Plague workers and sorcerers in the Duchy of Brabant and the County of Flanders (1347-1550)

Reinhardt, Renzo

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Renzo Silvino Reinhardt – s2002027
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r.s.reinhardt@student.leidenuniv.nl

Contents

Introduction

Since the major plague outbreak in 1347, also known as the Black Death, Europe was afflicted by the plague bacterium Yersinia pestis many times.[1] One of the geographical areas that had to endure these outbreaks was the Low Countries, meaning contemporary Belgium and The Netherlands.[2] The southern territories, the County of Vlaanderen and the Duchy of Brabant, had a high level of urbanization with large cities such as Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges, Brussels and Den Bosch at the time. During times of plague the need for helping hands in cities and towns was pressing, especially of carers, cleaners and corpse bearers. These were dangerous professions, because plague workers were exposed to the houses and people sick from the plague. To meet this demand *schrobbers, reeuwers* and *cellebroeders,* as they were called in the Low Countries, often poor workers, were hired to clean houses, take care of the sick and bury the corpses of plague victims.[3] However, *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* had to endure not only dangerous work but were also exposed to conspiracy theories and very strict rules and regulations. In other words, there was a high demand for their work but the *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* also faced stigmatization. *Cellebroeders* on the other hand, also took care of burials but they were not objected to such levels of stigmatization and prosecution. In the ordinances most *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* are characterized as migrants, either from villages close by or from cities further away from the site of work. This raises the question why *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* at times were stigmatized, despite their appointment as plague workers and why this did not apply to the *cellebroeders* in the Duchy of Brabant and the County of Flanders in the period from 1347 to 1550.

The *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* had to deal with conspiracy theories on spreading the plague on purpose. Conspiracy theories are an attempt to describe certain, mostly tragic, events. There is a belief that these events happened due to the influence of secret groups or organizations. This was also the case during times of plague. In the fifteenth century the spread of plague was connected to sorcery and

[1] John Aberth, *The Black Death 1348 - 1350: A Brief History with Documents: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St.Martin's, 2005).
[2] Joris Roosen and Daniel Curtis, 'The 'light touch' of the Black Death in the Southern Netherlands: an urban trick?', *The Economic History Review* Vol.72:1 (2019), 32–56 at 50-52.
[3] Janna Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment in the Late Medieval Low Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 246.

supranatural activity, but during the beginning of the sixteenth century these conspiracy theories were related to financial motives, to gain more work and thus more money. Conspiracy theories are often seen in times of widespread anxiety and uncertainty as an attempt to explain harmful or tragic events.[4] This research is in line with the research of Francois Soyer who argues that these theories existed earlier throughout Europe.[5] In the Low Countries during times of plague the conspiracy theories about the *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* meant they were stigmatized as untrustworthy. To this date little has been written about plague conspiracy theories in the Low Countries.

Historian William Naphy researched the plague-spreading conspiracies in the Western Alps during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[6] Cleaners and other lower classes of plague workers such as corpse bearers and caretakers were accused of spreading the plague via wells and of smearing a poisonous substance, grease, on the door knobs of houses of the wealthy. In the first round of prosecutions against plague workers because of conspiracy theories in 1521 the activities of the plague spreaders were not linked to sorcery nor diabolic motives, but rather to financial motives from plague workers.[7] During the second wave of prosecutions in 1571 the connection with sorcery and a pact with the devil was often made.[8] Naphy connects the conspiracy theories with the existing rumors about witches and Jews, who were also accused of spreading the plague via poisoned wells and using potions to infect others.[9] Naphy's work explains the relation between the plague, plague spreading and sorcery in the Western Alps and shows the prosecution of the lower order of plague workers.

Zlata Blažina-Tomić and Vesna Blažina researched the outbreaks of the plague in Dubrovnik from the fourteenth century to the sixteenth century and how the city council dealt with the plague. They argue that in Dubrovnik plague workers, such as cleaners and corpse bearers, were doing this job as plague survivors.[10] In Dubrovnik too, these plague workers had to deal with stigmatization and

[4] Francois Soyer, *Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories in the Early Modern Iberian World* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 7-8.
[5] Ibid., 8.
[6] William G. Naphy, *Plagues, Poisons, and Potions: Plague-spreading Conspiracies in the Western Alps, C. 1530-1640* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.
[7] Ibid., 9-43.
[8] Ibid., 128-157.
[9] Ibid., 158-196.
[10] Zlata Blažina-Tomić and Vesna Blažina, *Expelling the Plague: the Health Office and the Implementation of Quarantine in Dubrovnik, 1377-1533* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 185.

conspiracy theories. According to Blažina-Tomić and Blažina the cleaners and corpse bearers were distrusted because they were more or less protected against the plague, leading to envy.[11] The city council framed them as immoral, criminal and drunks who deliberately spread the plague.[12]

Samuel Cohn Jr., on the other hand, researched plague spreaders in Italy and France from the first outbreak of the plague onwards. He argues that accusations of the spreading of plague did not exist until the 1530s and that these accusations were short lived. He also states that the poor, religious minorities, and the lowest orders of plague workers were never the principal victims.[13] He thus challenged Naphy's argument who had linked the witch hunting and the persecution of Jews with the accusations against cleaners and corpse bearers. Yet Naphy, Blažina-Tomić and Blažina, and Cohn Jr. all researched geographical areas other than Flanders and Brabant. The latter is the focus of this research and can thus take position in the debate above. Janna Coomans adds in her research on *Community, Urban Health and Environment in the Late Medieval Low Countries* that much is unknow about the various groups of healthcare workers.[14] More research about these groups is needed. Coomans also adds that the measures taken against the plague were not completely new but rather the reinforcement of existing policies to improve the health of the communities inside the cities.[15]

J. Huyghebaert researches in his article from 1967 the position of *reeuwers* in the Low Countries in the year 1468.[16] *Reeuwers* was the name given to a group of plague workers who cleaned houses and mostly carried the corpses of the plague victims. Based on chronicles about Bruges and Ten Duinen he observes a clear connection between the witch hunt of the Waldensians in 1460 in Arras, which is called the *Vauderie* of Arras and the stigmatization of *reeuwers* who were accused of willingly spreading the plague. During the *Vauderie* of Arras many Waldensians, both male and female, were accused of witchery and after conviction were burned at the stake.[17] The Waldensians were a religious

[11] Blažina-Tomić and Blažina, *Expelling the Plague: the Health Office and the Implementation of Quarantine in Dubrovnik*, 188.
[12] Ibid., 187.
[13] Samuel Kline Cohn, *Epidemics: Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 160.
[14] Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment in the Late Medieval Low Countries*, 251.
[15] Ibid., 251.
[16] J. Huyghebaert, 'Reeuwers in Vlaanderen in 1468', *Biekorf* 68 (1967), 97-104.
[17] Ibid., 99-100.

group that allegedly followed the beliefs of Peter Waldes (†1218), who lived in poverty and sobriety. The term Waldensian was mostly used by the Church and was a synonym for sorcerer or sorcery. The group was seen as heretics in the eyes of the Church.[18] The Waldensians preferred to call themselves the poor of Lyon. The main connection between these two events, according to Huyghebaert, is the use of the term *wonderlijke saken* that both the witches and the plague spreaders were said to use.[19] Huyghebaert also points towards Germany and German sources that connect the conviction of witches to *reeuwers*.[20] He also states that the towns where *reeuwers* were convicted and burned, were exactly the places where no Jews lived, such as Leipzig, Magdeburg, Brieg and Frankenstein.[21] He concludes with the statement that the case of 1468 was not a coincidence nor a unicum.

Not only the literature on the plague is important for this thesis but also the literature and discussions on servants in the medieval period is relevant. For unmarried people from the lower classes working as a servant was a common practice.[22] They received wages but most of the time also board and lodging.[23] Women were a very important group of healthcare workers in the this period.[24] On the other hand the women that worked in health care were often portrayed as untrained and uneducated.[25] Female healthcare workers dealt with stigmatization and prejudice. Religious movements and orders also took part in working as servants and healthcare workers. This was also the case with the *cellebroeders* who were dedicated to the seven works of mercy according to the gospel of Matthew.[26] It is unclear when and where exactly the *cellebroeders* originated.[27] The movement probably started in the German Rhineland and spread from this region towards the Low Countries; the plague worked as a catalysator and caused the movement to organize themselves.[28] They were mostly focused on the

[18] Gabriel Audisio and Claire Davinson, *The Waldensian dissent: persecution and survival, c. 1170-c. 1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 73-74.
[19] *Wonderlijke saken* is how Anthonis de Roovere portrays either the reeuwers as the sorcerers and this can be translated as strange/miraculous things.
[20] Huyghebaert, 'Reeuwers in Vlaanderen', 103.
[21] Ibid., 103.
[22] J. Whittle, *Servants in Rural Europe: 1400-1900* (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), 2.
[23] Ibid., 1.
[24] Annemarie Kinzelbach, 'Women and healthcare in early modern German towns', *Renaissance Studies* Vol. 28:4 (2014), 619-638.
[25] Ibid., 619.
[26] Matthew 25: 31-46.
[27] Saskia M.C. Leupen, 'De kloosters van de cellebroeders en -zusters in het graafschap Holland en Zeeland tot aan de Reformatie', *Historisch Tijdschrift Holland*, 30:2 (1998), 63-93.
[28] Ibid., 65-66.

carrying and burying of corpses, both people who died during times of plague as well as in more peaceful periods.[29] Most cities in Brabant and Flanders had *cellebroeders* living in their towns. They were often appointed by the city council to bury and clean the corpses and the *cellebroeders* received financial compensation for these tasks. They often had the sole right of completing these tasks, certainly from the late fifteenth century. During times of plague more people died than in times without outbreaks. The *cellebroeders* also created plague hospitals in some towns, to take care of the plague sick.[30] In the case of the plague, the saying 'one man's loss, is another man's gain' can be applicable.[31] Plague workers were paid a certain amount per plague patient. Thus the cleaners, but also the corpse bearers, plague doctors and other health officials earned their wages because of the plague.[32] There are even confessions in the primary sources of *schrobbers* claiming to create more employment for themselves.[33] These and other events that are alike will be researched in this thesis.

Before turning to the sources and structure of this thesis, it is necessary to briefly discuss what exactly the plague was and what was its impact of the plague in Flanders and Brabant. The plague was an endemic disease caused by a bacterium, which meant that it recurred around every 15 years. The historiography on the plague in the Low Countries until recently mostly focused on the plague from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and has for a long time disregarded the earlier period. Some historians even claimed that the plague did not even cause many mortalities in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[34] In recent years historians such as Joris Roosen and Daniel Curtis have challenged this view and argued that the plague did impact the Low Countries from 1347 onwards.[35] Janna Coomans also contributes to the research on the impact of the plague in the Low Countries, especially focusing on the role of plague policies.[36] Coomans points out that the plague measures were not just a

[29] Leupen, 'De kloosters van de cellebroeders en -zusters in het graafschap Holland en Zeeland tot aan de Reformatie', 78-81.
[30] Ibid., 80-81.
[31] L.F.W. Adriaenssen, 'Verdienen aan de Gave Gods', *De Brabantse Leeuw*, 47 (1998), 32-37.
[32] Jane L. Stevens Crawshaw, *Plague Hospitals: Public health for the city in Early Modern Venice* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2012), 110-115.
[33] Adriaenssen, 'Verdienen aan de Gave Gods', A case in Hilvarenbeek/Den Bosch in the year 1521 is mentioned in the research of Adriaenssen, where a *schrobber* called Niclas Maess confessed to spreading the plague on purpose; he was burned at the stake during Pentecost in 1521.
[34] Roosen & Curtis, 'The 'light touch' of the Black Death', 32-33.
[35] Ibid., 32-56.
[36] Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment in the Late Medieval Low Countries*, 220-223.

vehicle to centralize urban governing powers but rather a way to preserve order during times of increased mortality.[37] Towns that dealt with the plague tried to fight the outbreaks of the plague with rules and regulations, which were often issued in ordinances. In Italy, there were professional health boards which were appointed by the city council. The health boards included multiple health officials that made the rules and regulations. The health boards appointed the health care professionals that took care of the plague houses, worked as plague doctors, nurses, cleaners and corpse bearers. In the Low Countries health boards did not exist before the seventeenth century, yet plague doctors were active in plague houses. Plague ordinances and plague treatises were produced, nurses, cleaners and corpse bearers worked with the plague sick. There were also monastic orders that played a part as health officials.[38]

To understand the stigmatization of *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* and the plague in general, it is necessary to picture the ideas that existed in the medieval period on how the plague spread and how contagion worked. There were three prominent ideas about contagion and plague from the first outbreaks in 1347 onwards. Firstly the idea that the plague was a punishment from God, secondly the idea of the miasma and finally contagion theory.[39] Rules and regulations were based on these ideas, which had a large effect on medieval society. Miasma and contagion theories existed alongside each other. Miasma was the idea that the plague was spread via inhalation of (corrupted) air but also from surfaces that had been touched by the sick. Contagion theories were based on the idea the plague spread by living creatures, in this case the individual is the agent of transmission.[40] In miasma theory, the main source of plague was the result of an atmospheric infection because of poisonous vapors, corrupted air that came from putrid waters or that was released from decomposing corpses.[41] A lot of different symptoms were connected to the plague, from headaches to swelling and tumors, but the diagnosis of plague was not easy to make.[42] One way to spread the plague according to some primary sources was

[37] Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment in the Late Medieval Low Countries*, 223.
[38] Ibid., 246-247.
[39] Wannes Dupont, "'Sie eens 't verzwakte volk': de bestrijding van pest in Antwerpen tijdens de vijftiende en de zestiende eeuw", *Stadsgeschiedenis* 2 (2007), 85-104 at 88.
[40] C.M. Ferreira, 'Contagions: Domains, Challenges and Health Devices', *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 9:4 (2020), 1-14 at 4.
[41] Ibid., 4.
[42] Stevens Crawshaw, *Plague hospitals*, 29-32.

also with mal intent. Boiled corpses of plague patients, herbs and sorcery were used to create poisoned potions to make people sick.[43] Sorcery is often placed in a later time period, but in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, accusations of sorcery, especially in relation to the plague or climate change were made.[44]

Why were *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* at times stigmatized, despite their appointment as plague workers and why this did not apply to the *cellebroeders* in the Duchy of Brabant and the County of Flanders in the period from 1347 to 1550? How can we explain the ambiguous attitude towards *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* compared to the *cellebroeders*? Is this connected to their social and economic background? These questions can give a new perspective in time and geographic area on the debate surrounding the plague workers and their role. The first chapter addresses different health care workers during times of plague working in the Low Countries. It researches the rules and regulations dealing with them that were set out by different city councils in the Low Countries and puts them in a broader European context. The second chapter researches the stigmatization and conspiracy theories concerning *reeuwers* in Bruges in 1468. The *reeuwers* were suspected of using sorcery and were connected to the Waldensians from Arras. What did stigmatization entail and where did it lead to? The third chapter is about the stigmatization of the *schrobbers* in Den Bosch and Antwerp in the sixteenth century. It researches the differences between the accusations between the *reeuwers* and *schrobbers*. It will also connect the social- and economic background to the suspicions of purposely spreading the plague.

To answer these questions, this research will use a variety of primary sources: city ordinances of Antwerp, Breda, Den Bosch and Ghent, reeve's accounts from the Duchy of Brabant, chronicles of Anthonis de Roovere (†1482), Adriaan de But (†1488) as well as others and plague tracts published in the Low Countries. To start with the city ordinances, these were a source genre that was seen throughout the whole of Europe, also in the Duchy of Brabant and the County of Flanders. Most cities and villages had ordinances, a set of rules and regulations, especially when there were outbreaks of the plague in a certain town. These official plague documents often had the same kind of structure and were frequently

[43] Huyghebaert, 'Reeuwers in Vlaanderen', 99
[44] Wolfgang Behringer, 'Detecting the ultimate conspiracy, or how Waldensians became witches', in Barry Coward and Julian Swan, *Conspiracies and conspiracy theory in Early Modern Europe* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 13-34 at 25-26.

based on earlier ordinances. The rules and regulations against spreading the plague were presented to the people in the towns and villages. The ordinances of the city of Antwerp from 1454 till 1793 were printed in two books by A.F.C. Van Schevensteen in 1932.[45] The accounts of the reeve consisted of the revenues and expenses of the reeve of a certain city or province. The allegations against *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* are to be found in the accounts of the reeve of the Duchy of Brabant, the so called *Schoutsrekeningen*.[46] The crimes that were tried in court were recorded in these accounts. These can be either more serious crimes but also smaller offenses. They were written down by the reeve and often copied and kept in different towns within the area the reeve was active. The bills of the bailiff used in this research are both in Brussels in original form and in Den Bosch as microfiches; both types are used in this research. The bills of the bailiff of Den Bosch researched during this research are in the period from January 1404 to December 1529, with the most information coming from the bill from March 1496 to December 1529. There was a difference between the 'high' reeve and the 'low' reeve. They had different tasks, the high reeve dealt with more serious cases such as murder cases while the low reeve had the smaller cases.[47] Chronicles were documents in which for the writer important things that happened in day to day life were accounted for. The primary sources that I have selected and researched are all within the time period between 1347 and 1555. I have selected these sources because of the time period in which they were produced and the geographical region that they were published. Both of the chronicles used in this research are produced around the period they describe. The difference between both is that the chronicle from De But was made by a Cistercian monk while the chronicle of Anthonis de Roovere was made by a member of the Chamber of Rhetoric of Bruges. The geographical area used for this research is chosen because of the sources and the gap in the historiography on this subject and the Duchy of Brabant and the County of Flanders. Because of the high grade of urbanization and the impact of the plague in this area and the presence of both *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* as well as *cellebroeders*, the Duchy of Brabant and the County of Flanders are suitable for this research. The

[45] A.F.C. Van Schevensteen, *Documents pour servir à l'étude des maladies pestilentielles dans le marquisat d'Anvers jusqu'à la chute de l'Ancien Régime*, Vol. 1 & 2 (Brussels : Maurice Lamertin, 1932).
[46] Algemeen Rijksarchief Brussel, *Rekenkamer*, *Rekeningen van de hoogschout van stad en Meijerij van 's-Hertogenbosch*, maart 1496 - december 1529, inv. 12996.
[47] Translated in *Middelnederlands*, these functions are respectively called the *Hoogschout* and *Laagschout*.

sources are official documents and describe events that are relevant to answer my research question. After critically researching the sources, they can supply information on the events that happened during the times of plague and the possible measures against plague workers. In the case of the chronicles of Anthonis de Roovere and Adriaan de But, they can also provide notions of contemporaries.[48]

[48] Algemeen Rijksarchief Brussel, Rekenkamer, Rekeningen van hoogschout van stad en Meierij van 's-Hertogenbosch, maart 1496-december 1529, inventarisnummer 12996. Anthonis de Roovere, *Excellente Cronike* (1467-1482), via https://sharedcanvas.be/IIIF/viewer/mirador/B_OB_MS437
Adriaan de But, *Cronica abbatum monasterii de Dunis* (Vertaald uit het Latijn in het Frans, 1839), via https://books.google.nl/books/about/Cronica_abbatum_monasterii_de_Dunis.html?hl=nl&id=a5BRAAAAcAAJ&redir_esc=y H. van Bavel, A.C.M. Kappelhof, G.M. van der Velden, G. Verbeek (eds.), *Die chronijcke der Stadt ende Meijerije van 's-Hertogenbosch* (1140-1699), Stadsarchief Den Bosch (2001). Meierijse Schoutsrekeningen gedigitaliseerd door Henk Beijers http://www.henkbeijersarchiefcollectie.nl/historisch_onderzoek/schoutsrekeningen.htm
Henric Nollens, Sterf Rekening 1511 (Turnhout). Ordonnantie uitgevaardigd door het bestuur van de stad Breda tegen de verspreiding van de pest, 1535 (GAB, H 6, Register van concepten van ordonnantie, fol. 130-134).

Chapter I: Plague workers, ordinances and rules

This chapter undertakes an examination of various categories of plague workers, such as carers and cleaners, who were active within the Low Countries during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Furthermore, I investigate the strategies adopted by cities in response to plague outbreaks employing these plague workers and the regulatory frameworks that were instituted during these periods. During times of plague, European cities that were afflicted implemented diverse measures to mitigate transmission of the plague. In the Low Countries, municipal authorities orchestrated religious processions in an effort to combat the plague, maintained communication with neighboring municipalities and the cities they had some sort of economical connection with. Concurrently, they engaged healthcare professionals and promulgated municipal ordinances which regulated the restriction of movement of people, goods and animals, predicated upon the compendium of plague tracts extant and circulated throughout Europe.[49]

In the Italian Peninsula, and within regions that subscribed to city-states based on the Italian prototype (such as Dubrovnik and Geneva), professional health boards featuring trained healthcare practitioners came to the fore during the fifteenth century.[50] This catalyzed the institutionalization of healthcare practices within these urban centers, with the health board assuming paramount importance especially during episodes of plague. In the Low Countries, conversely, the establishment of such health boards did not materialize; medical practitioners, primarily doctors, were entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of the plague policies.[51] The reeve and *burgemeesters* wielded significant authority in this context. Nonetheless, the absence of formal health boards did not preclude medical professionalization and institutionalization within the Low Countries. Analogous to the Italian city-states, the Low Countries engaged individuals in roles such as plague doctors, plague masters, attendants, and corpse bearers, creating a complex landscape where plague workers often found themselves navigating conflicting interests in their pursuit of livelihood. It is also noteworthy that there

[49] Lori Jones, *Patterns of Plague: Changing Ideas about Plague in England and France, 1348-1750* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022).
[50] Blažina-Tomić and Blažina, *Expelling the Plague*, 105-106.
[51] Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment in the Late Medieval Low Countries*, 222-223.

are resemblances between local rules and ordinances. It seemed that cities in the Low Countries had exchanged plague policies with each other.[52] It also seems to have been the case that most of the measures taken by city councils against the plague were sanitary measures that already existed.[53]

This chapter endeavors to delineate the identities of specific groups of healthcare workers active during plague periods within the Low Countries, along with an exploration of their organizational structures and supervisory mechanisms. A facet of this exploration pertains to the burgeoning institutionalization of specific healthcare worker cadres, alongside the nature and extent of their financial remuneration, which, as we shall see exhibited notable disparities across these groups. The groups that will be studied are the *reeuwers* and *schrobbers* who took care of the sick, carried the corpses and cleaned the houses as well as the religious orders with similar tasks such as the *cellebroeders*.

The professionalization of healthcare in the Low Countries

Healthcare professionalization in the Low Countries began to take shape in the second half of the fifteenth century, but efforts to play a role in healthcare by the cities date back to the thirteenth century, long before the plague outbreaks. Cities in the Low Countries started regulating and contracting healthcare professionals such as surgeon-barbers and other trained medical specialists during this period. They also sought to professionalize other healthcare roles, including midwives.[54] Healthcare professions that were predominantly carried out by women or individuals from lower social classes were also subjected to regulation. The Black Death and the subsequent plague outbreaks further influenced the development of healthcare in these cities. It created a whole new segment in the medical market with both new health care workers as well as new medicines.[55] However, the cities could not regulate every aspect of healthcare, and some professions remained informal. Healthcare administered by monastic orders became institutionalized around the mid-sixteenth century, with some orders

[52] Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment*, 224.
[53] Ibid., 226.
[54] Myriam Greilsammer, 'The midwife, the priest and the physician: the subjugation of midwives in the Low Countries at the end of the Middle Ages', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 21:2 (1991), 285-327.
[55] Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment*, 218.

demonstrating a high degree of professionalism, as seen in the hospitals of the *cellebroeders* and *zwarte zusters* (black sisters).[56] Primary sources such as ordinances, legal documents and plague tracts provide valuable information about how healthcare was regulated during both plague and non-plague periods.

Women played a crucial role in healthcare during the medieval and early modern periods.[57] However, despite their significance, these female healthcare workers were often depicted as untrained and uneducated.[58] Furthermore, they were sometimes targeted as sorcerers, a perception that gained traction due to the opposition of the clerical elite.[59] Midwives, in particular, were a group on occasion labeled as potential sorcerers and portrayed as dangerous.[60] Midwives typically came from lower social backgrounds but achieved status and received wages for their work.[61] The institutionalization of midwifery began to take shape toward the end of the fifteenth century. City councils would hire midwives, who were required to swear an oath to practice their profession.[62] Those who attempted to work as midwives without taking the oath faced punishment. Midwives were also enlisted for their services during plague outbreaks and were compensated with salaries and additional incentives for their work with plague patients.[63] Their position was more centralized and institutionalized by city councils compared to roles like *schrobbers* and *reeuwers*.

While the profession of midwifery was mostly dominated by women, *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* were both male and female workers. The institutionalization of midwifery was partly attributed to the endorsement of physicians and the Church, both of whom advocated that only women had the skills to assist other women during childbirth.[64] This stands in contrast to the situations of *schrobbers* and *reeuwers*, who did not receive the same level of support from physicians and the Church. It is to these workers that I will now turn my attention.

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[56] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 47. And Coomans, Community, Urban Health and Environment, 246.
[57] Annemarie Kinzelbach, 'Women and healthcare in early modern German towns', *Renaissance Studies* Vol. 28:4 (2014), 619-638.
[58] Ibid., 619.
[59] William L. Minkowsli, 'Women Healers of the Middle Ages: Selected Aspects of Their History', *American Journal of Public Health* Vol.82:2 (1992), 288-295 at 288-289.
[60] Greilsammer, 'The midwife', 285.
[61] Minkowsli, 'Women healers of the Middle Ages', 292.
[62] Greilsammer, 'The midwife', 298-299.
[63] Ibid., 302.
[64] Ibid., 292.

The *reeuwers*

During periods afflicted by plague a diverse array of individuals assumed roles as healthcare professionals, each specializing in distinct facets of healthcare. The term *reeuwer* was prevalent in the Low Countries from the outbreaks of the plague onwards and encompassed the roles of corpse cleaner, corpse bearer, and gravedigger combined. Additionally, the term was also employed as a verb, *reeuwen*, signifying the literal act of cleaning and exhuming corpses. In accordance with the Middelnederlands dictionary, the term extended to both male and female corpse bearers.[65] The *reeuwers* were primarily responsible for cleansing the bodies of the deceased, particularly when the cause of death was a contagious disease.[66] The word *reeuwer* carried a negative connotation and was even utilized as a derogatory epithet for individuals deemed untrustworthy.[67] Allegations frequently arose, accusing *reeuwers* of employing noxious substances to deliberately exterminate entire families for personal gain. It is noteworthy that this term was confined to the regions of West-Flanders and Brabant and appears to have dwindled from primary sources by the sixteenth century. For instance when researching the *Schoutsrekeningen* or ordinances of Antwerp, the term *reeuwer* is not used in the sixteenth century. It is not clear why it disappeared.

Despite the waning presence of the term *reeuwer* in primary sources, the profession endured. For the exigency of cleansing and interring corpses remained, whether the deceased succumbed to the plague or other causes. Regrettably, the *reeuwers* have garnered scant scholarly attention, encompassing both their profession and the individuals themselves. Analogous to the *schrobbers* and other occupational groups, the *reeuwers* sustained their livelihoods during plague outbreaks or by tending to patients afflicted with other contagious maladies such as leprosy. The composition of the *reeuwer* cohort potentially encompassed survivors of the plague, although it is conceivable that this profession attracted individuals who were marginalized within the societal fabric, both socially and economically.[68] During the sixteenth century in the city of Ghent, *reeuwers* became subject to municipal regulation,

[65] Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek, *reeuwer,* visited on 23 May 2023 via https://gtb.ivdnt.org/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=MNW&id=45678
[66] Ibidem.
[67] Ibidem.
[68] Luc Devriese, 'Van lollaarden tot alexianen,van matevrouwen tot zwarte zusters', *Ghendtsche Tydinghen* Vol. 48:6 (2019), 346-357 at 349.

necessitating them to brandish a white and red staff and don a red fabric as an accessory to their attire.[69] Their duties in the ordinance of Ghent consisted of the custodianship of deceased individuals, and handling the tasks of cleansing and burial.

In cities beyond the purview of the Low Countries, the roles of corpse bearers and gravediggers also found existence. In Dubrovnik, a substantial portion of individuals engaged in these vocations were survivors of prior plague outbreaks.[70] These workers were predominantly male, although during periods of male scarcity, women were also enlisted to perform the roles of gravediggers and corpse bearers.[71] Conversely, in the Low Countries, the *reeuwers* profession encompassed both sexes. This duality is reflected in the ordinances, which encompassed both the male variant *reeuwer* and the female variants *reeuwighe* or *reeuwsterigen*.[72] This distinction can probably be attributed to the specific task of the *reeuwers*, which entailed the cleansing of deceased bodies. For moral reasons, it was considered inappropriate for male *reeuwers* to cleanse the bodies of females, and vice versa.

The *reeuwers*, akin to the gravediggers and corpse bearers in Dubrovnik, constituted an integral segment of the lower echelons within the hierarchy of plague workers. This group predominantly comprised individuals occupying a lowly social and economic stratum, who frequently grappled with prevalent prejudices. Another contingent of plague workers, akin in social standing and classifiable as lower-tier, were the *schrobbers*.

The *schrobbers*

The term *schrobber* and its female counterpart *schrobster* denoted various workers whose activities were intertwined with the management of the plague. This terminology is derived from the Dutch verb *schrobben*, which translates to “to scrub" in English. One of the cities where *schrobbers* conducted their duties was Breda, situated within the Duchy of Brabant. In the 1535 ordinance of Breda, *schrobbers* were depicted as individuals responsible for cleaning houses, interring the deceased, and attending to

[69] Devriese, ‘Van lollaarden tot alexianen,van matevrouwen tot zwarte zusters’, 349.
[70] Blažina-Tomić and Blažina, *Expelling the plague*, 185.
[71] Ibid., 185.
[72] Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment*, 246.

the sick.[73] Analogous to "*reeuwer*", the term "*schrobber*" carries a pejorative connotation. It is conceivable that this term may be linked to the medieval Dutch word "*schrobbe*," signifying a miscreant, a homeless person, or a vagrant.[74] Another city where *schrobbers* were engaged in their tasks was Antwerp, also located within the Duchy of Brabant. From the earliest ordinance pertaining to the plague in Antwerp, dating back to 1472, the presence of *schrobbers* was noted.[75]

In the cities across Brabant, *schrobbers* make appearances in primary sources, predominantly within ordinances and records of the bailiff. Frequently, these mentions cast *schrobbers* in a negative light or as figures to be distrusted. This portrayal is consistent across many of the sources.

Historians have dedicated more attention to *schrobbers* compared to *reeuwers*, not only within the Low Countries but also in other regions. Referred to as plague cleaners, these individuals were responsible for the cleaning of plague-affected houses and plague hospitals. Plague cleaners, whether male or female, faced prejudice and suspicion in cities such as Venice, Dubrovnik, and Milan.[76] In most records, plague cleaners are portrayed as female, with some being survivors of the plague, while others undertook this perilous occupation due to the lucrative remuneration associated with it.[77] It is conceivable, however, that this characterization of cleaners only being female is skewed, as the role of caregiving and cleaning was traditionally associated with females. The duties of *schrobbers* encompassed the crucial tasks of cleaning houses and streets in front of the affected houses during plague outbreaks, as well as attending to the needs of the sick, as derived from the ordinances. This prompts the question of why these groups, whose assistance was evidently indispensable, encountered stigmatization and persecution.

It is intriguing that the term *schrobber* did not possess a single, fixed meaning; rather, it was employed to denote various, often overlapping, tasks and activities during plague episodes. Beyond the

[73] F.A., Gooskens, 'Pestepidemieën in Breda tijdens de middeleeuwen (1382-1535)', *Jaarboek De Oranjeboom* 39 (1986), 48.
[74] Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek, *schrobbe*, visited on May 27 2023 via https://gtb.ivdnt.org/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=MNW&id=50526&lemma=schrobbe&domein=0&conc=true
[75] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I.
[76] Blažina-Tomić and Blažina, *Expelling the plague*, 185.
[77] Daniel R. Curtis, 'The Female Experience of Epidemics in the Early Modern Low Countries', *Journal of Low Countries Studies* 45:1 (2021), 3-20.

literal connotation associated with cleaning (derived from the verb *schrobben*), the term was also applied to caretakers during times of plague, individuals responsible for caring for the sick in hospitals as well as within the homes of more affluent individuals. For instance, the account of Henric Nollens, who died in 1511 in Sint-Truiden, revealed that the household had engaged *schrobbers* to clean his residence after his passing.[78] In certain ordinances, *schrobbers* were further assigned the responsibility of bearing corpses, which entailed placing the deceased within coffins. At times, they even acted as witnesses, signing the testaments of the individuals under their care.[79] The rationale for the use of the same term to describe these diverse activities is not entirely clear, but it might simply be pragmatic, as all of these tasks were executed by the same group of individuals.

Starting from the fifteenth century, cities in Brabant began to enact ordinances in response to plague outbreaks, outlining the rules and regulations governing the city during such times. One of the earliest ordinances in reaction to the plague in Antwerp was issued on April 4th, 1472.[80] This initial ordinance was relatively concise, comprising eight articles. The first article, issued by the masters of the city and the city council, established rules for the sick.[81] The ill were prohibited from mingling with the "*goede lieden*" (the good citizens) and from visiting churches and markets.[82] They were also mandated to carry a white stick at all times. This theme of the white stick continued in the second article, specifically targeting *schrobbers* to only visit the Church at specific times and always carry their white stick visible with them when appearing in public.[83]

The third article imposed restrictions on individuals from outside Antwerp, especially those coming from plague-affected cities. It also prohibited the sale of butter, cheese, or eggs for six weeks.[84] The fourth article applied to *schrobbers* and others who had been in plague-infected houses, forbidding them to leave those premises until 40 days after the last person with the plague had either died or recovered.[85] The fifth and sixth articles related to the placement of a straw bundle hung above the door

[78] Henric Nollens, *Sterf Rekening 1511*, Stadsarchief Sint-Truiden.
[79] Curtis, 'The Female Experience', 5.
[80] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 1.
[81] Ibid., 2. Translated from: "*Want ter kennissen van den Heere ende van der stad comen is*".
[82] Ibid., 2.
[83] Ibid., 2-3.
[84] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 3.
[85] Ibid., 3-4.

of plague-infected houses for a period of six weeks. The final two articles banned the burial of plague victims in churches, regardless of their social status.[86] These measures were aimed at preventing the spread of the plague, operating on the premise that both those afflicted by the plague and those attending to the sick could serve as vectors for its transmission. This 1472 ordinance was the first of many that would increase in complexity over time.

During the fifteenth century a distinction was made between the able-bodied poor and the deserving poor.[87] This is reflected in the different types of plague workers where *schrobbers* were portrayed as able-bodied poor while the *cellebroeders* were seen as deserving poor. The able-bodied poor were seen as people who chose poverty as their way of living and were often fringe figures such as beggars and vagrants.[88] Some of the able-bodied poor were migrants or already born in poverty.[89] During times of plague city councils sometimes took care of the able-bodied poor, but often this was not the case and these groups took to crimes to make a living or did physically and mentally tough labor, this also includes working as a plague cleaner.[90] It is essential to note that not all impoverished individuals were viewed with suspicion, as the distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor was recognized. Religious orders that emulated the life of Christ or the Apostles, living in poverty and relying on alms, were often considered deserving poor due to their altruistic actions, such as carrying out the seven works of mercy. However, not all of these religious groups were universally esteemed as virtuous and deserving; some had to contend with stigmatization and persecution. For instance, the Waldensian movement, who faced the peril of being burned at the stake, whereas the *cellebroeders* received substantial compensation for their work during plague outbreaks.

[86] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 4.
[87] R. Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994), 11.
[88] Ibid., 12.
[89] Ibid., 11-12.
[90] Ibid., 139-145.

The Waldensian movement of Arras and the *cellebroeders*

During the thirteenth and fourteenth, numerous monastic orders and brotherhoods exhibited a deep concern for the well-being of the sick and the assistance of the impoverished. Their inspiration was often drawn from the corporal works of mercy, a set of principles derived from the New Testament.[91] The seven works of mercy, explicitly mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew, include feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and burying the dead.[92] Some monastic orders took these works quite literally, while others were merely inspired by this aspect of the Gospel of Matthew.

The Waldensians were inspired by Alexius of Rome, the group was founded by Peter Waldes in 1137 in the city of Lyon, situated in Burgundy.[93] Waldes was a late twelfth-century rich man from Lyon who gave up all of his worldly possessions after hearing about the holy Alexius and the bible verses in Matthew.[94] The followers of Waldes became known as the poor of Lyon or the good Christians but faced a lot of questions in Lyon, especially from the clergy. The group of Peter of Waldes was discussed at a ecclesiastical assembly in Lyon held by Henry of Marcy, cardinal bishop of Albano, in 1180. At this assembly the questions about Waldes and his so called 'brothers' were not resolved and the choice of Waldes was accepted and formalized by the Church.[95] However, the acceptance and formalization of Waldes and his followers disappeared over time and the group was targeted more and more as heretics. Most of the followers were uneducated laymen and women and they started preaching, this was also against the liking of the clergy.[96] Waldes started a kind of religious movement that survived in France. In the fifteenth century the movement still existed, even though the group dealt with prosecutions throughout the two previous centuries.[97] They faced prejudice and were seen as heretics as well as suspects with dubious intentions and the group soon became a scapegoat in the fifteenth

[91] Matthew 25: 35-46.
[92] Matthew 25: 35-46
[93] Grado Giovanni Merlo, 'Valdo (or Valdesius) of Lyons and the Poor in Spirit', in Marina Benedetti & Euan Cameron (eds.), *A Companion to the Waldenses in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 11-33.
[94] Matthew 19:16-22.
[95] Merlo, 'Valdo (or Valdesius) of Lyons and the Poor in Spirit', 13-14
[96] Ibid., 13.
[97] Audisio and Davinson, *The Waldensian dissent persecution and survival,* 60.

century.[98] The number of Waldensians during the fifteenth century is impossible to give, because of the absence of sources and the fact that there was a whole Waldensian diaspora from France to the Alps, Flanders and the Holy Roman Empire.[99] The group actively refused being called Waldensians or Vaudois as they were called by their prosecutors, because this term meant sorcerer or sorcery.[100] Hence why the name of the burning of Waldensians in Arras in 1460 was called the Vauderie of Arras. The term Vaudois did not only mean sorcerer but was also used as a synonym for heretic.[101] This term was used as such in the region of the Alps, the Duchy of Burgundy, Northern France and in the County of Artois.[102]

Both the *cellebroeders* and the Waldensians played significant roles in Northern Europe, both during periods of plague and times of respite. They adhered to a simple lifestyle akin to that of the Apostles, dedicating themselves to serving the poor and the sick.[103] However, the Waldensians and the *cellebroeders* experienced different treatment from the church authorities and civic institutions. The Waldensians faced persecution and were often not accepted by local authorities and the church, whereas the *cellebroeders* found greater acceptance among city councils and the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

However, as time passed, the role of the Waldensians underwent a transformation. An interesting observation made by Peter Biller in his research on the Waldensians is particularly noteworthy. After facing persecution and inquisition, the Waldensians apparently adopted the guise of medical carers between the 13th and 15th centuries.[104] While this observation suggests a potential role in healthcare, there is a lack of clear, direct evidence in the primary sources. Nevertheless, the deliberate choice to appear as healthcare workers indicates that there might be some credibility to the notion that the Waldensians were indeed involved in healthcare during this period. It is also conceivable that groups of Waldensians may have joined or interacted with groups of *cellebroeders*, either before, during, or

[98] Audisio and Davinson, *The Waldensian dissent persecution and survival,* 61.
[99] Ibid., 61-62.
[100] Ibid., 73-74
[101] Ibid., 76.
[102] Franck Mercier and Martine Ostorero, 'The "Waldensian Sect": Heresy and Witchcraft', in Marina Benedetti & Euan Cameron (eds.), *A Companion to the Waldenses in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 394-421.
[103] Saskia M.C . Leupen, 'De kloosters van de cellebroeders en -zusters in het graafschap Holland en Zeeland tot aan de Reformatie', *Historisch Tijdschrift Holland* 30:2 (1998), 65.
[104] Peter Biller, 'Helping the poor and Healing the sick', in Marina Benedetti and Euan Cameron (eds.), *A Companion to the Waldenses in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 422-444 at 432.

after their persecution. This is not an implausible scenario, as both groups shared devotion to Saint Alexius, and the *cellebroeders* themselves originated from various independent groups of lay brothers. The connections and interactions between these groups offer an intriguing area for historical exploration.

In the 15th century, both the Waldensians and the *cellebroeders* coexisted in the Duchy of Burgundy, thus also in County of Flanders. Both groups could be perceived as engaged in charitable activities, particularly aiding the impoverished and the sick, all while adhering to the tenets of the Holy Alexius. In the realm of secondary literature, a comprehensive debate persists regarding the Waldensians' role in healthcare.[105] Some historians contend that the members and adherents of this order were actively involved in healthcare, while others dispute this position within the ongoing historiographic discourse.[106]

The origins of the *cellebroeders* or Alexians are shrouded in uncertainty. It remains unclear whether there was a singular founder or specific motivations behind lay brothers choosing to join this brotherhood.[107] It is most likely that they originated in the Rhineland region of Germany.[108] Over time, they came to adopt the rule of Augustine and drew inspiration from the life of Alexius of Rome, who lived in the 4th century. As already mentioned in the introduction of this thesis the *cellebroeders* were laymen who made a living based on begging and alms.[109] During times of plague they took on healthcare tasks based on the gospel of Matthew, often hired by the city council. The *cellebroeders* made their living with carrying and burying the corpses. This caused them to professionalize and their organization was slowly built up.

The *cellebroeders* played a significant role during times of plague wherever they were situated. This lay group began to take shape from the late thirteenth century onwards, although precursors existed before that period.[110] The exact date and reasons for the formation of the *cellebroeders* are not entirely

[105] Biller, 'Helping the poor and Healing the sick', 422.
[106] Ibid., 422-423.
[107] Leupen, 'De kloosters van de cellebroeders en -zusters in het graafschap Holland en Zeeland tot aan de Reformatie', 65.
[108] Ibid., 65.
[109] Ibid., 65.
[110] Ubachs & Tagage, *De Maastrichtse Cellebroeders en hun kapel* (Maastricht: 'De Beyart',1966), 9.

clear; it was more of a gradual evolution.[111] Often, *cellebroeders* were closely connected to other religious groups, such as beguines and beghards.[112] The outbreak of the plague appears to have acted as a catalyst for the development of an independent order.[113]

On January 3, 1458, Pope Pius II (†1464) officially recognized the *cellebroeders* as an order. At this point, the brothers were required to commit to the three vows and adhere to the rule of St. Augustine.[114] Pope Sixtus IV (†1481), in 1472, formally sanctioned the rule of Augustine for the *cellebroeders*, solidifying their status within the Church.[115] The institutionalization of the *cellebroeders*, following their recognition by Pope Pius II, brought about certain changes, including the introduction of a distinctive clothing requirement. Members of the order were attired in black tunics with black hoods, a striking and recognizable presence in the streets.[116]

Before the acknowledgment by Pius II, the various groups of *cellebroeders* did not have extensive contact or cooperation with one another. However, after this recognition, collaboration became inevitable. This culminated in the first general chapter, held in Liège in 1468, during which Vrancken van Limburg was appointed as the first general of the order.[117] He was the leader of the *cellebroeders* in Maastricht and served as the general head of the *cellebroeders* from 1468 to 1476.[118] The order was divided into five different provinces: Holland, Flanders, Brabant, Rhineland, and Sachsen.[119] Although the level of cooperation varied from region to region, all of the different chapters were united by a shared mission: caring for the sick and burying the dead.

The Prince-Bishop of Liège, Jan van Horne (†1505), reaffirmed the primary task of the *cellebroeders* in 1487, emphasizing their role in caring for the sick and burying the dead.[120] The *cellebroeders* primarily attended to the needs of the sick, particularly those afflicted by the plague or individuals struggling with mental illness. They were also responsible for interring the bodies of the

[111] Leupen, 'De kloosters van de cellebroeders en - zusters', 65.
[112] Ibid., 65.
[113] Ibid., 66.
[114] Pierre-Jean Niebes, *Les frères cellites ou Alexiens en Belgique* (Brussels: Archives générales du Royaume, 2002), 10.
[115] Leupen, 'De kloosters van de cellebroeders en - zusters', 70.
[116] Leen Cleynhens, *Inventaris van het archief Alexianen in België 1472-1990* (Leuven: KADOC, 2001), 2.
[117] Niebes, *Les frères cellites*, 11.
[118] Niebes, *Les frères cellites*, 11-12.
[119] Ibid., 11.
[120] Ubachs & Tagage, *Maastrichtse Cellebroeders*, 26.

deceased, initially those who had succumbed to the plague and later all deceased individuals.[121] The *cellebroeders* received compensation for these tasks and were often supported by the cities in which they operated. This indicates that they held a respected position within both the healthcare sector and the urban community. Their relationship with city councils tended to be more amicable than with the Church. In cities where the *cellebroeders* were established, local citizens were appointed as guardians for the monasteries to oversee their worldly interests.[122] Over time, the *cellebroeders* came to monopolize the burial of corpses in most cities and were remunerated by the city councils for this service.[123] The *cellebroeders* were after 1500 formally integrated as the official municipal health care workers.[124]

While the *cellebroeders* experienced some mistrust and isolated incidents, such as the pelting of their convent with stones, these events were comparatively minor compared to the persecution faced by groups like the Waldensians, *reeuwers*, and *schrobbers*.[125] The *cellebroeders* gained the exclusive right to bury the corpses. This monopoly changed the situation, as beforehand people had the free choice to get buried by whom and where they wanted.[126] In Ghent for instance the *cellebroeders* had the privilege to bury the corpses in their own cemeteries from 1521.[127] This caused social tensions in towns were the *cellebroeders* were active.[128] The *cellebroeders* managed to institutionalize and professionalize their role in healthcare, while the *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* continued to grapple with ongoing suspicions, conspiracy theories, and convictions.

Regulating healthcare in the Low Countries

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, healthcare in the Low Countries was regulated through ordinances established by city councils. These ordinances were typically enacted during times of plague outbreaks

[121] Ubachs & Tagage, *Maastrichtse Cellebroeders*, 26.
[122] Leupen, 'De kloosters van de cellebroeders en - zusters', 71.
[123] Ibid., 82-83.
[124] Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment*, 247.
[125] Janna Coomans, Léa Hermenault, Rogier van Kooten and Claire Weeda., 'Plague, religion and urban space in sixteenth-century Antwerp', *Social History Of Medicine* (2024), 1-28.
[126] Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment*, 248.
[127] Ibid., 248-249.
[128] Ibid., 247-250.

or when the threat of plague loomed over a city. Antwerp was among the cities in Brabant that began publishing such ordinances, starting with the one in 1472. However, Antwerp was not the sole city in Brabant to introduce plague ordinances. For example, the city of Breda issued an ordinance comprising 27 articles during a plague outbreak in 1535.[129] This ordinance was formulated by the city council of Breda, under the guidance of Count Henry III of Nassau-Breda (†1538), in consultation with the city council, aldermen, and the schout of Breda.[130]

The Breda ordinance commenced with two points outlining the rules for households affected by the plague. Similar to Antwerp, it stipulated a quarantine period for households touched by the plague. In Antwerp, this period was 40 days, after which plague survivors and visitors could enter the house again. In Breda, this period was slightly longer, spanning six weeks or 42 days.[131] The use of a white stick, a symbol for individuals affected by the plague or their relatives, was consistent with the practice in Antwerp.[132] The first five points of the Breda ordinance primarily pertained to quarantine measures in cases of plague.[133] The term "quarantine," signifying a 40-day or almost six-week period, was not unique to Brabant or the Low Countries.[134] Starting from the fifteenth century, most Italian city-states also adopted quarantine measures when faced with plague outbreaks. This practice was widely recognized as an effective means of containing the spread of the plague. The Breda ordinance follows with ten points delineating rules and regulations concerning *schrobbers* and *schrobberessen* (female *schrobbers*) within the city.[135] The ordinance further covers regulations related to individuals from outside the city of Breda and restrictions on tavern owners regarding whom they could admit as guests.[136] Following these points, the ordinance delves into regulations concerning specific goods such as meat, butter, cheese, and eggs.[137] The final sections of the ordinance once again address the

[129] F.A. Gooskens, 'Pestepidemieën in Breda tijdens de middeleeuwen (1382-1535)', *Jaarboek De Oranjeboom* 39 (1986), 18-54. This publication consists of a transcription of a plague ordinance from the year 1535 from the following archive: (GAB, H 6, Register van concepten van ordonnantiën, fol. 130-134). This is an attachment from page 47 to 54.
[130] Ibid., 47.
[131] Ibid., 47-48.
[132] Ibid., 48.
[133] Ibid., 47-48.
[134] Stevens Crawshaw, *Plague hospitals*, 7.
[135] Gooskens, 'Pestepidemieën in Breda', 48-50.
[136] Ibid., 50-51.
[137] Ibid., 51-52.

schrobbers and beggars.[138] The ordinance concludes with a provision stating that the reeve will enforce the rules as outlined in the ordinance, along with the associated fines. The collected fines were to be divided into three parts: one for Henry III of Nassau-Breda, one for the city where the offenses occurred, and the final portion for the enforcer and executor of the ordinance.[139]

As previously noted, the ordinance of 1472 in Antwerp is not an isolated case. The 1556 ordinance of Antwerp, for example, is similar in scope and subject matter to the 1535 ordinance in Breda, consisting of 34 articles addressing various subjects, all aimed at preventing the spread of the plague within the city. The 1556 ordinance opens with an explanation for its issuance, citing the presence of the plague in cities and villages in the vicinity of Antwerp.[140] It also emphasizes the importance of strict compliance with the rules and regulations detailed in the ordinance. Roughly half of the paragraphs in the ordinance pertain to actions to be taken when a household is affected by the plague.[141] This ordinance is more comprehensive than earlier ones and features very specific rules and regulations based on information from plague tracts.

For instance, article nine allows a member of a plague-affected household to visit the markets to purchase essential goods.[142] Article eleven prohibits households dealing with the plague from drawing water from the wells due to the fear of contagion through the water supply. Instead, they were required to place buckets in front of their doorsteps and ask neighbors to fetch water for them.[143] The remainder of the ordinance contains rules and regulations regarding the *schrobbers* and prohibitions on certain goods. Article twenty-seven in the ordinance emphasizes the importance of maintaining clean streets and controlling unpleasant odors, as these factors were believed to potentially facilitate the existence and spread of the plague.[144] The practice of cleaning the streets every Wednesday and Saturday, with the threat of a three Gulden penalty for non-compliance, underscores the application of

[138] Gooskens, 'Pestepidemieën in Breda', 52.
[139] Ibid., 53.
[140] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 57. translated from: "*Alsoe in sommige steden, dorpen ende plaetsen omtrent gelegen, de peste ende haestige siecte (God betert) regerende is*".
[141] Ibid., 58-64.
[142] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 61. "*Behoudelick dat vuyt elcken huyse een persoon alleenlyck, maer nyet meer, sal moegen gaen ten Vleeschuyse, ter Vischmerct ende elders om victuaille ende nootdurft te coopene*".
[143] Ibid., 62-63. "*dat nyemant in eenich besmet huys hem houdende oft verkeerende, eenich water voer den huysgesinne en sal mogen selve in persoene gaen halen (..) selen sy eenen oft meer eemeren voer hen dueren moegen stellen ende aen eenige van de gebueren van verre versuecken dat sy hen water brenge willen*".
[144] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 67.

the miasma theory in public health and highlights the crucial role of *schrobbers* in maintaining clean households, especially in plague-affected areas. Subsequent ordinances, which followed the ordinance of 1556 and expanded upon its provisions, demonstrate the evolving approach to responding to the plague in the Low Countries. These more comprehensive ordinances fit within the broader context of the professionalization and institutionalization of healthcare in the Low Countries from the fifteenth century onwards.

Notably, this professionalization was not limited to periods of plague but extended to healthcare practices in general. The next section of this chapter will delve into this broader aspect of healthcare professionalization in the Low Countries.

Healthcare in the Low Countries and in Italian city-states

The comparison between the professionalization and institutionalization of healthcare in the Low Countries and the city-states following the Italian model, particularly in relation to the existence of health boards, reveals some key differences. In the Low Countries, there is a general consensus in historiography that there were no equivalent health boards. However, this absence of health boards did not preclude the professionalization and institutionalization of healthcare in the region, as demonstrated in this chapter. This process, as shown, was not without its challenges.

In Italian city-states, health boards or *Sanità* played a central role in healthcare regulation. These boards, primarily composed of trained healthcare professionals, were responsible for policy development, implementation, and management. They oversaw a wide range of healthcare activities, including the control of infectious diseases such as the plague and leprosy. Health boards were instrumental in creating and managing plague hospitals, where patients affected by the plague were isolated and received care in the form of shelter, food and medical care.[145] The establishment of such hospitals was a significant step in managing infectious diseases in Italian city-states.

The establishment of the first plague hospitals, known as *Lazaretti*, in various Italian city-states marked a significant development in healthcare management from the late fourteenth century onwards.

[145] Neil Murphy, 'Plague hospitals and poor relief in late medieval and early modern France', *Social History* Vol.47:4 (2022), 349-371.

These hospitals were created with the specific purpose of isolating individuals affected by the plague and providing them with care. Dubrovnik was a pioneer in this regard, having set up plague hospitals in the 1370s. Other Italian cities like Venice, Milan, and Florence followed suit, establishing their own plague hospitals in the subsequent years.[146] In the Low Countries plague hospitals were established after 1500 and mostly in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.[147] Plague hospitals were established in Ghent in 1572 and in Antwerp in 1549.[148]

There were hospitals in the region, and some cities, like St. Niklaas near Antwerp, had healthcare facilities where women were employed by the city council to provide care for the population.[149] These hospitals likely catered to a range of medical needs beyond just plague cases. The city councils in the Low Countries hired medical professionals, during times of plague as well as times without the plague.[150] The medical professionals that were appointed by the city councils were granted tax exemptions, housing and clothing.[151]

The key distinction lies in who was responsible for healthcare policies and implementation. In the Low Countries, the *burgemeester*, reeve, city council, and aldermen played a significant role in making healthcare ordinances and hiring professionals. In Italian city-states, the health boards were responsible for policy development and execution, benefitting from their expertise in healthcare matters.[152] These differences highlight the diverse approaches to healthcare professionalization and institutionalization in various regions during the period under consideration.

The distinction between the professionalization and institutionalization of healthcare in the Italian city-states and the Low Countries is indeed notable. In the Italian city-states, health boards or Sanità were established to centralize healthcare management, consisting primarily of health professionals. These boards played a significant role in shaping health policies, particularly during

[146] John Henderson, *Florence under siege: surviving plague in an Early Modern city* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 7.
[147] Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment*, 241.
[148] Ibid., 241.
[149] Curtis, 'The Female Experience', 6.
[150] Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment*, 242.
[151] Ibid., 243.
[152] John Henderson, *Florence under siege: surviving plague in an Early Modern city* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 3-4.

plague outbreaks, and they had the authority to dictate measures to prevent the spread of the disease. This centralized approach was characterized by a clear separation of healthcare management from political and municipal governance, providing a more structured and professional approach to healthcare.

In contrast, the Low Countries, while witnessing professionalization and education of healthcare workers, particularly during plague outbreaks, relied on a more decentralized system of healthcare management. During the sixteenth century a *collegia medica* appeared in some cities in the Low Countries, but they rather dealt with hierarchical tensions between medical professionals than have the same kind of role as the Italian health boards.[153]

[153] Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment*, 246.

Chapter II - The burning of Waldensians and *reeuwers* in Arras and Bruges 1458-1468

This chapter analyses the burning of the Waldensians during the *Vauderie* of Arras, which is a city in contemporary Northern-France, in 1458-1460 and the burning of *reeuwers* in Bruges in 1468. These events occurred in a period of plague and were surrounded by suspicions and accusations of sorcery. The cases in Bruges and Arras will be compared to the prosecutions and the burning of sorcerers in Den Bosch in 1521 and will be placed in a broader context of prosecutions and burnings of plague workers in Geneva, Dubrovnik and Venice. What happened in Arras and Bruges and how does that compare to the burning of plague workers in Den Bosch, Geneva, Dubrovnik and Venice? This chapter starts with the Vauderie of Arras that happened during the period of 1458-1460 and connects this burning to the prosecution of *reeuwers* in Bruges only ten years later. The Vauderie and burning of *reeuwers* in Bruges will also be connected to the burning of *schrobbers* in Den Bosch in 1521. These cases of burnings in the Low Countries will then be compared with Geneva, Dubrovnik and Venice.

During a spring day in 1460, Arras witnessed a gruesome spectacle as five individuals were burned alive at the stake, accused by a Dominican inquisitor of involvement in diabolical sorcery activities.[154] This persecution occurred in the aftermath of a plague outbreak and a period of unfavorable weather conditions.[155] Subsequently, 13 people faced the same fate in burnings associated with the Vauderie of Arras. Vauderie was a term used in the fifteenth century to describe practices of sorcery, in the case of Arras the term Vauderie is used to describe the burning of the alleged sorcerers. The impact of these prosecutions and related documents was substantial, evident less than a decade later when a *reeuwer* in Bruges was also burned at the stake after being accused of sorcery.[156] Accused of intentionally spreading the plague through sorcery, the *reeuwers* burning in 1468 was chronicled by Anthonis de Roovere (†1482), a prominent writer and chronicler from Bruges. Roovere, along with priest and chronicler Romboud De Doppere (†1502), played a key role in the creation of the *Excellente*

[154] Andrew Colin Gow, Robert B. Desjardins and François V. Pageau, *The Arras Witch Treatises* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), 1.
[155] Ibid., 2-3.
[156] Gow, Desjardins, Pageau, *The Arras Witch Treatises*, 3.

cronike. In his chronicle, Roovere linked the events in Arras in 1460 to the burning of the *reeuwer*, considered a sorcerer in 1468.[157] Both Arras and Bruges were during this period part of the Duchy of Burgundy (1384-1477). Theologian Jean Trinctor (†1469) wrote a tract on the sorcerers of Arras and the *Vauderie* which is named *Speculatio in secta Valdensium*.[158] The work of Trinctor was translated from French into Latin in Bruges.[159] Bruges was the city where the *reeuwers* were accused of using sorcery not even 10 years after the *Vauderie*.

The persecution and burning of the Waldensians in Arras

The witch hunts in Arras unfolded in 1459-1460, targeting the Waldensians, a religious movement founded originally by Peter Waldo (†1205).[160] The Waldensians were renowned for their healing abilities and disease cures.[161] Prosecutions against Waldensians date back to the thirteenth century, occurring in various regions such as France, Germany, and Switzerland.[162] The accusations against them were often rooted in suspicions of heresy and unconventional religious practices. The Waldensians, initially considered by the Roman Catholic church as heretics, underwent a redefinition as witches by the fifteenth-century inquisition.[163] Accused of having pacts with the devil and practicing sorcery in their daily lives, over a hundred Waldensians, both men and women, faced burning at the stake in Switzerland since 1428.[164] Those condemned during the Vauderie of Arras in 1459-1460 were from different social classes. The local inquisitor of Arras Pierre Le Broussard (†?) played a role in convicting the Waldensians and characterized them as evil, as sorcerers and that the Waldensians were heretics.[165]

[157] Huyghebaert, 'Reeuwers in Vlaanderen', 98-99.
[158] Frank Mercier, *La vauderie d'Arras* (Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2006), 109-121.
[159] Dries Vanysacker, 'Witch Hunts in the Low Countries (1450–1685)', in Johannes Dillinger (eds.), *The Routledge History of Witchcraft* (London: Routledge, 2019), 113-124.
[160] Wolfgang Behringer, 'Detecting the ultimate conspiracy, or how Waldensians became witches', in Barry Coward and Julian Swan, *Conspiracies and conspiracy theory in Early Modern Europe* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 13-34.
[161] Biller, 'Helping the poor and Healing the sick', 428-431.
[162] Behringer, 'Detecting the ultimate Conspiracy', 14-20.
[163] Ibid., 24-25.
[164] Ibid., 25.
[165] Gow, Desjardins, Pageau, *The Arras Witch Treatises*, 2-3. Translated by the latter from the following primary source: Jacques du Clercq, *Mémoires de Jacques du Clercq sur le règne de Philippe le Bon, duc de Bourgogn*e, 2nd ed., vol. 3, ed. Frédéric de Reiffenberg (Brussels: Lacrosse, 1836), 4.4.21. The conviction of the Waldensians in Arras was as follows: "*When they wished to go to [worship the Devil], they anointed*

The allegations against the Waldensians portrayed them as both heretics and sorcerers. However, not all contemporaries shared this belief in witchcraft. Nicolas of Cusa, a German theologian and philosopher (†1464), dismissed witchery as an illusion.[166] Similarly, Heinrich Kramer (†1505), a German inquisitor, and churchman, did not address the Waldensian case in his *Malleus Maleficarum*, while focusing on sorcery as the ultimate crime or conspiracy.[167] The connection to the pact with the devil, as mentioned in the earlier fragment, is also absent in Adriaan de But's work on the *reeuwers* in 1468.[168] Huyghebaert suggests that De But had limited knowledge of such matters and simply linked the events in Arras with the condemnation of the *reeuwers* in 1468.[169] Anthonis de Roovere also draws a parallel between the inexplicable events in Arras and those involving the *reeuwers*.[170] However, two other intriguing links can be established between the accusations and convictions of the Waldensians in Arras in 1459-1460 and the *reeuwers* in 1468.

The first relevant link between the accusations against the Waldensians and the *reeuwers* is their shared socio-economic background.[171] Both groups were predominantly composed of individuals from the lower classes. The Waldensians, largely peasants and herdsmen, embraced a life of simplicity aligned with the apostolic ideals. Similarly, the *reeuwers* were primarily from the poorer segments of society, engaging in hazardous tasks involving corpses of lepers or plague victims, which contributed to their societal distrust. The parallel socio-economic status and engagement in tasks with a perceived level of danger or taboo strengthened the negative perceptions of both groups. This connection aligns

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a small stick of wood, and their palms and their hands, with an ointment that the Devil had given them. Then they put the branch between their legs, and soon they were flying themselves . . . to the place where they were to have their assembly . . . and there they found the Devil in the form of a goat, of a dog, of an ape, and sometimes of a man. And they . . . paid homage to the Devil, and adored him, and most of them gave him their souls. . . . [T]hen they kissed the Devil in the form of a goat on his posterior, that is, on the anus, with candles burning in their hands. . . . And after paying this homage, they trod upon the cross and spat upon it, in defiance of Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity; and then they showed their anus toward the sky and the heavens, in defiance of God."

[166] Behringer, 'Detecting the ultimate Conspiracy', 27.

[167] Ibid., 27.

[168] Huyghebaert, 'Reeuwers in 1468', 101.

[169] Ibid., 101. But also Adriaan de But, *Cronica abbatum monasterii de Dunis* (Translated from Latin into French, 1839), via https://books.google.nl/books/about/Cronica_abbatum_monasterii_de_Dunis.html?hl=nl&id=a5BRAAAAcAAJ&redir_esc=y

[170] Ibid., 101.

[171] Behringer, 'Detecting the ultimate Conspiracy', 15.

with broader theories distinguishing between the deserving and undeserving poor, where religious movements like the Waldensians conflicted with the Catholic Church and were not considered deserving. These theories on the poor in the medieval period and early modern played an important role. Groups that were portrayed as undeserving poor such as vagrants or beggars were often looked down upon and were treated with a lot of prejudice. The prevailing notion that the poor were key agents in spreading the plague was not unique to the Duchy of Burgundy; across Europe, the poor faced mistrust and were often regarded as primary vectors for the transmission of the plague.[172] The poor were in France for instance labeled as the main spreaders of the plague by social elites, this because they polluted the air and the environment.[173] Also in Flanders and Brabant, groups of undeserving poor (workers) were targeted as the main spreaders of the plague such as the *schrobbers* and the *reeuwers*.

The second connection between the accusations against the Waldensians and the *reeuwers* is the temporal context of their convictions during times of plague. Arras also had to deal with outbreaks of plague during the fifteenth century, while Bruges and other towns grappled with the plague in 1468. This link between the plague and the burning of the Waldensians during the Vauderie is not extensively explored in existing historiography. While Wolfgang Behringer broadly associates the Vauderie with the plague, his focus is more on outbreaks in the fourteenth century than on the specific occurrences during the Vauderie.[174] Behringer attributes the rise of conspiracies and witch hunts to changes in the weather.[175] The sorcerers were seen as the causative agents of the climate change and the little ice age.[176] Anthony McMichael adds that the period of the little ice age was also the time of recurrent outbreaks of the plague.[177] McMichael also adds that there is a clear link between changes in climate conditions and the plague.[178] The convictions of the *reeuwers* in 1468, accused of purposely spreading the plague and subsequently burned at the stake, are similarly intertwined with plague outbreaks. Both groups

[172] Neil Murphy, 'Plague hospitals and poor relief in late medieval and early modern France', *Social History* Vol.47:4 (2022), 349-371.
[173] Ibid., 356.
[174] Behringer, 'Detecting the ultimate conspiracy', 25.
[175] Ibid., 25-26.
[176] Ibid., 25-26.
[177] Anthony J. McMichael (eds.), *Climate Change and the Health of Nations: Famines, Fevers, and the Fate of Populations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 176.
[178] Ibid., 186.

faced comparable accusations involving the use of miraculous items and potions to spread the plague during periods of heightened disease prevalence. In the chronicles of Bruges in 1468 multiple burnings of accused sorcerers are mentioned.

Evidence in the chronicles about the burning of sorcerers in Bruges in 1468

The case described by Anthonis de Roovere in his chronicle, the *Excellente Cronike*, which was published in 1531 as an edition with various parts written by contemporaries, recounts accusations against *reeuwers* in the year 1468.[179] This chronicle, translated from the *Flandria Generosa C*, covers the period from 621 until 1423, with additional years added between 1423 and 1482. De Roovere supplemented the chronicle for the years 1461 until 1482, focusing on Bruges, Ieper, Wervik, and Veurne.[180] As an eyewitness to the plague, he documented multiple cases of *reeuwers* allegedly spreading the plague. One case involved a *reeuwer* in Ieper, named Willem Matthys, who reportedly made two recovering plague victims drink his poison.[181] Another case in Wervik described *reeuwers* boiling a corpse of a plague victim to extract poison and contaminate wells.[182] Regardless of gender, *reeuwers* found guilty faced a common fate: being burned at the stake. While the gender of the *reeuwers* is not explicitly mentioned in the primary sources, other documents indicate that *reeuwers* could be both male and female. In Dubrovnik, for instance, female plague workers served as gravediggers and corpse bearers.[183] The tasks of *reeuwers*, discussed in the first chapter, had various manifestations, and the existence of the female version of the word "*reeuwer*" (*reeuweghen*) suggests that both genders could be subjected to burning at the stake.[184]

In addition to Anthonis de Roovere's chronicle, another source that mentions the events of 1468 and specifically implicates *reeuwers* is the chronicle by the monk Adriaan de But (†1488). As a

[179] Anthonis De Roovere, Andries De Smet, Willem Vorsterman, *Dits die excellente cronike va[n] Vlaendere[n] beghinnende va[n] liederick Buc den eersten Forestier tot de[n] laetste[n], die door haer vrome feyte[n], namaels Graue[n] van Vlaendre[n] ghemaect worde[n], achteruolghende die rechte afcomste der voors graue[n], tot desen onsen doorluchtichste[n] hoochghebore[n] Keyser Karolo* (Antwerp: Willem Vorsterman, 1531).
[180] Huyghebaert, 'Reeuwers in Vlaanderen', 97-104.
[181] Ibid., 98.
[182] Ibid., 98.
[183] Blažina Tomic & Blažina, V., *Expelling the plague*, 185.
[184] Jozef Geldhof, 'De pestepidemie in Brugge 1665-1667', *Biekorf* 75 (1974), 305-328.

Cistercian monk residing in the abbey of Ten Duinen from 1460 onwards, De But provides an account of *reeuwers* concocting poisons using the burned corpses of lepers, specific herbs, the blood of a poisonous animal, and the eucharist.[185] These *reeuwers*, according to De But, used the substance to poison wells in multiple villages and towns during the year 1468, with Veurne in West-Flanders being the most severely affected. The common punishment for convicted *reeuwers* engaged in such activities was burning at the stake, a severe penalty executed publicly. This irreversible punishment not only inflicted death but also obliterated the body, leaving only ashes. Burning at the stake was a prevalent form of punishment for heretics, Jews, sorcerers, and plague spreaders, notably around Geneva and other regions, during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.[186]

The connection between the witch hunt in Arras around 1459-1460 and the accusations against *reeuwers* in 1468 lies in the chronicled accounts of Anthonis de Roovere and Adriaan de But. Both chroniclers draw a link between the Vauderie in Arras and the events of 1468.[187] The geographical proximity of Arras and Bruges, Veurne and Wervik is significant, as they were all part of the Duchy of Burgundy during that period. While Arras was part of the County of Artois, Bruges, Veurne and Wervik were part of the neighboring county of Flanders. Moreover, the accusations against sorcerers in Arras and *reeuwers* in Bruges, Veurne, Wervik, and Ieper shared a common dimension. Both groups were believed to employ '*wonderlijke saken*' to harm people.[188] In the case of *reeuwers*, they were accused of concocting a substance using ingredients like human blood, body parts and the Eucharist, reminiscent of accusations against Jews in the fourteenth century. The blood of people who died of plague was a point of concern because of miasma stemming from this blood.[189] It was seen as a highly hazardous substance and it needed to be handled with high care.[190] While the Waldensians in Arras were accused of different offenses, such as causing bad weather and killing people, the similarity lies in the focus on the manner rather than the mere fact of causing harm, echoing themes present in cases of sorcery in 1468, which will be explored later in this chapter. The fact that these *reeuwers* were connected with

[185] Huyghebaert, 'Reeuwers in Vlaanderen in 1468', 99.
[186] Cohn, *Epidemics*, 132. or also William Naphy, *Plagues, Poisons, and Potions*.
[187] Huyghebaert, 'Reeuwers in Vlaanderen in 1468', 99.
[188] Ibid., 100-101.
[189] Coomans, Community, Urban Health and Environment, 228.
[190] Ibid., 228.

sorcery is in contrast with the work of William Naphy on the Alps, where this connection between plague workers, plague spreading and sorcery was made during the prosecutions of 1571.[191]

The connection with the prosecutions in Den Bosch in 1521

In 1468, Bruges experienced not only the prosecutions of the *reeuwers* for sorcery but also similar accusations against individuals like Margriete Achtels.[192] Margriete Achtels faced charges from the *Proosdij* in Bruges, which was the court qualified to administer justice in a district, related to sorcery, accused of creating substances to poison people and induce illness by distributing these substances through wells.[193] While the term "sorcery" was not explicitly mentioned, her verdict referred to her actions as "inhuman" and "unnatural".[194] In addition to Margriete Achtels, two others, Jacquemine Mote and Nele Wijts, were also convicted for similar offenses. Jacquemine was burned at the stake, and Nele Wijts was beheaded and exhibited.[195] These convictions and burnings occurred in the same year as the *reeuwers*' burnings in the region of Bruges, providing insight into the social climate of Bruges in 1468. Unlike the cases in Arras, the Bruges cases do not explicitly mention a pact with the devil, which, according to Monballyu, became a prominent factor only from the 16th century onwards.[196] However, this perspective contrasts with primary sources from Arras, where the pact with the devil played a central role in the convictions of sorcerers. In the context of Bruges, the focus is on the creation and use of unnatural or supernatural substances, a common thread evident in the cases of both the *reeuwers* and individuals like Margriete, Jacquemine, and Nele.

The case of the accused sorcerers in Arras and the *reeuwers* in Bruges share notable similarities in terms of accusations and convictions. In both instances, the accused faced charges related to sorcery and the deliberate spreading of the plague. While the specific details and circumstances varied, the similarity between these cases was the belief that these individuals engaged in supernatural activities to

[191] Naphy, *Plagues, Poisons, and Potions: Plague-spreading Conspiracies in the Western Alps*, 128-157.
[192] Jos Monballyu, 'Schadelijke toverij en hekserij te Brugge en te Ieper in de 15de eeuw', *Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis te Brugge* 3:4 (1983), 265-269.
[193] Ibid., 266.
[194] Ibid., 266.
[195] Ibid., 267.
[196] Monballyu, 'Schadelijke toverij en hekserij te Brugge', 269.

harm others. The accusations against the Waldensians in Arras and the *reeuwers* in Bruges involved the use of mysterious and miraculous substances to poison people, often through contaminating wells. The Waldensians were associated with heresy and sorcery, accused of having a pact with the devil and using their supernatural abilities to cause harm. Similarly, the *reeuwers* were suspected of spreading the plague intentionally, using concoctions and practices that were perceived as unnatural. In both cases, the accusations were linked to a broader societal context, including concerns about the spread of the plague, religious tensions, and the fear of supernatural forces. The convictions resulted in severe punishments, such as burning at the stake, reflecting the gravity of the accusations and the perceived threat posed by these individuals. While the exact nature of the alleged supernatural practices differed between Arras and Bruges, the overarching themes of sorcery, plague spreading, and the use of mysterious substances tied these cases together. The social and cultural contexts of the time played a crucial role in shaping the accusations, investigations, and outcomes in both instances. Another group that faced similar (mass) punishments were the Jews during the medieval period.[197] The burning of the Jews in times of plague happened especially in German-speaking areas and large groups of Jewish people were burned. This group also dealt with accusations of supranatural behavior and the use of blood to make poison for instance.[198]

In Den Bosch in 1521, *schrobbers*, akin to their counterparts in Bruges in 1468, faced accusations of purposely spreading the plague, resulting in severe consequences such as burning at the stake. Despite a relatively calm period for sorcerer prosecutions in Flemish-speaking Brabant from around 1510 to 1570, the *schrobbers*' cases indicate persistent suspicions of supernatural practices during plague outbreaks.[199] The bills of the reeve, detailing these cases, mention a woman accused of sorcery, suggesting ongoing suspicions in Flemish-speaking Brabant during the sixteenth century.[200] The contrasting intensity of witch hunts between Flemish-speaking Brabant and the Duchy of Flanders adds complexity to regional variations in attitudes towards sorcery. Examining the nuances of these

[197] Samuel K. Cohn Jr., 'The Black Death and the Burning of Jews', *Past & Present* Vol. 196:1 (2007), 3-36.
[198] Ibid., 3-4.
[199] Vanysacker, 'Witch Hunts in the Low Countries (1450–1685)', 114-115.
[200] Henk Beijers, *document 94: Inventaris van 12996*, microfiche 13. The following is mentioned: "*Een vrouw verdacht van tovenarij te Hintham*", which translates to "A woman that is accused of sorcery in Hintham".

cases, including the release of some *schrobbers* after questioning, highlights variations in legal responses to sorcery accusations.[201]

The *Schoutsrekeningen*, which were the financial accounts of the reeve, from Den Bosch in the duchy of Brabant of 1521, include the case of the so-called 'mob of cleaners' described by the *hoogschout*.[202] The reeve was called Maximiliaen van Bergen (†1521) and he was the *ridderschout* from Den Bosch from 1505 onwards.[203] This bill is from the period Christmas 1520 until 2 August 1521, a shorter period than usual for accounts because he died during this period.[204] The area around Den Bosch was dealing with the plague in 1521. A chronicle about the history of Den Bosch mentioned the plague in 1521.[205] One of the cases that reeve Maximiliaen van Bergen dealt with, was the case of Niclaus Maessoen who was from Gestel, which is nowadays a neighborhood in Eindhoven. He was a *schrobber* and the reeve explains that he worked with people who were sick and struck by the plague.[206] He was accused of purposely spreading the plague during the night in Gestel. He was accused of making the so-called 'good people' sick by contaminating their doors and doorknobs as well as the water wells.[207] He extracted his plague grease using the corpses of people who died of the plague. After being tortured, he confessed and he was subjected to being burned at the stake.[208]

Claus Muts is also mentioned in the bill of Maximiliaen van Bergen, he was a *schrobber* and from Gestel.[209] He was also convicted of using the corpses of the plague dead to create grease to infect people with and smear this onto their doorknobs. Again the term 'good people' was used in the description of this case and Claus Muts met the same fate as his fellow villager Niclaus. The fact that

[201] Adriaenssen, L.F.W., Verdienen aan de Gave Gods, *De Brabantse Leeuw*, 47 (1998), 32-37.
[202] Algemeen Rijksarchief Brussel, Rekenkamer, *Rekeningen van hoogschout van stad en Meierij van 's-Hertogenbosch, maart 1496-december 1529*, inv. 12996. For this thesis both the source in Brussels was used as well as the microfiches of this source. The microfiches that have been used are well numbered and are available in both the Algemeen Rijksarchief Brussel as in the BHIC in Den Bosch.
[203] Ibid., Microfiche 11, 11.4.2.
[204] ARAB, *Hoog Schoutsrekening Den Bosch*, inv. 12996, microfiche 11, 11.4.2.
[205] *Die chronijcke der Stadt ende Meijerije van 's-Hertogenbosch* (1140-1699), edited by H. van Bavel, A.C.M. Kappelhof, G.M. van der Velden, G. Verbeek (Stadsarchief Den Bosch, 2001).
[206] ARAB, *Hoog Schoutsrekening Den Bosch*, inv. 12996, microfiche 11, 11.4.4.
[207] Ibid., 11.4.4. 'Good people' is a quite literal translation of the often used term during times of plague: *goede luyden*. This was used to describe harmless and good christian people or the good citizens of the towns.
[208] Ibid., 11.4.4.
[209] Ibid., 11.5.1.

they smeared this substance at different places means that it was some kind of liquid or ointment, just like in the accusations of the *reeuwers* in 1468. But what kind of substance they were allegedly using does not really become clear from the bills of the reeve.

The case of Claus Muts was the last case in the bill of Maximiliaen van Bergen, but this was not the last case of convicted *schrobbers* in this period in the region of Den Bosch. The next reeve of Den Bosch was Everaerts van Doerne (†1527), who was appointed in 1521.[210] In the bill concerning the period between Christmas 1522 and 16 September 1524 other cases of *schrobbers*, but also a case concerning a sorcerer, are dealt with.[211] The case of the sorcerer occurred before the cases of the *schrobbers*. Jueten Jans the daughter of Van Null, was accused of using sorcery to bewitch certain animals. Reeve Everaerts van Doerne researched the accusations but he considered that Jueten Jans was not guilty of using sorcery.[212] This did not stop him from convicting her however, and she had to pay a fine of 50 guilders.[213] The next case, on the next page of the bill of Everaerts van Doerne, concerned two accused *schrobbers,* Marien Meeus and Lijsbeth Ruerpot.[214] These two female *schrobbers* were accused of purposely spreading the plague via doors and door knobs. The bailiff arrested them and after they were tortured both confessed to these cases, claiming they spread the plague in multiple different houses.[215] After this confession both were prosecuted and burned at the stake.[216]

The accusations that were made against the *schrobbers* all follow the same kind of pattern. They were all accused of purposely spreading the plague while using the corpses or the living plague sick to make some kind of liquid substance and smear this substance onto doors, door knobs or in wells. The same kind of grease was used according to the chronicles in the cases of the *reeuwers* in 1468. But in the cases of 1521-1522 the extra ingredients such as herbs that the *reeuwers* used when spreading the plague, seem to have disappeared. They are not mentioned by the bailiff in his bills nor are they mentioned in the chronicles. Vanysacker gives a simple explanation, as already mentioned in the

[210] Algemeen Rijksarchief Brussel, *Hoog Schoutsrekening Den Bosch*, inv. 12996, microfiche 11, 11.5.2.
[211] ARAB, *Hoog Schoutsrekening Den Bosch*, Microfiche 12, 12.2.10.
[212] Ibid., 12.3.10.
[213] Ibid., 12.3.10.
[214] Ibid., 12.3.11.
[215] Ibid., 12.3.11.
[216] Ibid., 12.3.11.:*"die selve met vonnisse der wethouderen doen executeren metten brande".*

introduction of this thesis; the witch/sorcerer accusations did not exist in Flemish speaking Brabant from 1510-1571.[217] But the case of Jueten Jans proves that there were still people accused of sorcery in this region and time period. So sorcery could still have played a role? Only in one of the cases, Niclaus Maessoen is a different motive mentioned, which is discussed further in chapter three. The other cases as already mentioned show a lot of similarities and some kind of continuity in the accusations against *schrobbers* and *reeuwers*. Both concerning the accusations of spreading the plague on purpose as well as the accusations about sorcery.

During the prosecutions of the *reeuwers* in Bruges in 1468, another significant event occurred in the city of Liège. The Augustinian order of the *cellebroeders* held their first chapter meeting, during which they appointed a superior-general of the *cellebroeders* and divided themselves into five provinces with approximately 30 houses.[218] These provinces included Brabant-Land van Liège, Vlaanderen, Holland, Rhineland, and Sachsen.[219] This restructuring followed the order's acceptance by Pope Pius II in 1458.[220] It is worth exploring whether the *cellebroeders* had any involvement in the convictions and accusations of sorcery against the *reeuwers*, given that they were the direct successors to the tasks of the *reeuwers*, as explained in the first chapter.

The Catholic Church played a role in the burning of heretics and those accused of sorcery, for instance in Arras where the Roman Catholic Inquisition proceeded with the burning of the Waldensians. However, not all members of the Church were unanimous in their belief in sorcery. Despite internal debates, convictions and burnings did occur, particularly through the Inquisition. The subsequent decline of the *reeuwers* in the following decades and the rise of the *cellebroeders*, who assumed similar tasks and institutionalized their monastic order, raises questions about the potential connection between these two groups.[221] Further exploration into the role of the Catholic Church and the *cellebroeders* in

[217] Vanysacker, 'Witch Hunts in the Low Countries', 114.
[218] Leen Cleynhens, *Inventaris van het archief Alexianen in België 1472-1990* (Leuven: Kadoc, 2001), 2.
[219] Ibid., 2.
[220] Ibid., 2.
[221] As already mentioned the *cellebroeders* held their first general meeting in the year 1468, the same year the *reeuwers* in Bruges were burned.

the accusations and convictions of sorcery against the *reeuwers* could provide valuable insights into this historical context.

The cases of Bruges and Den Bosch compared with Geneva, Dubrovnik and Venice

In this final part of the chapter the cases of burnings in Bruges and Den Bosch will be placed in a broader geographical context, of cases in Geneva, Dubrovnik and Venice. Comparing accusations against health professionals spreading the plague in different areas reveals parallels in targeting cleaners and corpse bearers as alleged plague spreaders.[222] In Geneva and Dubrovnik, plague survivors from the lower classes were singled out, facing accusations of purposely spreading the plague due to their economic status.[223] In Venice, corpse bearers wore bells to announce their presence, while being perceived as immoral and untrustworthy in other Italian cities.[224] However, unlike cases in Bruges and Den Bosch, sorcery was not explicitly mentioned in relation to plague workers in Geneva and Dubrovnik. While Geneva boasts detailed primary sources, particularly from the 1530s onwards, the events discussed in this chapter precede that period.[225] Naphy's research on Geneva underscores accusations and convictions of plague workers for purposely spreading the plague, placing blame on the poor and migrants. Despite plague workers receiving a good salary, their livelihood depended on the presence of the plague—a factor to be explored further in the third chapter. While Bruges and Den Bosch were not isolated in prosecuting plague workers or linking unnatural events to the plague, the distinctive temporal and continuous connection between witch hunts, sorcery, and the plague sets them apart from Geneva and Dubrovnik.

As highlighted earlier in this chapter, the church played a significant role in both the accusations and convictions of sorcerers and the utilization of sorcery. This ecclesiastical influence could have extended to spreading conspiracy theories about plague spreaders and casting suspicions on these

[222] Naphy, W. G., *Plagues, Poisons, and Potions: Plague-spreading Conspiracies in the Western Alps, C. 1530-1640* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002). and also Blažina-Tomić and Blažina, *Expelling the plague: The Health Office and the Implementation of Quarantine in Dubrovnik 1377-1533* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2015).
[223] Tomić & Blazina, *Expelling the Plague*, 187.
[224] Ibid., 187.
[225] Naphy, *Plagues, Poisons, and Potions*, 4.

individuals. The *cellebroeders* arrived in Den Bosch in 1434, establishing themselves in their own monastery, *De Notenboom*, situated in the city center. They had a dedicated church to the Holy Trinity, Augustine, and Alexius.[226] Their primary responsibility in Den Bosch was the burial of the deceased, including those succumbing to the plague—a duty reminiscent of the *reeuwers*.[227] Following the official meeting of the *cellebroeders* in 1468, they embarked on a process of institutionalizing and professionalizing their order and tasks. The *cellebroeders* were also present in Bruges during the prosecutions of the *reeuwers*. While the exact nature of their role in the existing conspiracy theories against plague workers remains unclear, it is noteworthy that the term "*reeuwer*" is seldom mentioned after the fifteenth century, suggesting the disappearance of this profession. As elucidated in the first chapter of this research, the *cellebroeders*, alongside the *zwarte zusters*, successfully professionalized and institutionalized their orders in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. They became the exclusive providers of corpse-bearing, grave-digging, and burial services. Similar to other plague workers, the *cellebroeders* and *zwarte zusters* received substantial remuneration for their tasks.[228] Their institutionalization and professionalization provided a more secure income than that of the *reeuwers* and *schrobbers*. While the simultaneous occurrence of the *cellebroeders*' conference, where they decided to formalize their order, and the burning of *reeuwers* in Bruges in the same year may be coincidental, there could be a connection between the two events.

[226] *Die chronijcke der Stadt ende Meijerije van 's-Hertogenbosch* (1140-1699), edited by H. van Bavel, A.C.M. Kappelhof, G.M. van der Velden, G. Verbeek (Stadsarchief Den Bosch, 2001); "*In den jaere 1434 quamen hier wonen de cellebroers ofte alexianen, eerst tegenover de Sint Jacobstraet, daernaer in De Nootenboom tegenover de Schilderstraet, daernaer op de Trinitijt; haer clooster ende kerck wiert gewijt ter eeren van de Hijlige Drievuldighijt, Sint Augustijn ende Alexius; het waeren leecken ende leefden naer den regell van Sinte Augustijn; sij geneerde haer met dooden te begraven, jae oock die van de pest gestorven waeren.*", 37.
[227] Ibid., 37.
[228] Van Schevensteen, *Documents I*, 47-53.

Chapter III - Alleged financial motives for plague greasers

In the second chapter of this thesis the burning of the *reeuwers* was researched. They were allegedly burned for spreading the plague on purpose and/or using sorcery. Another group that faced prosecution during times of plague were the *schrobbers*. The accusations and conspiracy theories surrounding the *schrobbers*, particularly the notion that they purposely spread the plague for financial gain, added another layer of complexity to their already challenging role during times of plague. The belief that *schrobbers* were intentionally contributing to the spread of the disease for personal profit created a hostile environment for these healthcare workers. The suspicions and rumors about *schrobbers* engaging in such practices likely stemmed from a lack of understanding of the nature of the plague and the role of these workers in managing its consequences. The conspiracy theory might have been fueled by fear, misinformation, or attempts to find scapegoats for the devastating effects of the plague. The response of the city council in Antwerp, launching an investigation in 1571, reflects the seriousness with which these accusations were taken.[229]

This scrutiny and the subsequent rules and regulations imposed on *schrobbers* indicate the societal impact of these conspiracy theories and the need for authorities to address and control such narratives. Investigating the historical context and the specific regulations put in place during this period can provide insights into the challenges faced by healthcare workers, the dynamics of public perception, and the efforts of authorities to manage and regulate healthcare during the plague. Plague greasers is another term for the suspected plague spreaders and refers to the so called grease that they allegedly used to spread the plague.

This chapter will delve into the financial suspicions surrounding *schrobbers* and compare them with the conspiracy theories involving sorcery and witchcraft discussed in the previous chapter, which were also linked to the spread of the plague. It aims to analyze the origins of these suspicions and draw comparisons across different cities. The city councils, in particular, suspected *schrobbers* of intentionally spreading the plague through wells, railings on benches, and door knobs.[230] Financial

[229] Van Schevensteen, 'Over pestepidemieën te Antwerpen in vroeger tijden', 1064.
[230] Ibid., 1064.

motivations were considered the driving force behind these actions, similar to the case of Nicolaus Maessoen in Den Bosch in 1521. During epidemics, alongside the suffering of victims, certain individuals stood to benefit financially from disaster. This was true for *schrobbers*, *reeuwers*, *cellebroeders*, *zwarte zusters*, plague doctors, and plague masters, all of whom received monetary compensation for their roles. However, this financial dependency on the existence of the plague created tensions between these groups and society. The physical proximity of plague workers, especially lower-class workers, to the sick, particularly when handling corpses of higher social status, could lead to societal tensions. To understand the evolution of accusations related to financial gain and fear of plague workers, it is crucial to examine the reputation and financial status of *schrobbers* in comparison to the *cellebroeders*. The latter, as plague workers within the Church institution, were remunerated by city councils. Investigating the relationship between the professionalization and institutionalization of healthcare workers, especially the role of the *cellebroeders*, will shed light on whether competition between these two groups fueled the persecution of *schrobbers* on financial grounds. The chapter will compare prosecution cases against cleaners in Antwerp, Den Bosch, and other European cities like Geneva and Dubrovnik. Additionally, it will explore the professionalization and compensation of the *cellebroeders* and *zwarte zusters*, drawing comparisons with *schrobbers*.

Antwerp 1571 and Den Bosch 1521 in a comparative context

The year 1571 was a challenging time for the city of Antwerp, facing both the threat of Spanish attack led by Alva and a significant outbreak of the plague. In response to these challenges, the city council issued various ordinances with rules and regulations.[231] An ordinance was enacted on the second day of the year to prohibit beggars from soliciting on the streets.[232] Additionally, people were forbidden from inviting guests or goods from Turnhout, the location where the plague initially surfaced.[233] As the plague continued to pose a serious threat, a new ordinance was issued on the third of August, 1571. This comprehensive ordinance comprised 40 articles outlining rules and regulations to address the ongoing

[231] Van Schevensteen, 'Over pestepidemieën te Antwerpen in vroeger tijden', 1064-1065.
[232] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 79.
[233] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 80-81.

plague outbreak.[234] Notably, some of these rules were unprecedented for Antwerp and were introduced for the first time in this ordinance. Among the regulations, the ordinance addressed the roles and responsibilities of the *cellebroeders*, *schrobbers*, and *schrobsters*. These rules likely provided guidance on how these groups were to contribute to controlling the spread of the plague and managing its consequences within the city.[235] To gain a deeper understanding of how *schrobbers* were targeted and regulated during this challenging period, it would be beneficial to explore the specific articles related to their duties and restrictions in the ordinance of 1571.

The rules issued regarding the *schrobbers* in the ordinance of 1571 are outlined in Article 24. This article first provides a summary of the tasks assigned to the *schrobbers* and *schrobsters*. They are described as individuals appointed to assist the sick, take care of them, and clean the houses, among other responsibilities.[236] Furthermore, the ordinance specifies certain dress codes for the *schrobbers*. According to the article, male *schrobbers* were required to wear a white hood, while female *schrobbers* were instructed to wear a white felt cape.[237] Article 29 of the ordinance imposes a restriction on the activities of the *schrobbers*. It forbids them from working outside the city walls. If they were to engage in work beyond the city limits, they would be unable to return to Antwerp as long as the plague persisted.[238] This regulation aimed to keep the *schrobbers* within the city boundaries, preventing them from visiting family or seeking employment in other locations, possibly to increase their income.[239] Conversely, Article 30 addresses *schrobbers* from outside Antwerp who had been working in another town. It prohibits them from coming to Antwerp to work as *schrobbers*. This rule establishes a restriction on *schrobbers* traveling from one plague-affected area to another, reflecting a cautious approach to prevent the potential spread of the plague.[240] The tone of the city council in these ordinances is characterized as coercive and distrusting toward the *schrobbers*, highlighting the apprehension

[234] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 81.
[235] Ibid., 81-99.
[236] Ibid., 92. Translated from: "*De persoonen geheordenneert ende gheadmiteert om de siecken t'assisteren, huysen te reynighen ende diergelycke te doene, die men heet schrobbers oft schrobsters*".
[237] Ibid., 92-93.
[238] Ibid., 94.
[239] Ibid., 94.
[240] Ibid., 94.

surrounding their tasks and movements. The regulations indicate a perceived need for control over the activities of the *schrobbers* to manage the risks associated with the plague.

This stance was confirmed on the 18th of August 1571 in yet another document produced by the city council and the reeve.[241] A document with three articles was produced, in which a premium of 100 gulden was offered to citizens who reported on *schrobbers*, *schrobsters* and also others who were purposely spreading the plague, using their cleaning devices and smearing plague grease on benches or door knobs or in wells.[242] The second article of this ordinance states that no one was allowed to work as a *schrobber* or *schrobster* unless their name had been registered by a certain city official named Jacobs Janssense. *Schrobbers* in violation would be fined 12 gulden.[243] This was the first time that *schrobbers* needed to be registered, so that the city could keep track of them. The last article of this ordinance represents a prohibition on cleaning houses that were infected with plague without permission and admission to a house.[244]

In the context of plague outbreaks, the measures imposed on *schrobbers*, who played a crucial role in caring for the sick and implementing cleaning measures, varied in severity and reflected the prevailing attitudes towards these practitioners. During the 1533 plague outbreak in Turnhout, located in Brabant near Antwerp, extreme regulations were implemented. *Schrobbers* entering a house to care for the plague-stricken during the night without permission risked being beaten to death if caught.[245] Additionally, being outside after the evening bell could result in being shot to death, with a reward of 25 gulden offered to those who carried out the act.[246] These measures were particularly harsh, indicating a lack of regard for the humanity of *schrobbers* and a willingness to resort to violence as a response to perceived violations. This suggests a deep-seated mistrust in *schrobbers* and a suspicion that they might intentionally spread the plague, potentially for financial gain. The extreme nature of these regulations underscores the social unease surrounding *schrobbers* in Turnhout. This contrasts with the measures in

[241] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 80-100.
[242] Ibid., 100.
[243] Ibid.,100.
[244] Ibid., 100.
[245] A. De Laet, De pest te Turnhout, 221.
[246] Ibid., 221.

Antwerp during the 1571 plague outbreak, which, while restrictive, did not endorse violence to the same extent.

Financial gain as a motive to spread the plague can be found in the primary sources of the sixteenth century. In 1521, Niclaus Maessoen in Den Bosch faced accusations related to his income in the context of the plague outbreak. He was charged with intentionally spreading the plague to generate more work, particularly at the residences of wealthy individuals.[247] Niclaus, under duress and after being subjected to torture, confessed to this accusation, as previously discussed in Chapter 2. Unfortunately, he did not survive his confessions and was subsequently executed by burning at the stake. A noteworthy aspect of Niclaus's case is that, among the *schrobbers* and *schrobberessen* convicted in Den Bosch in 1521, he was the sole individual who cited a financial motive for intentionally spreading the plague. Others who faced the court during the same period did not provide similar financial motivations during their sharp interrogations. The veracity of Niclaus's confession is challenging to ascertain, especially considering the use of torture in obtaining it. It remains unclear whether Niclaus's confession was genuine, a strategic move to secure a lesser sentence, or an attempt to avoid being burned at the stake. The *schoutsrekeningen* do not go in depth on the interrogation or the techniques they used on the *schrobbers*, beyond 'sharp interrogation'.[248] Given the limited information available, it is also plausible that Niclaus's words were coerced or distorted during the interrogation process. However, based on the available sources, Niclaus is recorded as having confessed to purposefully spreading the plague for financial gain.

The notion of plague workers intentionally spreading the plague for financial gain was a common theme across various European towns. Lower-socioeconomic plague workers, like *schrobbers*, faced economic challenges during non-outbreak periods. However, their roles during plagues offered a temporary source of income. Conspiracy theories suggesting intentional plague spreading for profit likely arose from the abrupt economic changes experienced by these workers during outbreaks.

[247] ARAB, *Hoog Schoutsrekeningen Den Bosch*, inv. 12996, 11.4.4. "*ten Bossche ende gestelt ter scerper examinacien, aldair hy bekende sulck als voirs. is gedaen te hebben om deswille dat hy als scrobber meer winninge soude hebben in dien dat zyn smeringe metten vreyssen ende andere substancie die hy dair toe nam effect sorteerde*".
[248] ARAB, *Hoog Schoutsrekeningen Den Bosch*, inv. 12996. Sharp interrogation is a quite literal translation of 'scerper examinacien' and indicates torture.

Additionally, the stigma attached to the 'undeserving poor' contributed to suspicions and distrust directed at lower-order plague workers, influencing the development of such conspiracy theories.

Theories on the poor and poor people as plague spreaders

The concepts of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor have deep historical roots, emerging from the 12th century onwards.[249] The deserving poor were those deemed incapable of working due to physical conditions or belonging to a 'poor' monastic order. On the other hand, the undeserving poor were individuals capable of working but struggling to make ends meet.[250] Augustine added an extra layer to this categorization, including those leading an 'evil way of life'.[251] This group encompassed individuals with professions or lifestyles considered incompatible with the Catholic Church's teachings, such as sex workers or those accused of sorcery. Beyond these distinctions, other religious or social groups that transgressed social norms, like vagrants, were also excluded from charitable assistance. Beggars, too, were often seen as part of the 'undeserving poor' and were sometimes removed and placed outside city walls. This complex classification system influenced societal attitudes towards various groups, impacting their access to help and charity, and contributed to the stigmatization and marginalization of specific communities.

This was also the case in 1571 in Antwerp, when all beggars were removed outside of the city.[252] This was not the only instance of the removal of beggars outside the city walls. Beggars were also prohibited from begging outside churches and houses and were forced to carry a white stick at all times.[253] Beggars were in most cases portrayed and seen as undeserving poor, who were often excluded from the rest of the civil society.

Plague workers, often survivors from impoverished backgrounds, encountered multifaceted stigmas mirroring those directed at the broader impoverished populace.[254] Much like the general poor,

[249] Sharon Ann Farmer, *Approaches to Poverty in Medieval Europe: Complexities, Contradictions, Transformations, C. 1100-1500* (Turnhout: Brepolis, 2016), 11.
[250] Ibid., 11.
[251] Ibid., 11.
[252] Van Schevensteen, 'Over pestepidemieën', 1064
[253] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 72. In an ordinance from the second of October 1556.
[254] Blažina-Tomić and Blažina, *Expelling the plague*, 187.

these workers were cast as morally questionable, labeled as drunkards and thieves, as seen in Venice where plague workers bore the brunt of such stigmatization.[255] In Brabant, *schrobbers* faced stringent regulations in Antwerp, restricting their activities such as staying at taverns, public drinking, nighttime travel, and mandating the constant presence of a white stick.[256] Similar limitations were imposed in Dubrovnik, where plague workers, starting in 1482, were barred from mingling with ordinary citizens.[257] Geneva made a pronounced focus on financial motives, with judges attributing the actions of plague workers solely to a pursuit of profit and a deliberate intent to spread the disease.[258] Paradoxically, despite their endeavors to secure a livelihood, plague workers found themselves further marginalized within their lower social class.

The undeserving poor were often stigmatized as untrustworthy, lazy, immoral, and other negative terms. As mentioned, they were also seen as possible vectors of the plague, connected to unhygienic living standards. This association between hygiene, dirt, and plague was reflected in ordinances, like the one in 1571, where article 31 contained strict rules and regulations regarding cleanliness to prevent the spread of the plague.[259] The ordinance emphasized hygiene practices, mandating people to clean with water, sweep diligently, and centralize trash collection.[260] Article 32 prohibited the disposal of dead animals and blood on the streets, requiring proper disposal with the trash or underground.[261] Article 33 outlined the collection of rubbish by dedicated trash carts, stressing the removal of all waste.[262] Although hygiene regulations during plague outbreaks were not explicitly class-specific, the sixteenth century witnessed an increasing link between poverty, hygiene deficiencies, and disease spread.[263] This changing perspective influenced accusations and stigmatization directed at lower-class plague workers during this period.

[255] Blažina-Tomić and Blažina, *Expelling the plague*, 187.
[256] Van Schevensteen, *Documents I*.
[257] Blažina-Tomić and Blažina, *Expelling the plague*, 187.
[258] Naphy, *Plagues, potions and poisons*, 32.
[259] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 94-95.
[260] Ibid., 94-95. Translated from: "*Omme alle stancken, vuylicheyden ende quade reucken te verhoedene die de voirs. siecte soude moghen causeren, tercken oft doen verbreyden*".
[261] Ibid., 95.
[262] Ibid., 95. Trash carts a translation of '*vuylniskerren*' as used in the ordinance of 1571.
[263] Murphy, 'Plague Hospitals and poor relief in late medieval and early modern France', 355.

Over time, the *cellebroeders* and *zwarte zusters* built a positive reputation for their efforts in dealing with outbreaks. This reputation contributed to the trust placed in them by the city council. Isolation measures were imposed, but likely less stringent than those on other plague workers. The city council recognized in the ordinances the importance of flexibility for the *cellebroeders* and *zwarte zusters* to carry out their caregiving duties, for instance in the ordinance of 1555.[264] In contrast to other workers facing persecution, these monastic orders secured high financial compensation and protection from the city council through the ordinances.

In the researched period from around 1468 until 1571, the plague ordinances of Antwerp reveal a notable institutionalization of tasks, rules, and regulations related to the *cellebroeders* and *zwarte zusters*. The ordinances of 1513 and 1534 do not mention these monastic orders.[265] However, on 21 January 1555, the *cellebroeders* are first introduced in an ordinance issued by the reeve of Antwerp, Jan van Immerseel.[266] This specific ordinance sheds light on the activities of the *cellebroeders*. It starts with details about the construction of their new convent, highlighting the financial strain on their order.[267] The ordinance proceeds with the *cellebroeders* requesting assistance from the city council, which is followed by a city council report on addressing this plea.[268] The ordinance comprises twelve articles, signifying a comprehensive set of regulations. The first article stipulates that the *cellebroeders* have exclusive rights to carry and bury the corpses of those who died within the city walls of Antwerp.[269] They are also appointed to serve at the funerals of those they bury, earning three *stuyvers* for each *cellebroeder* who is present.[270] For the coffin and burial of pestilential corpses, they receive 16 *stuyvers*. Anyone else attempting to handle such corpses must fully compensate the *cellebroeders*.[271] This marks a pivotal moment in 1555 when the *cellebroeders* solidify the institutionalization of their tasks, securing a steady wage, as they are entrusted with burying all, not just pestilential corpses or the poor. In

[264] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 47-53.
[265] Ibid., 9-14. & 27-32.
[266] Ibid., 47-53.
[267] Ibid., 48-49.
[268] Ibid., 49-50.
[269] Ibid., 50.
[270] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 50.
[271] Ibid., 51.

subsequent ordinances from 27 June 1555 onwards, the *cellebroeders* are consistently mentioned.[272] The 1571 ordinance introduces additional rules and regulations, further emphasizing the evolving status and responsibilities of the *cellebroeders* and *zwarte zusters* in the management of plague-related activities.

In the 1571 ordinance, the new rules and regulations for health workers, notably the *cellebroeders* and *zwarte zusters*, were promptly addressed. The first article highlights the role of *zwarte zusters*, allowing them to visit houses and individuals infected by the plague.[273] This signifies a level of trust in their ability to navigate plague-stricken areas without being considered plague spreaders. The 14th article presented yet another exception for the *cellebroeders* and *zwarte zusters* in contrast to the *schrobbers*. *Cellebroeders*, alongside 'plague masters' and surgeons, retained the freedom to move with in society.[274] This reflects the trust placed in the *cellebroeders* and *zwarte zusters*, contrasting with the mistrust and strict regulations imposed on *schrobbers* who were viewed as potential plague spreaders. Article 21 details specific guidelines for handling pestilential corpses. None were to be buried inside or outside the church, emphasizing the use of two buckets of quicklime to mitigate corruption.[275] This practice aimed to prevent the spread of contagion from the bodies.[276] The ordinance elaborated on how the *cellebroeders* were to carry both corpses and living plague-infected individuals. They follow a sequence, warning everyone to vacate the streets during this process.[277] A brief recapitulation of the 1555 ordinance emphasize that only the *cellebroeders* and *zwarte zusters* are permitted and committed to burying the corpses.[278] Out of the forty articles in the ordinance, five are specifically dedicated to outlining the roles and responsibilities of the *cellebroeders* and *zwarte zusters*. This allocation of articles underscores the significance of these monastic orders in the management of plague-related activities during this period.

[272] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 55-70.
[273] Ibid., 84.
[274] Ibid., 89.
[275] Ibid., 91.
[276] Ibid., 91-92.
[277] Ibid., 92.
[278] Ibid., 92.

The compensation and protection granted to the *cellebroeders* and *zwarte zusters* by the city can be further understood in the context of the numerous processions organized against the plague or to seek protection from it. The city council initiated these processions during times of plague outbreaks and even in periods when the plague was not present. For instance, in 1525, a procession was called for "rest and peace, and may God protect us from the plague".[279] Similarly, in 1530, a procession aimed to safeguard the people of Antwerp from the plague.[280] In 1533, two processions were conducted—one to implore God's protection against the plague and another to free the city from the 'sweating sickness'.[281] This pattern of organizing processions persisted throughout the researched period, demonstrating the city council's efforts to seek divine intervention for protection against the plague. The connection between these processions and the involvement of monastic orders becomes apparent. The city council likely considered these orders, especially those accepted and granted authority by the pope, as reliable entities to care for and bury individuals affected by the plague. This choice may have been influenced by the prevailing theory of the deserving and undeserving poor, coupled with the general perception of poor people as potential plague spreaders. The institutionalization of the *cellebroeders* and zwarte zusters was likely facilitated by their acceptance by religious authorities, as opposed to relying on individuals who were distrusted due to their economic status or surviving the plague. Thus, the city councils engagement with monastic orders can be seen as a strategic response, aligning with religious practices and beliefs to combat and cope with the challenges posed by the plague.

The professionalization and institutionalization of the *cellebroeders* and zwarte zusters were rooted in their commitment to the works of mercy, which were integral to their religious beliefs and practices. Both orders dedicated themselves to fulfilling aspects of the corporal works of mercy, which are based on biblical teachings.[282] The *cellebroeders* focused primarily on the seventh work of mercy, burying the dead, but both the zwarte zusters and *cellebroeders* extended their mission to caring for the sick. This commitment to the works of mercy provided a foundation for the expansion of both orders

[279] Van Schevensteen, *Documents* I, 22. Translated from: "*Processie van devotie voor peys en vrede, en dat God ons beschermen wilt van de peste*".
[280] Ibid., 25. Translated from: "*Processie tot bewaeren van de haestige sieckte & pestilentie*".
[281] Ibid., 27.
[282] Matthew 25: 35-46.

into professional healthcare roles, where they made a living by providing essential services. Over time, the *cellebroeders*, in particular, evolved to become the plague masters of the city, earning substantial annual incomes, often in the form of hundreds of guilders.[283] What began as lay organizations striving to fulfill the works of mercy transformed into professional entities. The city council played a significant role in this transformation by prohibiting these orders from begging or relying on the goodwill of the people. Instead, the city began to fully fund their salaries, recognizing the value of their services. This transformation stands in stark contrast to the experiences of lower orders of plague workers who faced suspicions, accusations, and convictions, often instigated by the same city council. The complete trust placed in the *cellebroeders* by the city council may not be fully explained by their religious commitment alone. Other factors, such as the reliability, organization, and effectiveness of the *cellebroeders* in fulfilling their duties, likely contributed to the city council's trust. The established reputation of the *cellebroeders* and their ability to navigate the challenges posed by the plague further solidified the city's confidence in their capabilities.

The continuity in suspicions and conspiracy theories surrounding lower orders of plague workers persisted from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century. The belief that these workers were responsible for transmitting the plague, using substances made from the corpses or bodies of plague victims to contaminate water wells or smear surfaces like doorknobs and railings, remained the same over time. The allegations against different groups, from Jewish people during the initial outbreaks in the 1347-1353 period to *reeuwers* and *schrobbers* in the sixteenth century, followed a similar pattern. While the methods of transmission remained unchanged, the motives behind the accusations evolved over time. There was a shift from early notions of devilish, heretic, and sorcery motives to more financial motivations. Both types of motives coexisted in the early sixteenth century, but the devilish and sorcery theories seemed to fade during this period. One possible explanation, as suggested by Vanysacker, could be the decrease in prosecutions against sorcerers after 1520.[284] Another influencing factor could be the evolving understanding of plague transmission by the city council and plague masters. The shift in focus from devilish motives to more scientific explanations like miasma and

[283] Schevensteen, 'Over pestepidemieën', 1083.
[284] Vanysacker, 'Witch Hunts in the Low Countries', 114.

contagion theories might have played a role in reshaping the accusations against plague workers. The statements of suspected plague spreaders attempting to avoid being burned at the stake may have influenced the changing narrative.

Additionally, looking at other regions like Milan, where plague spreaders were known as *untori*, Samuel Cohn Jr. suggests that these individuals were not necessarily poor outcasts but mostly middle-class local population.[285] Cohn even questions whether plague cleaners were accused of intentionally spreading the plague.[286] This perspective conflicts with the research mentioned in this paper, where plague workers, especially cleaners, were indeed blamed for the spread of the plague. The contrasting theories presented by Cohn and Naphy regarding the motives and actions of plague spreaders highlight the complexity of understanding the motivations. Cohn's observation in Milan during the declining phase of the plague in 1630, where suspicions and prosecutions did not rise despite the decrease in the plague's prevalence, challenges the assumption that financial gain was the primary motivation for intentionally spreading the plague.[287] Cohn argues against the idea that if plague workers were financially motivated to spread the plague, suspicions and prosecutions would have intensified during periods of plague decline. This perspective also contradicts Naphy's theory, which posits that most prosecuted plague workers were indeed guilty of attempting to spread the plague for financial gain.[288] Moreover, Cohn suggests that the widespread hunt for and prosecutions of plague spreaders did not commence until 1574.[289] This discrepancy raises questions about the timelines and regional variations in the response to perceived plague spreaders. The suspicion and prosecution of lower-order plague workers, such as the *schrobbers* in Den Bosch or Turnhout, could be seen as attempts to establish or maintain a position as professional healthcare workers.

[285] Cohn, *Epidemics*, 143-145. *Untori* translates from Italian into English as 'Infectors'.
[286] Ibid., 135-136.
[287] Ibid., 135.
[288] Naphy, *Plagues, Poisons and Potions*, 5–6, 33, 77, 172, 182.
[289] Cohn, *Epidemics*, 132.

Conclusion

This research aimed to answer the question: Why *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* at times were stigmatized, despite their appointment as plague workers and why this did not apply to the *cellebroeders* in the Duchy of Brabant and the County of Flanders in the period from 1347 to 1550. The inquiry was addressed in three chapters. The first chapter identified who the plague workers were, how their work was regulated, and how healthcare and their roles became more professionalized. The second chapter explored the burning of the Waldensians and its connection to the *reeuwers*' persecution in Brabant. Contrary to argument of Samuel Cohn Jr. regarding Italy and France, suspicions and conspiracy theories about plague spreading in Brabant were tied to witchcraft. The *reeuwers* were accused of using "*wonderlijke saken*" to spread the plague and were executed for these alleged crimes. The fact that sorcery was the basis of the convictions of the *reeuwers* in 1468 is also in contrast with historiography on this topic in the Low Countries. The connection between sorcery and the burning of *reeuwers* in 1468 is way earlier than in the research of William Naphy where the connection between plague spreading and sorcery was made from 1571. Although the period in which these burnings took place was previously seen as relatively calm when it comes to the burning of sorcerers, the opposite seems to have been the case. The third chapter investigated the link between financial motives and the plague's deliberate spread by *schrobbers*, who were accused of increasing their income by intentionally spreading the disease. This research can be placed in the historiographic debate on plague spreading, greasers and sorcery. This research shows the difference between the researched areas of Naphy, Cohn and Zlata Blažina-Tomić and Vesna Blažina and Duchy of Brabant and County of Flanders, especially when it comes to the burning of plague workers and their alleged motives for plague spreading. Furthermore this research contributes to the existing historiography on the plague in the Low Countries and how the cities and societies in the Duchy of Brabant and the County of Flanders reacted to outbreaks of plague.

As already mentioned in the introduction of the third chapter, people could earn their livelihood because of an outbreak of the plague. The fact that people could earn a rather good income out of this deadly and devastating plague caused distrust by members of the city's societies. This is shown in the

cases of the *reeuwers* and *schrobbers* in either Ghent, Antwerp, Turnhout, Den Bosch and also in other countries and cities such as Geneva, Dubrovnik, and Venice. As mentioned in chapter three, there were many theories on how poor people could suddenly make a livelihood because of the plague. But others, like the plague doctors or plague masters, could earn more and even become rich. The order of the *cellebroeders* in Antwerp had a lot of monetary problems when building a new convent in 1555, but their monopolization of carrying and burying the corpses saved them financially. So both groups earned their existence because of the plague, while one was prosecuted, the other group was earning more and more.

In the second chapter, the spread of the plague is linked to the burning of the Waldensians in Arras in 1459-1460. Primary sources indicate that the *reeuwers* used sorcery to spread the plague. The connection between sorcery and plague spreading, particularly by lower-order plague workers, is seldom made in the historiography of the fifteenth century. Historically, those accused of sorcery often belonged to the lower classes of society and were typically marginalized from civil society. This even went as far that the word Vaudois meant both sorcerer as well as Waldensian in France. As well as the connection between the word *schrobber* and *schrobbe* in the Middle Dutch language. The connection between the Waldensians of Arras and the *reeuwers* in Bruges were however made in the primary sources. Both Anthonis the Roovere as Adriaan de But made this connection in their chronicles. Only the Flemish historian Huyghebaert made the connection between both events but after his article these sentiments seemed to have disappeared in the historiography. In the third chapter, the dimension of sorcery vanishes, though the accusations against the *schrobbers* remain the same. The underlying theories behind these accusations shift from sorcery to economic motives both targeting (undeserving) poor.

Earning a livelihood did not help the lower order of plague workers escape the stigmatization and prejudice associated with the undeserving poor. Instead, it validated the prevailing theories and ideas in society. The lower orders of plague workers earned their livelihood through the handling of a deadly disease, leading to accusations of spreading the plague. Their means of earning were seen as suspicious and contrary to the "good and devoted" Christian way. These workers were accused of spreading the plague among "good and devoted" Christians and killing them to generate more work and

thus benefit financially. This occurred during a complicated time of healthcare institutionalization and professionalization, amidst suspicions and convictions based on sorcery, and during a deadly epidemic that profoundly impacted society. Despite their stigmatization, the *schrobbers* and *schrobsters* were not banned from their jobs, as maintaining a clean city was seen as crucial to preventing the plague's spread according to most plague tracts. Polluted and corrupted air and environment were directly linked to the spreading of the plague. Thus, city councils needed the *schrobbers* to maintain sanitation but also used them as scapegoats for the plague's spread. This contradiction caused a situation where the *schrobbers* earned their livelihood on the one hand while facing prosecution on the other.

The *cellebroeders* were part of the Christian elite, especially after being officially accepted and admitted by the pope and the cities as grave diggers and corpse bearers who performed tasks of mercy. They sustained their order through the plague, fulfilling duties seen as acts of compassion while burying the dead in a manner reminiscent of Jesus, preparing for the Day of Reckoning. Their activities were generally perceived as serving a noble purpose, conducted by "good and devoted" Christians following the order of Alexius from Rome (a 5th-century Roman monk). In stark contrast, the lower order of plague workers were seen as immoral, non-devout Christians, primarily concerned with maintaining their income. They faced accusations of intentionally spreading the plague to sustain their livelihood. This dual perception underscored the difference between the *cellebroeders*' respected service and the stigmatized actions of the lower order of plague workers. The motivations behind the actions of the accused plague spreader remain complex. While some *schrobbers* may have engaged in such practices to maintain a source of income and employment, others may have been persecuted because of deeper societal prejudices and convictions, reminiscent of historical biases against groups like Jews and the underserving poor.

The suspicions and convictions surrounding plague spreaders prevented them from achieving official recognition and professional status similar to that of the *cellebroeders*. The lack of organization and institutionalization among the *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* further hindered their ability to establish themselves as respected professionals. It is challenging to determine whether internal factors or external pressures, such as conspiracy theories, played a greater role in impeding their professionalization. However, it is evident that these conspiracy theories and convictions had a detrimental impact on the

reputation of *schrobbers* and *reeuwers*. This led to widespread distrust within civil society and may have even fostered distrust among the plague workers themselves. In a paradoxical twist, the efforts of *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* to escape their status as the undeserving poor by engaging in work only served to further stigmatize and prosecute them. This dynamic underscored the complexities of societal perceptions and the challenges faced by marginalized groups seeking to improve their circumstances as lower class plague workers.

This research is in my opinion only the beginning and start of further and more researches on this subject. Especially on the *schrobbers* and *reeuwers* more and more extensive research needs to be done. Research on who they really were, what drove them to do such risky jobs and to formulate more sharply why they were constantly suspected of spreading the plague on purpose and therefore often being burned at the stake. This research showed that the Low Countries can deliver a different view on plague spreaders than the views of Naphy and Cohn on Italy, France and Switzerland for instance. A new dimension and the connection with sorcery is quite interesting in my opinion. It seemed that the theories and accusations on plague spreading and sorcery were widespread and different groups, such as Jews, Waldensians and *reeuwers*, had to deal with the same kind of accusations. Also the connection between the underserving poor and spreading of the plague is interesting and contributes to a lager historiography on plague spreading. It could of course be a coincidence that the general meeting of the *cellebroeders* took place in the same year as the burning of the *reeuwers*, but there could also be a connection between both events. More research on this topic and on the role and conflicts between different groups of plague workers can research these connections deeper and more extensive. I look forward continuing to contribute to this kind of work to add to the historiography and give new dimensions to the already existing research on the plague in both the Low Countries as well as the rest of Medieval and Early Modern Europe.

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