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Gender, Credit, and the Institution of the Notariate in Medieval Barcelona

In the vibrant commercial atmosphere of Barcelona in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the institution of the notariate played a fundamental role in credit transactions. Urban dwellers frequently went to the notaries, public functionaries appointed by the count-kings of Aragon and Barcelona, to record a wide variety of private transactions. Credit transactions appear with especial frequency, representing close to half of all notarial transactions. In this paper, I intend to explore how medieval notaries effectively served the needs of debtors and creditors, and how gender affected the use of this institution for credit transactions. How did the notariate as an institution interact with prevailing social and legal assumptions about the relationship between women and money, to in certain cases encourage women's participation in publicly recorded credit transactions? The notariate likely reduced transaction costs, by offering greater security of enforcement. Would women creditors and debtors, in particular, have sought this added protection?

For this study, I will employ a selection of the surviving notarial registers from Barcelona during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Using these records, I will determine how often both Jewish and Christian women, relative to men of their religious group, participated in credit transactions. I will then try to reconstruct how borrowers and lenders connected with one another, and why they chose to record their loans with a notary. I hope through this study to develop a better understanding of women's relationship to credit and the institution of the notariate, as well as to use gender as a lens to discover how the notariate served the needs of clients engaged in credit transactions.