What to Do with Waste?
The Challenges of Waste Disposal in Two Late Medieval Towns
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Waste disposal in crowded urban settings often becomes a problem which does not simply go away. By better understanding how late medieval towns both perceived of waste and addressed it as an environmental problem, we may be able to better understand the growing waste dilemmas of communities in developing countries only now entering the urban phase.
THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT confronts unique challenges because of concentrated demographic pressures. One of the most crucial problems facing urbanised areas is what to do with all of the waste generated by its inhabitants. Dealing with waste is an issue not only faced in the industrialised modern world. During the late medieval period, European townspeople and their governments had to directly address this problem through the deployment of technological and social solutions. Some individuals attempted to remove waste from their own property by putting it into the street, the river, or dumping it in the neighbour's yard. These all seemed to be good solutions for these particular individuals, but from the viewpoint of the community as a whole they were not permissible solutions, as they were an infringement on others' property rights and trade. Thus individuals and town elites of the late Middle Ages struggled to handle the ever-increasing waste in their midst.

This article analyses late medieval governments' efforts to provide for a sanitary city by regulating use of the most commonly disputed sites of waste disposal—rivers and streets—in the two English towns of Coventry and York in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. It investigates how the civic governmental authorities responded to unsanitary conditions through both legislation and sanitation activities recorded in the civic council documents. Coventry and York are by no means exceptional in their interest in waste disposal, but both towns have substantial records from the period, allowing a relatively full analysis of the issue and responses to it. The medieval town is often characterised simply as a dirty, filthy place in both popular conceptions and modern scholarship, yet we should not adopt this conclusion too fast. When interpreting records of cleanliness in the medieval town, modern scholars are often presentist, interpreting medieval life in terms of modern technological standards. It is particularly easy to think that the cities were dirty because medieval households lacked flush toilets and functioned without engineered landfills. But the lack of complex technology to manage waste does not mean that it was indiscriminately handled. As this research shows, waste dumped in the streets, left by the town gates, or thrown in the market was considered unacceptable, in the same way that it would be for a modern inhabitant of the town. The fact that there are recorded complaints about improper waste handling means that when individuals were acting outside of accepted norms, the community became concerned. What we have in the records, then, is documentation of struggles to define proper waste handling and of how local governments attempted to cope with violators.
In 1928, the medieval historian Lynn Thorndike wrote an article in which he claimed that the medieval city was not nearly as dirty as modern writers would make it out to be, judging from a cursory look at some of the city statutes on cleanliness in France, Germany, and Italy. He argues:

"If a society lived contentedly with the streets in a state of 100 per cent filth, this condition, however shocking and deplorable it may seem to us, would evoke no remark or comment from contemporaries, and no records to prove the past existence of such a condition would come down to us. Most of the complaints that have come down to us from the past as to filthy and evil-smelling streets will be found to be applicable to abuses rather than to normal usage, and to testify to the existence in public opinion of higher standards in such matters than the presence of the abuse itself would suggest." 

At the end of his article, Thorndike included a call for serious research into the sanitary condition of the medieval city. Ernest L. Sabine picked up on this suggestion and wrote three articles in the 1930s about London's urban pollution. They reveal a concern for cleanliness in the medieval city and offer an explanation of the practical steps taken by the city government to sanitise London. Sabine found that London's public latrines served both transient businesses and residents who had no access to private latrines. City officials expected residents to use the public facilities rather than throwing excrement and urine in the streets, as is evident in complaints brought against those who behaved in this manner, and on several occasions the bridge masters financed repairs of the public latrines on London Bridge. Sabine also observes that both public and private latrines often were situated over running water in order to lead away waste, and that the city government tried to curb construction of such latrines because they caused watercourse blockages. These early twentieth century scholars saw the efforts of medieval authorities as positive signs of the sanitary state of the medieval city.

Some recent scholarship on waste in the medieval city has countered this positive view, instead seeing injunctions against waste disposal as evidence of uncleanliness. In 1982, Derek Keene wrote an overview article dealing with the issue of rubbish disposal in the documentary sources. Keene's view is that "the mass of documentation and its repetitious character show not only that by modern standards English medieval towns were extremely dirty places in which to live and work, but also that both municipal authorities and others had a self-conscious concern for the appearance and smell of their towns and made serious attempts to cope with the problems of cleansing." Although acknowledging the efforts, Keene clearly sees them as failures. The most extensive treatment of medieval sanitation is Straws in the Wind: Medieval Urban Environmental Law – The Case of Northern Italy by Ronald E. Zupko and Robert A. Laures. They assume that most of the sanitation laws indicate the bad sanitation condition of the cities rather than being positive signs of city cleanliness. They conclude that the efforts by medieval elites to clean up the urban environment were "incomplete, sporadic, and sometimes misguided."

This article proposes a reading of the sources that differs from that of Zupko and Laures, i.e. a return to Thorndike's proposition, that cleanliness statutes indicate that waste disposal in the urban environment was not acceptable and that efforts to prevent it were perhaps more effective than modern historians assume.

The Urban Centers under Consideration

Both York and Coventry were in the upper echelon of English urban centres. In the late fourteenth century, York ranked second in size only to London. The population captured in the poll tax returns of 1377 was approximately 11,000, although the population thereafter gradually began to decline. Coventry's population appears to have climaxd near 10,000 in 1434. In total population, it may have ranked as high as fourth in size, behind only London, York, and Bristol, in its heyday during the late
fourteenth through mid-fifteenth centuries. Both towns had experienced significant growth from the twelfth century on, as reflected in new housing development both within and without the town walls.

Both towns had a ruling oligarchic council with judicial and legislative functions during the period under investigation. The organisational structure in Coventry was dominated by the court leet. The leet usually met twice a year, at Easter and Michaelmas, in order both to execute justice and pass legislation. As a judicial body, the leet heard misdemeanour presentments, levied fines, and received capital pledges for minor offences. The primary function of the Coventry leet, however, was legislative. The leet issued ordinances, which were founded on bills presented to the mayor by any individual or group who wished to voice a grievance or amend common practice. The mayor and a council of twenty-four reviewed the petitions before the day of the assembly and decided on their inclusion or exclusion from the leet proceedings. It appears that the council was not elected by the citizens in a popular vote, but rather selected by the mayor, who could be advised by other council members. The proceedings of this court were recorded in the Coventry Leet Book, which contains 436 numbered leaves, the bulk of which record the mayoral elections and court sittings between 1421 and 1555. York likewise had a Court of Mayor and Alderman which issued civic ordinances and administered the law by imposing fines and making arrests. There were several concentric circles of government around the mayor who stood at the centre: a council of 12 aldermen, a council of 24 men, and a communitas of 48 men representing the community at large. There were multiple lower courts, including a court of wardmote, which was a jury of twelve or more men who heard complaints of nuisances, such as the failure to pave streets and lanes in the town.

Beginning in 1377, the York Memorandum Books A/Y and B/Y record ordinances related to the guilds and trade, property deeds, and tax collection amounts. In 1461, the government began keeping a new set of documents titled the House Books, which focus on municipal activities and legislation rather than craft regulations. In both Coventry and York, the primary actors – the mayor, council, and aldermen – tackled the environmental issues faced by these late medieval towns. The fact that the documentation for these activities comes to us through governmental records should not be interpreted as an indication that only the ruling elites cared about creating a sanitary urban space. Medieval town councils most often acted in response to complaints brought before them. Individuals issued complaints against neighbours who blocked street drains with their household waste or disposed of offal on abandoned land. From the civic records, we know that nuisance complaints of this kind were regularly brought to the civic authorities’ attention. In her study of misbehaviour in fourteenth to sixteenth century England, Marjorie McIntosh points out that because it was not obligatory to report wrongdoing of offences, “a report about misbehaviour therefore presupposes genuine concern among
community leaders, providing a glimpse into how misbehaviour was constructed.\textsuperscript{19}\textsuperscript{9} The authorities felt obliged to respond to the complaints because of their social role. As Lorraine Attreed has argued in her study of English late medieval urban government, we should not see local officers as merely self-interested oligarchs. They were, in fact, constrained by social norms to act in the best interest of the community: “The principles that underlay those constraints placed a high value on civic harmony in the face of inevitable inequity.”\textsuperscript{20}\textsuperscript{20} Thus, in response to citizen complaints the councils passed bylaws against illegal dumping, appointed officials to conduct regular inspections of suspected improper disposal areas, and fined violators. In addition, they designated areas for waste disposal, required waste separation and reuse, and funded weekly waste removal carts to go through the town. Waste was a real concern for the inhabitants of the towns and the authorities, and both sides took concrete actions to address the problem.

A River “Stoppyd of his Course”

The environment placed constraints and provided opportunities for the citizens of both towns. In both cases, the river played a significant role in shaping the urban landscape. Because of the necessity of water for commerce, travel and consumption, medieval cities of any size had to be situated next to a body of water. For Coventry, the River Sherbourne, a non-navigable river meandering through the medieval town, was primarily a drainage way. Coventry lies within a shallow basin where a bend in the river creates many low-lying areas and marshes. Medieval deeds include frequent references to land called mora, indicating that marshy land was a common feature.\textsuperscript{21}\textsuperscript{21} Because of the flat topography, heavy rains caused drainage problems. Several Coventry Leet Book entries enumerate flooding problems. In 1421, dwellers on the river were required to clean it and clear the river of blockage so that “the waturs in flod tyme may the lyghtlyer pass.”\textsuperscript{22}\textsuperscript{22} In York, the River Ouse passed through the heart of the town and the River Foss wound its way through the eastern side. The Ouse was the main commercial boating thoroughfare, whereas the Foss created swampy conditions and several large pools. The rivers played a critical role in both cities’ waste disposal dilemmas.

Disposal of household waste into the rivers made this into a contested space. Individuals might have viewed the river as a good solution for waste removal, because the water, theoretically, would remove the waste from the inhabited area. But other uses of the river—rainwater drainage, flood control, fishing, travel, commerce, drinking water, craft use—all conflicted with the river’s use as a waste disposal location. The resulting conflict among users required administrative intervention. A legal landscape developed to address the shortcomings of the physical landscape.

The environment of the two towns directly influenced how the urban elites attempted to deal with waste. The primary concern was the blockage of the waterway by accumulated waste. The River Sherbourne in Coventry provided rainwater drainage, so any reduction in the river’s carrying capacity could have serious consequences for town residents. The 1421 Coventry mayor’s proclamation lamented that the river had been “stoppyd of his course” by “filthe, dong, and stonys” causing “dyuers perels...by floodys.”\textsuperscript{23}\textsuperscript{23} In the opinion of the civic leaders, the urban waterway was a “comen Ryver.”\textsuperscript{24}\textsuperscript{24} Because of the Sherbourne’s status as a common good, the Coventry council acted to preserve the integrity of the river and avoid flood damage in the urban area. In York, the concern would have been more directly with navigation obstruction because of the Ouse’s role in commerce. As such, the local government needed to manage conflict among various citizen and business interests.

Because the casting of muck or filth into town waterways was considered an offence of “yll-disposid persons, contrarie to all good rule of the Citee”, both councils issued legislation forbidding waste disposal in the rivers.\textsuperscript{25}\textsuperscript{25} As early as 1377, York forbade the throwing of butcher waste or other refuse on the Ouse Bridge or into the Ouse River.\textsuperscript{26}\textsuperscript{26} An order of 1524 said that no one in York was to “cast eny manner of fylth, ramell nor dong into the said watter of Ouse.”\textsuperscript{27}\textsuperscript{27} The Coventry council issued

\textsuperscript{19} Marjorie McIntosh, Controlling Misbehavior in England, 1270-1600 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 40.
\textsuperscript{20} Lorraine Attreed, The King’s Towns: Identity and Survival in Late Medieval English Boroughs (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 44-45.
\textsuperscript{22} Coventry Leet Book, 1:31.
\textsuperscript{23} Coventry Leet Book, 1:29-30. Other things including the dyers’ waterlades \cite{Coventry Leet Book, 1:31} and stakes placed in the river \cite{Coventry Leet Book, 1:31} were also prohibited because of the fear of flooding due to decreased water carrying capacity of the river. Weirs and encroachments along with wastes are blamed for stopping the course of the Sherbourne in 1469 (2:347-348). The prior of the monastery complained in 1480 that waste was stopping up the floodgates and channels of the monastery’s watermill causing it to run not.
\textsuperscript{24} Coventry Leet Book, 1:91. The river is referenced as the common river many times: “comen Ryver” in \cite{Coventry Leet Book, 1:91}, “comen Ryver” in \cite{Coventry Leet Book, 1:91}, “the river of this Cite” and “the comon river” in \cite{Coventry Leet Book, 1:91}.
\textsuperscript{25} Coventry Leet Book, 3:631-632.
\textsuperscript{26} York Memorial Rolls Book, Part I, 17-18.
\textsuperscript{27} York Civic Records, 5,95-96.
prohibitions against waste disposal in the river and established fines for violators. The 1421 Mayor's Proclamation prohibited the casting of dung from stables and other filth into the Sherbourne and set up fines that increased with each successive violation.\textsuperscript{28} The prohibition was reiterated in 1424, 1426 and 1429, but no further denunciation of waste disposal in the river appears in the records until \textit{1444}. In the decade following 1469, there was a flurry of activity with regular reiteration of the prohibition against waste in the river.\textsuperscript{29} The hiatus of legislative activity between 1429 and 1444 and then between 1444 and 1469 might indicate that most people were obeying the law and not disposing of waste in the river during this time. Perhaps the matter reappears in the records because the legal restrictions had lost their effect as new generations of residents moved into the urban area. Because medieval legislation was disseminated orally, it would appear reasonable for the town council to reissue legislation which was last proclaimed 20 years before. The first course of action in both cities appears to have been to create a legislative framework within which waste disposal in the water bodies was deemed unacceptable.

Medieval illustrations show that latrines were often placed to allow direct disposal of excrement into water bodies. For example, in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting \textit{Netherlandish Proverbs}, the patron of an overhanging latrine is shown prominently depositing his waste in the water below.\textsuperscript{30} This type of placement was particularly problematic if the water course did not have enough flow to wash away the waste. Such was the case in Coventry's Red Ditch, located within the centre of town: it had no outflow, as it was not connected directly to the River Sherbourne which was located much further north in the town. In 1421, the Coventry council required that all latrines on the Red Ditch be removed.\textsuperscript{31} Two years later, the council reiterated that owners must remove all privies, as well as pig sties, on the ditch. As of 1429, individuals were still making latrines on the ditch. The council instituted a half mark penalty for anyone who constructed a new privy \textit{there}. The council ordered the removal of latrines several times through 1470. After 1470, there are no more latrine bans. It appears, however, that some residents installed drains directly from household latrines to the Red Ditch. The council issued orders to remove drains carrying water or filth into the ditch in 1508, 1517, 1537 and 1538.\textsuperscript{32}

So why did the council have to reissue orders about latrine waste in the Red Ditch so many times? Inhabitants of the southern section of the town had to build latrines somewhere, and many possibly thought it better to place them on the Red Ditch \textit{than} to merely place the waste in the \textit{streets or close to houses in cesspits}. Yet, the Coventry authorities obviously did not agree with this strategy, as the waste simply accumulated in the ditch. Should the case of latrines on the Red Ditch be seen as a failure by the government of Coventry to regulate citizen action? The evidence actually leads to the reverse conclusion. The council took up the issue of Red Ditch latrines at """"generational"""" intervals: two times in the 1420s, three in the 1440s, and one in 1470. This indicates that the latrines were removed after order was given to do so, but then several years later, latrines were set up again, \textit{perhaps by different individuals}. It is possible that, \textit{in the intervening years}, latrines did not exist on the Ditch. The concern about

\textit{""""Through its regulation of latrine placement on the Red Ditch, the Coventry legislative council was attempting to create a cleaner urban space."""

\textsuperscript{28} Coventry Leet Book, 1:29.\textsuperscript{29} Coventry Leet Book, 1:91, 107, 119, 208, 2:347-348, 361, 388, 477.\textsuperscript{30} Pieter Bruegel the Elder, \textit{Netherlandish Proverbs}. 1559. Oil on oak panels. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin.\textsuperscript{31} Coventry Leet Book, 1:31.\textsuperscript{32} The issue comes up in 1444, 1445, 1466, and 1470. Each time, the council requires the removal of all latrines on the Red Ditch by Whitsonday or a fine will be levied.\textsuperscript{33} Coventry Leet Book, 3:622, 652, 653, 727, 728.
In order to enforce waste regulations, both urban governments made river inspections part of their elected officials' regular duties. The organisation of official "searches" of the river for violators was common. The Coventry council specifically charged the mayor with duty of inspecting the river in 1429, 1430, and 1439, in order to find out where the river "is narrowed, myssruled, or stopped, or encroached." Unfortunately, we do not know if the mayor continued to perform these searches annually as required by the council ordinances. We do know that the issue reappeared 30 years later, when the council ordained that the mayor was to perform inspections of the river at least twice a year. They even stipulated that the oath of the mayor was to be changed to include this semi-annual inspection. This may mean that the mayor had been lax about the inspections or it could mean that waste in the river was now viewed as a more pressing problem, and more frequent inspections would better identify violators. The organisational structures that developed to enforce river regulations changed over time. Various Coventry officers were given the task of river inspection, including the common sergeant, named overseers, and the ward alderman. By 1517, the oath for each ward's alderman included a reference to the responsibility for ensuring that the river was cleaned and the streets were swept. In the mid-fifteenth century, York went so far as to create a special water bailiff position in charge of river inspections. The water bailiff looked for individuals who had "cast any ramel, swepyng of howses or gardynes, dung or any other thyngs or thyng into the watter of Owse," or had been lax about the inspections or it could mean that waste in the river was now viewed as a more pressing problem, and more frequent inspections would better identify violators. The organisational structures that developed to enforce river regulations changed over time. Various Coventry officers were given the task of river inspection, including the common sergeant, named overseers, and the ward alderman. By 1517, the oath for each ward's alderman included a reference to the responsibility for ensuring that the river was cleaned and the streets were swept. In the mid-fifteenth century, York went so far as to create a special water bailiff position in charge of river inspections. The water bailiff looked for individuals who had "cast any ramel, swepyng of howses or gardynes, dung or any other thyngs or thyng into the watter of Owse." Through the inclusion of river responsibility in official duties, the councils placed river cleanliness as a prominent goal for the cities.

In addition to the legislative activities undertaken by the councils, the governments of Coventry and York organised river scouring and cleaning operations to remedy past waste-dumping violations. Coventry's council required that every household "make cleane & clense" the Sherbourne River along the length of their property bordering it. The council levied a fine of 20 shillings on noncompliant landowners or their tenants. In 1546, York's council ordered that every merchant send one capable labourer to help clean the Ouse during one workday, under the supervision of the wardens. Because workers from each of the four wards only worked one day, they were not able to completely scour the river. The following year, the council mandated another workday in which the labourers would "begyn in that ware where as they left the last tyme." Merchants who did not supply a labourer for the cleaning operation would be charged for the cost of the town's hiring one. In one case, a specific individual was required to clean up the waste he had put in the river. In 1556, the council ordered butcher William Dawson to remove the dirt and construction debris he had laid on the Ouse bank beneath the bridge. These river cleaning activities indicate that both town councils recognised the importance of a clean river and implemented practical measures alongside legal restrictions to create a cleaner urban space.

**Streets "Gretely Anoyed with Casting of Muke"**

Streets and water bodies acted as an interconnected environmental system in the late medieval town. Both paved and unpaved streets carried runoff, both rainwater and waste strewn in the street, into ditches and eventually the river. To facilitate rainwater drainage, they were often provided with gutters, generally in the middle of the roadway. Although the gutters' primary function was to lead away rainwater, some individuals thought street gutters could be a convenient waste disposal location: waste could be thrown into the gutter and ostensibly the rainwater would wash it away. Out of sight, out of mind.

The problem with the individual's viewpoint was two-fold. First, rains were often not of a magnitude that would wash away all of the waste. Thus, waste putrefied in the street. Second, gutter systems drained into the local river, which might subsequently become blocked by the waste. Waste in the streets created waste in the river. Streets and river were intimately connected and were seen as two parts of the same environmental issue. The Coventry council recognised this and stated explicitly that...
sweeping the gutters to clear filth away while it was raining would "pester the Ryver with fylythe & muck." Thus, these two towns had to deal with waste in the gutters.

To counter the inclination of householders to equate streets with disposal locations, the two councils issued legal prohibitions against the practice. In 1371, the York council recognised that there was a common practice of relying on rain to get rid of dung. They expressly outlawed the practice of throwing dung into the streets, calling it "great defiling and nuisance of the said city." In Coventry, raking and sweeping in times of rain was prohibited as early as 1421 in order to reduce the quantities of waste in the streets and downstream rivers. In 1444, a specific ordinance was passed, which prohibited the sweeping of manure into the street and specified a 4d. fine for violators. In 1475, the ordinance was expanded. It now stated that no filth should be swept into the gutters.

A Coventry ordinance of 1511 sums up the gutter problem so well that it is worthy of an extended quote:

"That where the Comen dyches & Comen gutters of the Citee byn greetely annoyed with castynge of muke & filth in them and also in sweypynge of ther filth in-to the same by dyverse yll-disposid persons, contrarie to all good rule of the Citee; therefore it is ordeyned that every persone that is fromhensforth takyn with any such faute shall pay for every defaute ij d. to the Comen boxe and a penny to the constable for his fyndyng."

It is difficult to say how often these bans were enforced, as many enforcement records have been lost. However, in the surviving records for 1540/1, Coventry’s court fined the plumber Walter Lacy 4d. for casting dung and filth into the gutter near St. John’s Wall and the carrier William Shawe 12d. for throwing dung on the street outside of New Gate. We see then that when medieval urban residents employed gutters as a personal solution to their waste disposal dilemmas, the individuals entered into conflict with other residents and the "good of the city." Coventry and York elites responded with legislation to stop the behavior, but they did not stop at legal controls. They also looked for practical alternatives.

To require individuals to clean up the street was the most obvious practical solution to the waste problem. Both cities required that householders and shopkeepers clean the street in front of their doors on a weekly basis. In Coventry, the 1421 Mayor’s Proclamation required that every man clean the street in front of his place every Saturday or pay a 12 penny fine — with no exceptions being made. In 1484, York required that "the strete of this citie and suburbs of the same be cleynly kepyn and wekly sweypyn. The council reiterated this requirement in 1550 and added that inhabitants were responsible for cleaning and sweeping any part of a street in front of their dwelling twice each week in 1552, the council specified that the cleaning was to take place every Saturday and Tuesday. Community cleaning helped create a cleaner urban space, but it addressed the problem of waste disposal in the gutters only after improper waste disposal had already taken place.

“A Dung Cart in Every Ward”

To more proactively manage the waste that would have gone into the gutter or the river, these two medieval governments implemented two new approaches: establishing community waste services and specifying waste disposal locations. These two services moved the town government clearly beyond legislative activities and into environmental management.

Most scholars would associate municipal waste collection services with modern sanitation concerns. Yet, medieval town governments clearly established a role for themselves in managing inhabitants’ waste. In Coventry, waste collection services are recorded in 1420, when the council gave William Oteley the right to collect 1 penny from every resident and shop, on a quarterly basis, for his weekly street cleansing and waste removal services. The carrier of waste was re-authorised to collect his quarterly fee in 1452. In 1493, the constable of each ward was specifically ordered to

42. Coventry Leet Book, 3:604.
44. Coventry Leet Book, 1:21-30.
46. Coventry Leet Book, 2:4-6.
47. Coventry Leet Book, 3:613-632.
ensure that the weekly cart service was provided. The Carter was again authorised to gather the "cart tax" from the residents on a quarterly basis and anyone refusing to pay would be referred to the ward's alderman and required to pay double. 53 York required a dung cart "in every ward and a place assigned without the barre or postern where such dung as shalbe carri'd out of every ward shalbe laid so that husbands of the centre may come ther to and have it away." 54 The waste collection services were intended to pick up waste from the streets and the gutters to avoid the waste's putrification and/or runoff into the river.

One way to control latrine waste was to provide permanent public facilities. The York town council financed a public latrine house on the bridge over the River Ouse; latrines were installed in an arch of the bridge below the maison dieu in 1357. 55 In 1400, the Ouse Bridge financial records attest to the town paying 13s 8d for its yearly maintenance. 56 The government continued to support the latrine financially throughout the fifteenth century. In 1440, repairs at the entrance of the latrine house cost 12d and a labourer charged 8d for his work on the latrine and another tenement on the bridge intended to pick up waste from the streets and the gutters to avoid the waste's putrefaction and/or runoff into the river.

In 1544 the records note that the town paid 2s annually to a widow, Agnes Grethede, for keeping clean the place of Owsbrige called the pyssing house. 57 Agnes had complained to the council that latrine patrons were piling wood and other nuisances in the latrine house; the council agreed to remind citizens that the casting of construction waste or other filth in the house and directly in the river was prohibited. 58 The case of York's public latrines demonstrates the long-term commitment by the town council to manage the urban human waste. The councils' second tactic was to specify designated waste disposal locations. Dunghills and waste pits naturally sprang up around the perimeter of the town. Both councils authorised the use of specific sites for particular types of wastes. By 1427, five designated waste-disposal locations are mentioned for Coventry: a dunghill outside of the city limit beyond Greyfriar Gate, a pit in the Little Park Street Gate, a muckhill near the cross situated beyond New Gate, at Derne Gate, and a pit at Poolycroft. 60 In York, the council specified proper waste disposal locations by ward including the Toft Green area, Saint Leonard's Landing, Hungate, a place just outside of the Monkbar gate, and a pit at Castle Mill. 61 Each of these appears to have been used regularly for waste disposal. By naming allowable waste disposal locations, the governments attempted to clean up the town and minimise errant waste disposal within the urban space.

The councils even regulated which types of waste were permissible at what locations. For example, Coventry's council forbade the disposal of stones, construction material or other filth at the Greyfriar location and specified that only dung or muck was to be placed there, so that it could be used by local farmers as manure.”
But the local leaders found that although waste disposal locations were established, individual practices needed to be further controlled. Residents often dumped their waste before actually reaching the disposal location. Because the disposal areas were outside of the town walls, just beyond a gate, it was easy for residents to drop waste just outside of the gate instead of going to the disposal place. In order to rectify this situation, the Coventry council added the task of inspecting the gate areas for waste disposal and having any waste removed within the duties of the duties of the sub-bailiff.62 The butchers' waste disposal practices at the Poodycroft Pit also caught the eye of the council, which in 1474 ordered: "That the dryver of the Bochours Carre frohensfurth throwe his intrelles and other stuffe that he carieth in myddes of the pitte & not be the sides."63 The councils even regulated which types of waste were permissible at what locations. For example, Coventry's council forbade the disposal of stones, construction material or other filth at the Greyfriar location and specified that only dung or muck was to be placed there, so that it could be used by local farmers as manure.64 In 1550, York's mayor issued a statement that any person could take dung from the town's multiple dunghills free of charge for manuring fields.65 It was not enough to designate waste disposal locations. The town councils had to legislate the types of wastes that went into the areas and had to develop new responsibilities for oversight of waste disposal. The town governments employed both legislative and practical measures in tandem to manage their urban environments.

Conclusion: "Clenely Kept and Weekely Sweped"

Living in an urban setting comes with a price. Waste disposal in these crowded settings often becomes a problem. In the late medieval towns of York and Coventry, the town councils recognised and attempted to address their waste dilemmas for the betterment of the urban population at large. Individual inhabitants sometimes saw disposal in rivers and streets as a convenient solution to their own problems. But the local government had to take into account all of the users of the rivers and streets. Rivers and streets had to be seen as two parts of the same environmental issue because waste disposal in upstream gutters caused downstream river blockage. The town councils therefore developed legal and physical solutions to waste disposal. The councils forbade certain disposal practices and mandated others. They created urban services and appointed officers to monitor citizen behaviour.

The evidence from the urban records reveals that when individuals violated common waste disposal norms, the issue was addressed by the civic authorities. In contrast to the approach of Zupko and Laures, this article presents those instances as positive signs of urban sanitation. If the inhabitants normally accepted wastes piled up in their streets, they would not have complained about it. Although there are multiple complaints in the records, we must remember that these are spaced out over extended time periods. For example, we saw that Coventry's council banned waste disposal in the river nine times between 1421 and 1475. This is a fifty-year span and it should not surprise us that there were a few violators of sanitary regulations during that time. Although the council made a general statement about the issue each time and did not name particular perpetrators, we should not assume that the problem was widespread. The waste accumulation was obviously noticed, but that does not mean that the river had become completely filled with trash. The fact that both cities provided waste-cart services and appointed officials to monitor waste disposal practices and present violators indicates that the authorities made good-faith efforts to maintain a clean urban environment.

Waste is one of those problems which do not simply go away. Dealing with it requires a combination of harnessing the environmental resources at a city's disposal, creating a legislative framework within which citizens must live, and initiatives to oversee and address the practical aspects of waste disposal. By better understanding how late medieval communities both perceived of waste and addressed it as an environmental problem in a non-industrial setting, we may be able to better understand the growing waste dilemmas of communities in developing countries only now entering the urban phase.

62. Coventry Leet Book, 2, 475. "And that he, our lord, no dung shall be put at the gates of the city, especially at Greyfriar Gate, but that it may be removed as often as it is necessary at the chamberlain's cost."
63. Coventry Leet Book, 2, 386.
64. Coventry Leet Book, 3, 804. A complaint made in 1461 by the Prior of the cathedral church tells us that this 'pure' dung was used by Coventry-area farmers. "Where all lake tyne they make ther nothing but swepping of dons houses, which was started a-way be man of the Contrary to griffl their land, and now be cause they try ther ther [Rusell] ther will no man Carry a wyne thare so they were wey to dot, and syllyt ony worthly man & were to the hyndraunce & great hurt of the said Prisour" (Coventry Leet Book, 2, 351).
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