

COMMUNITY, URBAN HEALTH AND
ENVIRONMENT IN THE LATE MEDIEVAL LOW
COUNTRIES

By exploring the uniquely dense urban network of the Low Countries, Janna Coomans debunks the myth of medieval cities as apathetic towards filth and disease. Based on new archival research and adopting a biopolitical and spatial-material approach, Coomans traces how cities developed a broad range of practices to protect themselves and fight disease. Urban societies negotiated challenges to their collective health in the face of social, political and environmental change, transforming ideas on civic duties and the common good. Tasks were divided among different groups, including town governments, neighbours and guilds, and affected a wide range of areas, from water, fire and food to pigs, prostitutes and plague. By studying these efforts in the round, Coomans offers new comparative insights and bolsters our understanding of the importance of population health and the physical world – infrastructures, flora and fauna – in governing medieval cities.

JANNA COOMANS is a postdoctoral researcher in the ERC project 'Healthscaping Urban Europe'. She obtained her PhD on public health in the medieval Low Countries *cum laude*, which received the Praemium Erasmianum and Pro Civitate prizes. Her main research interests are the history of cities, health and environments, as well as gender, crime and daily politics.

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NOTE ON CURRENCY, WAGES AND DATES

A wide range of coins and currencies were in circulation in the late medieval Low Countries; Leiden's fifteenth-century accounts alone documented over a dozen different kinds. To calculate with and convert these various physical coins and currencies, city scribes used units of account, which did not exist as real coins. The standard unit of account was the pound. As elsewhere in Europe, a pound (*libra*, lb.), was divided into 12 schellingen (*solidi*, s.), and 240 penningen (*denarii*, d.). Thus: 1 lb. = 12 s. = 240 d.

Cities used various kinds of pounds, which differed greatly in value. Even more confusing, the same city administration used different pounds to express sums. In Ghent's urban records, the standard unit of account was the Flemish groat (*Vlaamse groot*, d. gr. Vl., consisting of pounds, schellingen and penningen). Yet in decrees the authorities here noted sums mainly in the Parisian groat (*grooten Parisis*, d. gr. Par.), while in the financial accounts (*stadsrekeningen*) they also used the much less valuable *groot payments* (d. gr. Paym.).² The Parisian groat was also the unit of account in Ypres' *Role de condamnations*, as well as in Ghent's bailiff's accounts. In Leiden and Dordrecht, municipalities mainly used the *Hollandse pond* (lb. Holl.). The standard ratios between these different currencies through the period under investigation were as follows:

- 1 lb. gr. Vl. = 12 lb. Par.
- 1 lb. gr. Vl. = 30 lb. Holl.
- 1 lb. gr. Vl. = 40 lb. paym.

Another often used currency was the guilder (gl.) which was divided into (often 24) *plakken* (pl.). Until 1392, Deventer's treasurers calculated mainly with pounds (gr. Vl.), and then switched to guilders, which were less stable in worth. In addition, dozens of other currencies are mentioned in the sources used in this study, often with a note on the ratio.

² *Rek. Gent 1351–1364*, p. xxxi.

Note on Currency, Wages and Dates

In the chapters, I have referred to the sum as it was indicated in the original source, which is often without any specification, and in a few instances recalculated the sum in d. gr. Vl., such as when discussing expenses on public works and officials' wages.

Day wages for municipal officials tasked with urban sanitation and policing threats related to communal health, such as Ghent's *coninc der ribauden*, varied from 1 to 2 d. gr. (Vl.) per day in the first half of the fourteenth century, to around 3–5 d. gr. during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.³ Skilled workers earned between 1,5 and about 3 d. gr. in the fourteenth century and up to 10 d. gr. in the fifteenth, and unskilled labourers earned about half of these sums. This could also vary from town to town. In Ghent in the 1320s, a digger or mason's servant earned around 1,4 d. gr. per day, and in Bruges in 1363, around 3 d. gr.⁴ Fines for environmental offences varied strikingly from costing a few days' work (a fine of 5 s. Par. = 5 d. gr.) to over a hundred workdays (a large fine of 10 lb. Par. = 200 d. gr.).

With regard to dates, different cities used different calendars, with various starting points during the modern calendar year. I have noted the year as it was documented in the original source and made no silent changes. One exception is that when accounted years straddled two calendar years, such as Ghent's *schepenjaar*, in the footnotes I have referred to that year by the first date (for instance: 1327–8 = 1327).

³ References on the *coninc's* day wages: *Rek. Gent 1280–1336*, pp. 390, 490; *Rek. Gent 1336–1349*, I, p. 444; *Rek. Gent 1376–1389*, pp. 103, 128, 197; SAG, Stadsrekeningen, nr. 11, fol. 320v (1411).

⁴ W. P. Blockmans and W. Prevenier, 'Armoede in de Nederlanden van de 14e tot het midden van de 16e eeuw: bronnen problemen', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 88 (1975), 501–38, p. 506. See also C. Verlinden et al. *Dokumenten voor de geschiedenis van prijzen en lonen in Vlaanderen en Brabant, II: XIVe–XIXe eeuw* (Bruges, 1965), 2 vols.

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| CMR ₄₇ | <i>De Cameraarsrekeningen van Deventer betreffende het jaar 1447</i> , ed. W. J. Alberts (Groningen, 1959) |
| CMRDev (I–VII) | <i>De Cameraars-Rekeningen van Deventer (1337–1393)</i> , ed. J. I. van Doornick (Deventer, 1883–1914), 8 volumes |
| <i>Comptes d’Ypres</i> | <i>Comptes de la ville d’Ypres de 1267 à 1329</i> , ed. G. des Marez and E. H. de Sagher (Brussels, 1909) |
| HMGOG | <i>Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent</i> |
| <i>Keurboeken Leiden</i> | <i>De middeleeuwsche keurboeken van de stad Leiden</i> , ed. H. G. Hamaker (Leiden, 1873) |
| RAD | Regionaal Archief, Dordrecht |
| <i>Rek. Gent 1280–1336</i> | <i>Gentsche stads- en baljuwsrekeningen 1280–1336</i> , ed. J. Vuylsteke (Ghent, 1900) |
| <i>Rek. Gent 1336–1349</i> | <i>De rekeningen der stad Gent. Tijdvak van Jacob van Artevelde 1336–1349</i> , 3 volumes, ed. N. de Pauw and J. Vuylsteke (Ghent, 1874–85) |
| <i>Rek. Gent 1351–1364</i> | <i>Gentse stads- en baljuwsrekeningen 1351–1364</i> , ed. A. van Werveke (Brussels, 1970) |
| <i>Rek. Gent 1365–1376</i> | <i>Gentse stads- en baljuwsrekeningen (1365–1376)</i> , ed. D. Nicholas and W. Prevenier (Ghent, 1999) |
| <i>Rek. Gent 1376–1389</i> | <i>De rekeningen der stad Gent. Tijdvak van Philips van Artevelde 1376–1389</i> , ed. J. Vuylsteke (Ghent, 1893) |
| SAD | Stadsarchief, Deventer |
| SAG | Stadsarchief De Zwarte Doos, Gent |
| SAK | Stadsarchief, Kampen |

List of Abbreviations

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| SAL | Stadsarchief Erfgoed Leiden en omstreken, Leiden |
| SAMH | Streekarchief Midden-Holland, Gouda |
| SRDev (I–VI) | <i>De stadsrekeningen van Deventer (1394–1440)</i> , 6 volumes, ed. G. M. de Meyer (Groningen, 1968–84) |
| <i>Stadsrekeningen Leiden</i> | <i>Stadsrekeningen van Leiden (1390–1434)</i> , ed. A. Meerkamp van Embden (Amsterdam, 1913) |
| <i>Voorgeboden Gent</i> | <i>De Voorgeboden der stad Gent in de XIVe eeuw (1337–1382)</i> , ed. N. de Pauw (Ghent, 1885) |