The long-term trajectory of Holland’s population in the early modern period is well-known: it grew from about 275,000 in 1514 to a peak of about 880,000 in the 1670s, after which it most likely reduced to about 780,000 in 1750, remaining fairly constant during the rest of the 18th century.1 But we know much less about the demographic factors explaining this curve. What was the balance between births and deaths? How much immigration occurred, and how many people left the region? The reason why we do not have a definite answers to such questions is that population reconstructions based on the vital demographic events have not previously been carried out for Holland. The Wageningen School, which from the 1960s to the 1980s provided most of the new research findings about the demographic history of the Netherlands, concluded that such a reconstruction was not a feasible option, because of the limitations of the available historical records (the registration of births and deaths). A synthesis of all the demographic data obtainable for the early modern period, such as produced by the Cambridge Group for England, has not yet been undertaken here. That means we still lack knowledge about the basics of demographic development before 1800. It is true that a study was undertaken for the city of Amsterdam only—more or less along the lines of the Cambridge Group—by Van Leeuwen and Oeppen. But their backward projection stops in the 1680s, again due to the limitations of the base data obtainable from historical records before that time.2

However, estimates of annual population growth were required for the project “Reconstructing National Accounts of Holland before 1800.” At first, we tried to obtain a series by means of interpolation, using benchmark years for which fairly reliable estimates are available: 1514 (275,000),

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1570 (c. 400,000), 1622 (672,000), 1670 (880,000), 1750 (783,000) and 1795 (783,000). But that procedure was not very satisfactory. In the first place, the literature tells us that there were years of civil war (1572–1580) and plague epidemics during the period of interest (1624–1627, 1635–1638, 1653–1657, and 1666–1667). At those times, the population may actually have declined, and the death rate would certainly have been much higher than the birth rate. But more importantly, it remains unclear if such interpolated estimates are consistent with the available evidence for other aspects of the demographic system: how do the estimates relate to the strong increase in the average age of marriage that occurred? And how did urbanization affect this pattern? Was the evidence consistent with what we know about migration flows? Jan Lucassen had already been grappling with some of these questions when he constructed the first systematic estimates of migration into Holland between 1580 and 1800. Is it possible to improve his estimates? We can try.

The strategy

We do not know much about Holland’s demographic system in the period before 1800. The little we do know, however, we can incorporate into one set of estimates of the main demographic parameters—and then see what results we get. So, what do we know?

We already mentioned the benchmark estimates for 1514 until 1795; we see no reason to challenge them. The same sources also inform us about the share of the urban population in the total, which increased from 45% in 1514 and 1570 to 60% in 1670, and stabilized afterwards. We also accept Van Leeuwen and Oeppen’s reconstruction of the demographic development of Amsterdam; thus, we derive estimates of the birth rate and the death rate for the period 1680–1800 from that source (but we do

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\[ \text{(5) Lucassen, “Immigranten in Holland”.
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\[ \text{(6) Ibidem.}
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