieste-Saint Petersburg (according to Hajnal, later refined by Laslett),³⁹ where both men and women married late, a high percentage of both men and women did not marry at all, and new couples formed a new household (neolocality). What is especially odd 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 is true of singles. This "cocktail" of major changes in society, which were all present at the same time in Northwestern Europe, developed into the specific Western European Marriage Pattern that still dominates our household formation system today (late marriages, high numbers of singles among both men and women, neolocality and consensus marriage), and still distinguishes it from other parts of Europe (especially from some parts of the south). It was not until after the shock of the Black Death that all these features became locked into a pattern, but the driving forces behind the consolidation of the EMP (the development of the labor market, introduction of consensus marriage, and developments in inheritance practices) were already becoming established before the Black Death.⁴⁰

The dominant features of the European Marriage Pattern played a major role not only in triggering the beguine movement but also in enabling its continuation. Whereas temporary "problems," such as an unbalanced sex ratio or a lack of access to convents, may have played a role in encouraging women to choose a beguinage, they cannot explain the long-term existence 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 were able to establish wills and manage their own fortunes. The beguines were, thus, able to take their property with them into the beguinage. Even if some of that property became the beguinage's communal property, the women 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 their poorer members and separate houses for the wealthier ones.⁴¹ A description from 1328 of the beguinage of Ter Hooie in Ghent shows that there were richer and poorer women, but that the latter did manage to provide for themselves, especially 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 coffers, and their beds. Yet they are a burden to no one, working with their hands, supporting themselves, napping wool and finishing cloth."⁴² Simons further mentions that, besides their involvement in the textile

industry and their charity work (in hospitals, leper houses, or as nurses to 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 European Marriage Pattern was the driving force behind the high female labor market participation in the area. Linked to this was the substantial immigration of women to the early modern towns, which was exceptional compared to southern Europe, and which also accords with the many out-of-town women who became beguines. The self-sufficiency of the beguines—through production or wage labor—should not be interpreted as an exceptional phenomenon (within the context of the EMP), but rather consistent with the role of women in the society and economy of Northwestern Europe. Women were able to earn their own living, and found support, safety, and security as a group, and the beguinage formed an excellent opportunity to achieve this. Retention of their own property and their textile production or wage labor allowed them to live autonomously.⁴⁴ The beguine movement is an (albeit only one) example of how (late) medieval and early modern society created openings, both economically and ideologically, for women to live lives that were unthinkable in more patriarchal societies.⁴⁵

Beguines as Institutions for Collective Action

Because of the greater numbers of single women in the Low Countries, those who had some religious vocation but wanted to remain single (and had no interest in going to a convent or marrying) could join a beguinage. However, this does still not explain the choice of the peculiar format of the beguinage. Apart from the very specific form of architecture (which is still preserved in many towns in present-day Belgium as World Heritage sites), the internal organization 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 to religious institutions, beguinages have many of the structural characteristics of secular institutions, such as guilds. In the literature they have even been called “female guilds,” but this mainly in relation to their work 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 development, no single point of origin, nor a single founder.⁴⁷ Although several noble families are known to have financially supported groups of women to set up a beguinage (by donating land to build upon),⁴⁸ the women themselves were responsible for creation of the community, and decided (without much influence of the religious authorities) how their community would be organized. 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 vows. One of the other key characteristics of institutions such as guilds and beguinages was their reliance upon economies of scale (e.g., in collective provisions such as a farm on the premises) and most importantly, risk sharing. As in guilds, beguines sought to avoid economic risks by banding 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 were closed at night, offering them much-needed security. The fact that the beguines chose to organize the way they did should be no surprise: they could find many examples of institutionalized collective action around them.⁵⁰

Conclusion

In this article, I have given an alternative explanation for the development of the beguine movement in the Low Countries. I have described the explanations in the literature, 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. After examining the importance of these factors for the period from the late sixteenth century onward, I came 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 failures. 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—although in the case of the beguines they could achieve this without the usual constraints of living in a convent.

The decision to live the life of a beguine reflects an exceptionally high level of agency among single women in Northwestern Europe. Women there had a substantially larger say over their own future, thanks to the conditions of household formation in the European Marriage Pattern, their right to inherit and to own and accumulate property, and their presence on the labor market. This enabled them to provide, through their own income, relative independence from a male breadwinner or their parents, but it also left them in a safety vacuum that was not easy to resolve. For those women, the beguinage formed a haven of safety.

Of course, the religious motives of women who entered a beguinage should not be ignored. Because beguinages have been studied in the past as particular constructs within the city, as peculiarities, or as reservoirs for nuns *manquées*, the wider context has however often been forgotten. That wider context was located in an area that differed in many ways from the rest of Europe, and as such can serve as an explanation for the emergence and continuation of this interesting movement. The choice to live collectively (in fairly large collectivities) and not as semi-religious small groupings could have been inspired by other forms of institutions that thrived on collective norms and advantages of scale through self-governance and bottom-up formation and organization. Of course, there was also the influence of the convent as a community model, but this does not hold for the entire organizational 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.

Although the beguine movement may seem peculiar and different to us, it was, given its context not so bizarre at all. It simply accommodated single women's needs, not shielding them from a society that was hostile, but rather offering them a unique opportunity to direct their future in a society that tolerated single women as a way of life.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank René van Weeren, Rianne van de Beek, and Cecile Van Ooteghem for their help with the data collection and the anonymous referees for their most useful comments on the earlier version of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: The research for this article was made possible by funding from the European Research Council under the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013)/(ERC grant agreement no 240928) as part of the project "'United we stand.' The dynamics and consequences of institutions for collective action in pre-industrial Europe." (See also www.collective-action.info)

Notes

1. <http://www.economist.com/news/obituary/21576632-marcella-pattyn-worlds-last-beguine-died-april-14th-aged-92-marcella-pattyn>
2. Translated from the introduction of Pascal Majérus, *Ces femmes qu'on dit béguines...: Guide des béguinages de Belgique: Bibliographie et sources d'archives* (Bruxelles, Belgium: Archives générales du Royaume, 1997), 7.
3. 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): 321–42, 325–26. Even more ironic is the assumption that the name "beguine" would be derived from a man called Lambert le Bègue.
4. 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 onward. But as with other forms of religious and semireligious movements 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. Such rights 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, which eluded most other informal female religious and semireligious movements.
5. Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 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 (1950): 31–76. For a graph of the development of beguinages founded before 1566, see Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 50.
6. Simons gives the example of Herentals, where in 1480 the beguines accounted for 7.7 percent of the entire population (*Ibid.*, 60).
7. The first religious women's movement took place in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and was characterized by many women joining already existing convents of various orders. The second, to be situated between the middle of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century consisted more out of women forming new convents—of which many were very small—that in the end would accept the rule of St. Francis (Madelon van Luijk, "Devote vrouwen tijdens de tweede religieuze vrouwenbeweging in de laatmiddeleeuwse Noordelijke Nederlanden," *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 27, no. 1 (2001): 33–56, 33–7.
8. *Ibid.*, 39–43.
9. See Tine De Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Vrouwen en de geboorte van het kapitalisme in West-Europa* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: 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.
10. The debate on institutions was set-off by the work of Nobel Prize winner Douglass 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 Cornelia Frijters, who was a member of the beguinage in Breda; she died at the age of 81 on April 13, 1990 ("Cornelia Frijters," Wikipedia, accessed January 31, 2013,

- http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornelia_Frijters). In Belgium, the last surviving beguine was Marcella Pattyn, who took her vows in 1942 in the beguinage of Kortrijk and died on April 14, 2013 (see also footnote 1).
12. Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 91–104.
 13. *Ibid.*, 126.
 14. In France, Germany, and the Low Countries, there were more marriageable women than men “due to local ward, feuds, crusades, . . . the large number of secular and regular clergy.” See Fiona Bowie, *Beguine Spirituality: An Anthology* (London, UK: 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 communities, 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 toward 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.
 20. Greven, *Die Anfänge der Beginen*; L. J. M. Philippen, *Het ontstaan der begijnhoven: Een synthetische studie* (Antwerpen: De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1943); Walter Simons, “Een zeker bestaan: de zuidnederlandse begijnen en de Frauenfrage,” *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 17 (1991): 125–46, 128.
 21. Karl Bücher, *Die Frauenfrage im Mittelalter* (pp. 31–33), 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*, 1992; Esther Koch, “De positie van vrouwen op de huwelijksmarkt,” *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 13, no. 2 (1987): 150–72.
 24. *Ibid.*, 162–4.
 25. For a thorough discussion of the timing of the emergence of the European Marriage Pattern, see Tine De Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden, “Girl Power: The European Marriage Pattern and Labor Markets in the North Sea Region in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Period,” *The Economic History Review* 63, no. 1 (2010): 1–33.
 26. 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. 16 (2008): 179–212.
 27. Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 139.
 28. According to Chapters XV to XIX of the Papal Decree “On Regulars and Nuns” of December 4, 1563, issued at the Council of Trent, vows should not be made until the novice had completed a full and uninterrupted year of probation within the monastery; an additional condition was that the girl that was to take vows after this probation should be at least sixteen years of age. The Chapters also contain the explicit prohibition to the family of the novice to bequeath any possessions to the monastery prior to the actual profession of the girl involved. Translated texts available at <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/trentall.html> [accessed 22 April 2013]. For an extensive case study of the way in which women were admitted to a monastery, see e.g. Eva Schlotheuber, *Klostereintritt und Bildung, in Die Lebenswelt der Nonnen im späten Mittelalter* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 104–74.

29. Kim Overlaet, “Beguinages 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).
30. For instance, the beguinage of Louvain, founded presumably c. 1232, originally consisted of several half-timbered houses situated outside the city walls of Louvain, surrounded by meadows and streams. Later on, most of the half-timbered houses were replaced by brick houses. When the city of Louvain expanded, the beguinage was incorporated in the city, but because of its walls, the beguinage retained its secluded character; even today, the appearance of the beguinage of Louvain is described as if it were “a city within the city.”
31. In this sense, the setting of the beguinages is also reminiscent of the much later but similar format of the *tuinwijken*, or garden cities, which were fairly small, often walled communities setup in the early twentieth century to tackle social decay in many Western European towns.

Year	<0 (percent)	1–1.99 (percent)	2–2.99 (percent)	Total (percent)
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
Total	3.37	89.79	6.84	100.00

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 is based on a combination of birth dates (in the great majority of cases) and baptism dates.
33. The period between arrival and taking vows did not change much over time, except for the period in the first half of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century, when beguines had to wait a little longer to be accepted officially.
34. When we calculate how long the period from arriving at the beguinage to the actual taking of vows lasted (this can be done for 2,848 cases), it becomes clear that in 97 percent of the cases this trajectory took less than 3 years (2,773 beguines). If we exclude the five extreme outliers who waited over 20 years between arrival and vows, the average period between arrival and taking vows is 1.5 years. This information I used to estimate the year of taking vows for those 540 beguines for which we only have the date/year of arrival.
35. Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 69.
36. Between 1861 and 1868, the number of Catholic communities 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 organized within strict, very “recognizable” formats.
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, UK: E. Arnold, 1965), 101–43, 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. 2 (1988): 153–75, 153; Hajnal, “European Marriage in Perspective,” 1965.
 40. See De Moor and van Zanden, “Girl Power,” 2010.
 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 from the start of the movement, the beguines had diverse social backgrounds. See Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 91–104.
 42. Citation from Simons (*Cities of Ladies*, 95) who translated an excerpt from a charter of the Begijnhof Ter Hooie, at the City Archives of Ghent. The many beguines that did need charity, in particular from 1275 onward, were supported by the other wealthier beguines (*Ibid.*, 104). [translation mine]
 43. *Ibid.*, 85.
 44. The following comment of the Robert Grosseteste (thirteenth century), 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” (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, for example, Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, xi.
 45. During the fourteenth century, the church did try to limit the expansion of the beguines.
 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, The Netherlands: Verloren, 2000), 393–95). The beguinage of Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe-ter-Hooie in Ghent was also originally a congregation of devote women living together; after some years, they organized according to the example of the larger beguinage of Saint-Elizabeth. The beguinage was formally recognized by the Countess of Flanders in 1262 (Majérus, *Ces femmes qu’on dit béguines*, 883–92; Hadewich Cailliau, “*Soo geluckigh als een beggijn*”: *het begijnhof Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-Ter-Hooie, 1584-1792* (Gent, Belgium: Maatschappij voor Geschied. en Oudh. te Gent, 1995), 13–7).
 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*, ed. Stichting Historisch Jaarboek voor het Land van Zwentibold (Sittard, The Netherlands: 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 the Flemish part of Belgium (Flanders) was the beguinage of Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe-ter-Hooie [Our-Lady-of-ter-Hooie], 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*, 883–92; Cailliau, “*Soo geluckigh als een beggijn*,” 13–7).

49. Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 143.
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).

Author Biography

Tine De Moor is professor of "Institutions for Collective Action in Historical Perspective" at the Department of History and Art History of Utrecht University. In her research, she focuses on the emergence and dynamics of institutions for collective action (ICAs), such as beguinages, commons, water boards, etc. and the relation between this emergence and demographic developments and the marriage patterns in Northwestern Europe. She has published several articles on historical ICAs in various academic peer-reviewed journals; for an overview see http://www.collective-action.info/_RES_Publications. The research for this article has been made possible by the ERC Starting Grant, awarded to her by the European Research Council under the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013)/ERC grant agreement no 240928 as part of the project "'United we stand.' The dynamics and consequences of institutions for collective action in pre-industrial Europe." (see also <http://www.collective-action.info>).