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THE CULTURE OF CLEANLINESS IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE
ORTAÇAĞ AVRUPASI'NDA TEMİZLİK KÜLTÜRÜ

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ABSTRACT

Although Medieval Europe is generally depicted as a period distant from cleanliness and dirty, this judgment is open to debate. Contrary to the negative image reinforced by modern films and literature, people of the period took care to maintain cleanliness within the limits of their circumstances. Practices such as bathing, hair and nail care, and dental hygiene were observed among both the aristocracy and the common people. The presence of individuals bathing in rivers, the activities of washerwomen, and the trade of cleaning products all indicate that cleanliness was an integral part of daily life. In particular, the royal court and the nobility maintained more systematic bathing and personal care routines. However, urban sanitation remained a significant problem. The inadequacy of sewer infrastructure led to the pollution of streets and water sources. Population growth increased environmental pressures, and with the spread of syphilis, the bathhouse culture declined. In response, among the upper classes, the emphasis on clean clothing, pleasant scents, and outward appearance gradually replaced the earlier focus on hygiene. This study examines the role of cleanliness in Medieval European society within the framework of its cultural foundations and contemporary perceptions.

Keywords: *England, cleanliness, public bath, soap, rivers.*

ÖZ

Ortaçağ Avrupası genellikle temizlikten uzak, kirli bir dönem olarak tasvir edilse de bu yargı tartışmaya açık durumdadır. Modern film ve kitapların etkisiyle güçlenen bu olumsuz imajın aksine, dönemin insanları mevcut koşullar içinde temiz kalmaya özen göstermişlerdir. Banyo yapmak, saç ve tırnak bakımı ile diş temizliği gibi alışkanlıklar hem aristokratlar hem de halk arasında mevcuttur. Nehirlerde yıkanmaya çalışan insanların varlığı, çamaşırcı kadınların faaliyetleri ve temizlik malzemelerinin ticareti, temizlik kültürünün gündelik yaşamın bir parçası olduğunu göstermektedir. Özellikle kraliyet çevreleri ve soylular, banyo ve kişisel bakım hizmetlerini daha sistemli biçimde sürdürmüşlerdir. Bununla birlikte, şehirlerin genel temizliği büyük bir sorun olmaya devam etmiştir. Kanalizasyon altyapısının yetersizliği, sokakların ve su kaynaklarının kirlenmesine yol açmıştır. Nüfus artışı çevresel baskıları artırmış, frenginin yayılmasıyla birlikte hamam kültürü gerilemiştir. Buna karşılık, üst sınıflar arasında temiz kıyafetler, hoş kokular ve dış görünüşe verilen önem giderek hijyenin yerini almıştır. Bu çalışma, Ortaçağ Avrupa toplumunda temizliğin rolünü, kültürel temelleri ve dönemin algıları çerçevesinde ele almaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *İngiltere, temizlik, hamam, sabun, nehirler.*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of cleanliness is inherently subjective and multifaceted. When individuals are asked to define cleanliness, their responses are typically shaped by personal experience, cultural norms, and social context. As a result, cleanliness can be understood and described in a variety of ways. Within this broader discussion, medieval Europe occupies a particularly distinctive position. A number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians who examined daily life in the middle ages have argued that, with a few notable exceptions, no coherent or widespread culture of cleanliness existed throughout nearly a millennium. This raises a series of critical questions: What meaning was attributed to cleanliness in medieval European society? How was the idea of hygiene understood, practiced, or perhaps neglected in the rhythms of everyday life? And, more broadly, did medieval people possess any sense of collective awareness regarding bodily or environmental hygiene? When these questions are explored, it becomes evident that people of the middle ages have long been burdened with an unfavorable reputation in this regard. They are frequently depicted as individuals whose hair, hands, faces, and teeth were so unclean as to be almost unrecognizable, whose bodies emitted unpleasant odors, and whose garments had effectively become breeding grounds for bacteria. Their domestic spaces were likewise characterized by an absence of sanitary conditions. Rodents, lice, and fleas were reported to have established colonies within the homes of common people, while the streets and waterways of medieval cities were often so polluted with excrement, refuse, and animal waste that they were scarcely passable. In this sense, medieval Europe has often been imagined as a world pervaded by pervasive stench and filth-a society overwhelmed by physical decay and the absence of hygiene (Ashenburg, 2007, pp. 50-70). This image has been perpetuated and amplified in modern popular culture, particularly through cinematic depictions of the middle ages, which frequently reinforce the narrative of an unclean and unhygienic past:

> "In Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975), two characters notice King Arthur but fail to recognize him. One of them remarks, "He must be a king; he hasn't got shit all over him." This line encapsulates a lasting belief about the middle ages: that people-particularly peasants-were dirty and foul-smelling."

It is also possible to find other examples that reinforce the impression that people in medieval Europe were not clean. For instance, Queen Isabella of Castile reportedly boasted to those around her-motivated by religious devotion-that she had bathed only twice in her life: once on the day she was born and once on the day she married Ferdinand of Aragon (Herman, 2018, p. 66). Similarly, the Italian mystic Catherine of Siena is said to have often wept when recalling how, in her youth, she had been persuaded to wash her face and comb her hair more frequently in order to attract suitors, as she considered such acts sinful manifestations of worldly vanity rather than devotion to God. A radical group of saints also embraced a filthy lifestyle as a form of asceticism, preaching that only through such practices could one demonstrate true devotion to God. For example, when Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, was martyred, his undergarments were reportedly infested with lice and fleas. The same was said of Thomas Cantilupe, Bishop of Hereford, whose body and bed were found in a similar state upon his death. Members of this ascetic minority, who refrained from washing their bodies and hair, even regarded lice and fleas as the ultimate signs of piety and self-denial. From this perspective, frequent bathing and attention to personal hygiene were seen by them as indulgence of the flesh. However, these radical notions did not reflect the social norms of medieval European society or the Catholic Church at large; rather, they represented the attitudes of a small and fanatical minority (Thorndike, 1920, pp. 20-21).

Although not to the same extent, it is well established that people in the middle ages attributed a meaning to cleanliness that differed significantly from modern conceptions. In the modern world, the notion of cleanliness primarily centers on the elimination of microbes to ensure absolute hygiene. However, the germ theory of disease was not discovered until the late nineteenth century. Consequently, medieval people were far from understanding what microbes were let alone how they spread. For this reason, instead of focusing on eliminating invisible agents of disease of which they were unaware, they emphasized spiritual purity, in accordance with the official doctrine of the Church. All illnesses and

misfortunes were believed to be messages sent by God to punish sinful individuals, and thus the most essential form of purification was the cleansing of the soul. Therefore, in medieval Europe, the purification of the soul was regarded as the highest and most important form of cleanliness, surpassing that of the body (Karaimamoğlu, 2017, pp. 44-58; Karaimamoğlu, 2023, pp. 1-27).[1]

While such accounts reinforce the general notion that people in medieval Europe lived in filth and squalor, they are not entirely inaccurate but the reality appears to be far less absolute than commonly assumed. It seems that medieval people, much like those of today, were concerned with avoiding unpleasant odors, maintaining cleanliness, and bathing as much as their circumstances and available means allowed. Therefore, contrary to popular belief, it is evident that they possessed certain basic hygienic habits and practices (Thorndike, 1928, pp. 192-203).

1. The Social and Cultural Dimensions of Cleanliness and Hygiene in Daily Life on the European Periphery

Tracing the availability of water in the middle ages provides crucial insight into the state of both personal and public hygiene. Settlements during this period were closely aligned with water sources. Castles and monasteries, for example, were often constructed adjacent to freshwater reservoirs. Wells, in particular, served as the primary means of supplying immediate water needs for large castles (Schuerl, 1978, p. 33). In England, for instance, nearly five hundred castles existed, and approximately 85% of them had one or more wells; the well at Beeston Castle reached a depth of 124 meters. Villages and towns were similarly established near rivers, lakes, or other water sources. In European urban centers, the freshwater needs of the populace were met through rivers, aqueducts, wells, and public fountains. All of these freshwater sources were used not only for consumption but also for cleanliness. Rivers, in particular, represented the most important source of water in medieval Europe (Classen, 2009, p. 115).

The dramatic increase in Europe's population between 950 and 1300 led to the unhealthy expansion of towns and cities, while also causing significant environmental degradation across the continent. Forests were cleared, and urban centers, along with rivers their primary sources of freshwater began to experience pollution (Karaimamoğlu, 2025-b, pp.1-19). As many riverbeds became reservoirs of pathogens due to human and animal waste, streets accumulated mountains of refuse, rendering them virtually impassable. This adverse situation prompted, for the first time, the emergence of public sanitation concepts and legislation. England was the first medieval state in the Western world to prioritize public cleanliness and health, as evidenced by the following royal regulations:

> "1225: *Laws* were enacted mandating the repair of existing sewers and the construction of new ones.
>
> 1281: *The London City Ordinance* prohibited pigs from roaming the streets; a subsequent ordinance in 1297 required the removal of pigsties from streets.
>
> 1283: *The London City Ordinance* prohibited the melting of animal fat (tallow) in the streets, and later regulations banned practices such as fur scraping (1310), the skinning of dead horses (1311), and metal soldering operations (1371) in public spaces.
>
> 1309: *A London City Ordinance* prohibited the disposal of filth and refuse from homes into streets and squares. Designated waste areas were established outside the city, and violators faced fines ranging from 40d to 80d.

[1] Renowned as an "age of spirituality" devoted to the renunciation of worldly life, medieval Europe was, in fact, a period of profound ambivalence toward the material world. Within such a context, the human body symbolized a host of contradictions: it was despised for its uncontrollable nature, disorderliness, sexual impulses, and bodily appetites, yet it simultaneously represented the tangible and visible link between fallen humanity and the Christian God. Within this framework of thought, cleanliness was first and foremost understood not as the purification of the body, but of the soul.

> 1357: A royal ordinance prohibited the disposal of refuse or filth into the Thames and Fleet rivers.
>
> 1371: A law prohibited the slaughter of cattle, sheep, and pigs in open areas in London. In 1388, the first *English Public Health Act* addressed slaughterhouses and offal, forbidding the disposal of animal waste and refuse into rivers or open ditches and prohibiting air pollution.
>
> 1427: *The Sewer Commission* Act aimed to prevent flash floods and water accumulation in streets (Karaimamoğlu, 2021, p. 72)."

These measures reflect a systematic effort to regulate urban sanitation and public health, illustrating the early institutionalization of hygiene practices in medieval England. The systematic sanitation measures implemented by the English were subsequently followed in Continental Europe by localized cleanliness initiatives along the Rhine, Seine, Rhône, and Po rivers, as well as in their surrounding towns. Nuremberg emerged as the most successful city in managing public sanitation in Europe. The relative cleanliness of water sources and streets contributed to a range of improvements in the medieval world, mitigating the pervasive olfactory and health hazards associated with widespread infection (Karaimamoğlu, 2021, pp. 72-78).

In medieval Europe, a distinction based on social status becomes apparent when moving from public to personal hygiene practices. Although individuals-regardless of gender-did not necessarily bathe each morning, the first act upon waking typically involved washing the exposed parts of the body, namely the hands and face. Throughout the day, handwashing was facilitated by equipment consisting of ewers and basins. Castles and monasteries generally contained stone sinks or communal fountains. In these settings, washing stations were often equipped with nearby towel cabinets to enable monks to cleanse their hands and faces (Olson, 2013, pp. 22-50). For example, at the Cluny Monastery in France, the monks' lavatory included special basins for washing their hands before and after meals, as well as towels changed twice weekly. Considering the conditions of the period, these provisions appear relatively luxurious. Since most people ate from the same communal vessel without forks or spoons-the metal versions of which were quite expensive-it is unsurprising that handwashing before and after meals became a particularly important obligation for the lower strata of society. Similarly, all social groups-including lords and ladies, servants dining in the hall, monks, merchants, and travelers stopping at an inn-generally observed hand hygiene. An ordinary peasant was likely more concerned with removing the day's dirt, whereas for an aristocrat, attention to handwashing was one of several requirements for earning respect within a polite society. The following instructions from *Les Countenances de Table*, a seminal work on medieval European etiquette, are particularly noteworthy:

> "…keep your fingers clean and your nails well-trimmed. Do not return a morsel to the plate after touching it. Do not touch your ears or nose while eating. Do not clean your teeth with a sharp iron object during a meal. As the rules indicate, do not bring the plate to your mouth. If you wish to drink, first finish what is in your mouth. Wipe your mouth after the meal. Wash your hands once the table has been cleared, and only then partake of a drink (Singman, 2013, pp. 154-155)."

Regardless of whether it was performed for reasons of cleanliness or social respect, a significant portion of medieval people washed their hands a variable number of times each day. It was also common for travelers on long journeys to end the day by washing-or having their feet washed-in a basin. As is well known, it was a tradition for monks to wash their feet weekly (Spielvogel, 2014, pp. 189-190).

Another method of combating dirt involved shaving unwanted hair or using depilatory agents. The most commonly recommended formula in the middle ages for hair removal was as follows: "mix powdered nettle seeds with vinegar, engage in vigorous exercise to warm the body, and apply the

mixture to the skin." Among the clergy, shaving was a widespread practice, with religious figures often shaving one another. Among the general populace, however, shaving was not considered a necessity.

Attitudes toward hair care were more complex. In particular, Danish men and women were criticized during the period for being proud due to the attention they paid to personal grooming and their hair. Across continental Europe, the situation differed slightly: women's hair left to fall freely over the shoulders was generally frowned upon, so styling (such as braiding) or covering the hair served to maintain a cleaner appearance. Excessive combing of men's hair was also socially discouraged. The aristocratic class, however, was largely exempt from these norms; due to the consistent importance placed on appearance, they combed their hair with special powders made from fragrant plants such as rose petals (Mortimer, 2008, pp. 199-200). Washing of hair was a common practice among both women and men, often using basins made of rice. Some medieval physicians recommended that hair be washed at least once every three weeks using water and herbal preparations. An alkaline solution, produced by combining soap with lime-salt, was frequently employed for hair washing. However, because this method could cause scalp irritation, the use of spices such as cinnamon, licorice root, and cumin was more common in England (Woolgar, 2013, pp. 133-134).

In Europe, guilds of soap makers responsible for producing soaps for hair care and general cleanliness can be traced back as early as the year 800. However, soap did not become widely used until the tenth century. Early soaps were typically soft bars made from tallow, ash, and the fats of cattle or sheep. Soap-making techniques developed significantly during the thirteenth century, as Europeans learned methods for producing harder soaps from the Muslims during the Crusades. The finest soaps were Castile soaps, made with olive oil instead of animal fats, resulting in a harder, less caustic product. During the period, a single bar of Castile soap cost approximately 4d. (Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous, 1377-1388, p. 72).

Cleaning of the ears and nails, much like the care given to hair, appears to have been a common practice at least among the nobility. Archaeological excavations have uncovered small, finger-sized instruments made of brass, copper alloy, or simple flat metal pieces. These artifacts are understood to have been used for removing dirt from the ears and nails. Consequently, the effort devoted to cleaning the hands, face, feet, hair or beards, and ears suggests that medieval people were not as unhygienic as they are often presumed to have been.

It appears that some people living in the middle ages were aware of the importance of dental hygiene, much like individuals today. Physicians frequently recommended rinsing the mouth with water upon waking to wash away the mucus that had accumulated overnight. The English physician Gilbert (13th century) advised cleaning the teeth with powders made from herbs such as mint or marjoram, while also cautioning against the consumption of hot spices that could cause tooth decay. Furthermore, he recommended wiping the teeth with a dry linen cloth after meals to prevent food particles from sticking and to remove residues that could lead to decay (Getz, 1992, pp.17-25). The Welsh, in particular, appear to have placed greater emphasis on dental hygiene. They reportedly cleaned their teeth regularly using green hazel twigs and then polished them with woolen cloths until they shone like ivory (Newman, 2001, p.155). In addition to such practices, another common method of maintaining oral hygiene involved the use of tooth-cleaning twigs, which functioned much like modern toothbrushes. These sticks were used to whiten the teeth and, although people of the period were unaware of it, proved highly effective due to their natural antibacterial properties. Furthermore, substances such as myrrh (yellow gum) and opium were recommended for dental treatment and cleaning. For those who could not afford these costly materials, a mixture of sheep tallow and holly seeds applied to the teeth was suggested as a more accessible alternative. When the teeth became too decayed to be cleaned or treated, the use of artificial teeth-as proposed by the English physician John Gaddesden was regarded as a last resort (Coulton, 1918, p. 507).

Various mixtures of spices were also frequently used for cleaning the teeth. In The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer notes that people of the time chewed cardamom and licorice to maintain oral and dental

cleanliness (Chaucer, 2018, pp.116-119). Physicians sometimes recommended anise, cumin, and fennel as well (Kuk, 2014, pp. 319-342). The primary aim, however, was not to protect the teeth from disease but rather to ensure fresh-smelling breath. Indeed, pleasant breath was of great importance in the medieval world, as foul-smelling mouths were believed to carry or spread illness; lepers, for instance, were often expelled from towns because their breath was thought to transmit disease (Serdar, 2018, pp. 109-127). This suggests that most dental care in the middle ages was not primarily concerned with preserving the teeth themselves, but was instead closely associated with the notion of odor. In medieval thought, pleasant scents were literally equated with holiness and paradise. It was even said that when saints died, people could smell the fragrance of sanctity in the streets. For many, therefore, this form of cleanliness was far more significant than washing behind the ears. Foul-smelling or dirty houses were associated with sinfulness, moral corruption, and decay. No one wished to bear such a stigma; on the contrary, cleanliness and respectability were regarded as virtues of utmost importance (Mortimer, 2008, p. 195).

In a society where most people were familiar with one another, household cleanliness was regarded as more than a mere matter of morality. The relationship between cleanliness, identity, pride, and respectability required individuals to pay close attention to their personal appearance. Members of the medieval aristocracy, in particular, were expected to maintain the cleanliness of their faces, teeth, hands, nails, beards, and hair. The idea of an unwashed, dirty, and foul-smelling aristocrat was inconceivable during this period. Similarly, a malodorous ambassador was believed to bring disgrace upon the kingdom he represented. For instance, King Louis XIV of France reportedly remarked that a Russian ambassador who appeared before him "smelled like a wild animal." Thus, a pleasant fragrance was considered one of the essential marks of belonging to the aristocratic class (Smith, 2007, pp. 174-176).[2]

For centuries, botanical remedies were employed to combat issues related to unpleasant odors. In the middle ages, in addition to fragrant bathing waters, deodorants were known and widely used. One popular deodorant consisted of a mixture of bay leaves and sweet grass. It was also common to place bay leaves in armholes, as they were believed to maintain cleanliness and produce a pleasant scent (Groom, 1992, pp. 65-68, 108). Wild rocket seeds, when ingested, were thought to enhance underarm fragrance, while sage preparations were recommended to prevent excessive sweating. The renowned pharmacologist Dioscorides similarly recommended sage as an effective disinfectant and a substance capable of stopping bleeding (Ihsan, 2007, p.71). Roses and lavender, as in modern times, were cultivated in the middle ages for the distillation of their oils, which were then used to produce a variety of perfumes. Myrtle and musk were also considered indispensable ingredients in perfumery. In addition, small scented bottles filled with various perfumes and aromatic plants were commonly carried by hanging them from the body. During the Crusades, Europeans learned the formulas of perfumes used by Muslims, and as Shakespeare later noted, these scents retained their uniqueness in Europe until the sixteenth century (Groom, 1992, p. 13). Trota of Salerno, writing in the twelfth century, addressed the issue of unpleasant odors among women and advised: "Do not cleanse your body with boiled blueberry leaves or with a cloth soaked in wine containing blueberry leaves" (Green 2001, pp. 117-119, 139, 141-143). Aristocratic women of the middle ages, much like women today, placed great importance on scent and personal appearance, making efforts to maintain a pleasant fragrance by wiping their bodies with perfumed cloths. Given that human nature generally dislikes filth and foul odors, it is evident that people living in medieval Europe endeavored, to the extent possible, to appear clean and to smell pleasantly.

One of the most essential components of cleanliness arguably the foremost is bathing. Bathing, a basic human necessity, was part of daily life in medieval Europe, contrary to popular belief. Surviving

[2] In Europe, there were bathhouses where ambassadors would bathe before appearing in the presence of the king. Similarly, Russian envoys who visited the Ottoman Empire were required to bathe in a hammam prior to meeting the Sultan, ensuring that their hair, beards, and clothing were thoroughly cleaned.

texts indicate that people bathed or attempted to bathe to varying degrees depending on the resources available to them. However, it is not possible to speak of a fully developed bathing practice akin to modern standards, as systematic water infrastructure did not exist in homes. The prevailing understanding of bathing varied according to social groups. During the harsh winters of the medieval period, when survival was difficult, poor masses who could not afford to visit bathhouses occasionally bathed by heating water carried from rivers, wells, or fountains. This process was both laborious and costly. Even when they endured such effort and expense, they often lacked sufficient water for a full bath, limiting themselves to washing off the dust from their bodies. Consequently, peasants spent much of the winter almost entirely without bathing, focusing instead on cleansing their hands, faces, and, most importantly, their "souls." Perhaps due to these circumstances, peasants unlike the aristocracy perceived the scent of an unwashed body as a mark of masculinity rather than as a sign of uncleanliness (Rawcliffe, 2008, pp. 3-21).

Figure 1: This Period Engraving Depicts a Nobleman Being Bathed By His Attendants (https://readdurhamenglish.wordpress.com/2014/02/14/baths-of-bliss-in-the-middle-ages-fact-and-fiction/ (05.06.2021).

For peasants, rivers and lakes served as open-air bathhouses during the summer months; it was quite common for manor workers and other villagers to bathe in these bodies of water at the end of a long day. As is the case today, bathing in rivers and lakes during the medieval period carried significant risks. The first danger was drowning: records indicate that children between the ages of ten and fourteen occasionally drowned while bathing in the Thames. The second hazard, as previously noted, was exposure to water bodies that had become reservoirs of bacteria due to human and waste contamination. Those who entered these waters to bathe often contracted illnesses from the microbes they encountered. The prevalence of dysentery and other waterborne diseases among this social group can largely be attributed to these conditions. Elderly and infirm individuals among the peasantry often had no opportunity to bathe in rivers or other bodies of water. Apart from the extremely poor and helpless, most peasants appear to have owned basic bathing implements such as basins, ewers, and half wooden barrels, which were the most common bathing tools of the period. For instance, in Oxfordshire, a relatively well-off peasant named Robert Oldham (1350) is recorded as owning two basins and four ewers (Keene, 2001, pp. 161-179).

Europe inherited a tradition of bathhouses from the Roman period (Genç, https://www.akademiktarihtr.com/ortacagdatemizlik2, 2021). Between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, there was a significant increase in the number of bathhouses, largely due to population growth and urbanization. By the fifteenth century, Paris alone had more than fifty bathhouses. Visiting

bathhouses had become a common practice, and even a form of leisure, particularly among townspeople and urban residents. Bathhouses were not merely spaces for personal hygiene. In her study on the history of cleanliness, Virginia Smith makes the following noteworthy observation regarding medieval European bathhouses:

> "By the fifteenth century, attending a bathhouse was as commonplace as dining in a restaurant in many cities. Fifteenth-century German city bathhouse engravings often depict couples bathing in long rows, some of whom are seen eating naked in tubs while other couples smile nearby (Smith, 2007, p. 176-177)."

As this observation indicates, public bathhouses were spaces where people of both sexes could cleanse themselves, but where the boundaries of privacy were often minimal and moral transgressions could occur. The Papacy recommended that individuals engaging in such behaviors be punished, with the severity of penalties varying depending on whether they were married or single. When enforcement proved difficult, a series of bathhouses were constructed across Europe under the auspices of various religious organizations. The primary distinction between church-affiliated bathhouses and secular bathhouses was the separation of men and women, as well as a reduced emphasis on entertainment. Some of these religious bathhouses were built in areas with natural hot springs; for example, the pools in Southwark contained abundant hot water and steam. By the sixteenth century, the tradition of bathhouses had become so widespread across Europe that among the phrases uttered by beggars in city streets was the request for "a bathhouse coin" (Karaimamoğlu, 2021, p. 116). Contrary to common belief the Church did not appear to have major objections to bathing itself. Rather, its concern focused on the immorality often displayed in many bathhouses. For instance, Pope Gregory I in the sixth century is known to have encouraged Christians to bathe regularly. Certain ecclesiastical institutions even required clergy to bathe prior to holy days and ceremonies. At Westminster Abbey, priests were advised to bathe at the end of June and September in preparation for Christmas and Easter. Indeed, the fact that monastery bathhouses were always kept ready by an attendant suggests that clergy bathed more frequently than has sometimes been assumed (Squatriti, 1998, pp. 59-61).

Bathing, for wealthy merchants and their wives who sought to emulate the aristocracy and its lifestyle, represented both a luxury and a means of cleansing the entire body. It is evident that this social group spent considerable sums to transform bathing into a lavish experience, as bathing itself was regarded as a royal custom. The renowned Italian writer Boccaccio notably described the bathing practices of a nobleman in the fourteenth century in his Decameron, drawing attention to the luxurious and distinctive nature of this activity (Boccaccio, 2016, p. 589).

King John of England was renowned throughout Europe for traveling and campaigning with his own bathtub, as well as for his habit of regular bathing. His royal household even employed bath attendants. John's successors transformed the practice of bathing into a hallmark of English royalty. King Edward I's bath, for instance, featured gilded bronze taps for controlling the water flow, while Edward III had several baths constructed in his Westminster palaces, each equipped with hot and cold running water. Before his coronation, Henry IV emphasized the noble ritual of bathing prior to being knighted, underlining the significance of both physical and spiritual purification, and thereby formalized the English bathing tradition (Karaimamoğlu, 2025-a, pp. 165-170). The baths used by kings and aristocrats typically consisted of wooden tubs covered with cloth. These tubs were filled either through taps or by pouring in heated water from buckets, often enhanced with rose petals, spices, and aromatic or medicinal herbs. Ash-based soaps were enriched with costly scented oils, and the bathing ritual itself was conducted with the assistance of servants. Infants of the aristocracy were also bathed regularly; they were wrapped in linen swaddles infused with salt and ground rose petals, reflecting the same emphasis on luxury, hygiene, and refinement that characterized the elite bathing culture (Salzman, 1952, pp. 276-180; Woolgar, 2013, p. 135).

Some medieval physicians also emphasized the health benefits of bathing. Although doctors who followed Galen's humoral theory often discouraged frequent bathing during times of epidemic believing it could disrupt the body's balance of fluids and heat they nonetheless acknowledged its therapeutic value for a range of ailments, from bladder stones to melancholy. Bathing every night was even regarded as a popular medieval remedy for the common cold. Magninius Mediolanensis, a fourteenth-century physician who had also worked at the University of Paris, recommended bathing not only as a means of cleansing the bodies of those soiled by daily labor, but also as a treatment for individuals suffering from digestive disorders. Moreover, in the middle ages, bathing was considered the most effective method for ridding the body viewed as inseparable from the person's identity of lice, fleas, and other insects. The English physician John Gaddesden, for instance, advised bathing in salty or sulfurous water to treat such parasites. This method was believed to cleanse the pores where lice were thought to breed, reinforcing the association between bathing, hygiene, and medical care in medieval thought (Talbot, 1967, p. 112).

How, then, did the perception arise that people in medieval Europe hardly ever bathed? The answer lies in the history of syphilis a disease that tormented Europeans for centuries. It is believed that Christopher Columbus's sailors contracted the infection from the Arawak people during their voyages, after which it spread rapidly across Europe. The exceptionally swift transmission of this venereal disease in the fifteenth century was largely due to the widespread practice of prostitution (Karaimamoğlu, 2021, pp. 113-119). Public bathhouses, as well as the private baths of the wealthy, had by then gained a reputation for being used less for bathing and more for illicit sexual encounters-a situation that, as mentioned earlier, had already drawn the ire of the Church. Consequently, rumors spread that these establishments had become centers of infection. In response to both public anxiety and medical opinion of the time, authorities ordered the closure of many public baths. Out of fear of contagion, people began to avoid bathhouses altogether. As a result, beginning in the fifteenth century, the popularity of public baths across Europe declined sharply, and many of the buildings were repurposed for other uses. The famous philosopher Erasmus lamented this change in 1526, writing; "Twenty-five years ago, nothing was more fashionable in Brabant than the baths. Today, there are none. The new plague (syphilis) has taught us to avoid them" (Ashenburg, 2007, p. 95). Nevertheless, the abandonment of bathhouses did not mean that people stopped washing entirely. Many continued to bathe, albeit under more difficult circumstances in rivers, streams, or makeshift basins set up outdoors. Thus, there is no concrete evidence to suggest that bathing was completely abandoned. The widespread modern misconception that medieval Europeans never bathed largely stems from the social and cultural consequences of the syphilis epidemic and the decline of public bath culture that followed (Frith, 2012, pp. 49-56).

Undoubtedly, true hygiene could only be achieved when bathing was combined with the cleanliness of clothing and household items. From this perspective, it becomes clear that maintaining clean garments was also important in the middle ages. Considering that few people would have been willing to bathe in rivers or cold baths during the freezing winter months, the most common form of personal cleanliness was the use of clean linen. In this way, people could both smell pleasant and present a respectable appearance in society. As the frequency of bathing declined further after the spread of syphilis, the aristocracy began to place even greater emphasis on the cleanliness of their luxurious garments in order to appear refined and to emit a pleasant fragrance. Interestingly, by the sixteenth century, linen undergarments began to be worn for the first time, designed to keep expensive outer garments cleaner for longer periods. Prominent figures of the period, such as John Gaddesden, also recommended frequent changes of clothing and the maintenance of garment hygiene to prevent lice, fleas, and other illnesses associated with dirty fabrics. However, it is evident that such recommendations were largely impractical for the vast numbers of impoverished people who owned little more than the clothes-or rags-on their backs (Karaimamoğlu, 2021).

Figure 2: In This 1582 Painting, Peasant Women Are Depicted Washing Laundry in A Stream And Hanging It To Dry (https://ingeniousanimaloracle.com/eries-4-women-washing (13.06.2021).[3]

Throughout the middle ages, laundry work was regarded as a task belonging exclusively to women. Washerwomen typically carried out their labor along streams, rivers, or near fountains, using basins or washboards. Clothes were beaten with sticks or trampled underfoot while being washed in water heated in cauldrons. On large rivers such as the Thames, wooden platforms were even constructed to facilitate washing activities. Laundry work, which was usually done collectively and noisily, sometimes provoked public complaints. In 1461, for example, washing clothes in the town canals of Coventry was officially banned because it was deemed a public nuisance. Washerwomen also faced some of the most exhausting and hazardous working conditions of the era. Many risked drowning in the rivers (with recorded cases), while others suffered from severe damage to their hands and feet or exposure to freezing temperatures, particularly during harsh winter months. A popular late medieval poem captures the social perception of the time with the line, "A woman is a precious being / she washes and wrings," clearly reflecting the gendered expectations and the cultural value attached to women's domestic labor in medieval society (Morrison, 2002, p. 5).

In some cities, it was possible to rent washing boards and basins; for instance, when King Henry of England visited Calais in 1396, he reportedly rented such equipment to have his clothes washed (Wylie, 1884-1898, p. 51). Thus, although laundry was an expensive service in the middle ages, it posed little difficulty for those who could afford it. Among the substances used to achieve thorough cleanliness, urine was perhaps the most surprising it served as a kind of detergent due to its ammonia content. However, wood ash and various types of soap were also commonly employed. In England, the soaps typically used for laundry were the cheaper varieties, available in white, gray, and black. By 1380, soap production had become sufficiently developed that molded bars sold for around 4 pence, while liquid soap sold in barrels could cost as much as 13 shillings and 4 pence (Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous, 1377-1388, pp. 72-75).

One of the greatest challenges regarding environmental cleanliness and consequently public health in medieval Europe was the management of toilets and sewage (Havlíček, 2017, pp. 5-26; Oğuz, 2022, pp. 171-173). This problem was particularly acute in densely populated areas and buildings. Nevertheless, it appears that various methods, which may seem primitive by modern standards, were developed to address these sanitation issues. In castles and manor houses of the period, toilets were referred to by different names, such as *privy chamber*, *garderobe*, or *projection*. Interestingly, the modern English word loo is thought to derive from the French phrase gardez l'eau! "watch out for the

[3] During this period, laundry work much like cooking was considered one of the domestic duties traditionally assigned to women.

water!", which people would shout as they emptied chamber pots out of windows to warn passersby below. Because the streets were often filthy, it was considered a mark of great courtesy for men to allow women to walk on the cleaner parts of the road. The unpleasant odors that rose from medieval cities serve as a vivid reminder of the limited sanitation infrastructure of the time and the persistent challenges of maintaining urban hygiene (Harmer & Stokes, 2001, p. 105).

Figure 3: The İmage Shows Both The İnterior And Exterior Views Of a Garderobe-A Type Of Toilet Built As A Protruding Structure in a Medieval Castle (Cartwright, 2018).

Because public toilets were largely nonexistent, people often relieved themselves wherever they could. Commenting on this situation in his writings on etiquette, Erasmus noted, "It is rude to greet someone who is using the toilet." Given this, it is easy to imagine how dirty the streets of medieval cities must have been. For example, a notice posted in an English palace instructed: "Let no one, whether before, during, or after meals, early or late, soil the stairs or corridors with urine or other filth." Queen Elizabeth, highly sensitive to unpleasant odors, had one of the first modern flush toilets installed for her personal use (Karaimamoğlu, 2025-a, pp. 245-255). Similarly, King Henry III of England, in a letter to one of his castle officials, addressed the problem of foul smells in the Tower of London with remarkable directness, ordering that it be resolved at any cost:

> "The privy in London is badly located and emits a foul smell. We command you not to spare any expense in constructing another toilet… Let it be in such a suitable place that, even if it costs a hundred pounds, you may choose that location. It must be completed before we arrive for the feast of Saint Edward (Gies, 2015, p. 73)."

This illustrates both the challenges of sanitation in medieval England and the extraordinary measures taken by the elite to ensure cleanliness and comfort. In order to ensure that guards did not leave their posts, some castle walls were equipped with triangular urinals. The presence of both toilets and urinals in twelfth-century English castles such as Orford and Castle Rising provides evidence of this practice. Although castles were typically outfitted with garderobes, the lack of proper sewage systems meant that their sanitation facilities were considered more rudimentary compared to Roman structures. For example, many tunnels built during the Roman period in London had collapsed by the middle ages due to neglect, leading to the failure of the city's sewage system a development that posed a major threat to public hygiene and health. The River Thames became so clogged with waste that it was no longer navigable, prompting the issuance of regulations at various times to prohibit the disposal of waste into the river and to enforce its cleaning. Ernest Sabine emphasizes the importance of cesspits constructed to collect waste from castle and manor toilets. These pits, which cost about £4-a sum equivalent to at least twice the annual wage of an unskilled laborer-were cleaned by workers known as gongfarmers. Performing one of the most grueling and hazardous jobs of the middle ages, gongfarmers in large cities

such as London and Paris often worked at night under difficult conditions, motivated by shame and fear of social exclusion. Although these cesspits were generally built at a prescribed distance from other properties as a temporary solution, they still posed serious hygiene and public health risks (Sabine, 1934, pp. 303-321).

CONCLUSION

There is a widespread perception that people in medieval Europe regarded bathing as a form of torture and were largely unaware of the importance of personal and clothing hygiene. This misconception has been reinforced, in particular, by modern films and books depicting the period. However, a closer examination of the people of the era and the physical and technical conditions in which they lived reveals that this view is far from accurate. While the understanding of cleanliness in the Middle Ages differed from contemporary standards, it is evident that people of all social classes sought to maintain personal hygiene to the extent that their circumstances allowed.

The existence of washerwomen, records of individuals who drowned while attempting to bathe in rivers, and the documented prices of basins and cleaning agents all demonstrate that hygiene and cleanliness were indeed valued. In addition to bathing, medieval Europeans also took care of their hair, nails, and teeth using various plants and substances, further underscoring their concern for personal care. Members of the royal family and the aristocracy, in particular, had the resources to maintain extensive bathing and personal hygiene practices, employing servants and purchasing specialized products. England, for instance, was at the forefront of both bathing and clothing cleanliness.

It is however, unrealistic to claim that medieval cities were particularly clean. Systematic sewage and sanitation infrastructure were largely absent, and streets and waterways were often heavily polluted. Efforts by authorities to maintain clean rivers and water sources, such as the Thames, highlight both the necessity and difficulty of managing urban sanitation. Population growth placed significant pressure on environmental resources, especially clean water, contributing to widespread infectious disease in Europe's periphery between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries. The arrival of syphilis further exacerbated this issue, leading to the closure of public baths institutions that had, since Roman times, played a crucial role in communal hygiene. In response, the aristocracy increasingly emphasized clean clothing and pleasant scents, striving at least to appear clean and well-kept. These practices, combined with the evidence of everyday hygiene measures across social strata, demonstrate that medieval Europeans were far more attentive to cleanliness than popular culture often suggests.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL / PARTICIPANT CONSENT

Ethics committee approval is not required for this study. There are no participants in this study

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