

2022

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Recommended Citation

Gubser, Morgan, "Hunting the Other: Witch Trials in Lorraine, 1490s-1590s" (2022). *Malleus Maleficarum*.
4.
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Spring 2022

Hunting the Other: Witch Trials in Lorraine, 1490s-1590s

Abstract:

This research paper provides a general survey of witch trials in sixteenth-century Lorraine, where Portland State's 1490 incunabula was held by the abbey of Saint-Avold (Saint-Nabor) of Metz. It includes a brief introduction to the region, information on structures of authority, and a description of the witch trials undertaken there. It will also include notes on what statistical analysis currently exists regarding Lorraine witch trials, as well as notes regarding the connection that witch hunting has to the PSU *Malleus Maleficarum* in Lorraine. There is also a statistical analysis included that takes data collected from the existing database of witch trial records and analyzes it for two key factors: the nature of the accusation and demographics of the accused.

Introduction to the Region of Lorraine and Ducal Authority

To provide a general survey of witch trials in Lorraine from the 1490s-1590s, one must first present the relevant characteristics of the locality. Lorraine is a region with boundary disputes that can only be described as complicated. These boundary disputes were, in great part, a cause of the unique ducal and legal structure of Lorraine between 1490-1590. The Duchy of Lorraine, and adjacent Bar, formed the border between German- and French-speaking populations. The nearby territories of Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Franche-Comté, and Burgundy were absorbed through various methods and conflicts into the larger Burgundian state (Briggs 2007, 10). This put Lorraine in a geographically unique location, one in which its residents felt pulled between different languages, customs, and systems of authority.

In the early winter of 1477 René II's Swiss infantry defeated Charles the Bold of Burgundy for control of the Lorraine region. Duke René II (1473-1508) held claim to both the

Duchy of Lorraine and the bordering Duchy of Bar, forming a state straddling a poorly-defined boundary. Lorraine was situated between powerful states, namely France and the Holy Roman Empire, that both held an interest in the territory (Monter 2007, 22). Shortly before René II started governing Bar in 1483, fiscal records showed a total of nineteen witch trial cases, with nine executions held between 1474 and 1480. Fiscal records from René II's reign reveal a further cluster of three trials in 1495, where three suspected witches were arrested and two were burned. Separately, there was also one execution for witchcraft in 1506 (Monter 2007, 30). Despite the loss of relevant records, the larger Duchy of Lorraine does have financial records that cover witch trials from 1476-1488. Three of these years had no witch trials, but the other seven saw twenty-two people executed across six districts, principally Saint-Dié and Arches. These districts together counted for almost 75 percent of the trial total for the entire Duchy of Lorraine (Monter 2007, 31).

Each duchy experienced small witchcraft panics, but no more than five accused witches were killed in any year in one district during René II's reign (Monter 2007, 31). The exceptions to this were two severe witch hunts that occurred around Metz. In 1481, there were eleven trials in eight villages that bordered Lorraine. These trials were the result of bad weather that had been blamed on witches. In 1488, thirty accused witches were executed, and again the nature of accusation was related to bad weather (Monter 2007, 33).

Duke Antoine I's (1508-1544) reign began much like that of René II's, as both he and his father took control of Lorraine during wartime. Antoine was not as keen in being involved in politics, but he did see himself as a French ally and supported France in a conflict with Italy. Antoine's brothers held positions of power in Lorraine, and his brother Jean became a cardinal at age twenty, controlling both the Prince-Bishopric of Metz and the Prince-Bishopric of Toul

(Monter 2007, 38). Antoine was invested in keeping the fragile neutrality of Lorraine, and sought guarantees ensuring the region's neutrality in 1523, 1528, 1536, and 1542 (Monter 2007, 39).

This preoccupation with upholding the neutrality of Lorraine was in part fueled by internal disputes, in which Antoine and his troops sought to address a peasant war that had spread to Germanophone Lorraine in 1525. Tensions grew with the rising Protestant Reformation, and Antoine felt it best to focus on trying Protestants and handling the civil and social unrest caused by the peasant revolt. On one occasion he even ordered that two women accused of witchcraft be immediately released and compensated for their experience, which stands in sharp contrast to his father's disinterest in overseeing such trials. There is a twenty-year gap in witch trials during this time because Antoine passed legislation that essentially only permitted witch trials in which there was both proof and a formal plaintiff. There is no evidence of executions for witchcraft in Lorraine until the very end of his reign, no doubt in part because of the new requirements regarding evidence and accusations (Monter 2007, 46).

Antoine's son, François I (1544-1545), did not have the long, accomplished reign of his father. François' reign lasted only twelve months and was marked by great misfortune and death. Turmoil arose between German Lutheran and Spanish mercenaries contracted by François to fight the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, and François only recovered lost territories in a peace treaty right before his death. This reign is most interesting because François seemed to have a particular interest in witchcraft, unlike both his father and grandfather, who did not seem to be personally involved in such discourse. Between 1544-1545 there were at least twelve witch burnings, with additional punishments recorded in six locations (Monter 2007, 49). Arches and Saint-Dié were the most prominent of these locales. François died shortly after this outbreak in 1545, leaving his two-year old heir, his wife, and his younger brother behind to govern Lorraine.

The duchess of Lorraine and François' brother reinstated and reissued François' anti-Protestant treaties, and shortly after there was a rise in the prosecution of heretics and Protestants.

In 1552 German Protestant princes reached an agreement with France. The princes would allow the French to seize French-speaking areas of Lorraine. Seven years later, at age seventeen, Charles III (1545-1608) became the Duke of Lorraine, serving as a satellite for France (Monter 2007, 58). Charles III spent a great deal of time restructuring the administration of Lorraine, focusing on stewardship and record-keeping. He even created the 'Book of Everything', a volume containing miscellaneous pieces of information about the region that any future leader would need to know. The first decade of his reign saw no trace of witch trials. However, after 1570 witch trials increased sharply, resuming in Lorraine and nearby Alsace. Between 1571 and 1580 there were over fifty witch trials in Lorraine, across seventeen districts. Arches had nine trials and seven burnings, the most of any district.

A short time later, in 1595, Catholic magistrate Nicolas Rémy published his *Demonolatria*, in which he profiled numerous cases in Lorraine that he oversaw. Rémy makes several claims in *Demonolatria* that modern historians find dubious: he claims he knew of 900 executions for witchcraft in the Duchy of Lorraine, but he himself only mentions 125 trials. He also included imprecise information that cannot be validated, including several instances in which he exaggerates the number of executions that occurred in trial outbreaks (Monter 2007, 70). Rémy's *Demonolatria* serves as a fitting conclusion for this era of witch trials in Lorraine – he stopped recording trials after 1591, viewing it as the end of an era.

Witch Trials in Lorraine and the *Malleus Maleficarum*

Long before the publication of Rémy's *Demonolatria*, there is evidence that the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487) was used in some trials in Lorraine. The connection between the *Malleus Maleficarum* and the region of Lorraine resides in a very interesting case study. In 1519, in Metz, humanist writer Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, like Heinrich Kramer a graduate of the University of Cologne, defended a village woman in a witch trial. The woman was arrested in Woippy and then sent to nearby Metz for trial. Nicolas Savin, a Dominican inquisitor, advised that she be sent back to Woippy. Once the accused was returned to Woippy, she was tortured, jailed, and deprived of water and food. When the chapter of Metz heard about these conditions, they advised that she be brought back for trial. The original judge of the trial died during the exchange of the accused from Woippy to Metz, and on his deathbed he expressed regret for the way that the trial had been conducted. Without explanation, Savin then took interest in this case, and used his position to insert himself and demand that he be the one to finish conducting the trial. Agrippa then intervened, claiming that Savin was unduly influenced by ideas in the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hoorens, 2012). Savin argued that the woman's mother was executed as a witch, and therefore the accused was a witch. Agrippa found this explanation wholly insufficient as evidence for witchcraft.

While no direct connection has yet been made to Portland State University's edition of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and witch trials in Lorraine, it is thought that the edition possessed by the institution was acquired after its publication by the abbey of Saint-Avold. Saint-Avold is roughly 20-30 km away from where the trial discussed by Agrippa took place. The case presented by Agrippa, in which he defends an accused witch by refuting the *Malleus*, shows a possible intersection between the *Malleus* and witch trials and Metz. As mentioned in this paper, almost all of the records of trials from the bishopric of Metz were lost. What remains of the

encounter between Savin and Agrippa may provide context about how the *Malleus* was used in witch trials conducted in Lorraine, though it is by no means conclusive.

Overall Mechanism of Trials

French historian Etienne Delcambre has compiled the most extensive list of witch trial records in Lorraine to date. Delcambre waded through dense collections of primary source documents—namely fiscal and trial records—to put together a collection of what is left of the relevant documentation. Robin Briggs, one of the foremost experts on witchcraft in Lorraine, did significant reconstructive research using Delcambre’s original research. Briggs estimates that only 20-25 percent of trial records remain (Briggs, 2014). With this, it is unwise to make broad, sweeping statements about the mechanisms of witch trials in Lorraine. Rather, one may present what is known from the information available, but it is hardly comprehensive or fully conclusive.

The tensions between important actors in Lorraine—the bishops, lords, and dukes—led to a very scattered procedure for witch trials. Almost no records remain from the bishoprics regarding witch trials, but Briggs concludes that the majority of trials were led locally, by local courts and the occasional inquisitor (Briggs 2007, 35). Typically, these trials started with an accusation against a party. This accused party could be one person or a group of people—married couples were common targets. Dozens of people were accused at a time in several notable instances, but the records available from 1490-1590 show that in villages most accusations were individual. Accusations varied greatly—notes are provided later in this paper—but the most common of these accusations include the ‘witch’ causing the death of a child or livestock, infertility, crop failure, extreme weather events, or mysterious illnesses. After the accusation was made, it would be investigated; depending on the period and village,

investigators might be a combination of village leaders and Dominican tribunals (Briggs 2007, 39).

Several notable Dominican demonologists, including Kramer and Rémy, were involved to some extent in these trials (Hoorens, 2012). Remy went so far as to remove records of trials he was involved in, in order to use them as a case study in his writings. These records later had to be reconstructed by Delcambre. Both Kramer and Rémy supported the use of torture in trials, and wrote about such events in case studies. Their views also reflect the broader opinion of witch trial tribunals in Lorraine and the use of torture; although some contemporary humanist scholars argued against it, it was used extensively and without intervention from ducal powers. Levack argues that torture to produce a confession was deemed a necessary part of witch trials in this region, and there is a case to be made for the prevalent use of torture in Lorraine (Levack, 2014). Roeck, in “Urban Witch Trials,” claims specifically that from 1583 to 1643, “trials in the Saarland carried out by the high courts of Lorraine and the electorate of Trier resulted in death sentences 96 percent of the time” (Roeck, 2009). Adding to the human cost of these trials, familial connections played a great role in who was accused and convicted of witchcraft.

Available Statistical Information, Records, and Resources

In *The Witches of Lorraine*, Briggs provides his own statistical analysis of trials in Lorraine based on available records from 1553-1630. In his sample, of 377 accused, 372 made it to trial (three fled; two died before trial). This brief analysis does not include every trial in Lorraine during this period, but Briggs argues that it provides a figure that could be used proportionately to calculate the total number of trials. He provides an estimate of total trials between 1580-1620 as somewhere around 3,000, with margins between 2,000-4,000 trials. There

are quite a few ‘dark figures’ in his survey, or figures created from incomplete evidence. William Monter has analyzed the fiscal records available from trials in Lorraine. No demographic information can be drawn from these records—they only discuss the costs of trials and executions, not the content of the trials (Monter, 2007). However, Monter’s analysis supports Briggs’ claim that the records available are not a full representation of all trials in Lorraine.

Analysis of Demographics and Nature of Accusation

As discussed earlier, the statistical analyses available for witch trials in Lorraine are complex. In this section, I have used the Briggs database of trial records from Lorraine to compile a table showing two key pieces of information: the demographics of the accused and the nature of the accusation. My methodology was simple: I used the database maintained by Oxford, which is a collection of all available trial records from Lorraine. I identified all recorded trials between 1490-1599. From there, I recorded the gender and class of the accused, and the nature of the accusation. Briggs, while interpreting Delcambre’s collection, classifies the accused into four categories: destitute, poor, comfortable, and wealthy. I will also be using these terms in the demographic analysis. In cases where multiple accusations were present, I used the initial claim as the stated accusation. In cases where multiple people were tried, I recorded individual demographic information separately.

In total, when pulling from the Briggs database of remaining records, there were 112 people tried for witchcraft from 1499-1600. Of those 112 people, 89 were female and 23 were male; just under 80 percent of those tried were women. Of those 112 people, 15 were destitute, 58 were poor, 34 were comfortable, and 5 were wealthy. Over 50 percent of those tried were poor, and when combined with the destitute category, over 65 percent of those tried were lower

class. Only 30 percent of people listed were comfortable, and less than 4 percent of the total trials involved those classed as wealthy.

The nature of accusations for all 112 trials fall into the following categories: those accused of causing livestock death, accused of causing illness, accused of unnatural healing, accused of conspiracy, accused by proxy (accused by another person being tried or interrogated), and accused by general reputation. The vast majority of accusations fall into two categories; 31 were accused because of their general reputation and 29 were accused by proxy. What this may indicate is that the majority of these 112 trials were the result of accusations that were not specific, but rather that accusations could be broad and based on the reputation of the person and their family.

The total numbers for the nature of accusations are:

2 accused of unnatural healing

10 accused of causing livestock death

16 accused of conspiracy

24 accused of causing illness

29 accused by proxy

31 accused by general reputation

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