

# Born in a Brothel: New Light on Childcare with Medieval Sex Workers

*New study reveals a poignant glimpse into the life and death of an infant in a 14th-century brothel, challenging views on childcare among medieval sex workers.*

TÜBINGEN, GERMANY, May 6, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- In a groundbreaking [study published in Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences](#), researchers from the University of Tübingen, Ghent University, and the Musée de l'Homme, Paris, unveiled biomolecular evidence that nuances prevailing assumptions about childcare in medieval brothels.

The study centers on the discovery of an infant's burial in a 14th-century brothel in Aalst, Belgium. Using ancient DNA and dietary stable isotope analysis, the team revealed that the infant – a three-month-old male – was likely breastfed and had been buried with apparent care within the brothel's domestic space.

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*Maxime Poulain*

This unusual find dates back to 1998, when excavations unearthed the remains of a medieval bathhouse, known historically as the Nederstove. This establishment not only served as a bathhouse, but was also in use as a brothel, a common combination in the medieval Low Countries. Positioned beneath the loam floor near a hearth, the infant's grave included textile remnants suggesting he was buried in a shroud. Now, nearly 30 years after the find, the sequencing of preserved DNA fragments confirmed the

child's sex, while stable isotope analysis of rib collagen indicated the infant was being breastfed – a clear signal of postnatal care. These findings depart from typical narratives that associate medieval prostitution solely with abortion, infanticide and neglect.



Excavation of the heated baths in the medieval brothel. Photo by Flanders Heritage Agency.

“Brothels regularly pop up in historical records from cities like Bruges and Ghent, notably when brothel owners are being fined for not paying their taxes. However, little is known about the personal lives of the women working in these houses”, says Dr. Maxime Poulain, who led this research. By interpreting the burial not as a product of criminal concealment but as an act possibly influenced by folklore beliefs, financial hardship, and emotional attachment, the study opens new conversations about maternal care by medieval sex workers. “We get a very moving perspective on motherhood at the margins of society”.

These findings are also supported by the burial location within the brothel. The infant was carefully placed close to the hearth that was heating the baths in this brothel. That location is not without meaning within folklore beliefs of the time. People namely believed that the soul remained in the vicinity of the body for a couple of days, if not longer. “The smoldering embers allowed the child to return and warm up at night”. So, rather than abandonment, the burial is suggestive of warmth, protection, and affection.

The findings challenge monolithic portrayals of medieval sex workers as neglectful or criminal, proposing instead a multidimensional view in which these women were potentially also caring mothers, even in what must sometimes have been the most difficult of circumstances.

Maxime Poulain  
University of Tübingen

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