

From Winter Wedding to May Marriage: a Transition in Dutch Marriage Seasonality

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Today, most Dutch couples choose to marry around summer. The months of May, June and September are particularly popular: the weather is great, and most guests are not on holidays. This preference for marrying in summer has emerged relatively recently. Prior to World War II, there was a strong preference to marry in May (Engelen, 2017; van Poppel, 1993). Earlier research suggests that this preference is strongly linked to the renewal of yearly lease and work contracts, but that marrying in a quiet period in the labor cycle, which was traditionally associated with growth and renewal may have been important as well.

The fact that these couples had such a strong preference is intriguing. While similar patterns have been found in Belgium, Germany, England and Sweden (i.e. Dribe & Van de Putte, 2012), people living in most of Europe did not have such strong preferences to marry in a specific month. Instead, people chose to marry in quiet periods of the labor cycle. This means that most marriages were concentrated in the winter period, and that summer weddings were relatively rare. Even in the late 19th and early 20th century, couples living in France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Serbia and Poland (i.e. Arsenović et al., 2015) were less likely to marry in summer.

Based on a few local studies, we know that Dutch couples did not always prefer to marry in May (van Poppel, 1993). In the 17th and early 18th century, several areas in the Netherlands preferred the winter wedding pattern instead. Thus far, it remains unclear why this change from winter wedding to may marriage has happened and how this change developed. In this article, we aim to (1) determine if this change has happened throughout the Netherlands, and (2) explore to what extent the timing of this change varied across the country.

By interpreting these findings, we hope to gain a better understanding of the change in Dutch marriage seasonality in the early 18th century.

Methods & Data

In our analyses, we make use of open data made available by 34 different Dutch archives, and preprocessed by Open Archieven (<https://www.openarchieven.nl/exports/csv/>). The full data set contains about 7 million marriages, 5 million registered during civil registration (1795 - 1940), and 2 million church marriages prior to civil registration (1590 - 1811). Most civil registration data is complete, but part of the data for the period before the introduction of the civil registration is

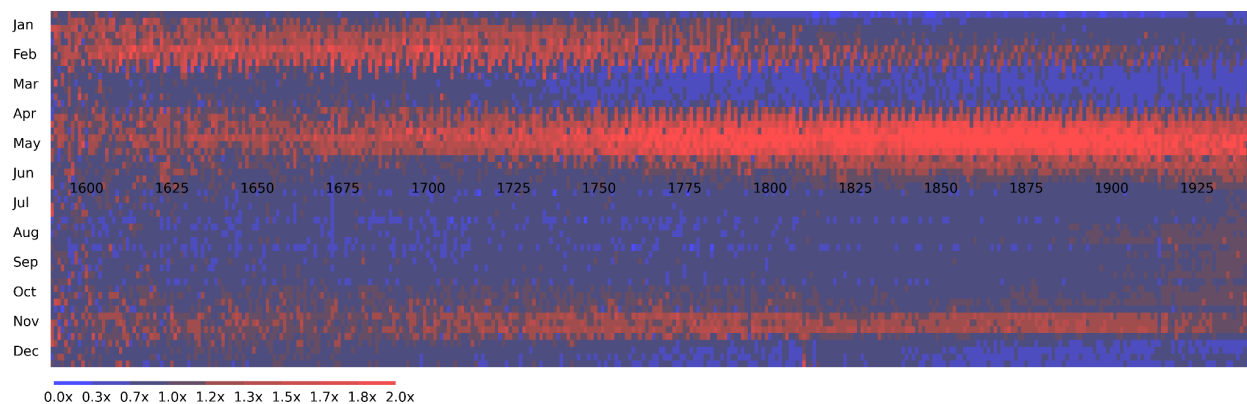
missing. Most of the missing data is concentrated in Zeeland, due to loss of records during World War II, and Overijssel, due to poor indexation.

To allow for comparisons across time and space, we converted all Julian dates to Gregorian dates and mapped all marriages to the 1054 municipalities existing in 1940. All marriage notices and divorce records were removed from the record set. Duplicate records were removed to the best of our abilities.

In our analyses, we used the “times more popular than the expected number of marriages” as a measure to determine whether couples were more likely to marry in certain periods. We calculated these numbers for every week of the year, as well as the May period. Moreover, we calculated these numbers for every municipality, for every 20-year period.

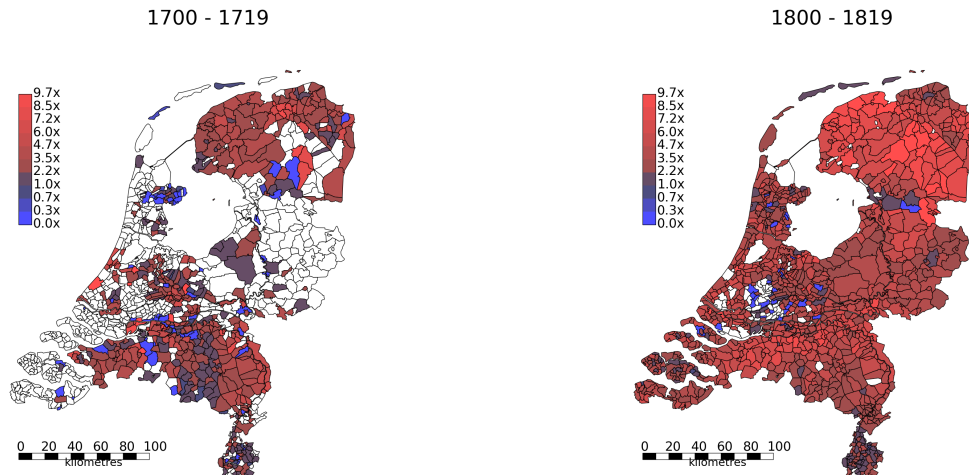
Results & Discussion

Figure 1: Changes in Dutch marriage seasonality between 1590 and 1940, shown by changes in the weekly “times more popular” measure.



In line with observations in earlier small scale studies, we observed that couples in the Netherlands followed a winter wedding pattern in the 17th century, and a May marriage pattern from 1750 onwards (Figure 1). When we distinguished between cities and rural areas, we observed that these patterns were stronger in more rural areas. This suggests that the yearly employment contracts used in Dutch farming are indeed an important factor. The preference to marry in May was particularly pronounced in the northern provinces Friesland and Drenthe (Figure 2). Based on literature research, it seems that the number of farms in these areas remained relatively constant, while the population in these areas grew. This pressure might have made people more dependent on the yearly contract cycle than in other areas.

Figure 2: Spatial differences in preferences to marry in the May period during the early 18th and early 19th centuries.



When we looked into the emergence of the preference to marry in May in the different Dutch provinces (Table 1), we discovered that this pattern first emerged in Limburg in the 1670s, and emerged a few decades later in other provinces as well. This might have to do with the economic conditions in Limburg at the time: while all provinces experienced the *rampjaar*, disaster year, in 1672 and the period of consolidation that started afterwards, these effects may have been larger in Limburg, which was directly impacted by the Franco-Dutch (1672 - 1678), Nine Years' war (1688 - 1697) and War of the Spanish Succession (1701 - 1714). This could easily have triggered a change in contract structures, quite early on.

Table 1: Start of the emergence of preference to marry in May in the eleven Dutch provinces

1670s	1680s	1690s	1700s	1710s	1720s	1730s
Limburg		Groningen Gelderland Utrecht	Friesland	N-Brabant N-Holland	Drenthe	Z-Holland

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