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The air we breathe: a study into the impact of historical socioeconomic changes on the respiratory health of past Dutch populations (ca. 470-1850 CE)

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The Air We Breathe

For centuries, the air people breathed shaped their lives in ways they may never have understood. In crowded medieval streets, smoky workshops, and damp rural homes, respiratory diseases quietly took hold, often leaving traces not in medical records, but in the bones of the dead.

This study explores how conditions like sinusitis, infectious middle ear disease, and pleural inflammation were influenced by urbanization, industrialization, and changing social and economic landscapes in the Netherlands from the medieval to post-medieval periods. Drawing on skeletal remains from 13 archaeological sites, it investigates how the growth of cities and evolving lifestyles impacted respiratory health across time.

What emerges is a complex picture: while we often associate respiratory illness with modern pollution, this research reveals it as a long-standing burden, deeply influenced by how people lived and worked.

By connecting past environments with patterns of disease, this dissertation offers a deeper understanding of how human health has always been tied to the spaces we inhabit.

The Air We Breathe

Maia Casna

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