

Didier Lett, *L'infanzia violata nel Medioevo. Genere e pedocriminalità a Bologna (secc. XIV-XV)* [Childhood violated in the Middle Ages: Gender and paedocrime in Bologna (14th-15th centuries)] (Rome: Viella, 2023). Print, 324pp., € 29.00, ISBN: 9791254693230.



Review

Studies on the administration of justice and its implications for medieval Italy are numerous. However, Didier Lett's *L'infanzia violata nel Medioevo. Genere e pedocriminalità a Bologna (secc. XIV-XV)* is distinguished by its specific focus on sexual crimes against children, a complex and rarely addressed topic. This subject has significant psychological implications for both the author and the reader, further challenging the historiographical approach.

In the introductory chapter, Lett provides a general overview of the book's content, offering a useful context for understanding the subject. Particularly noteworthy are the descriptions of Bologna's judicial institutions and municipal legal norms, which provide insight into the subsequent developments of the research. Bologna was in fact an important center for the study and development of legal subjects, with the university being particularly renowned in this type of study. This framework helps to place the study in a wider historical and institutional context, highlighting the importance of Bologna's legal system in dealing with such crimes.

The book is divided into three parts. The first focuses on analysing the identities of both victims and perpetrators. Of relevance is Lett's examination of the gender differences between female and male victims. In particular, women faced a hostile legal and social system in which they had to prove not only that they had been violated but also that their moral integrity was violated, especially in the case of less violent assaults, since only the most brutal violence justified a trial. For men, the loss of reputation and honour was the main issue, which was often considered more important than the physical consequences of the violence. In both cases, the victims' families were also affected, as their reputation in the community was damaged: in the case of female victims, the 'purity' of the woman was lost, which caused problems in later finding a husband for these women, who were considered guilty of the violence they had suffered; whereas in the case of men, the problem was that they had suffered a contrastive act, which could raise suspicions of homosexuality.

Lett also provides a detailed analysis of the perpetrators. Similar to the modern world, sadly, most sexual violence in the medieval period took place within the family or at work, with rare cases involving strangers. The author explores the social implications of such violence, focusing not only on the victims but also on the perpetrators. This analysis, rare in historical studies, provides an intimate insight into the family and social dynamics of the period, revealing aspects of private life that are otherwise poorly documented. Medieval sexuality is usually examined from a detached perspective, but Lett successfully integrates reflections on sexual practices and related violence from legal sources to present a detailed and complex picture.

The second part of the book focuses on the crime of rape. This section is particularly dense and detailed, drawn from Bolognese legal documentation. It is a chapter that may be difficult to read, not because of the writing style but because of the brutality of the events recounted. In fact, while the author's intention to bring these terrible stories to light is commendable, the emphasis on certain details could cause discomfort for the reader. Although the documentary value of such descriptions is undeniable, the narrative could have been toned down without losing its impact.

The third part is the most interesting and well-developed. Lett examines the various stages of the judicial process, paying particular attention to the act of denunciation, highlighting the difficulties faced by women in asserting their rights and the reluctance of children and adolescents, who risked severe punishment if accused of sodomy. The author then examines the various outcomes of the trials, from the most violent punishments, such as burning at the stake or beheading, to exile, especially for those tried *in absentia*, and fines. Particularly interesting is the analysis of the practice of forced marriage, which was considered an acceptable solution in Italy until a few decades ago. This section examines judicial sources and records in great detail and provides further insights by comparing them with other types of crime, as particular cases of homicide or others. Lett highlights the penalties imposed on offenders and the possible ways of escaping justice, such as fleeing the city or the notorious forced marriage.

Didier Lett's work is of great value, both for its choice of subject and for shedding light on a little-known aspect of legal history. The comparison with other

Italian and European contexts is somewhat limited with references scattered throughout the text. While these comparisons do exist, it might have been more effective to consolidate them into a dedicated section. Doing so would have provided a clearer and more comprehensive contextualization of the Bologna case, making it easier to assess whether Bologna was an exception, possibly influenced by the prominence of its law school, or whether similar crimes were taken seriously in other cities as well.

In conclusion, although I find the detailed accounts of violence disturbing and, at times, unnecessary, I consider this book a valuable contribution to understanding the history of crime and justice in the medieval period. Lett offers a profound and original perspective on intimate aspects of the medieval mentality, helping to fill a gap in modern historiography.

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