

## METOO IN THE MIDDLE AGES

**Chloé Tardivel** – I work on judiciary archives - specifically on the criminal justice archives of Bologna in the late Middle Ages. It's an archival source that has me marveling, and deeply moved. Several kilometers of archives, thousands of boxes, registers and odd sheets of paper piled on shelves, describing crises in the ordinary lives of past men and women. Moments of unhappiness, injury, violence, sometimes battered by crime. As I read the minutes, I hear their voices, imagine the scenes they portray occurring in the city - in this very city whose medieval structures, towers and porticos remain today. I try to revive these past lives, especially those of women. I try to retrieve their speech, their very words, motions and experience. It's long-term work, often fastidious. Deciphering notaries' handwriting is the first step. I remember how I was frustrated, even crying at first, as it took days to decipher a single trial. There's more: once you've deciphered, you need to understand what is written. The fascinating thing about these sources is that they include words and sentences in vernacular speech, the spoken language of people in the 14th and 15th centuries. Of course, it's not an exact reproduction of what was heard in the streets of Bologna, the notaries reframed and censored, but you can hear shouting and crying in those sources. Early on, I realized that men were everywhere, really everywhere, as aggressors, rapers, incestors. So when I come onto cases that involve violent, criminal women, I must admit that I feel a bit of elation, knowing that men didn't have a monopoly on crime in the Middle Ages.

As a historian and a feminist, the sources I work on speak to me, I'm moved. Reading the account of a raped seven-year old girl, even in 1352, raises emotion and indignation. The details, violence, running blood, the aggressor's menaces if the victim talks, sometimes just reminds me of what I hear today, I feel tears welling up and have to leave the reading room. Take a break. Breathe deep, come back to my own space-time. I fill note cards: rape, incest, infanticide, robbery, insults, poisoning, etc. Infanticide cases are also hard to stand, because you sense the parents' deprivation - often the mother's, by the way, who strangles her newborn or drowns it. I am in total empathy.

I read these sources using analysis categories that were unknown at the time, I identify cases of aggression and sexual harassment. In late 1351, for example, a young man declares to a young woman that he loves her, Margarita and attempts to put a hand on her breast. She tells him to leave her alone, to stop bothering her. He insists. She wields a small knife handle in one hand and a fan in the other, and hits him on the nose. He files a complaint for assault and battery. In 1373, another young woman, Maria, faces a sexual proposition in the street, from an apprentice, just as she passes in front of his shop. Hearing the sexual overture, she curses him and hits him on the breast. In turn, he seriously bruises her face.

Maria remains disfigured for life by the scars. He blandly files a complaint for assault and injury. The very triviality of these scenes of yesteryear raises questions. I find strange similarities with what affects women today, in a different way of course, but like a distant echo of another MeToo. So the question arises: What do I, the historian, make of my reading these documents? What do I make of all this past violence? Well, I'm a witness. I testify in bringing up these archives, these traces of desecrated lives, in order to provide these women with a level of justice that they never knew.

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