



Past life and death in a Flemish town. An archaeo-anthropological study of burials from the medieval and post-medieval St. Rombout's cemetery in Mechelen, Belgium (10th–18th centuries CE)

Katrien Van de Vijver*

Center for Archaeological Sciences, KU Leuven, Celestijnenlaan 200E – bus 2409, B-3001 Leuven, Belgium

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Skeletal analysis
Urban cemetery
Medieval
Post-medieval
Social organisation
Funerary practices
Contextual analysis

ABSTRACT

The excavation on St. Rombout's cemetery in Mechelen, Belgium yielded 4158 individual articulated remains in 3617 graves. The burials showed relatively extensive variation in the construction of the graves and treatment of bodies, expressed by the presence of a coffin or objects, the orientation and position of the body and the number of individuals in the grave. To provide a more in-depth picture of social organisation and funerary practices, a sub-sample of 351 individuals was studied in detail through a contextual analysis. Burial characteristics related to wealth and social background were confronted with skeletal parameters, including age, sex and pathological changes which can be related to growth disturbances, trauma and physical stress, disease and dental health. The large number of burials and the long period of use of the cemetery, from the 10th to 18th century CE, provide an exceptional opportunity to observe changes over time as well as between groups buried in this parish churchyard.

The results showed differences in burial modes associated with age, sex and pathological changes that can be related to social age, gender and socio-economic background. They particularly reveal a possible sub-group in the population consisting of adolescents and young male adults, who showed indications for more severe physical stress, growth disturbances and disease and were buried in less expensive and more unusual graves.

1. Introduction

1.1. Medieval and post-medieval burial practices

Traditional burial practice in the late Middle Ages (1050–1550 CE) and post-medieval period (1550–1850 CE) in North-Western Europe is generally thought to consist of single inhumation of a supine, extended body along a west-east orientation, in a shroud, coffin or plain earth. However, while Christian burials are often considered to be uniform, studies have demonstrated extensive differences within and between cemeteries and over time (Gilchrist and Sloane, 2005; Roberts, 2009: 50–51; Cherryson et al., 2012). Variation in burial type and location depended mostly on socio-economic background (Harding, 1998; Cherryson et al., 2012: 19), besides the nature of the population and cemetery, personal preferences, social roles and relationships and regional and temporal traditions (Harding, 1998: 54–57; Harding, 2002). Circumstances of death and a deviant social background could also affect funerary practices, for example in the case of unbaptised infants, suicides or mass graves related to epidemics, famine or violence (Daniell, 1997: 103–106; Alexandre-Bidon, 1998: 258–267; Harding,

1998: 60–61; Gilchrist and Sloane, 2005: 71; Cherryson et al., 2012: 105–132).

Numerous studies of burial grounds from the Middle Ages and post-medieval period have been published in Britain and the Netherlands. Britain and France have also produced several general studies on funerary customs in these periods. They may serve as comparison, since these are neighbouring countries of Belgium with similar social organisation, religion and lifeways and general trends in mortuary practices. Variation in mortuary practices has been observed in the burial environment and in the manipulation of the body. The majority of individuals were buried in a shroud in plain earth graves (Daniell, 1997: 44; Alexandre-Bidon, 1998: 136; Gilchrist and Sloane, 2005: 111), and archival sources indicate coffin burials were more expensive (Harding, 2002: 59–60). The wooden coffin was the most frequently used container and became increasingly common from the 15th–16th centuries onwards, although frequencies varied between cemeteries (Alexandre-Bidon, 1998: 136; Harding, 2002: 59–60; Gilchrist and Sloane, 2005: 111–119; Cherryson et al., 2012: 45–57). Another variation in burial environment could be the presence of a grave lining of ash, lime, soil or vegetal matter, related to practical or religious and symbolic motives.

* Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, Vautierstraat 29, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium.
E-mail address: kvandevijver@naturalsciences.be.

Graves could also be lined with stones, bricks or metal, related to status and wealth (Daniell, 1997: 157–162; Alexandre-Bidon, 1998: 143; Gilchrist and Sloane, 2005: 120–124; Roberts, 2009: 50–51; Cherryson et al., 2012: 112; Deforce et al., 2015; Schotsmans et al., 2015). Two or more individuals could be deposited in the same grave. In super-imposed burials a grave pit was used for several consecutive depositions, suggesting collective burial. This implies a wish to be buried together, besides an intention to save money and space (Alexandre-Bidon, 1993: 191; Harding, 2002: 65; Gilchrist and Sloane, 2005: 156–158; Cherryson et al., 2012: 97). Multiple burials signify the simultaneous deposition of individuals (Duday, 2009: 98–104; Castex et al., 2014: 299–300).

Orientations deviating from a west-east orientation were unusual and have been associated with varied explanations, including regional variation, punishment, carelessness, accidents, spatial organisation or social background, e.g. priests in the post-medieval period (Daniell, 1997: 148–149; Gilchrist and Sloane, 2005: 152–153; Gilchrist, 2012: 204). Body position showed more variation, mainly in the position of the arms. Prone burial is more unusual and often related to a deviant social background or circumstances of death, but may also represent penance or piety or a casual or clandestine deposition (Alexandre-Bidon, 1998: 135–136; Gilchrist and Sloane, 2005: 153–154). Arm positions could be intentional or symbolic, related to practical considerations or due to handling of the body or coffin and later taphonomic disturbances (Alexandre-Bidon, 1993: 190–195; Gilchrist and Sloane, 2005: 151–156). Objects were rare in late medieval and post-medieval burials and consisted mainly of clothing elements, pins and adornments, besides devotional objects, coins, apotropaic items or mementoes (Daniell, 1997: 149; Alexandre-Bidon, 1998; Gilchrist and Sloane, 2005; Cherryson et al., 2012).

1.2. Age and gender in the medieval and post-medieval period

Differences in the funerary treatment of non-adults in medieval and post-medieval cemeteries, such as spatial patterns and their relatively meagre burials, have been associated with a lower social status. Elaborate burials have nonetheless been observed for infants and children (Harding, 1998: 58; Gilchrist, 2012: 208–209). Sex, or rather gender, seems to have had less influence on burial (Harding, 1998: 57). Sex is used as a biological concept while gender is related to culture and influenced by age, socio-economic background, ethnicity and religion (Sofaer, 2006: 89–116; Hollimon, 2011). Age is also both a biological and varying cultural concept. Although osteology uses chronological categories based on the anatomical development of an individual to determine social age categories, these do not necessarily correspond to those used in the past. Osteological categories are still useful, since biological age and sex affect how people are perceived (Sofaer, 2006; Lewis, 2007: 5–7).

Historical studies from Britain and France show there was no uniform way of life in the Middle Ages, which was influenced by age, gender and socio-economic status (Shahar, 1990; Alexandre-Bidon and Lett, 1997; Connell et al., 2012: 169–170). Concepts of ageing were different in the medieval period and historical studies have indicated that adulthood was reached at a later age, while old age came earlier (Gilchrist, 2012: 42).

The stage of *infantia* (birth to seven years) was viewed as helpless and dependent (Shahar, 1990: 23). Between one and two years of age individuals attain important stages of development, such as walking, talking and social interaction which may have influenced burial practices. Stages such as crawling, walking, work and play also affect the risk of disease and injury (Lewis, 2007: 7; Gilchrist, 2012: 48). *Pueritia* (7–14 years) was the stage in which training and education started and differences between boys and girls became more important. From this age many children would have started to contribute to household tasks, while from 10 to 12 years of age they could take on employment outside the home or be sent away for training or education for the higher

classes, as evidenced by British and French studies. Children from the lower classes likely had a more extensive workload (Shahar, 1990; Alexandre-Bidon and Lett, 1997; Heywood, 2001; Gilchrist, 2012). Around age 12 in girls and 14 in boys puberty began with *adolescencia*, which could last until 21 to 28 years of age. For many, and particularly for males, this involved employment in service or apprenticeship and leaving home. Apprenticeships could last from 2 to 3 up to 10 years and adolescents were probably an important part of the workforce. Many boys and particularly girls were also employed as servants, with most in their late teens or twenties (Shahar, 1990; Hanawalt, 1993; Alexandre-Bidon and Lett, 1997; Heywood, 2001). It has been suggested that males in the Middle Ages could have had an ‘extended adolescence’ into biological maturity. Although it was different for females, their social adolescence also did not exactly correspond with biological puberty. Differences can be observed between socio-economic groups (Hanawalt, 1993: 111; Gilchrist, 2012: 41–42). Osteological studies have now suggested that the period of biological juvenile development could also extend beyond the teens (Gilchrist, 2012: 41–42; Lewis et al., 2015).

Like in most societies, gender also influenced socio-economic status. Both children and women were less valued and less independent (Dyer, 1998: 25; Sullivan, 2004). Sources from Britain and France indicate some girls could be trained as artisans or small shopkeepers and sent away as apprentices. Girls were employed in textile or food industries or as servants. Boys could be employed in more varied types of work, such as crafts, with merchants or bankers, as servants or labourers (Shahar, 1990: 231; Alexandre-Bidon and Lett, 1997: 157–159; Gilchrist, 2012: 145–147). Marriage could be postponed by apprenticeship, service and migration until around 23 for women and 26 for men, which resulted in a period in which these women enjoyed some independence. Adulthood generally included independence for men, while women became more dependent when they married (Shahar, 1990: 30; Hanawalt, 1993; Gilchrist, 2012: 38). Writers in the late medieval period also represent the composition of their society with many subtle layers of varying status, although urban social groups were less obviously demarcated (Dyer, 1998: 25–26), and differences based on age and gender varied between social groups.

1.3. Contextual skeletal analyses

Studying mortality profiles of excavated assemblages can inform us on funerary practices as well as the physical health and the composition and social organisation of the population. Unfortunately infants and children are often underrepresented, although a high non-adult mortality has been estimated between 30 and 70% for pre-industrial societies (Saunders and Barrans, 1999: 183; Lewis, 2007: 22). Adult mortality was influenced by genetic background, sex, socio-economic status, environment and occasional mortality crises (Jackes, 2011: 108; Gilchrist, 2012: 46). Excavated skeletal assemblages do not provide a representative picture and consist of only part of the original, living population. Mortality patterns, migration and fertility influence the composition of the dead population. Many cemeteries are not fully excavated, while some burials may not be preserved. The background of the population, funerary practices and spatial organisation can also create a selection and influence the composition of an assemblage (Chapman and Randsborg, 1981: 22; Mays, 1998: 13–14; Séguy, 2006; Sellier, 2011). Medieval and post-medieval urban cemeteries were generally intensively used, with a high degree of disturbance of older burials, which unfortunately only allows the recognition of wide periods (Lauwers, 2006; Cherryson et al., 2012: 160; Gilchrist, 2012: 46). Excavated burials also represent only the final deposition of the cadaver and form only part of the original funerary gestures. Evidence of preparation and transport of the body and remembrance is rarely available, but may have included additional differentiating characteristics (Blaizot, 2014a: 93). The organisation and location of the grave and the way in which the body was treated may nevertheless show differences

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7444495>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7444495>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)