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DYED-IN-THE-WOOL: THE IMPACT OF
OCCUPATIONAL BEHAVIOUR AND THE
ENVIRONMENT ON SMALL URBAN AND
RURAL COMMUNITIES IN FLANDERS,
C. 1200-1860 AD

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a bioarchaeological study of six cemetery populations from Flanders (Belgium), dating from the medieval to post-medieval periods. The six sites represent populations from different regions/contexts (coastal, inland, small-urban and one high-status group), and through a multi-faceted study incorporating historical, archaeological and osteological evidence, provides the opportunity to explore the impact of socioeconomic and environmental conditions on the health status of individuals working within rural and small urban habitats between the late 12th and 19th centuries.

In order to interpret inter- and intra-population variability, patterns of mortality, stature, diseases and activity markers (entheseal changes or EC) were assessed to investigate the consequences of a physically active lifestyle in an economically important and dynamic period. Historical socioeconomic research detailed the significance of Flanders in the production and trade of wool, linen, cloth, and specified the labour-intensive cultivation of flax and other crops that instigated a major impact on the working lives of both citizens and peasants. The analysis of EC supports the regional and gender labour differentiation between coastal and inland Flanders, whilst the palaeopathological investigation further indicates the consequences of the environment on health, especially upon those residing in a riverine, coastal or polder area.

This research demonstrates the complementary and interdisciplinary nature of integrating a bioarchaeological study within a historical socio-economic framework, and elucidates, not only the impact of an arduous lifestyle on working individuals, but also the vulnerability of the people across status groups to the environment.