

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Not to be tolerated in a city of such high repute’: the prosecution of rape as a window on crime, deviance and social order in late medieval Bruges (1490–1537)

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Abstract

At the turn of the sixteenth century, the city of Bruges, a considerable trading centre in the County of Flanders, witnessed a noticeable increase in rape prosecutions. Drawing on final judgments by the city magistrates, many of whom imposed the death penalty, this article examines how these prosecutions were shaped by broader concerns for social order and urban prosperity. It argues that deep-rooted anxieties about disorder and deviance among both civic authorities and the wider community fostered a more standardized policy towards sexual violence. This, in turn, enables the reconstruction of the late medieval ‘criminal-rapist’: an outsider associated with brutal and dishonourable violence, deemed particularly intolerable in ‘a city of high repute’.

On Wednesday, 9 May 1515, a crowd gathered in the *burch*, Bruges’ fortified centre of power, to witness the decapitation of Jan van Brelettes. The city magistrates had found him guilty of raping ‘a young daughter’. According to the detailed verdict, ten days earlier, Jan and an accomplice had encountered two young girls in the street, whom they had intended to lead to ‘certain places to do what they pleased with them’. The men pursued the girls for several blocks. When close enough, Jan seized one of the girls by her arm and dragged her by force to one of the city’s brothels. After repeatedly threatening and beating her, he cut open her dress and, brandishing his sword, forced her onto a bed, where he carried out his ‘unlawful and violent will’ with her, ‘in spite of her being unwilling’. Ultimately, the judgment concludes that these acts constituted ‘matters of great force and excess’ and could not be tolerated in ‘a city governed by justice’.¹

The closing statement of the verdict is particularly revealing: since such violence was perpetrated in what is described as a reputable ‘city of justice’ (also referred to as a

¹ City Archives of Bruges (hereafter CAB), Series 192, no. 1: *Verluydboec* (1490–1537), fols. 89v–90r.

‘city of commerce’ in a similar record), it could not remain unpunished, therefore warranting criminal, even capital, punishment. While this rhetoric follows that of a conventional judicial register, it nonetheless expresses a clear civic necessity to uphold order, exemplarily enforced through public execution. This imperative must be understood against a backdrop of heightened economic and moral crisis in the Low Countries at the end of the fifteenth century.² Scholars have traditionally emphasized the role of statutes and legislation in maintaining urban order and prosperity;³ however, legal cases such as Jan’s offer a different perspective. Court records illuminate not only judicial practice but also prevailing values and norms – in this case, the commitment to upholding justice. Hence, a thorough understanding of these values and norms is indispensable for reconstructing perceptions of deviance and the negotiation of social order.⁴ Approached through this lens, the death sentence imposed on Jan van Brelettes emerges as an expression of urban anxiety about deviant and criminal behaviour, rather than merely as a response to sexual transgression.

Indeed, scholarship has long emphasized the importance of social control or, more precisely, social discipline in premodern urban contexts across Europe.⁵ The conditions of late medieval towns, marked by large and socially heterogeneous populations, necessitated pragmatic strategies aimed at safeguarding the common good.⁶ A pervasive fear of crime encouraged communities to report offenders, while urban authorities increasingly embraced their responsibility to maintain public security, condemning particularly threatening offences such as murder, arson, rape, incest and sodomy.⁷ Social control thus operated on two interconnected levels: formal discipline, expressed through judicial systems of repression, and communal norms shaped by notions of gender, honour and neighbourliness.⁸ Within this broad framework,

²W. Blockmans *et al.*, ‘Tussen crisis en welvaart: sociale veranderingen 1300–1500’, in D. Blok (ed.), *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, vol. IV (Haarlem, 1980), 42–86.

³A. Boureau, ‘Privilege in medieval societies from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, or: how the exception proves the rule’, in P. Linehan and J. Nelson (eds.), *The Medieval World* (London, 2006), 621–34.

⁴M. Dinges, ‘The uses of justice as a form of social control in early modern Europe’, in P. Spierenburg and H. Roodenburg (eds.), *Social Control in Europe. Volume 1: 1500–1800* (Baltimore, 2014), 159–75.

⁵P. Spierenburg, ‘Social control and history: an introduction’, in *ibid.*, 1–20. Some recent studies highlighting the importance of social order in premodern cities include the following: M. van der Heijden, *Women and Crime in Early Modern Holland* (Leiden, 2016); G. Geltner, *Roads to Health: Infrastructure and Urban Wellbeing in Later Medieval Italy* (Philadelphia, 2019); C. Rawcliffe and C. Weeda (eds.), *Policing the Urban Environment in Premodern Europe* (Cambridge, 2019); J. Kamp, *Crime, Gender and Social Control in Early Modern Frankfurt Am Main* (Leiden, 2020); A. Schmidt, *Prosecuting Women: A Comparative Perspective on Crime and Gender before the Dutch Criminal Courts, c. 1600–1810* (Leiden, 2020); J. Coomans, *Community, Urban Health and Environment in the Late Medieval Low Countries* (Cambridge, 2021); S. Muurling, *Everyday Crime, Criminal Justice and Gender in Early Modern Bologna* (Leiden, 2021).

⁶M. Boone and J. Haemers, ‘“The common good”: governance, discipline and political culture’, in B. Blondé *et al.* (eds.), *City and Society in the Low Countries, 1100–1600* (Cambridge, 2018), 93–127; P. Spierenburg, *The Spectacle of Suffering. Executions and the Evolution of Repression: From a Preindustrial Metropolis to the European Experience* (Cambridge, 1984), 6–11.

⁷C. Gauvard, ‘Fear of crime in late medieval France’, in B. Hanawalt and D. Wallace (eds.), *Medieval Crime and Social Control* (Minneapolis, 1999), 1–48.

⁸Spierenburg, ‘Social control and history’, 7–10. Historians of crime widely acknowledge that social control was exercised through a broad spectrum of formal and informal institutions, including secular courts, ecclesiastical courts, guilds and neighbourhoods. Sharpe and Walker, in particular, emphasize that the household functioned as a key arena of social control as well: J. Sharpe, ‘Social control in early modern

deviance arises as a socially constructed and continually renegotiated as well as re-regulated category.⁹

The city of Bruges, located in the County of Flanders, provides a particularly productive setting for analysing the conceptualization of crime and deviance, through a case study on rape, in late medieval urban society. As a major medieval metropolis, Bruges experienced repeated episodes of revolt, unrest and criminal activity, especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁰ Although criminal source material from the Middle Ages is limited, several records allow for a reconstruction of patterns of criminality, including the *Verluydboec*, the city's criminal sentence book, as well as bailiff accounts, both of which have underpinned earlier scholarship on religious and sexual deviance.¹¹ Notably, rape has remained largely overlooked in studies drawing on these primary source materials.¹² This neglect is unwarranted, as Bruges' criminal records show a marked increase in rape prosecutions at the end of the fifteenth century. This points to the emergence of a standardized penal policy targeting what may be termed the 'criminal-rapist': an offender archetypically portrayed as an outsider responsible for brutal, dishonourable and violent acts.

This article, in its focus on the prosecution of rape in late medieval Bruges, begins by examining the remarkable number of severe prosecutions in this period. The relatively high number of punished rapists, this article argues, should be understood as a reflection of attempts to restore social order, signalling heightened concern with violence and the delineation of acceptable conduct. In this context, rape appears to have been constructed primarily as a form of violent crime rather than as a moral offence. Accordingly, those accused were deemed 'criminal' in multiple respects, as rape charges were frequently accompanied by allegations of other deviant behaviour, including blasphemy, vagabondage and burglary. The prosecution of criminal-rapists indicated less a shift in sexual morality (such as that evident in the city's repression of prostitution and sodomy¹³) than a perceived threat to civic peace, a view shared by both the local authorities and the urban community.

England: the need for a broad perspective', in Spierenburg and Roodenburg (eds.), *Social Control in Europe*, 37–54; G. Walker, *Crime, Gender, and Social Order in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2003).

⁹H. Skoda, 'Introduction', in H. Skoda (ed.), *A Companion to Crime and Deviance in the Middle Ages* (Leeds, 2023), 4; B. Hanawalt and D. Wallace, 'Introduction', in Hanawalt and Wallace (eds.), *Medieval Crime and Social Control*, ix–x.

¹⁰For an overview on the different facets of the city of Bruges in the Middle Ages, see A. Brown and J. Dumolyn (eds.), *Medieval Bruges, c. 850–1550* (Cambridge, 2018).

¹¹This register has previously proven useful in studies on medieval perceptions of deviance: M. Boone, 'State power and illicit sexuality: the persecution of sodomy in late medieval Bruges', *Journal of Medieval History*, 22 (1996), 135–53; M. Naessens, 'Judicial authorities' views of women's roles in late medieval Flanders', in E. Kittel and M. Suydam (eds.), *The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries* (Basingstoke, 2004), 51–77; J. Roelens, *Citizens and Sodomites: Persecution and Perception of Sodomy in the Southern Low Countries (1400–1700)* (Leiden, 2024).

¹²Mariann Naessens did previously examine the imposition of (capital) penalties for rape in the criminal records of Bruges as part of a broader study on sexual and religious deviance. While she addressed rape cases explicitly, her analysis focused primarily on prospects of 'social promotion', or the potential anticipation of marriage between perpetrator and young victim, a dynamic frequently observed in cases of abduction, but apparently far less common in prosecutions for rape. M. Naessens, 'De betoegeling van seksueel en religieus deviant gedrag door de stadsschepenenbanken van Kortrijk en Brugge, 1459–1537: een onderzoek naar het civilisatieproces vanuit gerechtelijke bronnen', KU Leuven, Master's thesis, 1998.

¹³Both Roelens and Dupont have noted a strict enforcement of moral offences, respectively sodomy and prostitution, in late medieval Bruges. Rape, by contrast, appears to diverge from these broader moral concerns

A closer examination of rape cases in late medieval Bruges contributes to broader debates on crime, violence and sexuality in urban contexts. This focus is particularly relevant given scholars' long-standing observation that judicial authorities in medieval Europe often refrained from prosecuting rape, despite its classification as one of the most severe offences in the majority of European normative legal texts.¹⁴ As Barbara Hanawalt has argued, this reluctance may be explained by the heavy burden of proof placed on female victims, whose testimonies had to persuade an all-male judiciary.¹⁵ Recent historiography has nevertheless demonstrated that many women did report rape and, in some cases, successfully obtained compensation or justice.¹⁶ A case study on thirteenth-century Bologna, for example, highlights the active role of working-class women in initiating complaints for sexual violence.¹⁷ Even so, a broad scholarly consensus maintains that actual rape convictions, despite strict legal frameworks, remained relatively rare, while a substantial number of cases remained unreported or unsuccessful, owing to the complex interplay between notions of consent, intent and force.

The Bruges cases demonstrate that city magistrates, referred to as aldermen, at times did respond to rape and attempted rape with notable severity, challenging assumptions about the leniency of medieval justice in matters of sexual violence. Previous research has already proven that urban authorities in the Southern Low Countries actively regulated gender- and sexuality-related offences.¹⁸ Whether this heightened intervention extended equally to rape, however, remains an open question. Addressing this gap in the literature, the article first examines how the rise in rape prosecutions aligned with the broader urban policy of the city of Bruges. It then analyses the perception and categorization of criminal-rapists, aggravating circumstances

that dominated urban regulation. Roelens, *Citizens and Sodomites*; G. Dupont, *Maagdenverleidsters, Hoeren en Speculanten: Prostitutie in Brugge tijdens de Bourgondische Periode (1385–1515)* (Bruges, 1996).

¹⁴G. Seabourne, 'Rape and law in medieval Western Europe', in Skoda (ed.), *A Companion to Crime and Deviance in the Middle Ages*, 353; S. McDougall, 'Judging sexy women in late medieval France', *Postmedieval*, 13 (2022), 87; C. Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction, and Adultery, 1100–1500* (Cambridge, 2012), 73.

¹⁵B. Hanawalt, 'Whose story was this? Rape narratives in medieval English courts', in B. Hanawalt (ed.), *'Of Good and Ill Repute'. Gender and Social Control in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1998), 138.

¹⁶Some of the most recent publications include: E. Hawkes, '"She was ravished against her will, what so ever she say": female consent in rape and ravishment in late-medieval England', *Limina*, 1 (1995), 47–53; R. Winer, 'Defining rape in medieval Perpignan: women plaintiffs before the law', *Viator*, 31 (2000), 165–84; Dunn, *Stolen Women*; A. Kissane, '"Unnatural in body and a villain in soul": rape and sexual violence towards girls under the age of canonical consent in late medieval England', in G. Dodd (ed.), *Fourteenth Century England*, vol. 10 (Woodbridge, 2018), 89–112; McDougall, 'Judging sexy women', 81–104.

¹⁷C. Lansing, 'Opportunities to charge rape in thirteenth-century Bologna', in L.Z. Domingues, L. Caravaggi and G. Paoletti (eds.), *Women and Violence in the Late Medieval Mediterranean, ca. 1100–1500* (London, 2021), 83–100.

¹⁸Some of the most recent publications include: W. Blockmans and T. Neijzen, 'Functions of fiction: fighting spouses around 1500', in W. Blockmans and A. Janse (eds.), *Showing Status: Representations of Social Positions in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 1999), 265–76; W. Prevenier, 'Violence against women in fifteenth-century France and the Burgundian state', in Hanawalt and Wallace (eds.), *Medieval Crime and Social Control*, 186–203; Naessens, 'Judicial authorities' views of women's roles'; C. Delameillieure, *Abduction, Marriage, and Consent in the Late Medieval Low Countries* (Amsterdam, 2024); Roelens, *Citizens and Sodomites*; E. Feys, '"A hot-tempered, capricious, jealous and compassionless wife": marital conflicts and homicide in pardon letters of Burgundy and the Low Countries (1450–1535)', *Journal of Family History*, 50 (2025), 425–43.

and the role of community involvement. In doing so, this work sheds light on how an urban society defined, judged and negotiated categories of deviant behaviour.

Setting the scene: the 'civic revival' of Bruges

From the mid-fifteenth century onwards, the city of Bruges, once celebrated as the 'cradle of capitalism',¹⁹ increasingly faced adverse conditions. The city gradually lost much of its economic power due to rising competition from neighbouring centres producing cheaper cloth, as well as Antwerp's development into a major hub for international trade, which led to the steady decline of Bruges' traditional industries.²⁰ The failed Flemish Revolt against Archduke Maximilian of Austria further intensified this crisis, placing severe strain on municipal finances and contributing to high mortality through war and famine.²¹ This pervasive 'sense of crisis' prompted the city government to intervene. Investments in public infrastructure were made to stimulate traffic and revive commerce and poor relief was reorganized, with magistrates assuming guardianship over hospitals, almshouses and orphan care.²² At the same time, the aldermen showed a pronounced interest in religious life and public ceremony, referred to as 'civic religion', using ritual and spectacle to advance agendas supportive of urban authority. Princely entries, investments in liturgical services and major processions such as that of the Holy Blood all underscored the centrality of civic identity during a period of profound transformation.²³

A shifting moral framework can likewise be discerned in the Low Countries between the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Contemporary literature produced by the rhetoric guilds points to the rise of a new 'burgher morality' centred on ideals of self-discipline, piety and civility.²⁴ Within this evolving moral climate, efforts to uphold social order increasingly targeted gender-related offences such as adultery and abduction, practices deemed particularly disruptive to the prevailing patriarchal hierarchy.²⁵ These concerns found concrete expression in the actions of

¹⁹J. Murray, *Bruges, Cradle of Capitalism, 1280–1390* (Cambridge, 2005).

²⁰R. Van Uytven, 'Stages of economic decline: late medieval Bruges', in R. Van Uytven (ed.), *Production and Consumption in the Low Countries, 13th–16th Centuries* (London, 2001), 259–69; W. Brulez, 'Brugge en Antwerpen in de 15e en 16e eeuw: een tegenstelling?', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 83 (1970), 15–37.

²¹L. Vandamme *et al.*, 'Bruges in the sixteenth century: a "return to normalcy"', in Brown and Dumolyn (eds.), *Medieval Bruges*, 445–84. For more information on the topic of urban revolt in Bruges, see J. Haemers, *For the Common Good. State Power and Urban Revolts in the Reign of Mary of Burgundy (1477–1482)* (Turnhout, 2009).

²²H. Deneweth, 'Brugge zoekt en vindt alternatieven', in V. Vermeersch *et al.* (eds.), *Brugge* (Antwerp, 2002), 86–99.

²³A. Brown, *Civic Ceremony and Religion in Medieval Bruges c. 1300–1520* (Cambridge, 2011).

²⁴Several key publications have addressed this intellectual climate, including: H. Pleij, *De Sneeuwpoppen van 1511: Literatuur en Stadscultuur tussen Middeleeuwen en Moderne Tijd* (Amsterdam, 1988); H. Pleij, *Op Belofte van Profijt: Stadsliteratuur en Burgermoraal in de Nederlandse Letterkunde van de Middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam, 1991); A. van Bruaene, *Om Beters Wille: Rederijkerskamers en de Stedelijke Cultuur in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden 1400–1650* (Cambridge, 2008).

²⁵J. Farr, *Authority and Sexuality in Early Modern Burgundy (1550–1730)* (Oxford, 1995), 8; Dupont, *Maagdenverleiders*, 49–79; Naessens, 'Judicial authorities' views of women's roles', 51–3; Delameillieure, *Abduction*, 70–3. Interestingly, similar developments can be observed elsewhere in Europe. Dunn has likewise identified a renewed emphasis on patriarchal authority in medieval England, which resulted in the intensified repression of 'ravishment' (a term encompassing both abduction and rape). Dunn, *Stolen Women*, 118.

urban authorities. The Bruges *Verluydboec*, which records all criminal verdicts pronounced by the aldermen between 1490 and 1537, clearly illustrates this development: offences classified as crimes ‘against nature’, including infanticide, transvestism and sodomy, were systematically punished with severe corporal punishment. Sodomy, in particular, was perceived as a grave threat to civic order and resulted in an exceptionally high number of convictions, frequently culminating in execution at the stake.²⁶

Similarly, Walter Prevenier has argued that, within the Burgundian state, rape was ‘in most cases effectively liable to prosecution and conviction’.²⁷ This claim, however, rests on an interpretive approach that frames rape and abduction as intertwined and pardonable offences. A closer examination of urban prosecution patterns in the Southern Low Countries does reveal several successful rape prosecutions, but these follow two tendencies rather than indicating a general pattern. First, banishment and penal pilgrimages were often deemed appropriate responses to (attempted) rape. In Antwerp, for example, perpetrators of rape and attempted rape were generally punished through pilgrimages throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.²⁸ Second, the prosecution of rape was often handled by the city bailiff. Urban criminal justice was divided between the local aldermen, who issued final judgments, and the bailiff or the representative of the count, who interrogated suspects, enforced sentences and had the ability to settle offences amicably, without the involvement of the aldermen. Sentencing books from cities such as Brussels, Aalst, Leuven and Malines reveal a striking absence of recorded penalties for sexual assault.²⁹ Similarly, in Kortrijk, punishments for rape accounted for less than 1 per cent of all banishments issued between 1459 and 1531.³⁰ In many instances, however, bailiffs agreed to halt proceedings in exchange for a financial settlement or ‘composition’.³¹ This practice also extended to rape cases: compositions appear to have been the most commonly applied sanction for sexual violence at the end of the Middle Ages in the Southern Low Countries.³²

Against this backdrop, the prosecution of rape in Bruges stands out for its severity. The *Verluydboec* records 18 accused criminal-rapists publicly placed on the scaffold. Eleven were executed by decapitation, while six were subjected to public flogging on

²⁶Roelens, *Citizens and Sodomites*, 83–89.

²⁷Prevenier, ‘Violence against women’, 195.

²⁸A. Tierssoone, ‘Vrouwen, criminaliteit en vrouwencriminaliteit in Antwerpen in de vijftiende en zestiende eeuw’, University of Ghent, Master’s thesis, 1998, 89–94.

²⁹City Archives of Brussels, Historisch Archief, no. XVI: *Witcorrectieboek* (1420–1516); C. Swiggers, “Gevioleert ende met forsten tegen hueren wille ende danck vercrecht”. Een onderzoek naar verkrachting en seksuele toestemming in de laatmiddeleeuwse steden Aalst en Leuven’, KU Leuven, Master’s thesis, 2024, 9; L. Maes, *Vijf Eeuwen Stedelijk Strafrecht: Bijdrage tot de Rechts- en Cultuurgeschiedenis der Nederlanden* (Antwerp, 1947), 225–8; City Archives of Leuven, Oud Archief, no. 584: *Dbdevaertboek* (1398–1422).

³⁰M. Marien, ‘Vrouwen voor het gerecht. Gender en criminaliteitspatronen in het laatmiddeleeuwse Kortrijk’, KU Leuven, Master’s thesis, 2025, 54–6.

³¹J. Van Rompaey, ‘Het compositierecht in Vlaanderen van de veertiende tot de achttiende eeuw’, *Tijdschrift Voor Rechtsgeschiedenis*, 1 (1961), 43–79.

³²F. Vanhemelryck, *De Criminaliteit in de Ammanie van Brussel van de Late Middeleeuwen tot het Einde van het Ancien Régime (1404–1789)* (Brussels, 1981), 149–54; N. Renier, ‘Vrouwencriminaliteit in de kasselrij Kortrijk’, University of Ghent, Master’s thesis, 1998, 67–70; Swiggers, “Gevioleert ende met forsten tegen hueren wille ende danck vercrecht”, 53; K. Van Eetveld, ‘Vrouwencriminaliteit in Gent tijdens de Bourgondische periode’ University of Ghent, Master’s thesis, 2007, 103.

their naked bodies, followed by banishment from 'the land of Flanders' for several years. One offender, by contrast, was sentenced to remain within the city for seven years and forbidden to leave without the explicit permission of the aldermen.³³ Overall, rape cases account for 4 per cent of all convictions documented in the *Verluydboec*. Moreover, the Bruges bailiff accounts, recording annual income and expenditure, mention only a single composition for sexual violence during the entire period from 1490 to 1537.³⁴ This striking absence suggests that the Bruges aldermen not only intensified but also standardized punishment, imposing corporal punishment as the exclusive response to rape and attempted rape from 1490 onwards.

No criminal sources from Bruges prior to 1490 have survived, complicating the reconstruction of earlier prosecution patterns. Nevertheless, the second part of the *Verluydboec* (1537–1555) indicates a clear shift: sexual crimes are markedly under-represented, whereas cases of theft dominate the record. Only three rape trials are recorded, all resulting in corporal punishment rather than execution.³⁵ The bailiff accounts provide additional insight into the earlier period, however. Before 1490, compositions for (attempted) rape are frequently mentioned,³⁶ in sharp contrast to the post-1490 period, when financial settlement virtually disappeared and corporal punishment became dominant. By comparison, bailiff accounts of the Liberty of Bruges, the castellany in Bruges' hinterland with a separate jurisdiction, record nine compositions for rape and attempted rape between 1490 and 1537.³⁷ Taken together, these findings point to a distinct wave of rape prosecution in Bruges around the turn of the sixteenth century, reflecting heightened anxiety about deviance and a deliberate effort to reinforce civic order.

A city regulation, or *hallegebod*, issued in 1490 provides a key indicator of this renewed attention to sexual violence. The document highlights a troubling pattern: it reports that several women, both those travelling with their husbands as well as women travelling alone, had been 'accosted and attacked against their will'. In response, the aldermen enacted legislation prohibiting armed and violent breaches of the peace.³⁸ As reflected in the *Verluydboec*, a consistent criminal policy followed, with a steady rate of three to five corporal punishments for rape per decade. These punishments were deliberately staged in public to serve as deterrents, with some perpetrators subjected to additional humiliation. Jan Goossens, convicted for raping 'a young virgin', was flogged publicly on a cart drawn through several major market squares.³⁹ After attempting to rape three women, the corpse of Pieter Fransois was displayed on a wheel outside the city gate as a warning to passers-by.⁴⁰ These measures were embedded within a well-developed system of extraordinary criminal

³³CAB, *Verluydboec*, fols. 199v–200r.

³⁴General State Archives Brussels (Algemeen Rijksarchief; hereafter AR), Chamber of Accounts: Account of the Bailiff of Bruges no. 13782, Dec. 1493–Jul. 1495, fol. 12v. Jaques Mesdach was imprisoned after being accused of 'wanting to rape multiple women'.

³⁵Roelens, *Citizens and Sodomites*, 84. The severe punishment of sodomy in Bruges also decreased noticeably after 1535.

³⁶For two examples, see Dupont, *Maagdenverleidsters*, 70–1.

³⁷AR, Chamber of Accounts: Account of the Bailiff of the Liberty of Bruges nos. 13710–13715, Jan. 1490–May 1537.

³⁸CAB, Series 120, no. 1: *Hallegeboden* (1490–1499), fols. 65r–66v.

³⁹CAB, *Verluydboec*, fols. 234r–v.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, fols. 98r–99v.

justice, characterized by secret and *ex officio* proceedings in which torture was used to extract confessions (or *verluyds*).⁴¹ This strongly inquisitorial framework demonstrates that sexual violence featured prominently on the agenda of the Bruges aldermen at the end of the Middle Ages. As discussed in the following sections, judicial intervention was typically reserved for cases in which the perpetrator's actions were described in terms of brutal, physical and excessive violence.

Recidivists and renowned troublemakers

All 18 verdicts begin by identifying the perpetrator by name, often specifying the father's name, occupation and place of origin. The latter is particularly significant. The hometown of the convicted individual is specified in roughly half of the cases, which reveals that many prosecuted criminal-rapists were not native to Bruges. Most originated from nearby towns within the County of Flanders. One notable exception is Pieter de Rijobee, who came from the French town of Beaufort-en-Vallée near Angers and may have moved to Bruges as a merchant, as was common among European tradesmen.⁴² Historians have observed that certain social groups were more often associated with (sexual) violence than others; foreigners, in particular, were ascribed as having generally deviant and untrustworthy characters.⁴³ Studies on French and English rape cases involving foreign merchants suggest that it was precisely their status as outsiders that created exceptional opportunities for women to persuade authorities and successfully prosecute their assailants.⁴⁴ This dynamic appears equally relevant in the case of Pieter de Rijobee.

In four verdicts, it is explicitly stated that the convicted had previously resided in other cities in the Low Countries, such as Lille, Antwerp or Malines, and had relocated to Bruges following serious misconduct or prosecution in those places. Their profiles closely align with characterizations of vagabonds or vagrants: individuals without stable residence who moved between town and countryside and were frequently associated with disorderly or criminal behaviour.⁴⁵ Jan Hermarijn, for instance, had been banished from Veurne for cohabiting with another woman despite having an 'honourable wife'. He subsequently moved to Antwerp, where he and his partner operated a brothel. After receiving remission for an attempted abduction on condition of 'not do[ing] anything wrong again', he murdered the woman he had been living with, reportedly 'out of jealousy', and later fled to Bruges, where he 'continued in his wild and reckless life'. His verdict concludes with another attempted

⁴¹J. Monballyu, 'De hoofdlijnen van de criminele strafprocedure in het graafschap Vlaanderen (16de tot 18de eeuw)', in F. Stevens and C. H. van Rhee (eds.), *Voortschrijdend Procesrecht: Een Historische Verkenning* (Leuven, 2001), 69–74. The same is highlighted in Klemettilä's study on late medieval executions: H. Klemettilä, *Epitomes of Evil: Representation of Executioners in Northern France and the Low Countries in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2006), 35–6.

⁴²CAB, *Verluydboec*, fol. 83v. For more information on foreign merchants in medieval Bruges, see P. Stabel *et al.*, 'Production, markets and socio-economic structures', in Brown and Dumolyn (eds.), *Medieval Bruges*, 210–18. It is estimated that a quarter of all Bruges' citizens came from outside the County of Flanders.

⁴³Seabourne, 'Rape and law', 349; H. Skoda, *Medieval Violence: Physical Brutality in Northern France, 1270–1330* (Oxford, 2013), 62–8; J. Coomans, 'Policing itinerant poor in the Northern Low Countries, 1450–1570', *BMGN: Low Countries Historical Review*, 138 (2023), 3–31.

⁴⁴J.-P. Leguay, 'Un cas de "force" au Moyen Âge: le viol de Margot Simmonet', in A. Corbin (ed.), *Violences Sexuelles* (Paris, 1989), 13–33; Hanawalt, 'Whose story was this?', 124–41; Dunn, *Stolen Women*, 63.

⁴⁵Coomans, 'Policing itinerant poor', 13.

abduction in Bruges, this time of a married woman, 'with the intent of sleeping with her'.⁴⁶ Scholarship has shown that local authorities in the Low Countries closely monitored the movements of vagabonds, perceived them negatively and in some cases criminalized vagabondage itself.⁴⁷ Bruges was no exception in this regard.⁴⁸

Other perpetrators' verdicts, however, present a very different social profile. Eight of the accused are described as married men of respectable standing, sons of urban inhabitants belonging to the city's middling groups, such as locksmiths and shoemakers, or promising young men apprenticed to guild masters. A comparable pattern has been observed by Didier Lett in late medieval Bologna, where most rapists were settled men of considerable age, often responsible for a household.⁴⁹ Although the *Verluydboec* never records the age of the perpetrator, occupational markers offer some indication. Gheeraert van Cuuc is identified as a 'master surgeon', implying an established position within the craft guild.⁵⁰ By contrast, Andries de Knuts is identified as a *cnape* employed in a master's workshop, with a wife and a newborn child at home.⁵¹

A dichotomous image thus emerges: some criminal-rapists are framed as disruptive outsiders; others appear as integrated and respected members of the (economic) community, both young and old. Interestingly, before detailing the circumstances of the sexual violence, scribes frequently included remarks on the perpetrator's reputation, underscoring his notoriety. In the verdict of Adriaen Ysenbaert, his nickname *quade nete*, or 'evil curse', is mentioned, indicating that he was regarded as a bad influence, to be cursed as it were.⁵² Similarly, Marijn vander Halle is described as being 'famous for his many acts of nocturnal violence',⁵³ while Jan van Brelettes is identified as a bastard,⁵⁴ marking them both as socially marginal. Moreover, although corporal punishments were mostly carried out within days of the offence, some verdicts note crimes committed long before punishment was imposed. Frenchman Pieter de Rijobee, for example, was said to have assaulted several virgins 'within a period of six years',⁵⁵ while surgeon Gheeraert van Cuuc had raped multiple girls 'years ago'.⁵⁶ In late medieval cities, reputation and honour were of paramount importance: information spread quickly and communal memory played a key role in shaping judicial intervention.⁵⁷

While some rapists were framed as outsiders or vagabonds, it was ultimately a negative reputation that most decisively shaped criminal profiles in Bruges, marking

⁴⁶CAB, *Verluydboec*, fols. 177r–178v.

⁴⁷Coomans, 'Policing itinerant poor', 7; F. Vanhemelryck, *Marginalen in de Geschiedenis: Over Beulen, Joden, Hoeren, Zigeuners en Andere Zondebokken* (Leuven, 2004), 15–28.

⁴⁸Brown, *Civic Ceremony*, 303–4.

⁴⁹D. Lett, 'Women victims of sexual assault and rape: evidence from the criminal records of Bologna (fourteenth–fifteenth centuries)', *Clio (English ed.)*, 52 (2020), 48–9.

⁵⁰CAB, *Verluydboec*, fol. 227v.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, fol. 54v.

⁵²CAB, *Verluydboec*, fols. 268v–269r.

⁵³*Ibid.*, fols. 94v–95r.

⁵⁴CAB, *Verluydboec*, fols. 89v–90r. For an overview of the characteristics ascribed to illegitimate children, see C. Avignon (ed.), *Bâtards et Bâtardises dans l'Europe Médiévale et Moderne* (Rennes, 2017).

⁵⁵CAB, *Verluydboec*, fols. 98r–99v.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, fol. 227v.

⁵⁷For more information on the role of reputation in the Middle Ages, see T. Fenster and D. L. Smail (eds.), *Fama: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, 2003).

these individuals as threats to the community. Overall, criminal-rapists are consistently portrayed as persistent and well-known troublemakers. Men identified as foreigners, vagabonds or recidivists were subjected to scrutiny by urban authorities. Even more strikingly, formerly respected individuals who had 'fallen' from social grace due to reputational damage appear to have been monitored just as carefully by both magistrates and the wider urban community.

Repetition, intoxication and other aggravating arguments

The Middle Dutch term *vrauwecrachte* highlights a defining feature of premodern sexual assault: rape was conceptualized not primarily as sexual intercourse, but as an act of male force (*crachte*). Classification as rape therefore required clear evidence of violence before and/or during the sexual act, demonstrating its non-consensual nature.⁵⁸ The term *vrauwecrachte* itself does not occur in the verdicts examined, yet numerous formulations emphasize the violent conduct of the perpetrators, confirming that these cases concerned (attempted) rape. Jan vander Haghe, for instance, is described as having committed 'so many acts of violence that he knew her carnally', which presents sexual assault as the culmination of physical aggression.⁵⁹ More implicit expressions, such as 'craving' or 'lust' (*appetijt*), also appear in the records, signalling the perpetrators' intent to use force.⁶⁰

The physical violence described in the verdicts is often extreme, closely resembling attempted murder. Mahouche le Maire and three accomplices brutally assaulted a woman, punching her until she bled heavily, stabbing her from behind and repeatedly forcing her under water in a canal.⁶¹ In another case, Hendric Ysac stabbed his victim below the collarbone, cut so deeply into her jaw that it required stitching and wounded her hands so severely that 'one finger almost fell off' as she attempted to defend herself.⁶²

Not all cases are documented in such detail, but acts of beating, wounding, threatening and coercion recur throughout the verdicts. Notably, the language used avoids explicitly portraying perpetrators as monstrous or diabolical figures, a trope found in rape trials elsewhere in Europe, where sexual violence against young girls was framed as a transgression against sanctity or morality.⁶³ In Bruges, by contrast, sexual violence was attributed to men's inability to control their instincts; therefore, they were perceived as threats to public order and patriarchal stability. The violent nature of these cases seems to reflect a broader shift in attitudes towards deviance rather than an intensified moral or religious condemnation of sexual sin. Offenders were labelled criminals, agitators who disturbed civic peace, rather than immoral monsters. This interpretation is reinforced by the prominence of aggravating factors not inherently linked to rape, such as recidivism, premeditation, accomplices, intoxication and the use of weapons.

⁵⁸G. Walker, 'Everyman or a monster? The rapist in early modern England, c. 1600–1750', *History Workshop Journal*, 76 (2013), 20; Lett, 'Women victims', 54–56; Lansing, 'Opportunities to charge rape', 90.

⁵⁹CAB, *Verluydboec*, fol. 5v.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, fol. 18v.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, fols. 13v–15r.

⁶²*Ibid.*, fol. 18v.

⁶³Walker, 'Everyman or a monster?', 18; Lett, 'Women victims', 52.

Indeed, several verdicts enumerate additional offences committed before or after the sexual assault, including spousal abuse, blasphemy, burglary, assault, murder and multiple (attempted) rapes.⁶⁴ Judicial officers consistently recorded all crimes, as repetition constituted an aggravating circumstance during the Middle Ages.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, only seven cases explicitly mention multiple offences, or recidivism, indicating that violent rape alone was considered sufficiently serious to warrant corporal punishment.

Furthermore, the verdicts frequently stress the intentions of the perpetrators, employing phrases such as 'with a set goal in mind'⁶⁶ or 'without any cause or reason'.⁶⁷ All victims are described as strangers to their assailants, reinforcing the sense of premeditation and arbitrariness; any woman might have sufficed. Perpetrators are portrayed as actively pursuing, deceiving and attacking women to achieve their aim. Two verdicts even suggest a conscious awareness of loss of control: Jan van Brelettes reportedly vowed that 'that night he would do as he pleased in spite of the whole world, even if it cost him his neck', as did Jan Hermarijn.⁶⁸ Overpowering a victim alone was often difficult: in roughly half the cases, perpetrators received assistance from one or more accomplices, who typically withdrew once the victim was subdued. One exceptional case involves the aforementioned Mahouche le Maire, who, although not the individual who committed the sexual act, was executed as the ringleader. After the group of men had decided by drawing lots who could 'have her', Mahouche stood guard while another man raped the victim.⁶⁹ His execution reflects the authorities' focus on leadership in cases of assault and organized violence as threats to the city.⁷⁰

When carrying out their predetermined schemes, most criminal-rapists also committed acts recognized as aggravating circumstances under contemporary law. First, half of the accused used prohibited weapons to threaten and assault their victims.⁷¹ Urban ordinances repeatedly regulated weapon-bearing; a December 1490 *hallegebod*, for instance, prohibited the public carrying of uncovered knives, swords and daggers exceeding three palms in length.⁷² In the verdicts, rapists are described drawing 'long swords' or 'long knives' from their sheaths. Second, seven of the recorded assaults involved forced entry into houses, either to abduct victims or to assault them in their own homes. Burglary was considered particularly intolerable, since every woman was 'supposed to be free' within her own household.⁷³

⁶⁴In the sources, the term 'item' is used to indicate separate crimes. Notably, the rape of multiple victims is often listed as one crime, even though such cases could be considered individual incidents in their own right.

⁶⁵Maes, *Vijf Eeuwen Stedelijk Strafrecht*, 491.

⁶⁶CAB, *Verluydboec*, fol. 18v.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, fols. 199v–200r.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, fols. 89v–90r; 177r–178v.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, fols. 13v–15r.

⁷⁰Collective action was a defining feature of medieval Flemish revolts and political life. See, for instance, J. Dumolyn and J. Haemers, 'Patterns of urban rebellion in medieval Flanders', *Journal of Medieval History*, 31 (2005), 370–1.

⁷¹Maes, *Vijf Eeuwen Stedelijk Strafrecht*, 491.

⁷²CAB, *Hallegeboden*, fol. 88r.

⁷³CAB, *Verluydboec*, fols. 18v, 43v; 94r–95v. Interestingly, Maëliiss Nouvel has identified the household as the most common site of rape in late medieval France: M. Nouvel, 'Violier la femme, violer la maison: une reconfiguration des rapports de genre dans l'espace urbain français de la fin du Moyen Âge', *Genre & Histoire*, 35 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.4000/149ul>.

Third, nearly all (attempted) rapes occurred at night, another aggravating circumstance. Night-time burglary, in particular, was regarded as a serious offence, as it disrupted the residents' sleep and sense of security.⁷⁴

The perpetrators' fondness for drinking and gambling is also repeatedly mentioned. Sixteenth-century legislation considered drunkenness an aggravating factor – both Charles V and Philip II issued edicts prescribing harsher punishment for intoxicated offenders – though in practice it could also be treated as a mitigating factor.⁷⁵ Several verdicts describe groups of men who, after drinking or gambling in taverns, identified a potential victim and pursued her. For instance, Christiaen van Heerdroode and his companions deceived a maid into letting them into a house, after which they barricaded the doors, forced her to fetch two jugs of beer and wine and later raped her while drunk.⁷⁶ Interestingly, intoxication not only facilitated sexual violence but was sometimes deliberately used to make victims more vulnerable, as in the cases of Heyndric de Cammere and Jan van Brelettes, both of whom forced their victims to drink against their will in order to overpower them.⁷⁷ The frequent emphasis on intoxication suggests that Bruges aldermen viewed such behaviour as exacerbating the threat of unrest.

In short, extreme violence and the presence of aggravating circumstances were decisive in classifying an offence as rape in late medieval Bruges. The crime was therefore deemed closer to assault and attempted murder than to sex-related offences. Criminal-rapists were constructed as criminals who endangered civic order, rather than as immoral figures driven by deviant sexuality: a distinction that sets rape apart from sodomy in the Bruges criminal records.

Community responses to rape

In addition to official judicial processes, a crucial second dimension of social control lay in community involvement. Premodern urban communities were deeply shaped by ideals of self-government and solidarity, with neighbours as agents of social discipline actively monitoring one another.⁷⁸ Witnesses, neighbours and local networks were therefore not passive observers but moral arbiters who evaluated behaviour and character, a dynamic particularly evident in rape prosecutions.⁷⁹ Numerous scholars have shown that victims' efforts, their kin and witnesses were indispensable in such trials, driven by neighbourly values of prosperity, order and patriarchy.⁸⁰ This

⁷⁴R. Van Caenegem, *Geschiedenis van het Strafrecht in Vlaanderen van de XIe tot de XIVe Eeuw* (Brussels, 1954), 64.

⁷⁵Maes, *Vijf Eeuwen Stedelijk Strafrecht*, 486.

⁷⁶CAB, *Verluydboec*, fol. 43v.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, fol. 142v; fols. 89r–89v. A similar discourse of intoxication and force is identified in other cases of sexual assault: G. Seabourne, 'Drugs, deceit and damage in thirteenth-century Herefordshire: new perspectives on medieval surgery, sex and the law', *Social History of Medicine*, 30 (2017), 255–76; C. Harris, 'A drunken cunt hath no porter: medieval histories of intoxication and consent', *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 54 (2018), 109–34.

⁷⁸K. Lynch, *Individuals, Families and Communities in Europe, 1200–1800: The Urban Foundations of Western Society* (Cambridge, 2003).

⁷⁹S. McDonough, 'She said, he said, and they said: claims of abuse and a community's response in late medieval Marseille', *Journal of Women's History*, 19 (2007), 35–58.

⁸⁰Leguay, 'Un cas de "force"', 23–30; Hanawalt, 'Whose story was this?', 133–7; J. Goldberg, *Communal Discord, Child Abduction, and Rape in the Later Middle Ages* (New York, 2008), 147–57; Dunn, *Stolen Women*, 52–81.

sense of social obligation also entailed offering assistance at the moment of the offence.⁸¹ Although the expansion of urban governmental authority gradually limited local autonomy in the sixteenth century, an active and participatory street culture persisted, sustaining collective identity.⁸² As Mireille Pardon has noted, crowds in the towns of the Low Countries played a vital role in maintaining urban peace through rumours, testimony and participation in public executions, revealing the close interaction between official justice and communal enforcement.⁸³

The Bruges verdicts equally underscore the importance of community intervention in preventing rape. In all cases, some form of communal response is evident: women assaulted in their homes often escaped by fleeing to their neighbours, husbands rushed to defend their wives and the hue and cry was often raised. Moreover, most cases mention taverns, bathhouses and brothels, which were highly public and accessible spaces in medieval cities. These settings functioned both as sites of crime and as spaces of crime organization.⁸⁴ Innkeepers even had an official obligation to report misconduct occurring on their premises,⁸⁵ as illustrated in a case from Brussels: a taverner who had failed to intervene in a rape out of fear of the assailant was fined by the aldermen for his negligence.⁸⁶ In Bruges too, innkeepers appear to have borne a particular moral duty to act, as five cases explicitly mention their intervention. In the case of Jan van Brelettes, an innkeeper refused to prepare a bed and repeatedly pleaded for the victim's release, despite being threatened herself.⁸⁷ In another case, an innkeeper interrupted an assault after being alerted by concerns raised by other guests.⁸⁸ These examples illustrate how tavern keepers, especially women, could decisively intervene, acting out of civic responsibility.

What, then, prompted communities to perceive certain behaviour as a threat to social peace, finding it so intolerable that they were driven to intervene? Above all, it was the public nature of the violence. Most assaults occurred in highly visible locations, such as in brothels or on the city ramparts, and were often preceded by public pursuits or abductions in the streets. Offenders also carried weapons and broke into houses, actions regarded by both magistrates and the wider community as grave threats to security. Public space held particular significance in the Middle Ages:

⁸¹J. Buntinx, 'Verkrachting en hulpgeroep in het Oud-Vlaams recht', in *Handelingen der Zuidnederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal- en Letterkunde en Geschiedenis*, vol. IX (Oudenaarde, 1955), 15–21.

⁸²C. Lis and H. Soly, 'Neighbourhood social change in West European cities: sixteenth to nineteenth centuries', *International Review of Social History*, 38 (1993), 1–30.

⁸³M. Pardon, 'The crowd's two faces: keeping the peace and fearing the stranger in late medieval Flanders', *Journal of Medieval History*, 49 (2023), 275–90.

⁸⁴The prominence of taverns as settings for criminal activity has been widely noted in scholarship on urban criminality in the Low Countries: Maes, *Vijf Eeuwen Stedelijk Strafrecht*; D.A. Berents, *Het Werk van de Vos: Samenleving en Criminaliteit in de Late Middeleeuwen* (Zutphen, 1985); Vanhemelryck, *De Criminaliteit in de Ammanie van Brussel*. Beyond functioning as crime scenes, taverns also operated as organizational hubs for deviant behaviour, particularly among young men: G. Dupont, 'Patronen van jongerencriminaliteit in een laatmiddeleeuwse grootstad (Brugge, 1385–1550)', in C. Lis and H. Soly (eds.), *Tussen Dader en Slachtoffer: Jongeren en Criminaliteit in Historisch Perspectief* (Brussels, 2001), 70.

⁸⁵B. Hermesdorf, *De Herberg in de Nederlanden: Een Blik in de Beschavingsgeschiedenis* (Arnhem, 1977), 215–27; M. Hell, *De Amsterdamse Herberg 1450–1800: Geestrijk Centrum van het Openbare Leven* (Nijmegen, 2017), 28–34.

⁸⁶Vanhemelryck, *De Criminaliteit in de Ammanie van Brussel*, 151.

⁸⁷CAB, *Verluydboec*, fols. 89v–90r.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, fol. 54v.

crimes committed there were considered a matter of collective concern, a principle embodied in the hue and cry. This mechanism, often described as essential in proving non-consent, required bystanders to pursue offenders and bring them before the court.⁸⁹ Six verdicts describe victims screaming ‘help’ or shouting ‘murder’, thereby drawing attention and causing a disturbance (in one instance by causing a dog to bark⁹⁰). The mechanism is exemplarily illustrated in the case of Mahouche le Maire, whose violent acts are described in detail in the previous section. The verdict further emphasizes that the victim screamed for help twice and continually resisted her assailants. Following the rape, a tavern owner rallied others in response to her cries, leading to the perpetrators’ capture.⁹¹

Additionally, the perceived respectability and conduct of the victim played a decisive role in communal judgment. More than age, virginity or marital status, female honour was central. One verdict explicitly describes the victim as ‘a good, old and honourable’ widow ‘who is loved and known’.⁹² Moreover, verdicts systematically stress women’s appropriate behaviour at the time of the offence: victims are portrayed as being accompanied by respectable men, responding politely to advances, invoking their marital status or clearly refusing. These descriptions thus affirm the acts as rape. In the attempted rape of two sisters by Marijn vander Halle, the scene is framed as ‘an evening of recreation’, with men and women walking peacefully through the streets while ‘playing the lute’. This pleasant evening was suddenly disturbed by the violence of Marijn and his companions, ‘who wanted to have and take these women’.⁹³ Similarly, in the case of Pieter Fransois, a maid politely refused his demands and threats to accompany him, explaining that she was working and thus was not allowed to go anywhere.⁹⁴ The sharp contrast between male aggression and female propriety is powerfully (over)stated: women adhered to accepted norms of behaviour, while men transgressed them, reinforcing communal condemnation of the assault.⁹⁵

Conclusion

In the city of Bruges, a trading centre located in the County of Flanders, the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century witnessed a notable surge in rape prosecutions. This increase is documented in the *Verluydboec* (1490–1537), which records 18 convictions for rape or attempted rape, each resulting in corporal punishment: execution, public flogging and body display. Such strict judicial responses must be understood within the context of Bruges’ economic decline following the downturn of

⁸⁹Buntinx, ‘Verkrachting en hulpgeroep’, 16–17.

⁹⁰CAB, *Verluydboec*, fols. 94r–95v.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, fols. 13v–15r.

⁹²*Ibid.*, fol. 54v.

⁹³*Ibid.*, fols. 94r–95v.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, fols. 98r–99v.

⁹⁵Similar ‘cultural scripts’ have been noticed in other studies on female litigation in medieval Europe, for instance, by McDonough and Youngs. S. McDonough, ‘Mothers and daughters and sons, in the law: family conflict, legal stories, and women’s litigation in late medieval Marseille’, in T. Phipps and D. Youngs (eds.), *Litigating Women: Gender and Justice in Europe, c.1300–c.1800* (Routledge, 2022), 14–31; D. Youngs, ‘“She hym freshely folowed and pursued”: women and Star Chamber in early Tudor Wales’, in B. Kane and F. Williamson (eds.), *Women, Agency and the Law, 1300–1700* (London, 2013), 73–85.

the traditional cloth industry. At the same time, civic authorities harboured deep anxieties of political disorder: fears of uprisings, gang formation, gambling networks, organized crime and the potential damage to the city's reputation all loomed large.

This article has argued that the measures taken against sexual assault in the city reflect a broader concern for social order and prosperity, shared by both urban authorities and the wider community. Prosecution focused primarily on cases that were exceptionally brutal, supported by substantial evidence and regarded as actions that could not be tolerated in a city keen to preserve its 'high repute'. All convicted criminal-rapists were portrayed as notorious troublemakers: vagrants wandering the streets, well-known criminals with extensive records or recidivists. The violent nature of their acts is deliberately emphasized in the final verdicts. Assaults typically involved threats, physical force, premeditated victim selection, the use of weapons, night-time burglary and intoxication. Moreover, these sexual assaults occurred in public spaces and in the presence of neighbours, acquaintances and bystanders who felt compelled to intervene when the violence escalated beyond what was deemed bearable.

An urban history approach has proven particularly fruitful in this case study, as it reveals how the regulation of rape was profoundly shaped by local contexts. Whereas previous scholarship has tended to examine medieval rape primarily through the lenses of gender studies or criminal justice, this article demonstrates the close ties between contemporary understandings of sexual violence and the maintenance of civic order. The framing of rapists as violent criminals illustrates the city's inclination to criminalize and exclude behaviours perceived as threats to urban stability. This, however, also implies that only cases meeting strict evidentiary thresholds were pursued in court, leaving instances of rape within households or familial settings largely unrecorded. While the studied final judgments reveal much about attitudes towards sexual violence, they also highlight the need for further research to develop a more comprehensive understanding of sexual deviancy in the late medieval Low Countries.

Competing interests. The author declares none.