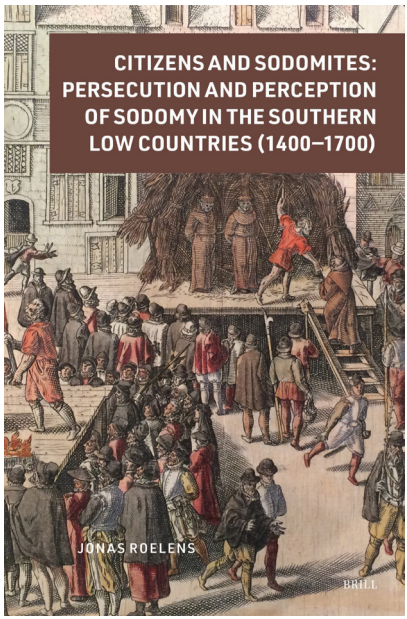
Review

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



The historical study of sodomy is one of those conceptual maelstroms that teaches us as much about the present as the past. As a legal category, developed first in medieval theology and later applied in early modern courts, it encompassed a bewilderingly wide range of sexual offences, extending far beyond the homosexual intercourse with which many readers today might associate it. Sodomy could include masturbation, anal sex within marriage, demonic coupling, and even, as Jonas Roelens's fine study taught me, necrophilia – in short, almost any non-procreative sexual act. This catch-all term for sexual deviance creates several methodological problems. Most obviously, sodomy was a nebulous category of *activities* rather than identities, complicating attempts to recover the histories of same-sex desire or queer selfhood. Yet it also sits uneasily with modern moral categories which emphasise consent. For every committed adult same-sex relationship that meets a tragic end in the records, we encounter multiple instances of rape, child abuse, and bestiality – cases in which even the animals were often put to death. The fact that contemporaries grouped all of these under the rubric of the 'abominable' or 'unspeakable' sin further shrouds the acts themselves in silence, making it still more difficult to distinguish between them, let alone infer wider social attitudes and sexual identities.

As Jonas Roelens's important study *Citizens and Sodomites. Persecution and Perception of Sodomy in the Southern Low Countries (1400-1700)* shows, the Southern Netherlands, and particularly the city of Bruges, are of exceptional importance to the wider study of early modern sodomy. Across much of Northern Europe, prosecutions and executions for sodomy remained vanishingly rare, with death sentences often numbering only in the

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single figures over entire centuries, at least until 1700. This stands in marked contrast to the Mediterranean world, where both prosecutions and evidence of male same-sex sexual activity survive in much greater abundance. Roelens's exceptional quantitative analysis of the Southern Netherlands draws on a comprehensive series of bailiffs' accounts in the Brussels archives, in which these officials recorded their annual receipts and expenditures, including the costs associated with executions. His findings complicate the familiar north-south geography in two important ways. First, he identifies 406 trials for sodomy across the Southern Netherlands between 1400 and 1700, 179 of them in Bruges alone. In the sources at least, the city stands out as a hotspot for sodomitical activity. Even more striking is the evidence for female sodomy. Roelens identifies twenty-five convictions of women for sodomy (thirteen in Bruges), a figure for which there appears to be no European parallel at all.

Roelens adduces some evidence that Bruges had indeed acquired a certain reputation for sexual deviance. In 1494, a disgruntled migrant labourer who found the city little to his liking posted several handwritten placards denouncing its citizenry as guilty of 'the vile sin and crime of sodomy'. After the authorities finally caught up with him in Tournai, the magistrates of Bruges even dispatched a delegation to witness his execution, presumably with some glee. A century later, in 1598, the insult resurfaced during a tavern brawl in Ghent. When three visitors from Bruges mocked the locals as *stroppendragers* ('noose carriers'), the tavern's resident drunkard responded in kind, labelling all men from Bruges 'buggers'. This second anecdote is doubly ironic. First, with seventy prosecutions in Roelens's figures, Ghent rather plays Gomorrah to Bruges's Sodom. Persecution rates were, in fact, markedly higher across the County of Flanders than those in the Duchy of Brabant. More importantly, however, by the 1590s Bruges's days as a 'Sodom of the North' appeared long past. Setting aside the exceptional anti-monastic sodomy prosecutions undertaken by the Calvinist republics of Bruges and Ghent in 1578, the number of cases had already begun to decline steeply from the 1530s onwards.

Indeed, as in Florence, sodomy prosecutions were a markedly fifteenth-century phenomenon, but Bruges magistrates evinced none of the lenience that the Tuscan city showed towards passive partners or younger participants. It sentenced seventy-five individuals to death during that period. Explaining this persistently high level of prosecution has proved challenging. In his formidable *Forbidden Desire in Early Modern Europe. Male–Male Sexual Relations, 1400-1750* (2024), Noel Malcolm rather implausibly invoked a 'prolonged moral panic' to account for Bruges's deviation from the broader European north-south pattern. Roelens considers a wide range of alternative explanations as well, including the impact of the Black Death and economic decline. The difficulty with many of these arguments is that they are hardly specific to Bruges.

Roelens's preferred solution draws on R.I. Moore's *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (1988), particularly its argument that governing institutions consolidated their authority by defining and prosecuting deviance. While applying this wider framework here feels somewhat forced, it is easy to see how the persecution of sodomy, once in train, could become a matter of civic morality, especially when it has come to tarnish a city's reputation. Perhaps other causes may then explain its origins. Previous historians have emphasised Bruges's links to Italy, and Roelens's research uncovered some Italian

sodomites. One possibility is that the fear of foreign contamination provided an initial impetus for a persecution that then acquired a momentum of its own. According to a 1463 sermon quoted by Roelens, even uttering the word sodomy could infect the speaker with it.

In any case, this temporary abnormality also means that Bruges's reversion closer to the northern European mean needs to be explained. Here, too, Moore's thesis is usefully applied, as persecution was redirected towards other targets, first heretics and later witches. Yet a theory capable of explaining both the rise and the decline of persecution explains rather too much. What is certainly beyond dispute is that the criminal records uncovered by Roelens do not show a teleological march towards greater visibility of same-sex desires.

It is, however, those same-sex desires, identities, and – at times – even the acts themselves that rather get lost from view in this book. Given the difficulty and paucity of the sources, this is unavoidable, but there is nevertheless a sense that the book's lengthy methodological opening engages with concepts and sets up themes that subsequently recede into the background. There simply is much we do not know and cannot know. The impressive quantitative analysis on display also produces some findings that will not greatly surprise historians of crime and deviance: high-status individuals were far less likely to be accused, while foreigners and other marginalised groups faced a disproportionate risk. One wonders whether a greater emphasis on qualitative, microhistorical analysis might have proved more rewarding, particularly in those cases where the sources are unusually rich. Indeed, the chapters on the 1578 persecution of the friars of Bruges and Ghent and the 1618 'lesbian' trial of Mayken and Magdaleene offer particularly illuminating close readings. More of that storytelling would have been welcome.

Both its geography and its source base make *Citizens and Sodomites* required reading for historians of early modern crime and sexuality. While answers remain at times frustratingly elusive, I suspect few historians could have extracted more from the surviving archives than Roelens has done.

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