

Jonas Roelens, *Citizens and Sodomites: Persecution and Perception of Sodomy in the Southern Low Countries (1400-1700)*. *Crime and City in History* 6. (Leiden: Brill, 2024, 430 pp., ISBN 9789004685956).

In *Citizens and Sodomites*, an expansion of the author's PhD thesis from the University of Ghent, Jonas Roelens presents a narrative of the way the offense of sodomy was treated in the southern Low Countries over a three-hundred-year period. Previous studies of same-sex relations in medieval Europe have either focused on a more restricted chronological or geographical field (Michael Rocke for Florence, for instance) or have been based more on literary sources (Helmut Puff for the German-speaking lands). Little work has focused on the southern Low Countries. In a period where ego-documents are very scarce, legal records provide some of the best information possible about sexual activity. Thus, one main contribution of Roelens' work to the field is to employ bailiff accounts from eight towns in Flanders and Brabant, a new body of material allowing him to examine 207 cases involving 406 individuals accused of sodomy. He contextualises the account material, which can be terse and unrevealing on its own, within the cultural productions of the time, while he also uses other court records where available. Whereas most scholars restrict themselves to one side of the great divide between the Medieval and the Early Modern period, this study traces changes over a long period of time.

Roelens' two introductory chapters make cogent points about the role of sodomy as 'unmentionable', including the holding of trials behind closed doors so the offense could not scandalise the public (40). The emphasis on 'silence and discretion' in the legal and other discursive treatments was resounding, although it did not stop prosecutions (61). The author makes clear that the term 'sodomy' was used quite broadly, not just for male-male and female-female sexual activity, but also for bestiality and masturbation. Everyone knows from Foucault that this is an 'utterly confused category', but Roelens provides a concrete demonstration. Most of the book focuses on relations between men because that is where most of the evidence lies; however, the discussion of women is substantial, unlike much other work that is content to note that there is not much information on it.

In the third chapter Roelens presents the statistical data he gathered from bailiff accounts, arguing that convictions for sodomy peaked in the later fifteenth and earlier sixteenth centuries. In the survey of scholarship from other regions in this section, it is striking that the Northern Netherlands, despite being part of the same overarching system of government for much of the period as the Southern Netherlands and having similar

social and demographic structures, did not see nearly as many cases up until the eighteenth century. It is always difficult to know, in comparing across geographic regions, whether the sources are really commensurate. Roelens presents the same kind of data for eight jurisdictions of the Southern Netherlands, thus providing the same sort of information for each jurisdiction. Here the number of trials in Bruges is high, although it would have been helpful if approximate population sizes were given for comparison purposes. Other evidence from Bruges supports the idea of a peak in convictions from 1490 to 1515, and the level of prosecutorial activity is higher than anywhere else north of the Alps.

Roelens suggests, although he admits the causality is hard to pin down, that ‘the lion’s share of the sodomy persecution seems to have coincided with the emergence of a “new moral climate” that emphasized the importance of social order and social cohesion within the city’ (98). He argues that this was not, as other historians have suggested, the doing of the elites and the process of state centralisation but of ‘the urban “middle class”, which increasingly adopted a civic identity’ (100). In fact, the power of the nascent Burgundian state worked to curtail the jurisdiction of the local nobility over sodomy cases and place them in the hands of the municipal authorities. Civic power can explain, according to Roelens, why Bruges and to a lesser extent Ghent so resembled Florence and Venice in their actions against sodomy. But in another way, as he points out, the Southern Netherlands were quite different: many more of those convicted were put to death. The author observes that this may be because many victims ‘were outcasts, people who were not wanted within the urban fabric’ (165).

But not wanted by whom, the authorities or the populace? Roelens clearly demonstrates that common city dwellers’ views on same-sex relations were not always the same as those of the authorities, and that they could make themselves heard. Discussing the use of gossip and rumours of sodomy, he shows that in the Southern Netherlands, as opposed to England, men as well as women were subject to sexual slander. He is also able to build up a picture of who the accused sodomites were; unlike in Florence and elsewhere, younger men or boys did not seem to be let off the hook as much.

The use of sodomy in Reformation propaganda complicates the effort to determine its actual prevalence within the late medieval church, as Roelens demonstrates in Chapters 5 and 9. These chapters provide a careful reading of trials against mendicant friars when Ghent and other towns were under Calvinist control. Interestingly, whereas other accusations were passed over in silence or swept under the rug, the memory of these trials was kept alive by a number of writers, not to claim that sodomy should go unpunished, but to argue that Catholics should not be repressed. Roelens also develops a general discussion of learned discourses around sodomy as a feature of foreigners and those of different religions, with careful attention to the writings of early

modern Netherlandish scholars. Yet he concludes that ‘immigrants did not suffer a disproportionate number of sodomy denunciations’ (219).

Chapter 7, on female sodomites, reveals that the term may have been understood more broadly than elsewhere (for example Florence), since there is more documentation of women – twenty-five over the whole time-span – being brought to trial. He suggests that this prevalence may have been due to a relatively late age at marriage for women, or that female sexuality was heavily repressed precisely because of the fact that women had more freedom in the Southern Netherlands. Chapter 10 returns to the discourse around women in the early modern period, with discussions of hermaphroditism – the disputed gender of female sodomites – and of witchcraft.

The author has not been well served by the publisher, who has done an inadequate job of copy-editing. In a number of places English words are misused (‘persecution’ for ‘prosecution’, ‘consumed’ for ‘consummated’, ‘officious’ for ‘official’, and so forth).

Overall, the book’s strength lies in its attention to local variance and its careful analysis of individual cases, as well as its presentation of evidence across a long chronological span and several towns. It does not attempt to develop a new theoretical vocabulary and is a bit over-cautious in bringing forth larger patterns. Given the nature of the evidence, it is quite reasonable to avoid giving a definitive answer to questions of causality, but it would have been useful to distinguish more between underlying conditions, such as the economic, disease-related, and political factors that affected a number of towns, and triggers that affected one town in particular. Roelens believes that ‘for the time being, there is no all-encompassing explanation to be given’ (126) for the patterns of sodomy prosecution in premodern Flanders and Brabant. The idea that ‘premodern societies needed a common scapegoat on which social disturbances could be averted in order to strengthen social cohesion’ (126) is undoubtedly true, but it would be helpful to be told why Bruges needed this more around 1500 than did Antwerp in 1585. Nevertheless the level of detail given on different towns provides rich new material for interested scholars and opens the way to further comparison.

Ruth Mazo Karras, Trinity College Dublin