

establish the underlying conditions conducive to its eruption. The emergence of Chinese immigrant communities beyond the confines of Batavia's walls was a consequence of both global economic forces and the policies enacted by the Chinese Qing court and Dutch colonial administrators. Despite the integration of intermediary Chinese residents into the city's administrative fabric, they were ill-equipped to contend with the rapid transformations unfolding around them, while colonial authorities were similarly deficient in their capacity to manage the influx of immigrants effectively. The collective failure of responsibility evidenced here stemmed from the ruling elite's inability to grasp the full complexity of the contextual landscape. This text thus offers insight into the multifaceted long-term changes occurring in early eighteenth-century Java, which transcended contemporaneous comprehension and delineated a cityscape characterized by a "prototypically regional nature" that persists into the present day.⁶

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Janna Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment in the Late Medieval Low Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). 334 pp. ISBN 9781108831772.

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Over the past decade or so, scholars have been re-examining the state of pre-modern public health. By re-interpreting both the reality on the ground and contemporary efforts to manage and regulate public health, they are completely upending long-held convictions that medieval cities were quagmires of filth, that medieval people (residents and officials alike) were apathetic, and that it took a cataclysmic event like the Black Death to spur efforts to 'clean up' urban spaces. We now know that urban communal health management across Europe predates the Black Death by centuries; that it encompassed a broad range of environmental, infrastructural, spiritual, and moral aspects; and that it actively engaged all levels of society.

Janna Coomans's extensive, comparative study of urban public health in the late medieval Low Countries expands upon well-known

6 Eric Tagliacozzo, *In Asian waters. Oceanic worlds from Yemen to Yokohama* (Princeton 2022) 198.

work on England and Italy.⁷ Coomans covers familiar territory, including municipal sanitation, infrastructure, fire prevention, the supply/sale of food and drink, access to potable water, public safety, moral pollution, civic pride, and the impact of plague epidemics on those public health measures. Like previous scholars, she finds that not only did local authorities introduce regulations to keep cities clean and healthy, but that local citizens acted as well, by following those regulations — and facing fines or other punishments if they did not — and by seeking to have problematic pollution and recalcitrant neighbors dealt with through the courts.

Coomans's study differs from other investigations in that she examines the late medieval urban environment through two distinct lenses. The first concerns the unique demography, topography, and politics of the late medieval Low Countries. This region of northern Europe was far more urbanized and densely settled than elsewhere on the continent, extraordinarily wet, and its politics more decentralized and negotiation-based. Netherlandish urban governments were neither independent like their Italian counterparts nor tightly controlled by a sovereign as were their English and French contemporaries. Nor were they unified, however, and each city's approach to public health management reflected its own distinctive set of historical privileges, artisanal and political dominance, and material and environmental challenges. While authorities across the region learned from and replicated the others when it made sense to do so, Coomans highlights the reality that 'one size did not fit all' by comparing and contrasting how political leaders and urban residents in Deventer, Leiden, and Ghent (and other Netherlandish cities) addressed various aspects of public health in individual ways.

As elsewhere, but perhaps even more so in the context of the cities of the Low Countries, collective efforts to define and normalize urban health interests informed and shaped community governance, while local political interests and power relations influenced what communal health encompassed and how it would be safeguarded. This observation reflects Coomans's second lens: a theoretical framework that blends spatial and environmental theories, studies of citizenship, and a revised version of the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics, or the idea that political power exercises control over all aspects of people's

7 See, for example, Carole Rawcliffe, *Urban bodies. Communal health in late medieval English towns and cities* (London 2013) and Guy Geltner, *Roads to health. Infrastructure and urban wellbeing in later medieval Italy* (Philadelphia 2021).

lives, including their health. In particular, Coomans emphasizes the polycentric nature of late medieval biopolitics, pointing to the dynamic negotiations that underpinned most urban public health practices. In other words, public health measures in the late medieval Low Countries were rarely, if ever, top-down impositions; instead, they reflected constant negotiation between diverse groups of agents: urban residents, officials, workers, institutions, and authorities, as well as regional rulers. Civic participation in communal public health management was not simply an obligatory burden, but rather an integral aspect of being a community member.

One of the greatest contributions Coomans's study provides – aside from the detailed evidence it offers about late medieval Netherlandish public health – is the light it sheds on routine maintenance activities and the many overlooked people involved in day-to-day public health management. Most of these people and their work are rarely visible in municipal records; indeed, in some instances their positions and achievements precede extant archival records. However, by carefully piecing together surviving municipal financial accounts, ordinances, and judicial rulings across the three cities, Coomans restores to life many of these workers. In doing so, she reveals, perhaps unexpectedly, that the same individuals were simultaneously engaged in multiple aspects of urban health management, such as fire prevention, market regulation, public safety, waste collection, and infrastructure maintenance, as well as identifying and punishing offenders. When plague epidemics hit, those same people were invariably tasked with enforcing and policing regulations designed to limit the spread of disease. Coomans's skillful blending of court records dealing with conflicts between neighbors and archaeological and geological research likewise offers rare insight into people's living environments, which complicates modern distinctions between private versus public spaces and oral versus textual traditions.

There are a few tantalizing windows that Coomans opens but does not look beyond. One is the fact that spoiled market goods were forfeited but not discarded; rather, they were donated to hospitals to feed poor patients. Further exploration of this practice and its biopolitical and public health implications would have been a welcome addition to her study. So, too, would have been a brief discussion of the impacts of the early Protestant Reformation on the spiritual/moral aspects of public health across the region. Notwithstanding these minor points, Coomans offers a richly detailed exposé of late medieval public health in a region that, to date, has received insufficient attention in the

English historiography. Her deft portrayal of urban communal health as a dynamic, moving balance based on constant (re)negotiation and of biopolitics as a meeting point of order, health, and morality leaves us with a much clearer sense that the medieval past is perhaps not quite so foreign as it has seemed.

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Yves Segers and Leen Van Molle (eds), *Agricultural Knowledge Networks in Rural Europe, 1700-2000* [Boydell Studies in Rural History, Vol. 2.] (Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2022). 262 pp. ISBN 9781783277124.

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The spread of knowledge and subsequent technological development have allowed, since the eighteenth century, an optimization of all the productive phases in the agricultural and rural sector, such as soil preparation, sowing, adding manure and fertilizers, irrigation, harvesting and storage. Agricultural growth may be linked therefore to the spread of knowledge, know-how, and expertise in this field, resulting in augmented scale economies, a price reduction of agricultural products, an increase of food quality, and an overall improvement of life quality. Knowledge is the unravelling of reality to the human comprehension: it is dynamic, multifaceted, and capable of being transferred. Knowledge as a whole is composed both of theory and practice and every part is mutually necessary. However, the spread of knowledge is often hampered when the holders of theoretical knowledge fail to pass it on to the holders of practical knowledge and vice versa.

How did knowledge create, spread, and immobilize from the early eighteenth to the late twentieth century in the European agricultural context? The introduction of this book, written by Yves Segers and Leen Van Molle, offers a riveting interpretation of the phenomenon of knowledge diffusion in the agricultural sector from the eighteenth century. After defining the concept of knowledge and social networks, the editors propose the methodology of “knowledge networks”, as a framework applied to different historic case studies, to investigate the circulation of both theoretical and practical knowledge. A great emphasis is placed on the concept of network and social network analysis, as a useful tool to study social structures and the social