Notes

**Seasonality of Marriage in Estonia**

H. Palli

The earliest parish registers to survive for rural Estonia date from the second half of the seventeenth century. The Estonian population was at this time entirely Lutheran so that there was only one register in every parish. The Estonian parishes were quite large: Ronuge (Raug in German) in south east Estonia had 7,500 inhabitants in 1685, Karuse (Karusen) in the west, 3,000, in fact most of the parishes had a population of between 2,000 and 4,000, though the smallest parish, Ruhnu (Runö), situated on an island, had only 290 inhabitants.

During these years marriages had distinct seasonal fluctuations. In most parishes ‘the marriage season’ began in November and continued for two or three months, during which some two thirds to three quarters of the annual marriages took place. Indeed, in the parish of Kaarma on the island of Saaremaa nearly five sixths of all marriages were celebrated during the month of November. As a consequence the number of marriages occurring in spring and summer was very low and these marriages were mostly confined to non-farmers (usually servants in manor houses) or to widower farmers remarrying. The upper class German population married more freely during the whole year. There are some exceptions to this general pattern, for example, in some parishes on the Estonian islands there was an additional marriage season in spring or summer.

In the eighteenth century, after the Great Northern War, the pattern remained generally the same, although some slight changes did take place. But in the nineteenth century the picture is rather different. The marriage season became longer and the difference between the months not so sharply defined as in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. If we calculate a seasonal marriage index, as suggested by M. Fleury and L. Henry ¹ for a group of parishes: Rongu (Ringens), Rannu (Randen), Noo (Nüggen) and Puhja (Kawelecht) in 1834-59, the peak months run from August till November with indices of 128, 152, 262 and 103. ² On the other hand in another group of parishes, Poltsamaa (Oberpahlen), Pilistver (Pillistfer) and Kolga-Jaani (Klein St Johannis) in the period 1834-80 the marriage season continued from December until May with indices of 127, 115, 182, 161, 171, 141. ³ In this latter group of parishes relatively few marriages were celebrated between June and November.

Differences in seasonality of marriage in Estonia and Western Europe stand out clearly if we compare marriages in Estonia with those in France. In Crulai in 1675-89 we find three marriage peaks: January-February (indices of 137 and 216), June-July (115 and 154) and November (228) ⁴ The same three monthly peaks are to be found in twenty one parishes of Bretagne and Anjou in the eighteenth century but the differences between the month’s indices are greater than in Crulai (January and February: 209 and 395, July: 131 and November: 129). ⁵
How can we explain the seasonality of marriage in Estonia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? The Estonian rural population consisted mainly of serfs whose standard of living was very low. It was only once a year, after the harvest, that they had both more food and more leisure and it was at this time too that the farm animals were slaughtered. Bad economic conditions therefore had a great influence on the marriage customs of the Estonian peasant population in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although in the course of time they may well have become merely traditional. Sometimes marriage may also have been regulated by the Church and by manorial authorities.

Notes

The months of the year are not of equal length: it is therefore necessary to convert the monthly numbers of marriages to daily numbers of marriages. The figures for January, March, May, July, August, October and December are divided by 31, those for April, June, September and November by 30, whilst the February figure is divided by 28.25. The 12 figures thus obtained are then added together and the proportionate monthly figures based on a total of 1200 are calculated. If the marriages were evenly distributed throughout the year there would be 100 in each month and the extent to which each monthly total exceeds or falls short of this provides a direct measure of its popularity or unpopularity.


### Index of Marriages for 20 Estonian Parishes

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N.B. For explanation of Index see Note 1