

Modernity and Medieval Muck

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Abstract

This article challenges the common presentation of the medieval street as a mud- and muck-filled cesspit. Using the television episode “Medieval London” of the *Filthy Cities* series aired by BBC Two in 2011 as a springboard, I discuss the realities of medieval waste management and modern conceptions of it. Through an examination of historical records from London, I show that the early fourteenth-century medieval street was not nearly as filthy as portrayed in *Filthy Cities*. Rather than being based on medieval evidence, our notion of the dirty medieval city is built on modern ideas of civility and scientific progress. Interpretations like that in *Filthy Cities* reflect more on our modern condition than the medieval one. The constructed dichotomy of medieval filth versus modern cleanliness obscures our contemporary waste problems and reinforces a physical and mental distance from our own waste.

Keywords: history, London, Middle Ages, sanitation, television, waste management

Introduction

We are fascinated by filth. At least, that is what BBC Two was banking on when it aired the three-part television series *Filthy Cities* (directed by Jeremy Turner) in 2011. In the series, the historian/journalist Dan Snow takes viewers to get down and dirty in medieval London, revolutionary Paris, and industrial New York. Snow gets to shovel dung, smell wastewater effluent, and butcher a pig, among other filthy activities, during the hour-long “Medieval

London” episode aired in April 2011. The viewers could even experience firsthand the stench of the show by picking up a scratch-and-sniff card produced by BBC in cooperation with the Wellcome Trust, which specializes in the history of medicine, or by visiting the Wellcome exhibition “Dirt: The Filthy Reality of Everyday Life” that ran concurrently with the series premiere (<http://www.wellcomecollection.org/whats-on/exhibitions/dirt.aspx>). Those who do not have access to BBC Two or missed the broadcasts can still see episode excerpts online (www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00z8r9l).

[p226] The first episode of *Filthy Cities*, “Medieval London,” contends that the London of today, a “clean and modern city,” emerged “from the muck of the past.” According to the narrative arc of the episode, early fourteenth-century London was a place of “dirt and squalor” and only the coming of the Black Death in 1348 forced the people into trying to clean up the mess. The show’s visual presentation accentuates the medieval-modern dichotomy: modern London is shown in aerial views as a gleaming white city radiating in the sunshine, whereas fourteenth-century London is cloaked in dark shadows and storm-filled skies; modern Londoners walk briskly on light-colored pavement, while medieval ones trod through ankle-deep muck. The audience gets to see the ingredients of medieval muck, which consists of mud, dung, entrails, rotting fish, beer, urine, and human excrement. The host Snow stomps through his concoction with rain boots, claiming that there were “few pavements or solid road surfaces,” “any part of an animal not worth eating would have been dumped in the road,” and excrement would have been “running down their street.” In Snow’s words and with his emphasis, “in the fourteenth century, they had *no* public sanitation.” As evidence of the problems, Snow references cases from a few medieval London records, including the *Book of Customs* and the assize of nuisance rolls, and

claims that although there were regulations banning waste in the street, “they were very often ignored.”

In this article, I want to challenge this reading of medieval London’s records, arguing that interpretations like that in *Filthy Cities* reflects more on our modern condition than the medieval one. I will begin with a look at the medieval historical records themselves, identifying what they can tell us and what they cannot about preplague London. Then, the article turns to how modern ideas of civility and scientific progress have affected our understanding and presentation of medieval sanitation. Finally, I will propose some environmental implications of the falsely constructed dichotomy of medieval as dirty and modernity as clean.

Medieval Muck

By 1300, London was a bustling metropolis, with 80,000 to 100,000 inhabitants living for the most part within the confines of the original Roman city walls (Barron 2000). This meant that there was indeed a high population density in London, and with it, problems associated with what to do about waste generated by the inhabitants. According [p227]to historian and popular book writer Ian Mortimer, who is interviewed in “Medieval London,” this created a crisis: “The history of cleanliness is a bit like a small child when they need to go to the loo. They don’t mention anything until they are absolutely desperate. And our records are the records of absolute desperation.” In this condescending statement, our medieval forefathers are accused of acting to clean up their city only under duress. The episode references the records of the assize of nuisance as evidence of these dire times, so it is worth taking a closer look at these records.

London had a multilayered system of courts for criminal and civil suits, with the Husting (the highest city court) and the wardmote (the local court for a ward, or city district) most

relevant in matters of city cleanliness. These courts heard cases related to the assize of nuisance, which gave freeholders the right to complain against neighbors who caused damage to their property (Chew and Kellaway 1973), meaning that cases such as blocking ditches, managing rainwater, obstructing roads, and building illegal privies came before them. The assize procedures and regulations for London were recorded in the *Liber Albus* (Riley 1859).

Unfortunately, the medieval wardmote records have been almost entirely lost. From a few presentment records from 1422 and 1423 copied into surviving rolls and some other cases that are referenced in Husting records, we know that the wardmotes heard local nuisance complaints, but we have no idea of the frequency or details of the complaints (Chew and Kellaway 1973). We do, however, have one related roll—Corporation of London Records Office, Misc. Roll DD—that covers citywide assize of nuisance cases for the years 1301–1356.

Looking at Misc. Roll DD (as calendared by Chew and Kellaway [1973]) for the period before the pestilence, there are 252 complaints recorded from February 1301 to December 1346. The majority of the cases deal with whether or not a person can build on a particular property, who should be responsible for repairing party walls, and how rainwater must be diverted away from structures. Among the 252 cases, there are 24 cases dealing with the placement of latrines. Almost all of them claim that the defendant has placed the latrine against a party wall, causing the wall to rot or leakage in the basement. The assize required that cesspits had to be two and a half feet from a neighbor's property if stone-lined and three and a half feet if not (Riley 1859: 324), so most of the cases are straightforward decisions that order the defendant to move the latrine away from the wall. There are a few more interesting cases in Misc. Roll DD, however. In one, the court orders the defendant to clean out an overflowing latrine (no. 165). In [p228]another, a woman named Alice Wade had fashioned her own “flush” toilet by connecting

the seat of her latrine to the rainwater gutter with a wooden pipe, which allowed her excrement to be evacuated through the gutter, causing a great stink (no. 214). Finally, in 1333, a neighbor was accused of removing a party wall and roof of a latrine so that the plaintiffs' backsides were exposed when using the private facilities. The court naturally ordered the defendant to replace the roof and enclosure to restore the dignity of the latrine users (no. 325). In addition to the latrine cases, there were three complaints against illegal waste disposal, one leaking tanning pit that was placed against a party wall, and one pigsty causing damage to a party wall.

Over the course of 45 years in a city bulging at the seams with nearly 100,000 inhabitants, the Husting heard 29 cases about waste disposal matters, mainly latrine placement issues. Medieval Londoners were not oblivious to the horrid stench of decomposing waste. Three of the assize cases mention that leaking latrine waste generates a stench (Chew and Kellaway 1973: nos. 214, 297, 364), so Londoners objected to foul odors and wanted to control them. Considering how Snow reacted to the reeking slop he stomped through in the "Medieval London" episode, we should not expect less disgust from our medieval counterparts. Disgust with waste, particularly bodily fluids and excrement, appears to have been the norm in medieval Europe (Bayless 2012). Although the existence of court cases has often been cited as evidence of the filthiness of medieval cities and the lack of sanitary facilities (e.g., Zupko and Lares 1996; Bayless 2012: 32–42), the number of surviving waste disposal complaints before the Black Death in London is actually quite small and most likely shows violations of sanitary standards were exceptions, not the rule.

Unfortunately, the surviving records do not necessarily capture all nuisance cases, since the wardmotes would have likely been the first recourse for stopping noisome neighbors. As McIntosh (1998) found for later medieval England, it appears that neighbors reported each other

when behavior was causing trouble in the community; therefore, cases could be expected in the wardmotes. While we cannot make any assumptions about what did or did not happen in the neighborhood-level wardmotes, the assize of nuisance cases on Misc. Roll DD show improper waste handling was not considered acceptable in pre-plague London.

Do the records available before the Black Death reached London indicate a “sense of desperation” about city sanitation? My answer would be that they do not in any obvious way. On average, one time [p229]a year, a Londoner reported a neighbor for a sanitation nuisance to the Husting, which doesn’t exactly appear extreme. The decisions indicate that these cases were resolved with relative ease by referring to the assize of nuisance standards; it does not appear that the defendants could argue that their practice was typical or acceptable. This would appear to indicate a general enforcement of established sanitary standards, even if there were transgressors.

In addition to legislative and judicial controls placed on individuals’ private actions, the City of London provided public services to maintain a clean city long before the plague. First, the records reveal that although the lack of “public” latrines was brought up as a dramatic example of the lack of medieval sanitation in *Filthy Cities*, the local government actually provided common latrine houses maintained by the city’s funds in at least 13 places in medieval London (Sabine 1934), although some of these might not have been present during the mid-fourteenth century. There were apparently several latrines on London Bridge, including a large privy house with at least two entrances that is attested in 1306 (Sabine 1934). In addition, many private houses had their own or shared latrines on their property. Both the public and private latrines were cleaned out, so human waste likely did not regularly enter the street.

Second, the city government monitored the condition of pavements through the election of four men in each ward to keep the pavements clean and in good repair and remove

obstructions like horse dung (Sharpe 1899: folio 88b), in support of the London city government's 1277 order that all lanes had to be kept free of dung and other filth (ibid.: folio 129b). These men repaired, lowered, or raised pavements as needed and charged the householder who had responsibility for that area for their efforts, as well as collected fines from anyone who had a dung heap in the street. More than just empty words by the government, men were indeed elected, as evidenced by a record of four men sworn in to survey the pavements and look for any filth in the ward of Langebourne in 1311 (Sharpe 1903: folio cxcli). The assize of nuisance cases cited several people for not properly maintaining the street pavement (Chew and Kellaway 1973: nos. 141, 142, 175, 176, 186, 249, and 369), meaning that residents were held responsible for pavement upkeep and the surveyors were doing their duty to check up on its condition. A historical and archeological study of later medieval towns found that street paving with stones and allocation of areas for maintenance to householders was common (Jørgensen 2008), so we shouldn't be surprised that stone paving and the upkeep of it [p230] was a regular feature of London's fourteenth-century streets. Major city streets would not have been the muddy thoroughfares depicted in "Medieval London."

Third, the City of London collected taxes earmarked for cleaning operations. In 1345, the mayor and aldermen received a complaint that the river Thames near the dock had become contaminated with dung and other filth, making it impossible for the water carters to obtain clean water for use by the city's inhabitants (Riley 1868: Letter-Book F, folio cii). To remedy the situation, the City of London authorized five men to collect a tax from every boat landing at the dock as well as every cart carrying goods to and from the dock to pay for their services for keeping the area free of filth. These five carters not only had the right, but also the duty, to keep

the dock clean: if it was found dirty again, the mayor and aldermen said the men would be imprisoned for negligence of duties.

Of course, even having all these private and public measures to control waste does not mean that all was clean and tidy in fourteenth-century London. The instances of transgressions of sanitary norms show that there were certainly some Londoners who were not model citizens. The king of England even ordered the city's mayors and sheriffs to repair and clean the streets and remove vagrant pigs in 1316, which must mean that there were some ongoing sanitation issues (Sharpe 1903: folio xcix b). At the same time, based on the existing evidence, we have to reject the idea that "cleanliness was a luxury few could afford" and the streets were only "a place to dump their waste" put forward by *Filthy Cities*. In line with the classic work of Thorndike (1928) and Sabine (1937), as well as more recent scholarship (Geltner 2012), I believe *Filthy Cities* has underestimated the medieval capacity to handle waste in urban spaces.

Modern Mentalities

If I am right in arguing that the surviving evidence does not paint a picture of muck-filled streets in medieval London, why does *Filthy Cities* show it this way? Why does it make the assumption that everyone disobeyed sanitation rules?

To begin with, this one BBC television show cannot be dismissed as an anomaly in its presentation of medieval muck. The medical historian Dobson wrote a children's book called *Medieval Muck* (1998) as part of her Smelly Old History scratch-and-sniff book series with [p231]Oxford University Press. In her presentation, "the dirty, narrow streets are littered with hogs, dogs, rubbish and rats" (Dobson 1998: 8). The cartoon drawing of the city includes a butcher dumping entrails into a street puddle, pigs attacking a little boy, two women emptying

buckets of urine (one into the street and one into the river), a man's shoes covered in mud, and another man walking on stilts through the muddy street. It's a mirror image of the *Filthy Cities* depiction. One of the main selling points of the Jorvik archeological exhibition in York, England, as a tourist attraction is its "authentic" smell (D'Arcens 2011), demonstrating how much medieval muck is integrated into the thinking about the medieval condition. The French historian of technology Guillerme believes that medieval prohibitions against human waste in the streets "were rarely respected by the masses, for whom excrement was part of everyday existence; neither its sight nor smell provoked disgust" (1988: 166). Legal historians Zupko and Laures (1996) likewise assume the sanitation laws of northern Italy indicate the bad sanitation conditions of the cities rather than being positive signs of urban cleanliness; they conclude that the efforts to clean up the urban environment were "incomplete, sporadic, and sometimes misguided," like throwing straws into the wind (ibid.: 111). Thinking of the Middle Ages as muck-filled is not unusual.

Progressive narratives of civility and science and technology stand behind these visions of the medieval. These ways of telling history as a linear progression with some bumps in the road that must be overcome has made the medieval into the modern counterpoint. All that is good about us must be bad, even monstrous, about them. Scanlan (2005: 163) has remarked that progressivism demands that "the past must be seen as garbage," as something without value. In this case, the past literally becomes filled with garbage; our contemporary rejection of filth has displaced it into the Middle Ages (Morrison 2008: 137–138). We think we are clean, thus they must have been dirty.

Norbert Elias's classic *The Civilizing Process* ([1939] 1978) exemplifies how a civilization narrative has been constructed. In the book's preface, Elias says that if a person from

a “present-day Western civilized society” was transported back in time to the Middle Ages, he would find it “uncivilized” (ibid.: xi). Elias argues for ever-escalating feelings of shame, delicacy, and fear that have resulted in Western society moving from childlike behaviors to adult ones (ibid.: xiii). Taking examples of bodily functions such as urination and defecation described in texts, Elias argues that restraints on instincts became more common at the turn of the sixteenth century (ibid.: 129–143). In [p232]another well-read tract on the development of sensitivity to odors, Corbin (1986) argues that elite sensibilities and the development of science to measure air components drove changes in attitudes toward foul smells; the populace was indifferent to smells, and only in the late eighteenth century was there a “reduced threshold of tolerance” for smell from decomposing corpses and cesspools (ibid.: 57–59). These authors want to draw a distinction between the modern notions of cleanliness and the medieval ones in order to reinforce the progressive narrative. We think of ourselves as “civilized”, therefore our ancestors who did not have the knowledge or understanding we have must have been “uncivilized”. Jenner (2000: 129) has criticized this “narrative of progress and deodorization,” arguing that the history of smell and cleanliness cannot be reduced to a grand evolutionary narrative. Yet, that is exactly what the standard works in the field have done.

Complementary progressive science and technology narratives are laid out alongside these civility trajectories. In these narratives, Romans are portrayed as engineering specialists whose legacy was quickly forgotten after the fall of the western empire. For example, in the second volume of the magisterial eight-volume *A History of Technology* (Singer et al. 1956), the authors state that early medieval towns witnessed a decline in public services: “hygienic conditions fell far below the standard of Imperial Rome,” because open gutters carried refuse and streets were “mud-pools from which the excreta of pigs and other animals leaked into wells and

private plots” (ibid.: 690). Whereas paved streets were “common in Rome,” medieval towns had “few such amenities as paving and lighting” (ibid.: 530–531). This narrative praises the Romans for their water-flushed public latrines and street lighting while deriding the medieval inhabitants for ignoring refuse disposal laws and allowing the streets to fall into disrepair. Medieval times were dark times—a vision picked up by the cinematography of *Filthy Cities* in the “Medieval London” episode, which consistently paints the medieval segments with dark, cloudy skies and a gray-and-brown palette in contrast to the bright whites of modern London.

Scientific “progress” has often guided the scholarly construction of sanitation periodization. Melosi (2000), for example, has divided his history of American urban sanitary infrastructure into three phases based on dominant scientific theories: miasmas as disease agents, bacterial transmission of disease, and ecological thinking. While these are not incorrect labels for the periods, their use emphasizes development along a progressive trajectory; that is, as time has gone on, we have gained more and more knowledge, coming closer to the truth. [p233]In a similar vein, in *Filthy Cities*, Dan Snow attributes the sanitary deficiencies of medieval times in part to a “lack of understanding of hygiene and medicine.” This follows a typical characterization of medieval people as children who have not yet learned what we modern people who act as adults have (Morrison 2008: 136).

It is extremely hard to break free from the dominant progressive story lines. Even when trying to develop a theory of the cultural construction of smell, Classen et al. (1994) revert to the standard Western chronology: perfumed Romans, filthy medieval times, and the olfactory revolution and sanitary reform of the late nineteenth century. Accordingly, in the Middle Ages, “most streets were made of dirt which would mingle with waste products to produce a sticky and

malodorous muck” (ibid.: 55). It is easy for *Filthy Cities* to make medieval London into a dark and smelly city within this mental structure.

Future Filth

But, one might argue, what does it hurt if both popular culture and scholarship portray the Middle Ages as a filthy time? Does it matter if medieval cities are relegated to “smelly old history” and Monty Python jests that only a king “hasn’t got shit all over him” in the Middle Ages (*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones, 1975)?

I would argue that such presentations of the medieval create a dangerous dichotomy: the medieval city as dirty in contrast to the modern as clean. Sullivan (2012) has previously argued that modernity shows a “despised connectedness” to dirt, constructing a dichotomy between pure, clean nature and the dirty human sphere. In this case, we see that dirt in the human sphere can also have a time-bound construction, with premodernity as filthy and modernity as pure. “We have come to view the Middle Ages as a repository of filth and waste, a time when waste was domesticated and even embraced; this view of the Middle Ages allows us to construct ourselves as clean and modern, unlike those filthy childlike medievals” (Morrison 2008: 137–138). The medieval filthy city is envisioned as a dystopian society, one in which everything has gone wrong: the people are reckless, the government powerless, and the streets filled with muck. Directly dealing with waste is presupposed to be unsanitary because medieval cities lacked the technological conveniences and scientific knowledge of today. Simpler times are dirtier times.

[p234]Modernity is thus imagined as a utopia in which we are distanced from waste and the streets are clean. In *Filthy Cities*, Snow presents modern London as this utopia: a “well-oiled machine,” “a clean and modern city” where “we have worked out sophisticated ways of dealing

with” our waste, from wastewater treatment plants to mechanical garbage trucks. The show is right that in today’s world, we are distanced from our waste, which is handled by specialists and technology. This is the organizational paradigm of modern waste management (Rogers 2005; Scanlan 2005: 157, 163). We only see our waste as far as the toilet or the trash can—from there, it disappears and becomes someone else’s problem. Individuals, particularly urbanites, assume that the waste that disappears from their doorstep has vanished as a concern (Nagle 2013). As Sullivan (2012: 526) observed, modernity’s antidirt campaigns allow for concealment of disposal practices “as if waste and dirt blissfully disappeared from the earth in a wink of an eye.” The problem with making our modern system appear as a utopia is that it obscures our own contemporary and global environmental dilemmas of dealing with waste.

Modern waste management methods in our globalized, technologically dependent world are in reality fraught with difficulties. How to deal with some of the hazardous wastes generated by modern practices continue to baffle us. We currently concentrate and store nuclear waste with the intent of burying it deep inside the earth because we can’t make it less radioactive; it will be with us forever (Melfort 2003). E-waste from our obsolete computers, iPods, and televisions is shipped to developing countries for low-cost laborers to manually recover the precious metals in the components (Grossman 2006). Waste generated in one part of the world directly affects the environmental conditions and human health in other parts as it moves globally, yet these environmental justice issues are rarely considered when a consumer throws an electronic component away.

In our modern waste management paradigm, technological conveniences require the implementation of more technologies to solve the secondary problems that come along with the conveniences. The introduction of running water into homes at the beginning of the nineteenth

century resulted in dramatic increases in water consumption and enabled the installation of water closets, which in turn led to overflowing cesspits (Tarr 1996). In response, cities began construction of sewage systems to handle this greatly increased flow in the later nineteenth century, but treatment of that raw sewage did not begin until the twentieth century. Modern sewage treatment plants still have [p235]permit-level “exceedance” days in which waste that is not completely treated is discharged because of various system failures.

We tend to think that more and better technology is the only way to approach waste—thus, since medieval waste management was in contrast primitive, it must have been ineffective. On the contrary, some scholars working with sanitation in developing countries have argued that Western water-based sewage systems are not necessarily the best solution to waste management (e.g., Black and Fawcett 2008). More technologically simple systems that can be managed at the local level without technical expertise may be a better way to make lasting sanitary improvement. Perhaps the communal nature of medieval sanitation (Jørgensen 2008) in conjunction with city authority (Jørgensen 2010) might not have been as ineffective as we have imagined it, and might provide some guidance for how local sanitation systems in the urbanizing developing world could function.

The fundamental difference between modern urban waste management and the medieval is that waste practices are invisible to us now—individuals do not take direct responsibility for what happens to their waste. We have erected physical and mental barriers that separate us from our garbage. Medieval people struggled with designing appropriate waste handling procedures, just as modern societies do, but perhaps they were even better at it since they could see the immediate result of their choices. While medieval London was not as shiny and clean on the surface as the modern one, the waste handling systems were more visible, more transparent.

Everybody knew what happened to waste. Certainly there were transgressions of waste disposal norms in the Middle Ages, but just as we have people who litter or throw a sack of garbage on a countryside lane today, those were the exception, not the rule. Medieval city dwellers did not trample through ankle-deep refuse in the street every day—they would have found that as loathsome a prospect as Snow did in *Filthy Cities*.

How we write about, visualize, and consume medieval muck matters because it can help us question the underlying assumptions of our modern waste practices. If we continue to see the medieval as the antithesis of a utopian modern society, the faults of modernity will be obscured while the vision of medieval life is distorted. If we think of contact with waste in the past as filthy, we lose the opportunity to reflect on what it means that we have increasingly separated ourselves from it (Morrison 2008: 156–157). Sullivan (2012: 529) advocates a “dirt theory” that combines “dirt’s gritty physicality with its elemental potential to inspire reverence and, hopefully, responsible care.” To [p236]embrace dirt theory means to critically examine our modern relationship with dirt. Progressive civility and technology narratives hide a real historical change—a distancing of us from our waste—which may not be that positive after all because it discourages critical reflection and awareness of our waste management choices. Modern society still has many waste management dilemmas, and if we are unwilling to acknowledge them because we cannot stand to think about filth, we cannot move forward. We must recognize that muck has been with us in the past, is here in the present, and will be with us in the future.

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