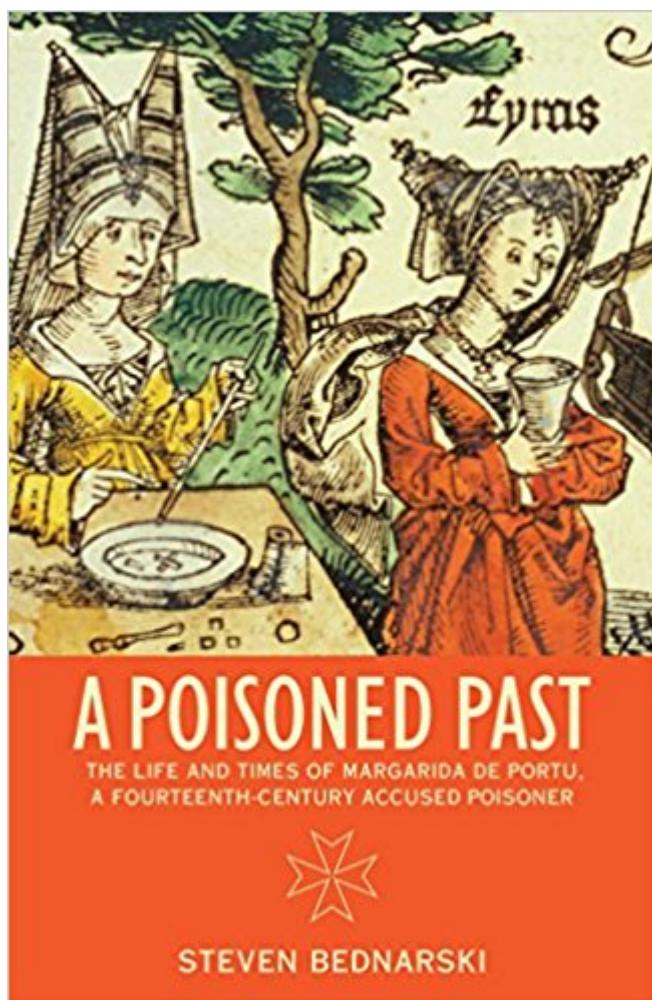


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# A Poisoned Past: The Life And Times Of Margarida De Portu, A Fourteenth-Century Accused Poisoner (Thinking Historically)



## Synopsis

This is the story of Margarida de Portu, a fourteenth-century French medieval woman accused of poisoning her husband to death. As Bednarski points out, the story is important not so much for what it tells us about Margarida but for how it illuminates a past world. Through the depositions and accusations made in court, the reader learns much about medieval women, female agency, kin networks, solidarity, sex, sickness, medicine, and law. Unlike most histories, this book does not remove the author from the analysis. Rather, it lays bare the working methods of the historian. Throughout his tale, Bednarski skillfully weaves a second narrative about how historians "do" history, highlighting the rewards and pitfalls of working with primary sources. The book opens with a chapter on microhistory as a genre and explains its strengths, weaknesses, and inherent risks. Next is a narrative of Margarida's criminal trial, followed by chapters on the civil suits and appeal and Margarida's eventual fate. The book features a rough copy of a court notary, a notorial act, and a sample of a criminal inquest record in the original Latin. A timeline of Margarida's life, list of characters, and two family trees provide useful information on key people in the story. A map of late medieval Manosque is also provided.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book attempts to serve two purposes: tell the story of Margarida de Portu and teach university students about microhistory. Bednarski has achieved both these goals with a well-told tale, useful

pedagogical queries and suggestions, and appropriate documentation to support the arguments. (Mediaevistik)With *A Poisoned Past*, Bednarski has written a book that is engaging, entertaining, and learned. His study is geared more toward the advanced undergraduate student or beginning graduate student of medieval history, but novice and established scholars who work in the field of late medieval legal and social history and, to a lesser degree, medieval science, medicine, and magic, will find useful material between its covers. It would also serve quite well for graduate seminars focusing on microhistories, the intersection of gender and legal culture, and late medieval history writ large. Bednarski has also produced a book that is perfect for the classroom, the graduate seminar, and for anyone interested in how historians work. He has written a solid study and scholars and teachers who adopt his book for their own research and classes will find the life of Margarida de Portu to be valuable. For both the high quality of Bednarski's scholarship and his unwavering dedication to transparency and pedagogy, this book needs to be read far and wide. (H-France Review)*A Poisoned Past* is a welcome addition to scholarship and the classroom. This book could be used in just about any course—from the introductory to the more advanced. It is also well suited to a class on historiography or historical methodology. This volume should also be read by non-medievalists as it is a remarkable resource for teaching students about the past. Bednarski has given students and their instructors much to discuss and I am looking forward to having those conversations with my own students. (Amy Livingstone, *The Medieval Review*)This is a useful and lively study, in microhistorical mode, of a group of linked court cases from the southern French town of Manosque at the end of the fourteenth century. (Trevor Dean, *Speculum*)

Nothing better stirs the hearts and minds of modern students than a lively small story abrim with the strange stuff of life long gone. Steven Bednarski knows that well; he employs microhistory's wiles to catch his readers' imaginations and sharpen their scholarly wits. This is a charming way to teach good historical method. (Thomas V. Cohen, York University)Steven Bednarski has crafted an exceptionally thoughtful volume. Blending vibrant storytelling with methodological rigor, he guides readers through the personal experience of historical analysis in all of its various demands, occasional frustrations, and exhilarating discoveries. He simultaneously brings to life the detailed and intricate world of a late-fourteenth-century woman, and prompts vital questions about the very nature and limit of the historical enterprise. (Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, University of Minnesota, Morris)Bednarski demonstrates through vivid prose a very human story of an ordinary medieval woman who finds herself caught up in murder accusations. *A Poisoned Past* is a fascinating introduction both to the lived realities of late medieval people and to the historian's craft. (Shannon

This is an interesting and unique look at the way history is "done." Bednarski shows and describes how he used primary source information to learn about an relatively minor episode; his look at what happened, and his analysis of the evidence, sheds light on several aspects of European history as well as on the craft of the historian in general. Recommended for those interested in the study and writing of history.Peter L. BelmonteDays of Perfect Hell: The U.S. 26th Infantry Regiment in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, October-November 1918Italian Americans in World War II (IL) (Voices of America)

This is a good combination of primary source and analysis of historical methodology. Was it the most exciting I've ever read? No, but that doesn't mean I didn't learn something. I say buy it.

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