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Survival strategies of single women in the Bruges countryside, 1814

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Introduction

Since Alice Clark's pioneering study in 1919, many social historians writing about pre-industrial times have tried to shed light on women's work and the experiences. However, single women have only started to receive particular attention since the mid-1980s. Some researchers present a rather gloomy picture of their historical position. According to scholars such as Olwen Hufton (1984) and Derek Phillips (2008) unwed women had but limited agency and were a vulnerable group in early modern society because they lacked the privileges widows and married women derived from their marriages. In their view, the transition to capitalism and modernization taking place at that time was especially detrimental for the employment opportunities of single females since women's work was lower paid and of lower status than that of men (Bennett, 1988, 1993).

Other authors advance a more optimistic interpretation of the position of single women. Pamela Sharpe (1996) for instance and, more recently, Amy Froide, contend that the opportunities available to lone women from the middle and higher classes increased during the eighteenth century: they set up businesses, became teachers or governesses, and were able to enter new and even masculine trades. In her 2005 book on unwed Englishwomen, the first devoted entirely to this group, Froide authoritatively establishes the self-reliant nature of their lifestyles. Furthermore, Dutch historians Manon van der Heyden and Ariadne Schmidt (2012) have lately argued that, although unattached women were undoubtedly less well-off than their male counterparts, the assumption they always led ancillary lives in pre-industrial times, needs revision. Bridget Hill (2001) examined early industrialization's impact on the lives of various groups of Englishwomen. She took a more intermediate position, stating that because the resultant changes were uneven, some – mainly middle class – women had more prospects, but others much less.

However, despite the fact that research on single women has thus far been very fruitful, discussions of the opportunities and constraints in their lives have almost exclusively focused on urban populations and/or are based on qualitative material. Somewhat surprisingly, we know almost nothing about how their sisters out in the countryside managed their lives and the assumption seems to be that the majority of them were in service. In an attempt at providing a more complete picture, this paper explores the survival strategies of unmarried women in the so-called Franc of Bruges and compares them with their counterparts in Bruges proper based on the 1814 census.¹ One advantage of having used this particular quantitative source is that it enabled us to gain a picture of both the professions and living arrangements of more than 5500 single women. All of our subjects were 30 or over, exceeding the mean and median age of marriage (by 27 and 26 years respectively) – and so presumably had to develop very specific subsistence strategies.

During the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century, the standard of living declined significantly due to the crisis in agriculture and the linen industry and as a result, women in the Southern Netherlands, as in the rest of Western Europe, either married at a later age or increasingly stayed single (Devos, 1999). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the unwed comprised around 18 per cent of all females above age 30 in the Bruges countryside. In Bruges proper, the percentage was nearly 32 per cent (De Langhe, 2012).

These figures are in line with other Western European estimates for this period, which suggest that on average as many as a quarter of all women were unattached at a given point in time but how many never married at all is more difficult to pin down. By employing John Hajnal's methods (1965), we can identify people who were permanently single in the census as those who

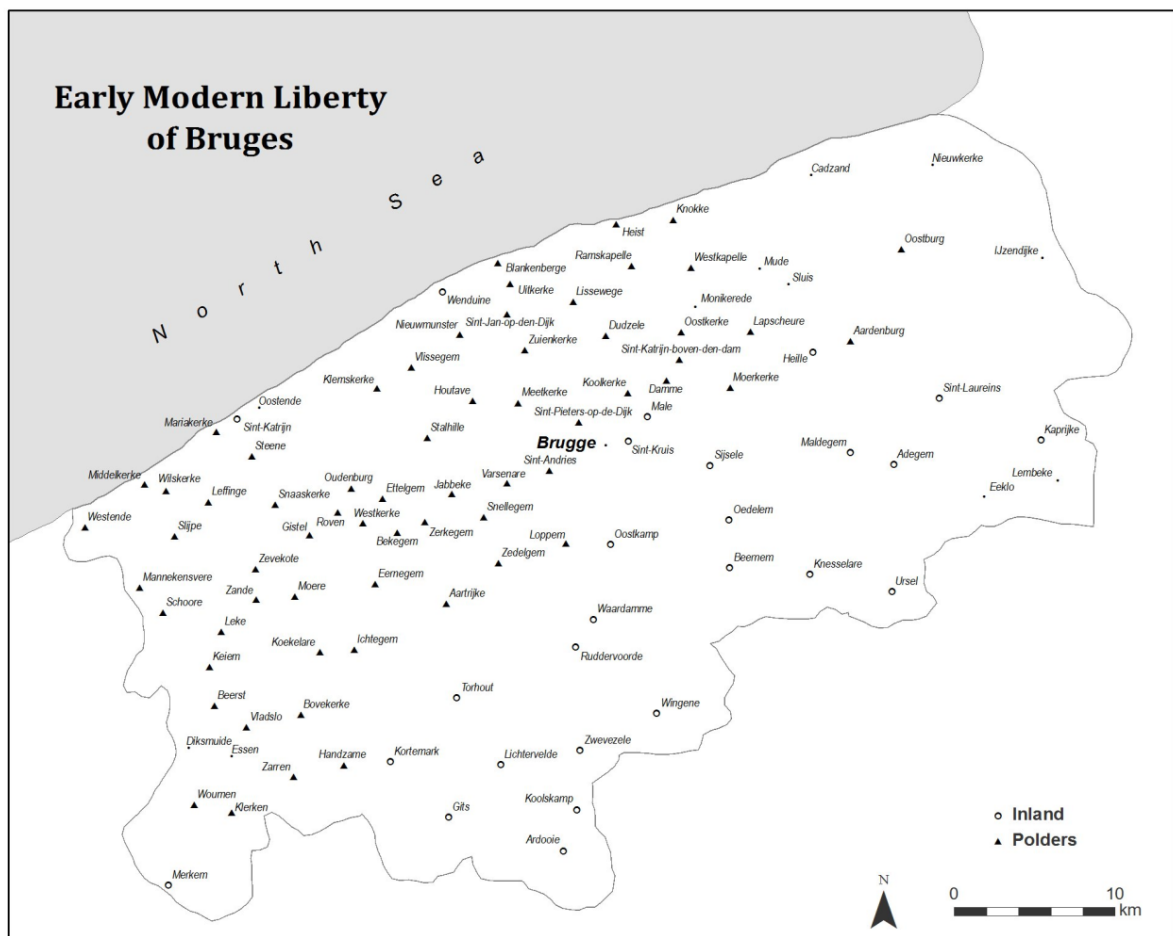
¹ The Franc of Bruges (*Brugse Vrije*) refers to the former castellany of Bruges. It was founded around the year 1000 as part of the county of Flanders and abolished in 1795 under the French Regime. It includes the countryside around Bruges (and not the city) and was bordered by the North Sea, the Westerscheldt and the Yser river (see Figure 1).

were never married in the age groups 45-54. Accordingly, the census of 1814 reveals that 15 per cent of women in the Bruges area aged between 45 and 55 had never married (Gyssels and Vanderstraeten, 1986)

Clearly, high rates of female bachelorhood were not restricted to the city, but extended into rural areas as well. We say “rural areas” because it is now widely recognized that socio-economic and demographic behaviour can differ substantially from one rural region to the other (Mitteraur, 1992; Thoen, 2004). Research has already delineated two subareas in the Franc of Bruges, each characterized by a different “social agro-system” (Thoen, 2001). It follows that the specific opportunities and limitations linked to the economic, demographic, geographic and institutional characteristics of each agro-system can - at least partially - explain similarities and differences in subsistence strategies of the single women living in both the Franc and the city (De Langhe, 2012).

The main body of this paper consists of four sections. In the first, we go deeper into the differences between the agro-systems involved before describing our source, the 1814 census, in more detail in the second section. In the third section, the employment opportunities for single women in the Franc of Bruges are analysed. After that, we will focus on the survival strategies and living arrangements of women without an occupation.

Figure 1. Map of the Franc of Bruges



1. Social agro-systems in the Franc of Bruges

In 1992, Michael Mitteraur introduced the concept of the “agro-system”: the complex interplay of geological features and economic activities in a specific area. Later, Eric Thoen (2004) expanded on Mitteraur’s idea by including cultural, social and demographic behavioural patterns. The result was a regional approach to the study of economic and social phenomena, as well as for the analysis of demographic and economic behaviour in terms of different sets of social and political relations (De Langhe, Mechant and Devos, 2011). The key elements used to define such agro-systems are the area’s environment– its soil typology in particular –, agricultural technology, holding size, labour relations, income strategies and, property and power relations.

Two different social agro-systems, demarcated by the city proper, can be distinguished in the Franc of Bruges: the marshy polders along the coast and the sandy region inland (see Figure 1). Both are defined by distinct soil typologies, suggesting differing economic structures and socio-demographic behavioural patterns as a result.

With fertile soil composed of marine clays, the polder agro-system to the north of Bruges proper was a rich agricultural area made up of commercially-oriented farms with large holdings: many measured between 15 and 50 hectares (Thoen, 2001). During the early modern period, big farms crowded out the smaller ones, resulting in a strongly polarized society comprised of large landowners and a growing class of full-time and resident labourers who worked for them for most of their lives. In contrast, the inland agro-system to the south had lighter, sandy soils of lesser quality and was home to smallholders and peasant households trying to seek out a living. The inhabitants of this agro-system developed different survival strategies: intensive cultivation was complemented by any extra source of income that could be found, including market production and proto-industrial activities (Gyssels & Vanderstraeten, 1986; Lambrecht, 2003; Segers & Van Molle, 2004). Women were key to the survival of peasant households in both agro-regions. Inland females had traditionally dominated the linen industry while their sisters in the polders provided their families with additional funds by hiring themselves out as farm labourers.

2. Source

The census of 1814 is a particularly valuable source, although its origin differs somewhat from that of later censuses, as it did not begin within an administrative context so much as that of law enforcement. The census came at a time of great political uncertainty: the Dutch had recaptured the French departments, but following the Napoleonic Wars there was no unified government until the creation of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1815. In the interim, Prussian authority held to the east, while the central and western portions of the territory were placed under joint British-Dutch administration. In order to maintain order, the Dutch General Commissioner of Justice commanded that lists be drawn up of “political and criminal suspects”. Viscount Constantin de Nieupoort, the *intendant* of the Lys Department (the modern-day province of West Flanders) decided to use this opportunity to gather data on the population at large. The 1814 census was, however, not a novelty. The French central administration had already familiarized the municipal authorities with keeping track of population traits and trends (Gadeyne, 1981; Devos, 2004).

Each municipality appointed at least one census-taker, who compiled lists of the inhabitants by going from house to house. The result was a register of the inhabitants by household in each municipality of the Lys Department between 1814 and 1815. The mandatory use of printed forms assured, to some extent, the uniformity of the data. Alongside residents’ names, the registers record

age, place of birth, relation and/or profession for persons of age twelve and over, and whether the head of household was a tenant or the owner of the residence. The form included a column for the number of children under twelve, as well as another for additional comments ('Observations').²

The collection is currently preserved at the State Archives of Bruges and represents a rich source for historical demographers.³ In this paper, we've employed data from the 71 municipalities of the Franc of Bruges.⁴ Nonetheless, for our purposes, the source was tricky to use since there are no separate columns for marital status and occupation, just 'état ou profession'.⁵ We considered women above age 30 to be single not when they were registered as 'épouse' or 'veuve', but as 'fille', 'soeur', 'belle-soeur' (if no husband was indicated), 'servante', 'indigente'... Clearly, these are categories that position single female adults as household dependents rather than as autonomous individuals. This was the case for bachelors as well. According to Amy Froide (2002), unwed persons of either sex were assumed to be 'husbands or 'wives in waiting' and were not considered fully adult. Population censuses of the time clearly reflect the early modern ideal of universal marriage; family life was paramount and it was hard for unattached individuals to find a place either in society, or – indeed – in their own homes.

3. Occupation

Using the census of 1814, we were able to assess the employment opportunities for single women. In order to aid our analysis, occupational titles were categorised by professional status in order to represent the major groups within both the urban and rural economies. We made no effort to codify or delineate a social hierarchy, but obviously if a woman was listed as *rentier*, *particulière/bijzondere*, poor or disabled it is possible to distinguish between the middle and lower classes. Furthermore, as is usual with censuses, only one occupation is registered per person, although women could have held various jobs either concurrently or consecutively.

Several urban case studies indicate high labour participation by (unmarried) women. Laura Van Aert (2008) for example, who studied women's employment in the city of Antwerp, estimated that female labour participation was between 68 to 80 per cent during the early modern period. In the Dutch town of Tilburg at the start of the nineteenth century, 85 per cent of all unmarried women 18 and older were employed in some capacity (van Nederveen Meerkerk, 2007). Our calculations for the city of Bruges show even higher percentages. There, according to the 1814 census, 90 per cent of all unmarried women over 30 had an occupation. Single women formed an essential part of the urban labour force, and – based solely on our data for the Franc of Bruges – it appears this was also true of the rural labour market. For the inland agro-system, the 1814 census lists an occupation for about 70 per cent of the unwed females, and this figure rises to 73 per cent in the polders. However, if we discount the poor, disabled, *rentiers* and former contemplatives, these percentages drop to 66 and 69 per cent in the Franc and 78 per cent in the city.

Table 1 shows that in both agro-systems, most of the working single females were either agricultural or the textile industry labourers. This paints a picture very similar to that of rural

² With regards to foreigners, it was noted whether they had the necessary papers (usually a *certificat du maire*), and for the heads of households, work booklet (*livret*) or license to perform certain professions (*patente*). However, this information was not always carefully recorded.

³ RABr, Leiedepartement. Tweede aanvullende reeks. Bevolkingsregisters (1814-1816) en addenda, BE-A0513/ TBO 138; Leiedepartement. Derde aanvullende reeks. Bevolkingsregisters (1814-1815); TBO 139.

⁴ A great many of the censuses taken in the Franc of Bruges were transcribed and published by the *Vlaamse Vereniging voor Familiekunde*.

⁵ This is in direct contrast with marriage certificates, where a bride-to-be was listed as 'jongedoghter' or 'jeune fille' (young daughter).

Germany during the same period (Wiesner, 1999). In the Franc of Bruges, however, occupations did vary throughout the region. Unmarried women among the polders were primarily employed as domestic servants or as day labourers; the majority of those inland were listed as spinsters.⁶ Both findings correspond with the overall labour market of these regions (see section 1). Nevertheless, despite the distinct occupational profile of single women in each agro-system, 17 per cent of the polder subjects were spinsters and 21 per cent of the inland inhabitants worked as either a servant or a labourer. The latter is, of course, an imprecise category.

However, the question of whether these percentages concern women either permanently or temporarily unwed remains unanswered. Undoubtedly, some still managed to find a husband in their thirties or forties. Recognizing the inherent difficulty in measuring how many people never wed, Hajnal (1965) suggested that those had not married by the time they reached the ages of 45 to 54 should be identified as definitively single. For our purposes, however, the number of potential subjects in this age group was further limited by region and occupation, leaving us with not enough women for an effective analysis. We attempted to resolve this by looking at all single females above the age of 50 in order to achieve a larger sample size. Nevertheless, this presents an additional problem: while the census-takers always listed a married female as a 'wife', it is not always clear if an unmarried adult woman was widowed or single. The percentages in Table 2 might include 'hidden widows'⁷.

Table 1. Occupational category of single women above age 30

Occupation	Inland (n=1445)	Polders (n=1245)	City of Bruges (n=2799)
<i>Rentier/Particulière</i>	4	3	8
(Former) Contemplative	0		1
Tradeswoman/Artisan	1	2	3
Public/Private Sector			1
Female Farmer	2	4	
Spinster	40	17	1
Seamstress/Knitter	2	1	9
Lace Maker			46
Domestic Servant	13	21	15
Labourer/Day Labourer	8	25	5
Poor/Disabled		1	4
Not Mentioned	30	27	9
Total	100%	100%	100%

⁶ 'Spinster' here, and throughout the text, is only being used to denote occupation. It is not intended to be taken as an indication of a marital status.

⁷ Due to the relatively good series of parish and civil registers we were able to cross-check the names of these singles women listed in the 1814 census. The sources consulted include marriage and death certificates. Cross-checking for 'hidden' widows among these singles has revealed no major discrepancies in the relative numbers of occupations of unmarried women.

Table 2. Occupational categories of single women above age 50

Occupation	Inland (n= 523)	Polders (n= 450)	City of Bruges (n=1207)
<i>Rentier/Particulière</i>	6	3	12
(Former) Contemplative	1		1
Tradeswoman/Artisan	1	1	4
Public/Private Sector		1	1
Female Farmer	3	2	
Spinster	47	28	1
Seamstress/Knitter	3	2	6
Lace Maker			46
Domestic Servant	10	19	10
Labourer/Day Labourer	10	21	6
Poor/Disabled	1	5	5
Not Mentioned	19	20	8
Total	100%	100%	100%

Table 2 shows that spinster was the most common profession for rural single women over the age of 50. When we compare this age group with the over-30s, the percentages of those involved in the linen industry increases, probably as a result of the higher physical demands placed on those in service – as well as a limited economic environment. In Bruges proper, the linen industry gives way to the lace industry, which employed half of all single females. Thus, the regional occupational patterns established for the younger subjects remain the same among the over-50s. In the inland agro-system, clearly the linen industry absorbed most of the available single females. In the polders, however, employment remained more diverse despite their advanced age: apart from work as spinsters, at least one in five worked as servants or labourers. This might indicate a more heterogeneous and independent occupational position for women in the polders. However, we shouldn't rush to conclusions. The data does not tell us how well paid our subjects were - whether any of these occupations actually provided women with the basic necessities, or if they had to take more than one job. Unfortunately, detailed information on wages is unavailable, but we can analyse how many of these single women were able to set up independent households, and in which occupational sectors and regions they were predominant.

Table 3 seems to confirm the Pamela Sharpe's thesis regarding eighteenth century England (1991); namely, that the linen industry provided women a chance to gain economic independence. In inland Bruges, more than half of all female heads of household worked as spinsters. Even in the polders, where this cottage industry was not as prevalent, this still held true for a third of all such cases. However, the figures in Table 4 put spinsters' supposed economic independence in a different perspective. The 1814 census noted whether heads of household owned or rented their accommodations – providing us with a unique window into these women's assets. In the polders, just 23 per cent owned their homes, and this dropped to 15 per cent inland. A quick glance at the

figures makes it clear that spinsters were much less likely to own their own homes than their counterparts in alternative occupations. These results confirm findings from other studies that households involved in the linen industry were in a precarious economic situation (Vandenbroeke, 1985; Vermoesen, 2006; De Langhe, 2012).

Table 3. Occupational category of single heads of household above age 30

Occupation	Inland (n=221)	Polders (n=209)
<i>Rentier/Particulière</i>	10	8
(Former) Contemplative	1	
Tradeswoman/Artisan	4	5
Public/Private Sector	1	2
Female Farmer	2	4
Spinster	56	33
Seamstress/Knitter	2	1
Lace Maker		
Domestic Servant	1	
Labourer/Day Labourer	17	41
Poor/Disabled		
Not Mentioned	6	5
Total	100%	100%

Table 4. Ownership of residence among single household heads by occupational category

Occupation	Inland	Polders
<i>Rentier/Particulière</i>	72%	75%
(Former) Contemplative	0	
Tradeswoman/Artisan	75	
Public/Private Sector	100	100
Female Farmer	9	67
Spinster	15	23
Seamstress/Knitter	33	0
Lace Maker		
Domestic Servant	0	
Labourer/Day Labourer	32	27
Poor/Disabled		

4. No listed occupation

The absence of occupational titles for women in censuses has stymied numerous scholars (Hill, 2001; Vikström, 2010). The reason for their frustration is that it is not clear whether these women were actually unemployed, or whether their occupation was simply not registered for some reason. In the 1814 census, the majority of women did have an occupation listed, but there was still a considerable percentage where this information is absent. In Bruges proper, this was the case for about 9 per cent of the unmarried women, but in the inland and polder agro-systems, the figures were as high as 30 and 27 per cent, respectively (see Table 1). The inadequate registration of female occupations is one of the reasons why the emphasis has mainly been on male employment in historical demography and socio-economic history. The approach used in this study, however, allows us to examine the living and working conditions of women without a registered occupation in greater detail.

After all, there are reasons for believing that the absence of a listed occupation in the census does not necessarily mean that a particular woman was not actually working. Combining different types of sources is a useful, albeit time-consuming, way to reveal such hidden employment – as illustrated by the example of Rosa Grymonprez. In 1814, 71-year old single mother Rosa was living in a household headed by her brother-in-law. According to the census, she had no job. Yet, when she died five years later, the death register had her down as a textile worker. Since it is highly unlikely that Rosa took up this occupation as an elderly woman, we can assume that the 1814 census-takers chose not to register her job at that time.

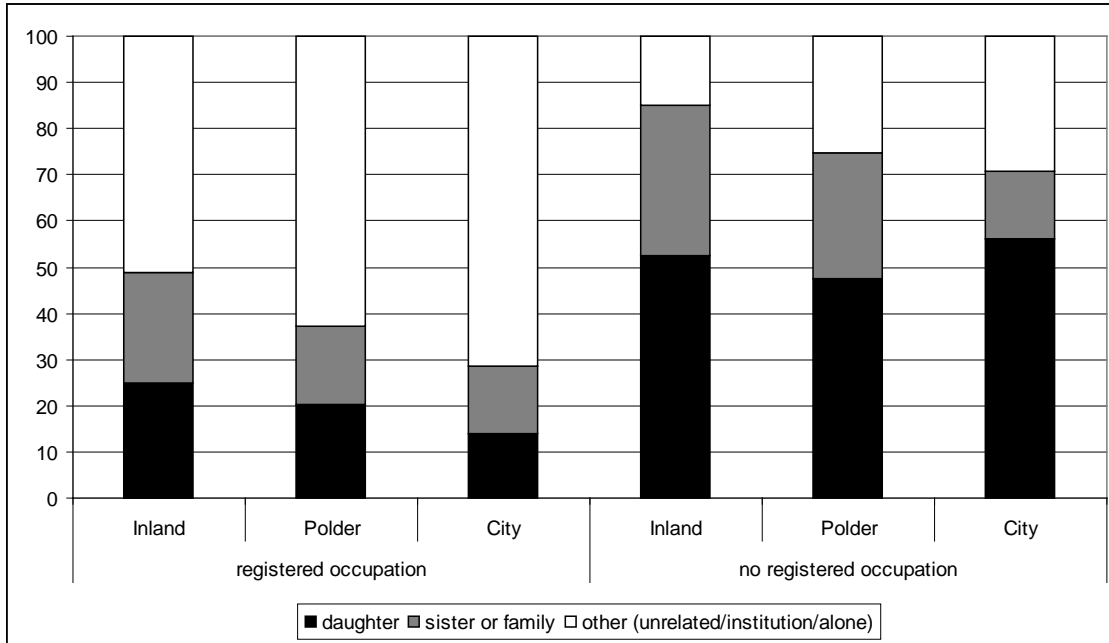
There are several possible reasons for not recording female occupations. The first explanation comes down to carelessness on the part of the census-takers. The authorities may have simply not been interested in these women; their marriage-centred perspective could have led them to focus their efforts entirely upon the activities of the heads of household. The second possible reason for this lacuna may be that it reflects how women positioned themselves in society and/or were positioned by the authorities: the 1814 census only had one column for marital status and occupation. Women were primarily viewed as dependents (daughters, sisters, etc.) rather than as autonomous individuals (Fairchilds, 2007; Tilly and Scott, 1978). As a result, their work was overshadowed by the family's primary economic activities - the head of household's occupation, in other words. A third explanation may reside in the nature of their work. It could be that women listed without an occupation mainly performed domestic tasks, rather than paid labour. They could also be women without a fixed type of labour, just doing "the things that needed to be done" (Whittle, 2005, 51) with regards to housekeeping, farm duties and manufacturing in order to contribute to the household economy. Finally, it is entirely possible that some women really were out of work when the census was taken, an indication of at least seasonal unemployment.

As Rosa Grymonprez's case shows, combining various sources can improve our understanding of the survival strategies and employment of those women without a listed occupation. However, the amount of time required to trace a single individual through numerous sources makes this method prohibitive when dealing with large sample sizes. An alternative is to consider single women's living arrangements. If the situations of women without an occupation are markedly different from those for whom an occupation is reported, then we can deduce that their occupational titles were not omitted at random. In the remainder of this section, we will analyze different aspects of co-residence that highlight the roles played by single women within the family economy.

Step one is to consider the differences between unmarried women with and without occupations with regards to their relationship with the head of household. This can indicate

whether they were integrated into a family economy or if they developed more independent survival strategies (Litchfield, 1988). Figure 2 shows a marked difference between the two groups.

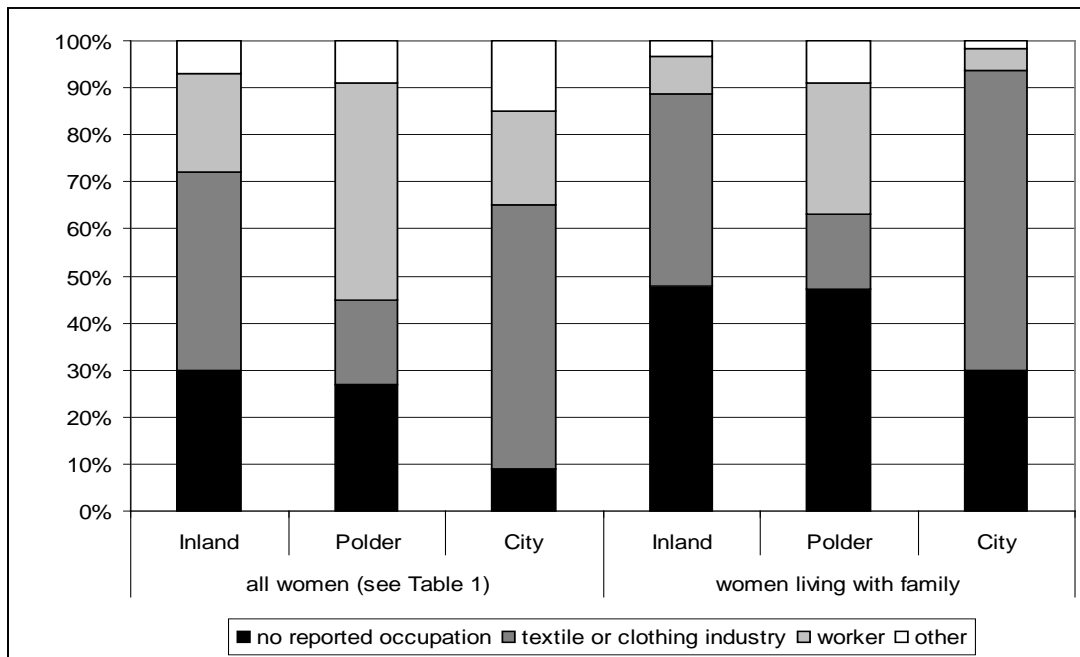
Figure 2. Relation to head of household



In all three areas, women without an occupation were more likely to reside with close kin than those with a declared occupation. While more than half of employed females lived with non-relatives, this was only true for about 15 to 30 per cent (inland and city, respectively) of those without registered employment. The difference was especially clear among women residing with their parents. These results can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, they may suggest that women without a listed occupational were indeed integrated into the familial economy, either with work related to the head of household's, or with an amalgam of tasks for which no obvious description was available. Secondly, they could also indicate that these women did not actually have work. Generally, women living outside the family fold would have had more urgent need of employment than those residing with relatives.

Our second step, which should help to clarify this matter, is to take a closer look at those who were living with their family with regards to their listed occupations (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Occupation of women living in the household of relatives



The figures indicate that among women residing with relatives, the percentage without an occupation was generally higher. Just under half of all women living with their family in both agro-systems had no occupation mentioned in the census, and in the city, this was one third. The results also show that there were fewer female workers (servants, labourers) living with relatives. The percentages of those employed in the textile or clothing sector (spinsters, seamstresses, lace makers) are similar for all women residing in the countryside. In the city, however, this form of occupation was about 10 per cent higher among females residing with relatives. In contrast with the worker category, textiles and clothing were typically home-based industries – and it does appear that work outside the home was less frequent among unmarried women living with their family. We can therefore assume that at least some of the women with no registered occupation were employed in some type of home-based labour.

A third way to acquire information on the position of “unemployed” single women among their kin is to examine their relatives’ wealth. Researchers have found important links between family property and demographic behaviour. In the Low Countries, for example, it has been shown that children of homeowners emigrated less frequently than others (Winter and Lambrecht, 2013). As stated above, the census of 1814 contains information on whether the head of the household owned or rented their place of residence. Figure 4 displays the distribution of homeownership among parents with an unmarried daughter living with them.

Figure 4. Parents' homeownership

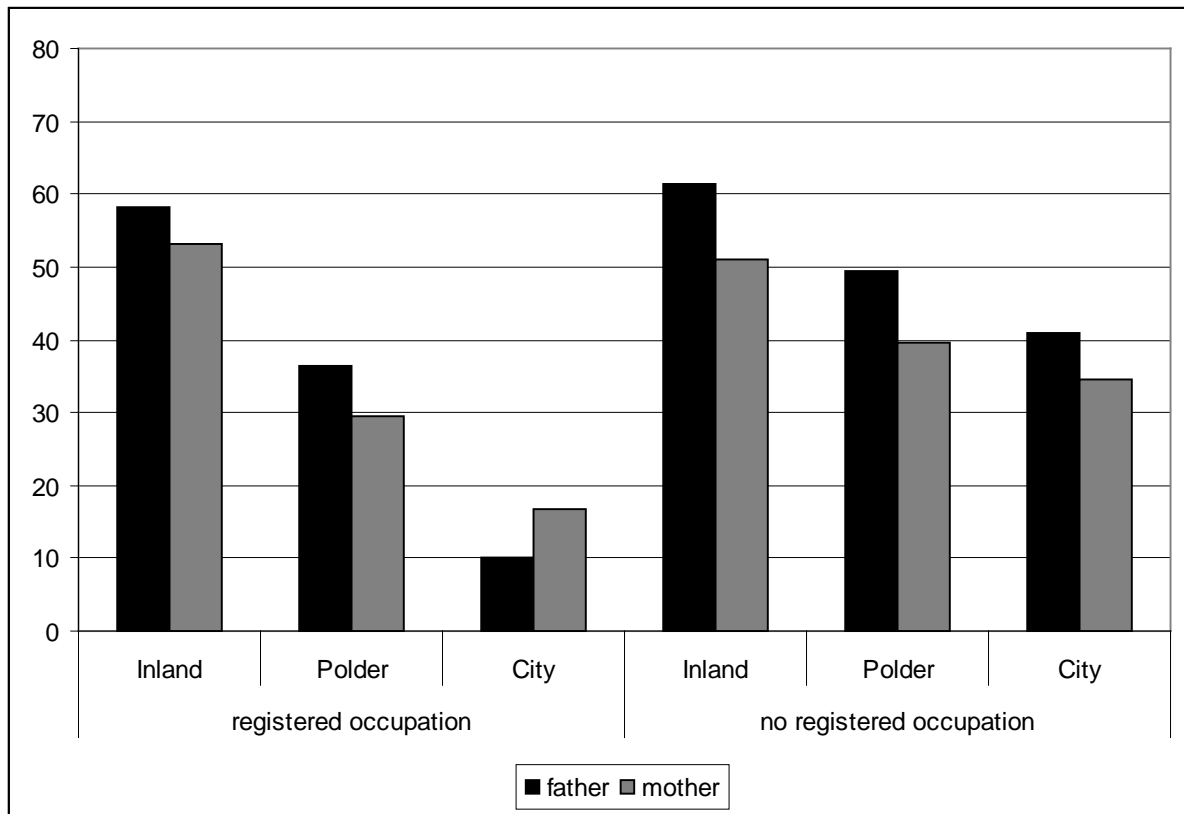
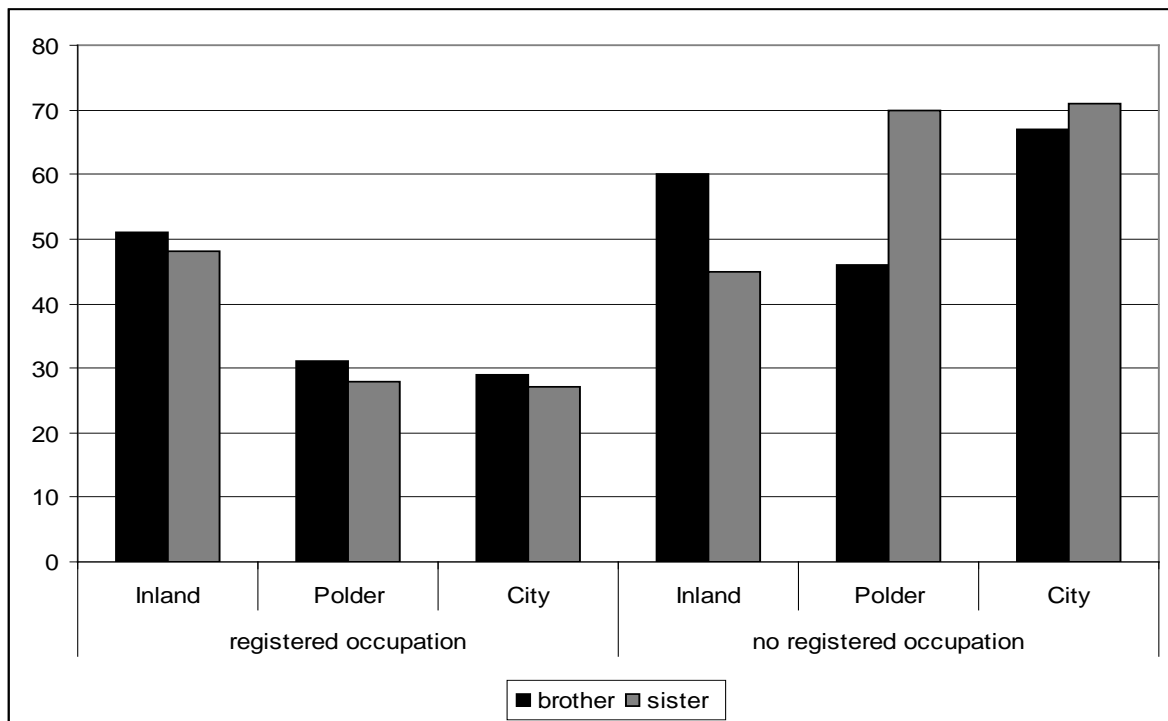


Figure 5. Siblings' homeownership



In the inland agro-system, the differences between the employed and those without official occupation are small. However, for the polders and especially Bruges proper, it is clear that more of the women with no official occupation had parents who owned their home. Figure 5 shows the results for single females residing with siblings.

In this case, the differences between single females with and without employment are more pronounced and existed inland as well: home-ownership was more common among the families of women with no declared occupation. The smaller difference inland is probably due to the fact that agricultural plots and enterprises were small in this area (85 per cent of the parcels were less than 5 hectares and too small to divide amongst siblings, forcing them to live together). Women living with relatives in this region might therefore have been more often living and working within the family out of necessity, even though the employment was not registered. In the polders and the city, on the other hand, the difference in homeownership might actually reflect a genuine distinction between the employed and unemployed.

Contrasting the living arrangements of women with a listed occupation to those without provides us with a new way to deal with this lacuna in censuses. Our comparison of single females' relationship with the head of household and homeownership has revealed that occupations were not randomly omitted. Women without a job were more likely to live with close kin, especially if the head of the family owned his or her house. This clear distinction among our study's subject pool means that the first possible explanation for under-registration of female employment – that the census-takers were simply not interested in working women – does not hold water. However, the three other potential reasons discussed above may still have played a role.

Single women were often in a subordinate position within someone else's home; only a small minority were themselves the head of a household. Table 3 showed that of out of this group, only 6 and 5 per cent of the females residing inland and the polders, respectively, had no listed occupation. The results also suggest that women likely took part in home-based industries, although this varied across the two agro-systems. It is also worth bearing in mind that because the 1814 census was taken during the winter, unmarried women listed with no occupation may indeed have been unemployed at the time. This could also partly explain the high percentage of women working in the linen industry, as there were fewer opportunities for agricultural employment during that season.⁸

Conclusions

In this paper we explored the survival strategies of unmarried women in the Bruges countryside on the basis of the 1814 census. In that sense, the paper contributes to two important discussions: the living conditions of single females, and those of rural women in particular – a group that has been largely overlooked in the literature in favour of urban women. Not only did this source enable us to construct an overview of the professions and household situations of unwed females above the age of 30 but the Bruges countryside offered us two social agro-systems to analyse; each with specific attendant structural environments that provided women with both specific opportunities and limitations.

Our results show that single women were an essential part of the rural labour force. In the polders, they mainly worked as domestic servants or day labourers; while the majority of those inland were listed as spinsters. Both findings correspond well with these agro-systems' labour

⁸ Census enumerations in the Lys department started in December 1814. 3 in 4 municipalities in the Bruges area submitted their forms to the intendant before April 1st of 1815 (Gadeyne, 1981).

markets. The inland linen industry was highly labour intensive and clearly provided women with work that they could perform within the household, while the polders offered more chances to work outside the family home – although the employment was often seasonal.

Moreover, the two agro-systems provided women with unequal opportunities for remaining single. In inland Bruges, for instance, the census showed that there were more unwed women above the age of 30 than there were elsewhere: one in five compared to just one in seven in the polders. Furthermore, the majority of the single women who were heads of household worked as spinsters, confirmation that this cottage industry was a source of independence. However, our analysis of homeownership among this group confirms findings from elsewhere that it was very difficult to survive in the linen industry

Not only did the census of 1814 allow us to examine the living situations of women with official employment, but it also provided us with material for taking a more in-depth look at those without any occupation. While these women may have been “unemployed” from the authorities’ point of view, our figures suggest that they most certainly did work – whether as part of the family business or (possibly) as seasonal labour. The data on household structure also allowed us to gain insight into their living arrangements, and revealed that their situations and family relationships were closely intertwined.

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