

Bathing Culture in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period: Debunking a Modern Myth, with a Focus on the Contribution by Der König vom Odenwald

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Citation: Classen, A. (2025). Bathing Culture in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period: Debunking a Modern Myth, with a Focus on the Contribution by Der König vom Odenwald. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 1(1), 01-09.

Definition

It is one of the favorite strategies by many people to reflect generally and superficially on the past for comparative purposes and then to cast it in mostly negative terms. Thereby they can aggrandize and idealize their own culture as if all that technological progress in the modern world really represented progress for humanity in ethical, moral, or spiritual, and then also material terms. The Middle Ages and also the following centuries were, so the story goes, mostly dark, cold, barbaric, and ignorant, entirely subservient to the Catholic Church, and only with the rise of the Renaissance, later the age of the Enlightenment, did notable progress develop. Numerous medievalists have rallied against this myth, but myths tend to be stronger than historical facts, at least in popular opinions. In particular, the concept of physical hygiene proves to be most insightful in this regard especially because we have much more evidence available confirming a relatively higher level of hygiene in the pre-modern world than most commentators today want to believe. After a critical review of the common process of myth making today and the notion of dirt, this article will examine the statements by the rather obscure and yet important poet *Der König vom Odenwald* who had much to say about this and other related topics in cultural-historical terms. His comments and those by numerous contemporaries easily confirm that we must put to rest this foolish myth of the dirty Middle Ages and the early modern period. Most scholars are fully aware of this need, but we often lack the concrete evidence to make this claim.

Keywords: history of hygiene; medieval bathing culture; modern myth-making; *Der König vom Odenwald*; modern fake concepts of the past; misconceptions

1. Introduction

As we all know, unfortunately, fake news always tend to be much more popular than factual news, but our task as scholars centrally pertains to efforts to correct what is generally assumed and what can be confirmed as facts solidly based on the relevant evidence. Human fantasy leans toward self-illusion and self-glorification, which then implies that the present is so much better than the past, whatever period is chosen for such an elusive and meaningless comparison. Of course, in material and technical terms, the present world seems to be supremely advanced, but does that mean that we are better off today than in the past? What does cultural sophistication really mean when we investigate cultural history at large? Can we truly determine whether we are happier people today than those in the Middle Ages, for instance? Certainly a highly ambivalent and amorphous notion that cannot be addressed here in this short paper but still needs to be kept in mind. Anyone invested in the history of hygiene extending all the way to the Middle Ages and antiquity knows, of course, that such ideologizing concepts of dirt, primitiveness, and hence unhealthy conditions are only reflections of ignorance by people in our own time. In fact, the projection of the past as the very opposite to the present – imagined as a rather childish, simple-minded, and unsophisticated world – is the result of specific media-driven strategies to dramatize the ‘dirt’ in previous periods and to feed propaganda interests to create an image of the pre-modern period as a barbaric alterity we have ‘fortunately’ left behind. To be sure, the development of robotic machines, the internet, and other technologies moves us ahead in material terms, but those gadgets, operation systems, and tools have no impact at all on our ethics, morality, ideals, and values, or rather constitute a threat to human life. Modern laughter about the past is actually a reflection of our ignorance and sheer hubris as to the meaning of humanity. In the first part of this paper, I will first review the result of the popularization of the Middle Ages with all the ensuing formation of mythical concepts. This will then lead over to some reflections on what has been achieved already regarding the critical analysis of modern ideologizing regarding the past. And finally, this paper will bring to light the strong evidence of a generally positively viewed bathing culture in the late Middle Ages, a poem by the thirteenth-century *König vom Odenwald*.

2. History Is Constant Change, and Progress is a Relative Term

Of course, human culture is constantly changing, whether improving or deteriorating, and dirt thus quickly proves to be a highly relative term much depending on the context and the actual cultural concept characterizing a specific society. By the same token, the history of hygiene, medicine, and health has undergone constant changes, which have confused and misled many modern readers because they desire for clean-cut and absolutist categories distinguishing between good [= today] and bad [= the past]. Research has already offered plenty of evidence confirming a much more nuanced and complex situation on the ground during the pre-modern period, and this also regarding the history of hygiene. Undoubtedly, people cleaned themselves, took baths, washed their clothes, made sure to have access to good drinking water whenever possible, but not everyone could enjoy the same level of hygiene, all depending on the resources, climatic conditions, and technological and architectural development. The textual analysis below will illustrate this by discussing one unique literary document.

To be transparent, I do not intend here a philosophical examination regarding the true nature of individual happiness and its progress or decline in the course of time, which would require a book-length study and more. Instead, I will examine simply the question of whether the Middle Ages and early modern period knew already a culture of washing and cleaning the human body and whether we could thereby determine more precisely what medieval

culture looked like in material terms. It might be possible to correlate personal hygiene with individual happiness, but such a study would require extensive philosophical, religious, ethical, and moral reflections that would be beyond the limits of this brief analysis [1].

As Virginia Smith now points out: "In the 700 years between c.800 and 1500 the urge for constant domestic improvement is visible in the steady separation and multiplication of spaces – something we now recognize as a sign of increased personal refinement" [2, p. 156]. As evidence for this global statement, she refers to many different health regimens, medical tracts, comments on clothing (undergarment), pregnancy, and then states with all necessary clarity that the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century commonly knew public baths where people of both sexes regularly cleaned themselves without any shame, as in modern-day saunas in Japan or Finland. But in her view, there is both much truth and also some lack of awareness of the highly problematic nature of the entire issue in cultural-historical terms [2, p. 168]. So, we hear, for instance: "Virtually all commentators, approving or disapproving, agreed on the essential innocence of the free manners of the public baths" [2, p. 169]. Overall, Smith's a bit too sweeping, often rather generalizing evaluations certainly hit the target well, at least in broad terms, but they tend to refrain from more detailed analysis and do not even consider the strongly opposing views formulated in modern times about earlier forms of hygiene whether they were correct or not. Her purpose is to offer a historical perspective from antiquity to the present, so the medieval period is covered only to some extent. To proceed further and to gain a more critical perspective on the history of cleanliness, we really have to take into view essential texts and images that address the topic in a more specific way [for older but still relevant research, see 3; 4; 5].

To lay the theoretical foundation, we have to understand, first of all, that dirt is not only a physical condition, but also the result of cultural-anthropological negotiations over time. As anthropologist Mary Douglas formulates in her seminal study on this topic: "dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder ... Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment [6, p. 2]. Nevertheless, human life has always depended on a certain degree of cleanliness, whether people had access to the necessary hot waters, soap, and other cleaning agents or not. The human body depends on ingestion, digestion, and defecation. We are, after all, biological beings and constantly go through material transformations, and this in a rather 'dirty' environment. However, each people or culture has pursued a different approach to hygiene, and many times our literary and historical sources do not share enough information to understand the situation on the ground, although my specific example discussed below certainly defies this pattern and will take us to a new level of critical investigation of this universal anthropological issue.

3. Who Took a Bath and When in Medieval Literature

Nevertheless, many popular speakers or writers today tend to claim that previous cultures were entirely ignorant about the health needs of their own bodies. Those opinions, however, are mostly predicated on rather ignorant notions regarding the lack of hygiene in the past, reflecting nothing but modern desires to perceive the past only through a mythical lens, as is so often the case. But we commonly hear of knights arriving at a castle who receive at first a bath to prepare themselves for the festive dinner, such as the protagonist in Chrétien de Troyes's *Percival* (ca. 1170). After a battle against a dragon, for instance, Tristan in Gottfried of Strassburg's eponymous romance (ca. 1210) takes a long bath but he would have almost been slain by the Irish princess Isolde who recognizes in him the 'murderer' of her uncle Morold. Similar scenes can be found in countless other courtly romances, but then also in visual documents, especially in late medieval Books of Hours. Many didactic treatises from

the late Middle Ages and early modern age clearly outlined the necessity for a cultured person to observe personal hygiene.

The myth of the fountain of youth (*Jungbrunnen*) was widespread and found representation in many different artworks [7; 8]. The idea represented in this trope was that water had the power of rejuvenation. Travelers commonly reported about warm spas where they could recover from their long journeys, and public baths were often depicted in drawings, frescoes, tapestries, and elsewhere. Taking a bath was a cultural highlight for wealthy people, providing hygiene, pleasure, comfort, and entertainment, but almost the same might have applied to the peasant class as well although we do not have sufficient evidence for baths in rural areas [for a broadly conceived historical overview, see 9]. Didactic poets such as Der Stricker (ca. 1220–1240) repeatedly referred to private baths where the family assembled on a cold day in Fall ("The Naked Knight," or "The Naked Messenger"). The sad irony for us consists of the growing discrepancy between public opinions about the history of hygiene and what scholarship has observed and discovered in literary works, in artworks, in historical documents, and in archaeological sites [10].

The darker the image of the past is being painted in popular culture (e.g., *Monty Python*), the more absurd those opinions prove to be because scholarship has been increasingly able to dismiss them thoroughly, whether we think of the silly notion of the medieval chastity belt or the presumed belief that the earth was flat [11]. It might be almost silly to engage with these popular concepts of the past, but only when we recruit really strong evidence to the opposite can we hope to transform common opinions of today and inject true scholarship into this blurry amalgamation of fantasy and history.

It seems unimaginable that the knight or the courtly lady who appear gloriously at tournaments or at other public places would not have had any interest in personal hygiene, bathing, and the like. Bad smells, soiled clothing, or simply dirt were a taboo already in pre-modern society, which finds its unique expression in the stereotypical and antisemitic notion that Jews simply stank, although the very opposite was the case considering the great emphasis on baths in Jewish culture and religion. Contributors to a recent conference in Tübingen with the corresponding volume having appeared in June of 2025 have hopefully settled the entire dispute, and we can hence proceed with more informed and more solidly based literary analyses to confirm what we have learned and thus to combat the foolish public opinions of today [12]. Generally, we can identify the highly amorphous term 'dirt' as a litmus test of all cultural history. Identifying how a society approaches dirt tells us much about the intrinsic and extrinsic values and concept prevalent there [13, 14]. By taking on the modern myth about medieval dirt, we enter a powerful methodological framework because the popular opinions force us to challenge our own approach in scholarship to produce water-tight evidence that can convince both colleagues in research and the public, certainly two very different prongs in investigating this global topic.

4. The König vom Odenwald

When we turn to a poem by an individual only known as the "König vom Odenwald" (The King of the Odenwald), we encounter impressive and convincing literary evidence reflecting the common usage of baths for hygienic and comfort purposes already in the (late) Middle Ages. While this poet did not intend to prove to his listeners that the cultural elite was committed to bodily hygiene as a high value, his satirical comments underscore the entire question regarding bathing customs in the pre-modern age relevant for all social classes. The importance of water in all cultures, and so in the pre-modern world, has already been solidly confirmed, but here I want to add a brief analysis of this poem with its most unique and direct discussion of baths and how people used it commonly. This poem matters critically for

this topic because we hear more about the many reasons why people took a bath than anywhere else in medieval literature.

We do not know much about this odd poet who was apparently the leader of a group of vagrant poets operating in the region of the Odenwald, a large forest area east of Frankfurt and near Würzburg in south-central Germany. References to some of his patrons confirm that he was closely connected with the local noble families. His works, thirteen stanzaic songs, have been preserved primarily in the so-called *Hausbuch* (House Book) of the Würzburg canon Michael de Leone (ca. 1300–1355; the collection dates from ca. 1350; fols. 192r–201v, 277r–279v, 280rv; <https://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/2350>; last accessed on July 8, 2025), a miscellany manuscript containing a variety of texts of different genres. But there are also six other anthologizing manuscripts that contain some or all of the poems by the *König*, so he appears to have enjoyed considerable respect. Our poet, who seems to have flourished during the 1340s, composed rather surprising poems consisting of stanzas following the pattern of the so-called “Titirelstrophe,” as used in the anonymous *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200) and in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s famous *Titirel* fragments [15; for an English translation, see 14]. Whereas other poets from that time were concerned with the themes of courtly love – wooing a lady from the distance – and courtly manners, courtly adventures, and courtly entertainment, here we suddenly encounter the material reality in most concrete terms as if eating and drinking were the only relevant occupations – perhaps a satire, but perhaps also an indication of that society turning to much cruder and material interests than before. Another example would be Der Pleier’s *Meleranz* (ca. 1250) where we hear of an elaborate bathing system for the princess. However, since courtly poets hardly ever addressed peasants, we know very little about their culture and hygienic resources. As an important aside, in Marguerite de Navarre’s *Heptaméron* from 1558/1559, the entire setup or framework is predicated on the existence of a location in the Pyrenees where mineral baths attracted people from many countries.

The poet, only known as *König*, begins, rather shockingly, with the topic of the cow and how all of its parts prove to be highly useful for people. The second poem deals with chickens and eggs and the many different ways individuals like their eggs cooked or fried. But the *König* does not provide specific recipes and only outlines in rather astonishing detail the culinary conditions in very concrete terms. In the fifth poem, the focus rests on straw and what it could be used for in agriculture. Whether the aristocratic audience of these poems might have really had interest in these aspects of daily life in the countryside, remains doubtful or uncertain, but there is no question that the *König* provides stunningly minute comments on various objects or practices. Other topics are geese (no. III), sheep (no. VI), men’s long beards (no. VII), pigs (no. IX), and the standard equipment of a solid household (no. XIII). We might wonder whether the poet was a chef, a farmer, or simply a well-informed individual. If we can accept his works as literary mirrors of the material conditions of his time, we face here an excellent opportunity to gain insights into the practical conditions of life both on the farm and at court.

We can explain the poet’s relative popularity only by way of emphasizing his strategy to transgress common expectations in courtly poets and to turn his attention to areas which no other poets normally dared to address, unless they were the authors of cookbooks and other manuals. Occasionally, he also drew from the ancient fable tradition (nos. VIII and X) and thus demonstrated his poetic versatility and narrative skills.

5. Bathing Customs, Poetically Reflected

The one poem that interests me here and that simply destroys the modern myth of the dirty Middle Ages with one stroke of the pen, so to speak, pertains to bathing. Again, the *König*

does not demonstrate any hesitation to talk about this topic within the courtly context because he considers it as an essential component in people's regular habits, irrespective of the social class. In particular, he profiles bathing as one of the most important activities in human life [for a comprehensive approach to the larger issue here at stake, see the contributions to 16]. The poem consists of only fifty-four verses, but those are cramped filled with references to the various reasons why people are taking baths. We are not informed about the material conditions, costs, architectural structures, heating systems, or pumps relevant for a bath. The *König* only reflects on the many different reasons why people are taking baths, and there are many, indeed. As far as I can tell, this is the only time that any medieval poet addressed this issue so explicitly and thoroughly. Hence, we must highlight the unique character of this text, which should matter to scholars working in this field. At the same time, despite the rather simplistic outline of the bathing practices, this poem can also be cited in the modern context to defy the perceived mythical notion of dirt in the Middle Ages.

Some people take a bath because they need to clean themselves (v. 6); others need to warm up during the cold season (v. 7) and do not need to get rid of the rust which commonly covered knights' bodies resulting from them wearing metal armor (v. 8). For some people, taking a bath helps them to avoid boredom ("urdrutze," v. 10), whereas others believe that this would help them to find sleep (v. 12). Bloodletting was a common practice in medieval healthcare, either in preventative medicine or in serious cases of sickness (often with rather negative consequences, of course). But in preparation for this practice, some people take a bath first (v. 14), as we learn, for example, in the *lai* "Equitan" by Marie de France (ca. 1190). The sixth reason for taking a bath would be, according to the *König*, itching skin (v. 16), and the seventh pertains to the need to wash one's hair (v. 18). Interestingly, those people who are traveling and need to get their clothes washed resort to the bath as their resting place until everything is cleaned and dried again (vv. 19–22). This offers a good explanation of how medieval travelers handled those daily concerns. For others, the bath serves as the best opportunity to get the beard shaven off (vv. 23–24).

In addition, some people's use of public baths appears to be cheaper than to take it at home, whereas the next group represents a challenge because the poet emphasizes that some people take a bath to earn money (v. 28), that is, maybe because there they could meet their customers or business partners and strike deals with them. Health reasons also entered the picture quite commonly, and this especially when the bath was used as the opportunity to sweat (v. 30). In addition, taking a bath was apparently a communal activity and contributed to one's entertainment (v. 32). Or, as we learn next, one might come across an opportunity to find love during the taking of a bath (v. 34). Of course, baths were places for comfort, rest, and cleanliness, which was often not possible find at home where the open fireplace might make life somewhat unpleasant (v. 36). hilariously, some people simply take a bath because their shoes are ruined, so they wait in the warm water until they have received new ones from the cobbler (vv. 37–38). Those who have been wounded, perhaps in battle, resort to the warm bath to recover their health (v. 40). Other reasons to take a bath are to regain one's sobriety after excessive drinking (vv. 41–42). But the opposite is also the case because some take a bath specifically to enjoy some alcoholic drink (vv. 43–44). Ironically, some resort to the bath to hide from their creditors whom he cannot pay back his debt (vv. 45–48).

The poem concludes with a reference to the *König's* patron (?), the Duke of Saxony, who had confirmed that he had enjoyed the bath himself, and since he had not incurred any blame for it, the poet can summarize that bathing is of great use for many different people all of whom have their own motivation to resort to the warm water. Surprisingly, there are

no opportunities to identify the social background or status of those who utilize a bath; hence, the *König* suggests that this custom of cleaning oneself and enjoying the warm water was highly common and attracted people from all classes. On the one hand, the poet emphasizes hygienic and medical functions of the public bath, on the other its social purpose, either to enjoy drinking or to become sober again. Plainly put, everyone in that world knew about and utilized baths. Although we are not informed about the financial or technical aspects, it appears to be an absolute standard for everyone to frequent a bath for whatever reason. That is to say, according to this poem, taking a bath was completely normal, and this already in the late Middle Ages. As we have seen already above, numerous other medieval poets and artists confirmed the same observation through their texts.

Of course, we are still confronted with the ultimate question why this poet addressed such highly unusual topics in his songs, including bathing. The editor of these texts, Reinhard Olt, assumes, based on a variety of circumstances, that the *König* must have belonged to the circle of nobles residing in the Odenwald region [15, p. 21], even though he even addresses ordinary farm animals, food items, straw, and men's long beards. Can we thus conclude that, according to these poems, the social and material distance between the aristocracy and the peasant population was much lower than we might have assumed, at least in the case of the *König's* poems? But while the other stanzas focus primarily on the nutritional value of animals, here, in the text on baths, we hear of twenty different reasons why people take a bath. Many if not all of those would have applied to individuals on a lower social class as well. Hence, the *König* signals to us that bathing was a universal practice both because it provided cleanliness and also joy, protection and amusement. There is nothing about dirt in the modern sense of the word to be observed here. Considering the poet's comments at plain face value, we cannot help but reject in strongest terms the modern popular myth of the dirty conditions in the pre-modern world.

Of course, we should be careful to avoid the danger of generalizing and use the *König's* comments as evidence regarding bathing in the ninth, tenth, or twelfth century. However, in light of what other scholars have already observed about bathing throughout the medieval age, the poem by the *König* simply re-emphasizes the general observation that washing and cleaning was of great relevance already at that time at least for most people and actually did not need to be discussed in detail. The facetious character of this poem does not hide or undermine the material conditions reflected here, which in a way states what everyone did on a daily basis, whether out of need (health, medicine) or out of interest in public entertainment.

6. Conclusion

We can thus conclude that, because the poet offers, tongue-in-cheek, many reasons why people take a bath, we are certainly justified in arguing that the bath was, indeed, a central location to practice cultural habits, maybe much more in public than today. However, the need of bodily hygiene was a given, already then, so we can easily dismiss this myth of the dirty Middle Ages [for a useful overview, see 18; cf. also the contributions to 19; see also 20; 21] for once and all. Of course, only when the standard schoolbooks covering the medieval period accept these new insights, can we hope for a profound paradigm shift in our concept of the past.

Recent historiographical, art-historical, and literary-historical research has amply demonstrated that the bath was an essential component of noble households. We cannot say with all desired exhaustive evidence to what extent people of the lower classes could enjoy the same luxury of a hot bath, or whether they observed hygiene at large in a similar way as the nobility. We also would have to differentiate considerably between bathing

cultures in the various parts of medieval Europe, especially because Arabic influences in that regard mattered much more in the South than in the north [22; 23]. The poem by the *König*, however, already extensively confirms that many people took baths for many different reasons and regarded it as an essential part of their daily lives. Hence, we have to realize that personal hygiene had assumed an important function in the late Middle Ages, if we can take the *König's* poem as representative of that cultural transformation. Otherwise, the poet's irony if not satire would not have worked for his audience. Familiarity with a topic, a condition, customs, habits, or people has always proven to be foundational for comedy to work.

Two final literary example, never having been discussed before, can also shed some light on the hygienic conditions in the countryside, and this in the sixteenth century, somewhat beyond the traditional limits of the Middle Ages, but certain still within its wider ambit. The highly popular author of jest narratives ("Schwänke"), Hans Wilhelm Kirchhof (ca. 1525–ca. 1602), famous especially for his collection *Wendunmuth* (1563 and many times thereafter), twice discusses a bath frequented by the mayor of a village [see 24, no. 146, p. 178 and no. 160, pp. 190-91; cf. 25].

In the first story, the mayor used to be a simple peasant but was eventually elevated to the rank of mayor. In the bath, he encounters a friend from his youth and chats with him about his amazing career. Remembering their time together in their youth when they had herded horses, he affirms to the friend that although he has become a mayor, he would not allow this new status to make him arrogant. Everyone would be able to talk with him as an equal. This short narrative highlights the danger of hubris coming with an official title and political rank. For us, however, another aspect matters centrally. In the second story, the focus rests on a mayor who wants to get some reward for his hard administrative work, so he attends a bath where the maid asks him whether he has already had his hair washed, which he does not know since his head is so full with 'important' business.

As these brief prose narratives inform us, the village population obviously enjoyed at least one communal bath where people get together, chat with each other, and get hygienic treatment. The bath is not explored further, but the fact itself that it is mentioned simply *en passant* confirms that it was a common institution also in the countryside. To proceed further, we could also refer to the various *Schwänke* in the collection of *histori* dealing with the rogue Till Eulenspiegel, probably composed by the Brunswick toll official Hermann Bote (first printed in 1510/1511), where we repeatedly hear of bathhouses which Eulenspiegel soils badly because he cleans himself both on the outside and the inside of his body, but this would be the topic of another paper [for further research on this large topic, see now 26 and 27].

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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